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Cover image: Ferdinand Bol, *Elisha Refuses Naaman's Gifts*, 1661 (detail). Image courtesy of the Amsterdam Museum. Public domain. The scene is described in 2 Kings 5 and in Ellul's *Politics of God, Politics of Man*.

The Ellul Forum

About

Jacques Ellul (1912–94) was a French thinker and writer in many fields: communication, ethics, law and political science, sociology, technology, and biblical and theological studies, among others. The aim of the *Ellul Forum* is to promote awareness and understanding of Ellul's life and work and to encourage a community of dialogue around his ideas. The *Forum* publishes content by and about Jacques Ellul and about themes relevant to his work, from historical, contemporary, or creative perspectives. Content is published in English and French.

Subscriptions

The *Forum* is published twice a year. Annual subscriptions are $40 USD for individuals/households and $80 USD for institutions. Individual subscriptions include membership in the International Jacques Ellul Society, and individual subscribers receive regular communications from the Society, discounts on IJES conference fees, and other benefits. To subscribe, please visit www.ellul.org.

Submissions

The *Forum* encourages submissions from scholars, students, and general readers. Submissions must demonstrate a degree of familiarity with Ellul's thought and must engage with it in a critical way. Submissions may be sent to ellulforum@gmail.com.

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Articles

Book Reviews

A Honduran Mayor's Experience of Ellul's Political Illusion

Mark D. Baker

In the midst of introducing me to his boss, and greeting my family, "Eduardo" (not his real name) pulled me aside just long enough to say, "Ellul was right!" In a way, that said it all. I knew what he meant. At the same time, Eduardo's statement begged for further explanation and conversation. Questions immediately flooded my mind. We were both just passing through La Ceiba. This chance encounter did not allow for that conversation. I vowed to myself that on a future visit to Honduras I would visit Eduardo and follow up on that comment.

In the early 1980s, fresh out of college, I taught at a bilingual high school in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. I met Eduardo, at that time a university student studying chemical engineering. He was charismatic, confident, and fun to be with. We spent hours in wide-ranging conversation. Many of my beliefs and assumptions were shaken by the poverty and injustices in Honduras, and the revolutions in neighboring countries. Eduardo enthusiastically encouraged my critical thinking. We became soulmates. We actively sought to convince others that working for justice for the oppressed was central to the Christian faith, and we reflected on ways we could do that ourselves in the present and future.

I first encountered Ellul's writing in that time period. Eduardo and I read and discussed a number of Ellul's books. Ellul added to our growing sense that a commitment to God called for commitment to radical change. Ellul also challenged us to think more critically about the means we might use to bring change—including the use of political power. I interpreted Ellul as warning us against the political option, yet it was easy for me to be negative

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about an option I did not realistically have. Eduardo, however, read *The Political Illusion* and *Politics of God, Politics of Man* from a different setting than I did. His family was politically active. He knew politicians. For him, becoming an elected government leader, or a high-level bureaucrat, was a realistic idea. Eduardo took Ellul's warning seriously, but rather than ruling out participation in politics Eduardo entered the fray with the hope that because of what he had learned he could be a different type of politician.

In 1985, Eduardo's uncle became a candidate for president, and Eduardo worked in his campaign. His uncle lost in the primary election, and in January 1986, Eduardo shared the following reflections with me:

> I had the chance to travel around the country and see hunger, sickness, and ignorance in my people. I saw a lot of problems that need to be solved. I was happy because I thought I would have some power, some power to solve these problems. That was the beginning of the process. [...] As the days were passing by, I was changing. I was thinking just about power, the sweet taste of power. [...] I started seeing myself in a suit with a silk shirt, in this big air-conditioned office, with a big desk, in a comfortable chair—sitting there having people coming asking me for favors. [...] I am not saying I'd be a corrupt person. [...] In the back of my mind, of course, were big dreams, big concerns about the people [...] but I lost perspective.
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> I was in this boat and we were sailing in the water of politics, and I had realized that the important thing was to keep yourself within the boat. You could see a lot of people swimming around, trying to get into the boat, and some people within the boat pushing them and drowning them. And I was there thinking, that's good, because then I won't have to fight anyone else for my share of power. I was thinking that, and I am a Christian! I love my neighbors, but I was becoming part of this, becoming selfish.
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> You have to be really careful, because the gap between the powerful and the oppressed becomes wider all the time. In my speeches, I was saying we'd seek justice, health, education, and agrarian reform. When I was saying things like that, I really meant them, because I think it's what is best. But I was on a stage seven or eight feet above the ground, and I didn't talk to my people. No, I was with the men on stage, and when we talked among ourselves we did not talk about the needs of the people. [...] I remember we were developing a strategy so we could gain more power in the Congress and the Supreme

> Court. We were just seeking power, power, power. [...] And they were saying, "I'm going to buy this house," "this farm," "buy that car," "get this for my family." I never heard, "We have to do this for the people." I never said it.
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> I'm telling these things to you because I know you love me and will pray for me so that I can see the light and gain more wisdom. [...] I know your ideals and your dreams and how much you love my people. I love my people too, and I am seeking justice for them. I know that this feeling that burns within me was set there by God. I failed.[1]

Eduardo's first foray in politics confirmed many things he had read in Ellul. He continued to read Ellul and still had a burning passion to rectify situations of injustice and to lessen the suffering of the poor. His experience in politics had left him feeling great disappointment and disillusionment. He had, however, learned that he could give speeches that moved people. He loved to see how people reacted to his words, and the thought played in his mind: "Why give speeches for others? Why not speak for myself?" Four years later, he had the opportunity to do so. Leaders in his party determined they needed some younger candidates to compete better with the opposing party. They persuaded Eduardo to run for mayor of a large city in Honduras. He won the election and became mayor in 1990.

