Incomplete Draft: Two of Three Parts

La Technique/Technology: Revisiting Ellul's Concept

As someone who has been deeply influenced by Ellul since 1964, when I stumbled on *The Technological Society* in a new acquisitions rack at the San Francisco Public Library, and as one who has been a member of IJES since its founding, I'm deeply honored to be placed in the lead-off position here.

Yet I'm also both embarrassed and somewhat ambivalent. Embarrassed because there are many others more involved in Ellul studies and in IJES who might do a much better job. Ambivalent because over the years I've become somewhat detached from what we might call the Ellul mainstream and questioning of some of Ellul's basic thought and rhetoric. While attempting to give a sympathetic account of Ellul, I will also not hide my lack of comfort with some ideas and arguments.

At the same time, my primary aim here is constructive: an effort to build on and complement Ellul's understanding and analysis of this thing, this phenomenon, this event we seek to call to attention with the words "technique" and "technology". To this end my talk will be divided into three parts. The first positions Ellul's discourse on technology in what I call classic European philosophy of technology. The second elaborates on Ellul's own contribution to this discourse. The third calls attention to how his analysis of technology, for some strange reason, overlooks the true dynamism at the core of modern technology, that is, engineering. Despite

the empirical fact that engineering is the dynamic home of technology as method and as the process that produces technologies as artifacts that have transformed our lifeworld, engineering is, as far as I'm aware, conspicuous by its absence across all of Ellul's many works, from early to late, from sociology to theology.

But in order to get it out of the way, let me begin by swiftly indicating one point of uneasiness or disagreement, so that you may know where I'm coming from and perhaps discount my constructive proposals appropriately. It concerns Ellul's basic approach or method: to work back and forth, in counterpoint, dialectically, between sociology and theology, but in ultimate allegiance to theology and faith. I think this runs the danger of distorting sociological thought and philosophy. This is not the place to defend such a criticism; I just want to acknowledge it. I also note that the tension between the secular and the theological is handled in quite different ways by two of Ellul's contemporaries: the Catholic Ivan Illich and the Jewish Leo Strauss. In all three, however, the philosophical question that Ellul takes as fundamental – that is, Whether and to what extend human subjectivity remains in a world of technique? Or whether a new civilization might appear inclusive of technique? – is handled quite differently.

Part One

With that out of the way, let me open part one of my presentation: situating Ellul in classic European philosophy of technology. Ellul's rejection of philosophy to the contrary, this is the frame in which I think his thinking on technology most properly belongs.

As I've argued elsewhere, philosophy of technology discourse in the Euro-American context can be parsed into four waves or generations. The first emerged in Europe in the 1950s; a second in North America in the 1970s; a third in the Netherlands in the 1990s; and a fourth, from about 2015, in which philosophy of technology discourse escaped its Euro-American bounds and began to become global. This is, of course, the discourse context in which we now live, even as we live in the shadow of the Euro-American legacy.

The classic European origins of this legacy, the first generation of recognition of technology as field for philosophical research emerged in the 1950s and, for historical-philosophical purposes, can be anchored in three texts from three different philosophical traditions: in England, Alan Turing's "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" (1950); in Germany, Martin Heidegger's "*Die Frage nach der Technik*" (1954); and in France, Jacques Ellul's *La Technique ou l'Enjeu du siècle* (1954). Each represented a different approach not just to technology but to philosophy, and can be read as initiating analytic, phenomenological, and social theoretical approaches, respectively, in the philosophy of technology.

Turing's analysis of computing machines focused on conceptual clarification and philosophy of mind. Heidegger's phenomenological interpretation of *Technik* presented modern technology as an historically original form of truth, revealing the world as *Bestand* or resource and as a challenge to culture. Ellul's sociological studies emphasized the influence

of technology on social institutions such as the economy, state, education, and religion.

Note how each anchor text used a different word to reference the thing, phenomenon, or event that it and we want to think, conceptualize, analyze, understand, and criticize. For Turing it is “machine”; for Heidegger *Technik*; for Ellul *technique*. None of them employ the English “technology” or its German or French cognates.

The “machine” in Turning’s sense is not what we ordinarily think of as a machine. It is not a material or physical entity. It is a mathematical object as important, according to AI engineer Stuart Russell, as the discoveries of numbers, geometric objects, and matrices. In a manner that might be compared to the Pythagorean theorem, which proves that the sum of the squares on the two sides of a right triangle equal the square on the hypotenuse, the Turing machine proves that there is no universal algorithmic method for determining whether a proposition is undecidable (in the Kurt Gödel sense of mathematical undecidability). The attraction of this kind of calculative reason exercises a continuing hold in areas of philosophy of technology.

For Heidegger the German *Technik* is etymologically grounded in the Greek *techne*. (The Greek itself is rooted in the Proto-Indo-European *Teks-* meaning “to weave” or “to fabricate”.) The relation is one of sameness and difference: same in the sense that both *Technik* and *techne* are processes of fabricating or producing; different in their ways of producing (Latin *producere* “to lead” or “to bring out”) and the kinds of things produced.

Greek *techne* and modern German *Technik* are both processes, in Heideggerian language, of “bringing forth into presence” and thereby the “disclosing” of Being (with a capital B), but at the same time “occluding” or obscuring it.

