

# When *Technique* meets the State.

## A Theological Reading of Propaganda Dynamics: Updated Perspectives for our Time

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### Abstract:

Knowing that we owe the English translation of *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* to the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions is not neutral information. Ellul's analysis of the impact that *Technique* has on society invites us to focus on the challenges that a technological system imposes on the whole of society, reaching even to the foundations of democratic values themselves.

Thus, the aim of my presentation shall be to analyze how, according to Ellul, the technological system deals with propaganda: "Political motivations do not dominate technical phenomena, but rather the reverse", he says. As propaganda deals with narratives, I propose to focus on a theological reading of how the so-called "sacralization" of technics is presently and significantly impacting some political values and practices.

*NOTE – The text that follows is only the prologue to my contribution. I share it to introduce the presentation, with the hope that, being able to give it as read, we will be able to focus our attention on the other two parts of the speech, indicated at the end of this paper: putting our subject into an historical and thematic perspective, and exploring four theological challenges about it.*

## 1. A Theological Reading of Propaganda Dynamics.

Since, after analyzing its structure, dynamics and fruits, Ellul speaks of the sacralization of Technique, theology too, and not only the sociology of religions or philosophy, is involved and challenged in an important interdisciplinary dialogue.

In this paper I will propose a theological reading of the increasingly evident connections between the so-called "Technical System" and propaganda, which Ellul himself calls a further system, inserted into the technical one. To begin, then, it is important that we try to clarify what we mean by "theological reading," and in what sense we speak of propaganda as a "system" in its own right, embedded in the technical system.

## Reading theologically.

Let us begin by proposing a possible definition of theology. We call theology the analysis of narratives that nurture the belief that human life, individual and collective, has meaning and can receive a mission from an Otherness. Such narratives affirm the existence not only of a presence, but also of a perspective, a promise that also brings meaning to the duration and history of the individual, as well as to the faith and the social communities within which individuals fit and live. In the context of Christianity, there are at least three subjects: the triune God, the individual person and the human communities. Contemporary theology tends to recognize or at least reflect on a fourth element, for some a "context," milieu, for others a subject in its own right: Nature, creation. In doing so it opens new perspectives, but also rediscovers others, long undervalued or forgotten.

Within the context of a theological analysis of propaganda dynamics, we emphasize some "theological" keywords: salvation, person, conversion, people. Moreover, we can consider how, at times, propaganda narratives can be formulated whose patterns trace religious ones, particularly Christian ones: the rhetoric of "good" fighting "evil," the promise of a "better future," and so on. Third, the same techniques are used as much by political and commercial propaganda as by religious and spiritual ones: the two contexts often inspire each other, both in form and content. It also happens, sometimes, that the political discourse hijacks religion, its language, its methods and its beliefs.

## Technique as a System.

A second starting point, we said, is to recall the Ellulian definition of *Technique* as a system. In this set of structures, the analysis of which is but in its early stages in *The Technological Society*, it is already evident how *Technique* has - and is - an *order*, and as an order, it has a structure, rules, clearly recognizable characteristics, analyzed and presented by the author himself.

I find it interesting to note a certain gap in the translation of the titles: what in French was, in this first volume of the trilogy, *l'enjeu du siècle*, "the challenge of the century," in English has been translated *The Technological Society*. It is as though, in the U.S. context, the conclusion that Ellul would come to years later, in 1977, with *Le système technicien*, in the United States was already (sadly?) clear from the outset.

Among the very specific features of this order, which Ellul illustrates at length in the first part of *The Technological Society*, we particularly emphasize "the necessary linking together of techniques" (p. 111ff.), which nourishes the necessary "universalism" of *Technique* (p. 116ff.). As a result, from the outset, one of the major problems posed by the technical system is that of the definition and autonomy of the individual, of the person, versus the growing autonomy and self-sufficiency of the *Technique* itself.

"The individual's role is less and less important in technical evolution. Human beings are, indeed, always necessary. But literally anyone can do the job, provided he is trained to it. [...] The qualities technique requires for its advance are precisely those characteristics of a technical order which do not represent individual intelligence". (TTS p. 92-93).

As we were saying, in *The Technological Society* Ellul's definition of *Technique* as a "system" is not achieved: we'll have to wait for the second volume of the trilogy on *Technique* for that. Another element, however, is of great help to us in analyzing the dynamics of propaganda as it functions in technical society. Namely, these are what Ellul points to as the historical reasons for the powerful advance of "technical invasion": trade and war. It is no coincidence that these two elements are also, in the first place, the mainstays of modern and postmodern propaganda. Their joint action originates and feeds colonialist dynamics, with a strong tendency to standardize cultures, peoples, economies and societies.