In the summer of 1990, my wife and I, once again living in Honduras, ran a two-month program for some university students involved with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in New York State. We passed through his city on one trip, and I had arranged for us to visit Eduardo. I had not seen him for a few years. He sat behind a large desk in an air-conditioned office. Aides sat at his side. While talking to our group, various people interrupted the meeting to get his signature, ask a question, or to report someone was waiting for him. He dealt with each one quickly and returned to his animated description of the changes he was trying to bring about in the city—how he was using his power to help others. For instance, he explained how he helped some poor and landless people get land. I felt a mix of things: excited by what he was accomplishing, yet wondering if he was remembering the lessons he had learned in 1986.

I was even more confused when, two years later, I read in the Honduran newspapers that Eduardo was in jail and accused of misusing public funds.

He was forced out of office. In the end, he was found innocent. I left Honduras that year to begin my doctoral studies and did not see Eduardo again for over ten years until, as noted above, we ran into each other by chance in another city.

Now two years had passed. I was once again visiting Honduras, and Eduardo came to Tegucigalpa to spend the afternoon with me. He immediately began explaining the phrase he had mentioned to me two years earlier. "You know that book you gave me by Jacques Ellul, *The Political Illusion*; it's true." What follows are excerpts from interviews I did with Eduardo on June 24, 2004, and June 16, 2017.

Eduardo: True, I did positive things as mayor. I am grateful I had the opportunity to do so. I did not just give handouts but began projects that people worked themselves to obtain the results. Yes, some good was accomplished. As Ellul says early in his book *The Political Illusion*, "Political decisions are still possible. The point here is merely to demonstrate the growth of limitation weighing them down."[2] The latter is clearly evident in my experience.

I won in a landslide, three to one. I did not think about how my opponent felt. After the election, he despised me. His sons had been my friends. He had been friends with my father. In politics, when you take a space you are taking it away from someone else, and they want that space.

As mayor I got even better in my speaking ability, but I also became ever more enamored with the feeling of being able to move a crowd. I learned to say the things they wanted to hear. The longer I was in office, the more absorbed I became in seeking power for myself, and the more the power I obtained changed me. Increasingly I used laudable goals to justify questionable means.

I see that now; I did not see it then. A few people, but only a few, tried to tell me. People who really love you will slap your face. I remember my mother saying, "You are changing; the real you is still there, but there is a layer that is not letting your true personality shine out." At the time, I thought she was being over-protective, that she did not know things I knew. One aide,

"Miguel," told me, "You are changing." I ignored him and listened to all the others that praised me.

Mark: You did not finish your term; you ended up in jail. What happened?

Eduardo: As Ellul points out, in politics the power struggle is not just between parties but also within a party. And as a politician, one's obligation is to help the party—to make that a principal concern.[3] I thought that since I was mayor I could do what I wanted, what I thought was best. It was an illusion. The same people that had encouraged me to run, the elders of my party, turned against me. They would call and critique the things I was doing. For instance, they would say, "Why are you paving that road? You will get no political advantage from that. Most of the people who live there are from the other party." Or, "Why are you helping that organization? They were against us in the past." They challenged me, but I kept doing what I thought was best. When they saw they could not control me, they viewed me as a loose cannon and they wanted to get me out of there. I did not realize how selfish they were and how devious they could be. I did not imagine that they would get together and strategize about how they could hurt me, how they could get me out of office. But they did. Although in the end I was found innocent, they did succeed in getting me out of office.

Those were dark days. Sometime later, I started reading Ellul again. His writing penetrated me. It brought to light what was hidden. It was as if he was saying to me, "Eduardo, they gave you the chance to be a politician, they gave you the power. What happened?" And as God asked Adam and Eve, Ellul asked, "Why are you hiding?"

Mark: When you read Ellul this time, it was as if he was saying that Miguel was right, your mother was right?

Eduardo: Yes, because they were speaking with love. I think that is the Ellulian way—love.

Mark: What had you been hiding from yourself that Ellul brought to light?

Eduardo: Why do people seek power? The real question is, why do we change when we have power and forget why we sought power in the first place? Power changes people. Politics is grounded in the power of the world. The realm of politics is full of mirages, it distorts reality.

Mark: And when you were in the middle of it, you were not aware of that.

Eduardo: It is very difficult to see. You are walking in hell—not that you are burning, but you are losing your soul. You put your soul in the darkness, and you feel comfortable with it. It absorbs you more and more. That is what worldly power does.

When I love, I do not have to prove to others that I have more power. That was the contrast between the party leaders, absorbed in power-seeking, and Miguel and my mother, absorbed in loving. In a related way, there was the contrast between how people treated me before and after I was mayor. When I was at the peak, our friend Santos came to visit me. According to the political people around me, in terms of the elite, he was a nobody—a simple carpenter. He was proud to be with me: "This guy, the mayor, is my friend." Of course, lots of people wanted to be around me then and say I was their friend. They disappeared when I lost power, when I was disgraced. But Santos was special, because when I was in the pit, he came too. He did not judge me. He just sat there with me. I do not know how to explain that. He did what someone who loves you would do.

Similarly, the person who worked in my office who confronted me was also, in political terms, a nobody. Miguel ran errands. Yet not only was he the only one to challenge me when I became absorbed in power-seeking, he also was the only one from those working for me who stuck with me even when I was in jail and run out of office. There is something very telling in these three people, my mother, Miguel, and Santos—how little power they had and how differently they acted than those concerned with accumulating power.

Mark: Let's move to the present. You have been asked, lobbied, to become involved in politics again. Why do you say no?

Eduardo: I have not said no one hundred percent. True, I have turned down requests to run again. I have not been a candidate, but I am still involved in politics. Because I grew up in it, have been a candidate, won an election—people call me for help, for advice—especially local candidates. They assume that because I have been there, I know things they do not know.