Any “presencing” also hides: just think of how paying attention to me now as I’m present and speaking hides or keeps you from noticing or listening anyone sitting beside or behind you. Even more significantly, it keeps you from experiencing the multiplicity of people in the room and the sensory, tactile richness of all that surrounds us. *Techne* and *Technik* disclose and hide different aspects of a reality much more profound, that is, Being itself. Each only discloses some limited but real aspect of Being.

Greatly simplifying, *techne* discloses Being as what the Greeks called *physis* or nature whereas *Technik* discloses Being as *Bestand* or resource, that which is available for human engineering. Heidegger’s phenomenological effort is to carefully describe, analyze, and compare these two disclosing processes – the logic or structure of these two modes of production (as well as others such as art and speech and politics) – and thereby call our attention to the greater reality of Being that always lies behind and occluded by these disclosures. In this, however, he focuses especially on the Being occluding phenomenological features of *Technik*, which he contrasts with Greek *techne*.

The persistent translation of Heideggerian *Technik* into English as “technology” as well as his own occasional usage of *Technik* as covering both ancient and modern making or presencing processes, already

suggests that “technology” is not a rigid designator. This becomes even more obvious when we get to Ellul.

Part Two

Let me turn now to Ellul’s contribution to classic European philosophy of technology. Most obviously, he introduces another word for understanding and analysis of the thing, the phenomenon, the event that distinguishes and defines our lifeworld: that is, *technique*, sometimes with a capital *T*, sometimes without. Just as with Heidegger, any simple translation of Ellul’s *technique* with the English “technology” creates a potential for misunderstandings. Even within English itself there are many conceptual issues, as Eric Schatzberg’s *Technology: Critical History of a Concept* (2018) has shown.

In another (profane) comparison with Heidegger, Ellul too is a kind of phenomenologist. He is certainly closer in method to Heidegger than to Turing. Like Heidegger, Ellul also sees a fundamental difference between ancient or premodern and modern technology. For Ellul, however, the difference is not ontological but common sense, ordinary, experiential: between what he calls a multiplicity of technical operations and the modern, unified technical phenomenon. The concept of technical operation is, as he admits, adapted from the paleoanthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan’s pains-taking analyses of stone age tool making and the long historical evolution of psychomotor skill sets in flint knapping, extending into pottery, bronze, iron, and steel craft fabrication: “what characterizes technical action [of these sorts] within a particular activity is the search for greater efficiency.”

What turns “the extensive field” of technical operations into what Ellul terms the “technical phenomenon” of the modern world is consciousness and judgment. “This double intervention produces what I call the technical phenomenon,” Ellul writes. “Essentially it takes what was previously tentative, unconscious, and spontaneous and brings it into the realm of clear, voluntary, and reasoned concepts” (1964, p. 20). It also dis-embeds these operations from symbolic or symbol-forming life.

Ellul makes two distinct attempts to analyze the character of the technical phenomenon: First in *La Technique ou l’Enjeu du siècle* (1954), which was translated into English as *The Technological Society* (1964). Deeply influenced by Karl Marx in his youth, Ellul argued that modern technology has replaced capital as the dominant societal influence and as such called for dialectical analysis and revolutionary response. The core of *The Technological Society* is a characterology of modern technology as exhibiting a number of ordinary features that distinguish it from premodern technology. Among these characteristics are its rationality or dependence on calculative reason; its internal dynamism in the sense that one technological innovation regularly stimulates other, new innovations; its universalism or global expansion; and its autonomy or seeming independence of any values other than power and efficiency. After identifying its key characteristics, Ellul proceeded to describe how they transform the economy, political affairs, and “human techniques” such as education, work, propaganda, entertainment, sports, and healthcare.

The second attempt was *Le système technicien* (1977, translated as *The Technological System,* 1980), which revisited his definition of modern

technology as “the *totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency* (for a given stage of development) in *every* field of human activity.” In response to objections that had been raised against this definition — and taking into account changes that had taken place over the previous quarter century — Ellul proposed to adapt the concept of system to understanding of technology.

Social scientists Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann analyzed society in system theoretical terms; Ellul argued that the analysis actually applies even better to technology. Technology has become “a system of elements interrelating in such a way that any evolution of one triggers a revolution of the whole, and any modification of the whole has repercussions on each element.” Additionally, it now exhibits cybernetic “feedback structures” and is dependent on computers for its management. Any thought of “detechnologization” is a fantasy.

In the conclusion of *The Technological System*, Ellul promised a third volume that would examine a series of “dysfunctions of the technical system.” However, in the course of researching this project, he became aware that there already existed many such studies on this topic. As a result, when *Le Bluff technologique* (1988, translated as *The Technological Bluff* ,1990) appeared, it was a truncated version of the promised update. Instead of focusing on specific dysfunctions, he analyzed the way in which rhetorical appeals to technology as a solution to all problems was distorting the ability to think clearly. *The Technological Bluff* is not so much about specific failures in particular technologies as it is a description of how the repetitive marketing of technology and an ideology of progress tends to

overwhelm critical reflection.

To adapt Cicero's description of the achievement of Socrates, Ellul's distinctive contribution to classic European philosophy of technology was to bring it down from the mathematical heaven of Turing and the ontological heaven of Heidegger compel it to ask questions about life and morality.

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