About war and conquest dynamics, here's what Ellul states:

"The vanquished peoples, in a state of mind compounded of admiration and fear adopted the machines, which came to replace their gods. Not only were the machines the means their conquerors had used to subdue them, but the machines represented the possible means of liberation from these conquerors. In these colonies traffic in arms and in all the instruments of power began to flourish as a means of provoking insurrections. At first, rebellion was incoherent, but to the degree that these peoples became better organized and technicized, rebellion became a national affair". (TTS p. 118)

And as for commerce,

"It was mandatory for Western powers to conquer the markets necessary for Western industry and technical life. No barrier could oppose this necessity; and primitive peoples were literally swamped by the products of modern technique. [...] After consumer goods came an invasion of productive techniques. Technical invasion is a question not only of colonialism but also, for the less powerful countries, of simple technical subordination". (*ibid.*)

Trade and War, with their respective techniques and practices, have been and remain at the basis of the evolution of the social, economic and technical system. They also often infuse the values and ethical systems of different societies, imposing not only their own techniques and methodologies, but also their own languages and priorities and, as a result, what soon become true values. Since language, transmission and the purpose of convincing and making individuals and groups act are brought into play in these contexts, it becomes possible to say that we are not simply dealing with a system of techniques, but also with a system of propaganda, which it is important to understand, know and analyze.

## Propaganda: The System inside the System.

The third element on which to base our reflection is Ellul's definition that propaganda is a "system within a system". Let us first recall how the author presents the context, in *The Technological Society*. Please remember that the English translation, 1964, follows by two years *Propagandes*, published in French in 1962 and translated into English by Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (Vintage Books, 1973).

Two definitions seem particularly interesting, one by Jacques Ellul and one by Konrad Kellen. Let us read and briefly comment them. Introducing the chapter of *The Technological Society* on propaganda, Ellul writes:

“Here we are faced with a new system of human techniques, more complex than we have studied, since it involves techniques of different natures, partly hierarchical and partly synthetic. We do not even have a term to describe this system. *Propaganda* is too limited, but it comes closest to the fact”. (*The Technological Society*, p. 363)

This first statement, as well as the analysis of propaganda proposed by Ellul in *The Technological Society* will later be taken up and expanded in *Propagandes*, a text that grew out of the critical analysis of a course on the history of propaganda given at Sciences Po Bordeaux in 1952. In this context, we will simply emphasize the importance of the challenge to look at propaganda not as a single block, with only one *milieu* and a single and obvious direction, that of totalitarian regimes. On the contrary, modern and post-modern propaganda has perfectly appropriated the diversity and variety of liberal and democratic societies and thrives in them. The strength of the propaganda of Ellul's time - and a fortiori of propaganda acting in our own times, as Peter K. Fallon also explains - lies precisely in diversity, in the free exchange of ideas, information, opinions and methods of communication, conviction and coercion. Dissociating, deconstructing the totalitarianism-propaganda pair is, today more than ever, the first step to take. Probably, to begin with, it would be good to become aware of what the totalitarianisms of our time are and how they work.

Moreover, propaganda is called “the Siamese twin of our technological society” by Konrad Kellen, who also writes, in his foreword to the English translation of Ellul's *Propagandes*:

“Only in the technological society can there be anything of the type and order of magnitude of modern propaganda, which is with us forever; and only with the all-pervading effects that flow from propaganda can the technological society hold itself together and further expand”.

Kellen underscores what Ellul explains in his analysis of different propaganda techniques: technical society is the ideal ground for propaganda of all kinds and for experimentation with different techniques, with equally different purposes. The two mechanisms feed off each other, and mutually inspire each other. Technique and propaganda are the ideal pair.

## End of the Prologue.

Having posited these three elements, I hope to have clarified what I mean by a "theological reading of propaganda dynamics." A theological reading of the dynamics and rhetoric of what we may call a propaganda system in the technical society will mean, then, analyzing the context, operation, lexicon and "kerygma" proper to the narratives and programming of propaganda that nourish and orient postmodern societies.

Therefore, to continue the analysis, it seems important to me to first put Ellul's discussion of propaganda in technical society into perspective. I would propose, on the one hand, to briefly recall some elements of the context in which Ellul's studies are published and translated, and on the other hand, to look at who and how, today, is interested in the issue. For this reason, of course, since I

cannot propose an exhaustive analysis, I will try to "think locally": we will therefore choose a few case studies, from which to hypothesize some conclusions.

Next, the hope is that the analysis of the case studies will help us to argue and explore four main challenges that the links between *Technique* and propaganda also address to theology: one challenge on the hermeneutical level, one on the homiletic level, one on the ethical level, and finally on the ecumenical level.