Tomorrow morning I will join two women who have asked me to accompany them in a meeting with a political leader—to help mediate. I am not sure why; perhaps they think I will protect them, I will be fair. Perhaps because I am the son of a man who was a leader in the party and I was a mayor, they think I still have power. They have the illusion. Power—we keep coming back to that word.

Mark: When people come to you for help and counsel, do you try to be for them what Ellul was for you?

Eduardo: Of course. I was walking down the street; I saw the car and did not move. I got hit. Do you think I will stand by and not say something when the car is about to hit a friend? I see myself in them. Yes, I talk to them, but not with much success. You can tell them, as someone could have told me, "You will not change the world." And they respond, as I would have, "You are crazy, you do not know who you are talking to."

Mark: You have experienced that?

Eduardo: Yes. I have a very close friend who is a surgeon—a brilliant man. He decided to run for office. I asked him, "Why are you doing this?" He said, "I have been saving people one at a time in the operating room. More must be done. I do not want to stand on the sidelines. We need to change the world." I said to him, "You have a beautiful family, a great career, the reputation as the best surgeon in the country; why tarnish that reputation?" He told me this story: "I was in the operating room. A girl was brought in who ate half a banana she found at the dump. It was poisoned—rat poison. She died. Same age as one of my daughters. I imagined my daughter on the operating-room table dying because she desperately ate a banana from the garbage—in a country with an abundance of bananas, that exports bananas. I feel a calling to change things."

His story is like mine. He was going the right way, but he was destroyed by the surroundings, by other politicians—envy, he became too strong. Of course, he was not perfect. I am not saying that, but he loved his people, was willing to sacrifice so much. Again, Ellul was right.

Mark: Yet, the doctor was correct to say that something has to change. You were correct years ago, when you ran for mayor, to say that there were

problems at the structural level that must be addressed. But Ellul exposes the illusion of doing that through politics. What alternative did you suggest to the doctor?

Eduardo: You cannot isolate yourself from politics. Achieving true change through politics is an illusion, but Ellul is not calling for inactivity. Ellul states that the Kingdom of God will come. One could respond to that and say, "Fine, the Kingdom will come, I will just live comfortably and let it come." Ellul, however, tells us that as Christians we do not have that option. We must be in the world, and work for change, but work for change with faith and hope that our work will not be futile, because God is at work. We cannot stand idly by. We are called to love.

Mark: What about you? What about all our talk of justice thirty-five years ago?

Eduardo: I think about it every day when I wake up, and a plaque of Isaiah 58 hangs behind my desk at work. "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free."

Mark: Can you give an example of your seeking to live this out?

Eduardo: I work for a company that makes plastic bottles for soft-drink companies in a few different factories in Central America. I ran the factory in Honduras for a number of years. With Isaiah 58 in mind, I proposed to the owner and other administrators that whatever we produced above a certain level in my factory we would give as bonus to the workers. My thinking was that once the company had covered its costs and met its goals, why not give the extra gain to the workers. The others thought I was crazy. They looked at me and said, "Why would we do that? The workers are being paid minimum wage. If you want to give away your salary, you can."

I tried to figure out a way to do it on my own, but when I presented the idea to some workers they did not believe me. They thought it was just a scheme to get more production, please my boss. They did not think they would really get a bonus.

One of my managers, an accountant, suggested I give them something to show that I was trustworthy: I really did want to give them a bonus. I did

not like his suggestion; it felt too paternalistic. But the accountant came up with an elaborate plan to give everyone a new bike—the company would pay part, workers would pay the rest over time (they ride bikes to work). The 120 workers in the factory got together and then came to me and said no. They did not need new bikes. But, they said, if I was willing to give some money, could they start a cooperative loan fund, with the company matching what employees contributed to the fund. Workers could borrow money from the fund when emergency needs came up.

The fund quickly ran out of money. I put in some more than just the matching; still, it ran out regularly. One day, when the fund was very low, two men came together to make sure the other would get some. I was very impressed. Although I felt like giving some of my own money so each would get the full amount they needed, I did not want to undercut their spirit of solidarity and sharing. They split the amount in the account.

On Labor Day, May 1, we typically had a company picnic. The company provided the food. It was a good day but not a great day. So that year I asked the workers, "What shall we do for Labor Day?" One said, "My wife is a great cook, she could make—." Someone else then volunteered to make something else. The day had a very different feel. Gradually things began changing in the factory. It was much cleaner. They did not want someone else to have to clean up their mess. They showed more respect for the janitors. One man received training on how to run a machine. At his initiative, he taught others what he had learned, rather than guarding his ability and status.

Shifts became competitive in a healthy way, seeing who could produce more. Production went up. Before they were little islands in the same plant. They became more of a community, a team.

After about eighteen months the owner told me, "Eduardo, give them the bonus you had originally proposed"—tying it to production over a certain level. It is not that I had become more persuasive, or that they had a new awakening in relation to justice for all. Rather, production had gone up so much that the owner was making so much more money that he was going to have to pay a lot more taxes.

Mark: Ellul's "Meditation on Inutility," at the end of *Politics of God, Politics of Man*, is a challenging word to the Eduardo who was mayor and thought, "I am going to change things," but a word of freedom to the Eduardo of the present who says, "I am a servant of Jesus, seeking to follow where he leads."

Eduardo: Yes.

Mark: You are still actively involved in trying to live out Isaiah 58, "to loose the bonds of injustice," even if you are not using the means that many in the world would see as the most obvious means to use to achieve that end.

Eduardo: Yes, that is very accurate. I think a huge difference is that Jesus tells us to not draw attention to ourselves, to "not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,"[4] and politicians do the opposite. What is most important is that you are seen. Perception is more important than reality. I have seen political advisors tell my friends, "You have to do this, because perception is more important than reality." And it is not just politicians. Think of the social clubs that so proudly deliver wheelchairs to the needy—and get their picture in the paper. In the process, they destroy the dignity of the person receiving the wheelchair. I tell them, "Fine, do these actions, but do not let anyone know." They look at me like I am crazy. Too many of us are looking for Jesus by going to church, but we avoid him in the street.

Mark: Your comments lead me to reflect on my reading of Ellul's "Meditation on Inutility." Although my story is not as dramatic as yours, Ellul's writing has penetrated me numerous times and revealed things hidden. Reading these pages was one of those instances. The unworthy servant pronounces this unworthiness *after* acting. I realized that much of my reading and thinking, including my reading of Ellul, was seeking to avoid "useless" acts. I wanted to figure out *ahead of time* what would not work, so I could do what would work. That is not the freedom Ellul writes about.

Thank you for so openly sharing from your life and your ongoing journey to live out this freedom, to love and resist the political illusion. I deeply value our friendship and conversation over the years. May we both continue to be sensitive to ways the Spirit of Jesus calls us to act with confidence that God will use our actions in the present and in the Kingdom to come. Yet,

as Ellul writes, we do not know which acts God will retain and use. "I have to realize that the acts I think indifferent might be the very ones that God retains."[5] May we live in this freedom and hope.

Notes

1. In June 1983, I returned to the United States. I went to Honduras each summer, and while there visited Eduardo until he graduated and returned to his home city. His words are excerpts from a transcription of a cassette recording he sent me in January 1986.
2. Jacques Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, trans. Konrad Kellen (Knopf, 1967), 33.
3. *Ibid.*, 151.
4. Matthew 6:3.
5. Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, 71.

Meditation on Inutility

Jacques Ellul

In spite of God's respect and love for man, in spite of God's extreme humility in entering into man's projects in order that man may finally enter into his own design, in the long run one cannot but be seized by a profound sense of the inutility and vanity of human action. To what end is all this agitation, to what end these constant wars and states and empires, to what end the great march of the people of Israel, to what end the trivial daily round of the church, when in the long run the goal will inevitably be attained, when it is always ultimately God's will that is done, when the most basic thing of all is already achieved and already attained in Jesus Christ? One can understand the scandalized refusal of modern man who can neither accept the inutility of what he has done nor acquiesce in this overruling of his destiny. One can understand that the man who wants to be and declares himself to be of age is unwilling to acknowledge any tutor, and, when he surveys the giddy progress of his science, cannot admit that it has all been already accomplished by an incomprehensible decree of what he can only regard as another aspect of fatality. In fact, in spite of all that we have been able to learn in these pages, before God we are constantly seized by an extreme feeling of inutility. It begins already on the sixth day, when we come up against the inutility of the function of Adam in the garden of Eden. Here is this man, the lord and master of a creation which has been handed over to him and which is perfect when set under the eye of God. Yahweh takes man and sets him in the garden of Eden in order that he may till it and keep it. But what sense is there in tilling it? Already on the third day God has set up the order whereby plants and trees propagate themselves. Everything grows in abundance. God himself causes

Ellul, Jacques. "Meditation on Inutility." In *Politics of God, Politics of Man. Ellul Forum* 72 (Fall 2023): 15–22.

trees of all kinds to grow out of the soil and they are pleasant to the sight and good for food. What can tilling mean in these conditions? The point of tilling is either that things cannot grow without it, or that the various species should be improved, or that plants which produce food should be protected against noxious weeds, or that the yield should be increased. But in this perfect order there is no place for cultivation. And keeping? Against whom or what is man to keep it? What external enemy threatens the perfect work in which everything is good? What protection can man give to a world where God himself is the full protector? Against what disorder is he to keep it when order is the finished work of God? What place is there for tilling and keeping in the perfect fellowship and unity represented by God's work, in this creation in which there is no division, when everything has a part in everything else, when each fragment is not just a fragment united to all the others but also an expression of the total unity of a creation that reflects the perfection of its creator, when the bond between the Lord and the universe is of such perfection that the Lord's rest is the equilibrium of his creation? Tilling and keeping make sense only in a world in which things are divided, the unity is shattered, equilibrium has been disturbed, and the relation between the Lord and his creature has been destroyed. To till it and keep it? It is God's command and yet a useless service.

Then we are confronted by the law or will of God broken down into commandments entailing our works. But works to what end? What are we to make of the long struggle of the Hebrew people, which regards works as necessary to salvation, except that it is all useless? What are we to make of works performed to effect reconciliation with God, except that they are all in vain? The whole frenzied effort of well-intentioned man has been crushed. At a stroke we learn that in Jesus Christ salvation is given to us, that God loved us first before we did anything, that all is grace; grace—gracious gift, free gift. Life and salvation, resurrection and faith itself, glory and virtue, all is grace, all is attained already, all is done already, and even our good works which we strive with great difficulty to perform have been prepared in advance that we should do them. It is all finished. We have nothing to achieve, nothing to win, nothing to provide. On this road it is not that half is done by God and half by man. The whole road has been

made by God, who came to find man in a situation from which he could not extricate himself. But what about works? Not just the deadly works of the law, which are deadly because man thinks he can fashion his own salvation, which is his destiny, by them, but the works of faith, the works without which faith itself is dead, the works which are the expression of the new birth, the fruits of the Spirit—of what use are these works? Why should we do them? Here again we come up against the same inutility, the same vanity, as we contemplate God's omnipresence and stand in the perfect presence of his love. And yet works are demanded of us; they are God's command and yet a useless service.

We turn next to prayer, to the relation with the Father which Jesus himself taught, the gift which confuses us since what is given to us is that we may speak with God as a man speaks with his friend. But again the thought arises: Your Father knows what you need. Of what use is it, then, to confide our fears and plans to him, to present our requests and problems? God knows well in advance that we are not aware of all our needs, of all that saddens us, of all that lacerates us. He knows in advance. What good is it, then, to seek his blessing, his help, the gift of his Spirit? What good is it to pray to him for our mutual salvation and to present to his love the living and the dead? Does he not know them each one? For each one did he not on Calvary undergo the shed blood and the bowed head? For each one has he not decided in love from all eternity and brought his benediction in person to all distress and toil? And when we haltingly seek to express ourselves in prayer, we have every reason to be discouraged in advance: "You do not know yourselves what you should ask." You do not know your true needs or real good. Fortunately there is one to help. The Holy Spirit intercedes for you before the Father with sighs that cannot be uttered (Rom 8:26ff). But if this perfect prayer is rendered by other lips than ours, if it is out of our hands, of what avail is our own awkward formulation of our requests and complaints? Why put our hands together for him who himself prays for us? We are thus struck by the vanity of prayer, by its inadequacy and poverty. Prayer? It is God's command and yet a useless service.

Then there is wisdom, human wisdom, man's intelligent ordering of his life, the serious employment of right reason, the attempt to find the proper way

of life, the whole enterprise that takes form in political action and personal morality, in social work and poetry, in economic management and the building of temples, in the constant improvement of justice by changing laws, in philosophy and technology, the manifold wisdom of man which is also inscribed in the wisdom of God and which may be an expression of this wisdom, the first of all God's works that rejoiced before him when he laid the foundations of the world (Prov 8:22ff). And yet—are we not told that God has convicted of folly the wisdom of the world? "For the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men. […] Consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards" (1 Cor 1:l8ff). Human wisdom, futile pride, a Babel built by those who think they are wiser than God; man has been able to plumb the depths, to find gold there, and to explore the oceans, as Job says, "but where shall wisdom be found?" (Job 28:12). Human wisdom, an incomparable excuse for all that we are not, under the concealment of all that we do! But should we invent it? Should we reject all its work? Should we lead the world to nothingness, because nothingness is the way of resurrection? Should we already cut the harvest because the venomous fruits of wisdom are indissolubly linked to the adorable fruits of the same reason? It is not yet time, says Jesus, and he restrains the seventh angel; wisdom must pursue its work. Wisdom; it is the command of God and yet a useless service.

We now come to preaching. What language, what word, what image, what eloquence can pass on a little of this flame to others? All that we count most dear and profound and true, we want to communicate, not to make others like ourselves, not to win them or constrain them, but to show them the way of life, the irreplaceable way of love which has been given to us, so that they can have a share in the joy of this wedding. But the language is empty and conveys nothing; the form gives evidence of our own unskillful hands. Nothing becomes true except by the Holy Spirit. What can we say, and why should we say it, if everything depends on this unpredictable act of the Spirit of God who blows where he wills (John 3:8) and lays hold of whom he wills, if inward illumination is directly from God, who calls Paul when he is a persecutor and Augustine in his rhetorical pursuits and makes all truth known to both of them? If our words to even the dearest

of brothers are lifeless and fall to the ground unless the Holy Spirit comes and breathes on them, if our tongue is mute in spite of our illusions, as that of Zechariah was (Luke 1:19ff), or if, which is worse, it is unclean, as that of Isaiah was (Is 6:5), and if the angel alone can release it, what is the good of preaching and speaking and witnessing and evangelizing? Does not God do it quite well by himself? And yet—"How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? […] So faith comes from what is heard" (Rom 10: 14–17), and again: "Go […] teach all nations" (Matt 28:19). Futile preaching, and yet so important that Paul can cry: "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Cor 9:16). Preaching! It is God's command and yet it is useless service.

What we have been saying can all be summed up in the judgment which Jesus passes with intolerable clarity: "Say, 'We are unworthy servants.' " But we should isolate two different elements in this saying in Luke 17:10. Jesus says: "When you have done all that is commanded, . . ." Jesus is not evading the problem of law and order. There is a divine law, which is a commandment, and which is addressed to us. Hence we have to fulfil it to the letter. We have to do all that is commanded. The sense or conviction of the utter futility of the work we do must not prevent us from doing it. The judgment of uselessness is no excuse for inaction. It is not before doing or praying or preaching that we are to proclaim their inutility. It is not before their work that Elisha, Jehu, and Hezekiah proclaim the uselessness of their work, which is only a fulfilment of God's action. Pronounced in advance, futility becomes justification of scorn of God and his word and work. It is after doing what is commanded, when everything has been done in the sphere of human decisions and means, when in terms of the relation to God every effort has been made to know the will of God and to obey it, when in the arena of life there has been full acceptance of all responsibilities and interpretations and commitments and conflicts, it is then and only then that the judgment takes on meaning: all this (that we had to do) is useless; all this we cast from us to put it in thy hands, O Lord; all this belongs no more to the human order but to the order of thy Kingdom. Thou mayest use this or that work to build up the Kingdom thou art preparing. In thy liberty thou mayest make as barren as the fig tree any of the works which we have

undertaken to thy glory. This is no longer our concern. It is no longer in our hands. What belonged to our sphere we have done. Now, O Lord, we may set it aside, having done all that was commanded. This is how Elisha and Elijah finished their course.

The second point to be noted in the verse is that it is not God or Jesus who passes the verdict of inutility. It is we ourselves who must pronounce it on our work: "We are unprofitable servants." God does not judge us thus. He does not reject either us or our works. Or rather, he does not echo the verdict if we have passed it ourselves. If (as Christ demands) we judge ourselves in this way when we have done all we could do and accepted all our responsibilities, if we are able to view our own works and most enthusiastic enterprises with the distance and detachment and humor that enable us to pronounce them useless, then we may be assured of hearing God say: "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt 25:21). But if we pass in advance this bitter judgment of uselessness that paralyzes and discourages us, if we are thus completely lacking in love for God, or if on the other hand we magnify our works and regard them as important and successful (Jesus, little Jesus, I have so wonderfully exalted you, but if I had attacked you in your defenselessness your shame would have been as great as your glory […]), if we come before God decked out in the glory of these lofty, grandiose, and successful works, then . . . "woe to you that are rich" (Luke 6:24), for the rich man today is the successful man.

Everything is useless, and we are thus tempted to add: Everything, then, is vanity. We are tempted, for it is a temptation to do only what is useful and to assimilate the judgment of Ecclesiastes on vanity (1:2ff) to the inutility which we have been briefly sketching. Now this spontaneous reaction raises a question. Why are we so concerned about utility? Why do we regard what is not useful as worthless? In reality, we are obsessed at this point by the views of our age and century and technology. Everything has to serve some purpose. If it does not, it is not worth doing. And when we talk in this way we are not governed by a desire to serve but by visions of what is great and powerful and effective. We are driven by the utility of the world and the importance of results. What counts is what may be seen, achievement,

victory, whether it be over hunger or a political foe or what-have-you. What matters is that it be useful.

My desire in these meditations on the Second Book of Kings is to call our judgments into question. Yes, prayer is useless, and so too are miracles and theology and the diaconate and works and politics. The healing of Naaman served no purpose, nor did the massacres of Jehu.

The piety of Hezekiah could be no more effective than the impiety of Ahaz. But what then? We must fix our regard on another dimension of these acts, of all these acts that kings and prophets had to perform. It is just because these acts were useless and did not carry with them their own goal and efficacy that they are on the one hand testimonies to grace and on the other an expression of freedom. To be controlled by utility and the pursuit of efficacy is to be subject to the strictest determination of the actual world. To want to attain results is necessarily not to be a witness to the free gift of God. If we are ready to be unworthy or unprofitable servants (although busy and active at the same time), then our works can truly redound to the glory of him who freely loved us first. God loved us because he is love and not to get results. Our works are thus given a point of departure and they are not in pursuit of an objective. If we act, it is because God has loved us, because we have been saved, because God's Spirit dwells in us, because we have received revelation, and not at all in order that we may be saved, or that others may be converted, or that society may become Christian or happy or just or affluent, or that we may overcome hunger or be good politicians. Elisha goes to anoint Hazael because he is ordered to do so and not so that Hazael may do good. In this way the freedom of our acts, released from worry about usefulness or efficacy, can be a parable of the freedom of the love of God; but not in any other way.

It is thus in this bread cast on the waters (Ecc 11:1), in all these somber and passionate acts we have been reading about together, in all these past decisions, that we have seen outcroppings of freedom. Just because these acts were useless within the plan of God, man was free to do them. But he had to do them. To do a gratuitous, ineffective, and useless act is the first sign of our freedom and perhaps the last. The men of the Second Book of Kings, each in his own place, played their part for God. But none of them was

indispensable. None of them served in a decisive way the great plan of the Father accomplished in the Son, the mysterious purpose the angels wanted to look into (1 Pet 1:12). None of them did the radical deed, and each was free in his own way. "A wonderful freedom," one might say, "if it can have only vain and futile works as its object! If to be successful we must be subject to necessity or fatality, then so be it!" In fact, if nothing in the Second Book of Kings had taken place, if none of the decisions of these men had been made, little would have changed. Israel and Judah would have been led into exile, the remnant would still have been weak, and the plan of God would have been fulfilled as it was in Jesus Christ. Nothing would have been different in the facts, in what we call history. If we do not pray, if we do not do the works of faith, if we do not seek after wisdom, if we do not preach the gospel, nothing in history, nor very probably in the church, would look much different. The world would go its way, and the Kingdom of God would finally come by way of judgment. And yet there would be lacking something irreplaceable and incommensurable, something that is measured neither by institutions nor metaphysics nor products nor results, something that modifies everything qualitatively and nothing quantitatively, something that gives the only possible meaning to human life, and yet that cannot belong to it, that cannot be its fruit, that is not its nature. This is freedom: man's freedom within God's freedom; man's freedom as a reflection of God's freedom; man's freedom exclusively received in Christ; man's freedom which is free obedience to God and which finds unique expression in childlike acts, in prayer and witness, as we see these in the Second Book of Kings, within the tragic acts of politics and religion.

Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley.

Hope as Provocation

Charles Ringma

It is not my intention to fully set out Ellul's comprehensive biblical and sociological perspectives,[1] although I will have to refer to some of his central concepts. But my focus is to point out that Ellul in his writings provides a rich spirituality of hope that is theologically centered, is world-engaging, and has a vision for the life of the world to come. Put most simply, Ellul asserts that the "vision of God's people is both historical and prophetic and is lived in hope."[2] Therefore, "hope is in no way an escape into the future, but is […] an active force, now."[3] This hope, according to Ellul, is not simply a psychological imperative and posture. Rather, it is a theological and spiritual gift. He writes: "In Christ, [is] a power which can cause hope to be born," because "Jesus Christ is the living hope."[4] And for Ellul, hope is waiting for the Kingdom of God, the presence of the Spirit, and the "return of Christ." But this waiting is not passive; it is a "wide-awake waiting"[5] for God's final future.

Ellul has woven the theme of hope through much of his writing. It is important, therefore, to touch on some of the broader dimensions of his work. Ellul has primarily written in two fields, the sociological and the biblical-theological. In the latter, he writes as a lay theologian. And in this domain, he explores many themes from a fundamental dialectic of being "in Christ," and being "in the world." Ellul is deeply concerned about the way Christians and the faith community should live their faith in society. And he is not reluctant in pointing out the failures of the church in history.[6] At the same time, Ellul is hopeful about the transformative power of God's revelation in Christ in renewing individuals and the church and impacting

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society through the prophetic voice and actions of those who have been impacted by Christ.[7]

But unlike so many writers who write about God's concern for the world but do not demonstrate any insightful understanding of society, Ellul's writings constantly set out a reading of the world that shows its structures, its ideologies, its beauty, its deep follies, perversions, and lack of freedom and justice. Just focusing on one societal dimension, he is well known for the way he has engaged the problem of technology in contemporary society.[8]

I regard Ellul as a significant contemporary transformational and missional thinker, and I am always surprised to see his name missing in missional texts.[9] Ellul was both a scholar and an activist. His activism ranged from political involvement, to working with delinquent youth, to ecological issues. And this activism was informed by a critical and selective use of Marx, the philosophy of personalism, a modified Barthian theology, and a firm belief in the power of biblical revelation regarding the person and work of Christ. Andrew Goddard concurs. He writes that Ellul was

> an activist whose personalist convictions and faith in Jesus Christ made him a revolutionary dissenter and true "protest-ant," who in living out the Word of God radically critiqued and resisted established institutions and the direction of the modern world.[10]

What is of interest and significance in this broad profile of Ellul is that he was particularly sensitive in both his thought and activism to power issues[11] and the human propensity toward creating alternative kingdoms to God's Kingdom.[12] It is therefore not surprising, as Goddard points out, that "throughout his life he was constantly to be found on the margins,"[13] rather than in mainstream institutions and movements. Marginality is thus an important dimension of understanding Ellul and his work. Ellul himself writes, "Transformation of the church does not begin at its human head, but with an explosion originating with those at the fringe."[14] Clearly Ellul saw himself there.

This is not without profound implications. Ellul believed that so much of what we seek to do is "idolatrous" and with unexpected outcomes. Thus, while we need to work for the good, we also, and possibly often, have to work against the very good we are seeking to promote and institute. This in-

volves a profound self-critical posture rather than a flag-waving conformism or a self-congratulatory triumphalism.

What is possibly most significant here is that Ellul critiques the Christendom model, where church and society reinforce each other and where the church seeks political support to gain influence. The core idea, that the more powerful the church is, the greater good it can do in society, is, according to Ellul, an illusion. He makes the generalization that Christianity "should never seek to justify any political force," whether conservative or revolutionary.[15]

In this broad context, Christian hope for Ellul is not rooted in our religious institutions but in the revelatory power of God, who "descends to humanity and joins us where we are."[16] This power liberates us because it is the power of Christ, who is the "Liberator."[17] This encounter with Christ is a free gift of grace and is an act of faith. Ellul writes: faith "grasps me and takes me […] where I do not want to go."[18] While Ellul does not go into much detail regarding his own coming to faith, he does admit that the Bible "seduced me" and that he experienced "a very sudden conversion."[19] Stating it most simply, Ellul writes: I "can affirm […] that the hope is in God through Jesus Christ."[20]

To live this hope in Christ means that other hopes have to be relinquished. Ellul makes the point that if people "have their hope," then they "have no need of the hope that is in Christ."[21] And in his writings Ellul gives much attention to the hopes we should abandon, including political systems, the power of technology, and our own achievements that weren't birthed in the power of the Spirit. Ellul is deeply concerned that we so easily "deify" our own systems. He laments that we have created and embraced "the deified religious character of technology." We should, therefore, be iconoclastic and "destroy false images."[22]

But he also stresses that we need to abandon all our institutional attempts in the name of religion to control and market God. Ellul points out that "we wish to use the divinities" and that we attempt "to take possession of God."[23] Within this frame he is deeply concerned about institutional Christianity. His concerns include the way the church seeks social power,

its adoption of particular political ideologies when these are seen as convenient, its orientation toward conservatism, its cultural conformity, and its escape into "personal piety."[24]

While Ellul is seen by some as being too dark and pessimistic, this is a premature misreading.[25] Ellul is hopeful about God's faithfulness, the power of God's revelation, and the renewing and revitalizing work of the Holy Spirit.[26] He has hope for the renewal of the institutional church. He writes that there may be "dead institutional dogmas," but then new light and life appears. The Bible, he says, "is always alive," and the "Holy Spirit has not been defeated."[27] And even though he has some harsh things to say about the institutional church—"the archangel of mediocrity is the true master of the church"[28]—he also calls the church the bride of Christ and celebrates that Christ "cannot abandon the church."[29] But he believes that the church needs to be constantly renewed. He writes: "The church institution can be valid only if there is interference, shock, overturning, and initiative on the part of God."[30] This disruptive and renewing work is the work of the Spirit. For Ellul, while Christ is the genesis and model of our hope, the Holy Spirit is the great empowerer. He writes: "The Holy Spirit gives hope where all is despair, the strength to endure in the midst of disaster, perspicacity not to fall victim to seduction, [and] the ability to subvert in turn all powers."[31] One can hardly be more hopeful! But note where his hope is placed. It is a challenge to articulate Ellul's gestalt of hope, since it is so multi-layered, but here is my summary.

First, Ellul acknowledges that all people place their hope in something. Thus, hope is generic to the human condition.

Second, Christian hope—through the power of revelation and the Spirit—needs to denude us of our false hopes. Thus, Christian hope is both affirmative, and critical or deconstructive. It affirms the power of Christ and in his light exposes all false hopes, whether ideological or political. This has important implications. Christian hope is not an add-on. It is not all other hopes and also Christian hope, but hope in God alone. This makes conversion for Ellul such a profound one. One's whole world through Christ is turned upside down.

Third, as we seen, Ellul is not enamored with institutions, including the church, but he believes they are necessary and are important when they are impacted and renewed by the movement of the Kingdom of God. And that is what needs to constantly occur if hope is alive and active.

Fourth, Christian hope is not simply an emotional or psychological interiority, it is to be an embodied hope. He writes that Christians need to be an "incarnation" of Jesus Christ, who is "the living hope."[32] He further notes that "a hope lived and living is the prior condition for witness" to the world.[33] Elsewhere he elaborates: "The life of Christians is what gives testimony to God and to the meaning of this revelation" in Christ.[34] This is important. It is so easy to categorize hope in spiritual terms. And so easy to merely think of interiority. But Ellul's great challenge is that a living hope is where people live the gospel. Living that well occurs when the "church is forced back to its origins," and people are alive due to the "presence of the Holy Spirit" and people in humility pray and witness.[35]

Fifth, Ellul acknowledges the value of Moltmann's theology of hope. He notes that we are not marching toward the Kingdom of God but that "the Kingdom of God is bursting violently into our times."[36] However, the Kingdom does not come in the way we expect and certainly not in some grandiose way. Ellul speaks of "God's secret presence in the world" and says that this presence is in an "appearance of weakness."[37] He continues: "God strips himself of power and presents himself to us as a little child," but at the same time "the incarnation of Jesus Christ has achieved all that I could hope for in terms of relationship with God."[38] All of this means that for Ellul a very different understanding of kingdom and of power is at play.

God's way in the world is the way of Jesus Christ and of the Beatitudes.[39] This is the way of God's "upside-down" way of redemption, restoration, forgiveness, peacemaking, and justice. Ellul further points out that the Kingdom of God is "visible only in hope," that the Kingdom in Christ is fully not-yet, that we don't progress toward the Kingdom but that it comes to us as God's "sovereign initiative."[40] Ellul calls this way of being and living as "apocalyptic"—which is to live the "last" in the present and to "act at every moment as if this moment were the last."[41] This makes Kingdom-living not one of secure structures but a precarious journey of faith, hope, and love.

Sixth, it should be clear by now that Ellul does not sketch out for us a nice program of how to live the journey of life and hope well. Instead, he accents precarity, which makes the Christian life very dependent on God's continuing initiative in our life and service. Therefore it should not surprise us that Ellul seeks to present us with varied colors in the tapestry of hope that are usually missing in our sometimes benign theologies of hope. One usually missing strand has to do with the interplay between God's absence and our hope. Ellul writes that in the long journey of the church there are "periods […] or epochs of history in which God abandons man[kind] to [… its] folly," and that a "man [woman] is without hope because God is silent."[42] He immediately goes on to make the point that Christians can never say that because Jesus was abandoned for our sake, we will never be. He thus speaks of the silence of God and our experience of the "desert." But he makes the point that God's silence is never "final" and that we are always abandoned "in God."[43] All of this may point us in the direction of the dark night of the soul, but more specifically that our so-called mastery in the technological world can't be replicated in our relation to God. God is sovereign and not at all at our disposal. Ellul reiterates: that "Jesus Christ is God-with-us, does not at all preclude […] abandonment."[44]

Seventh, the silence of God can lead to an abandonment of hope. But Ellul wants to awaken us to the opposite. He believes that hope becomes alive "in our abandonment."[45] And he wants us to enter into "conflict with God," since "when God turns away, he has to be made to turn back to us again."[46] Here Ellul evokes the biblical tradition that one can wrestle with God, lament, and press God for answers.[47] These answers are not for our personal and often whimsical needs but have to do with God's presence and God's renewing work in our lives, the church, and the world. The point here is clear enough: we don't honor God's sovereignty when we fall into a sullen silence, but when we actively engage God. Ellul writes that we must not "sit in weary resignation," nor should we necessarily think that "we must repent" of something, but we "must arouse God" and recapture the idea that "God repented."[48] Ellul concludes: "Hope is protest […] before God."[49] There is nothing impious about any of this. The God of the biblical story is quite capable of dealing not only with our sin and folly but

also with our longing, our cries, and our lament. And God can more than cope when in faith and hope we cry out for the renewing presence of God. This is important for Ellul, for he notes that while we humans can do and achieve much, we "cannot fill the void left by the withdrawal of God."[50] And we should not try, for we will only come up empty-handed or embrace ineffective substitutes.[51] It is here that we most clearly see the theme of this discussion—hope is a form of provocation.

Eighth, hope in Ellul's thinking is not what we hope for due to our own efforts. Ellul writes: "Hope is not self-fulfilment by one's own powers."[52] He notes that hope is not "acting on the basis of the possible"; rather, "hope is the passion for the impossible."[53] This means that for Ellul hope is something that is radically different. He seeks to explain: hope is not a little addendum to our knowing and acting, but when knowing and acting are impossible, then "hope is born."[54] Thus there is an ultimacy to hope. And for Ellul this is clear. Hope, he says, takes place when all our "justifications" cease and we "connect hope with […] God's promise" and are carried by the Holy Spirit, "who leads us to this hope."[55]

So, what does all of this have to do with a missional spirituality of hope? Again, we have to note that Ellul does not explicitly use this terminology. But it is implicit in his writings. Here is an attempt to articulate this. Ellul is deeply concerned about the church. He believes that we need to face the brokenness in our institutions and to acknowledge our propensity to mediocrity and an unhelpful conservatism. He is also deeply concerned about the world and has made a vigorous attempt to understand it in terms of its ideologies and social structures.

He believes that our personal faith and the life of the faith community needs constant renewal through the revelatory Word in Christ through the life-giving Spirit. This is the irruption of the Kingdom of God in our lives and institutions. And it is this irruption that makes the church a prophetic community in its witness to the world. He stresses that hope, while a generic condition, needs to find its genesis and outworking in a hope in Christ, who as redeemer and icon of the new humanity is the fulfilment of all of our hopes. Hope in Christ has both present-day and future implications. And when our hope is weak and we are in the "desert" of life, we are

called to provoke God to again draw near to comfort and sustain us in the journey of faith. A transformational spirituality lies at the heart of Ellul's writings. And hope lies not in our conformity to the world, nor does it lie in the prowess of our religious institutions. It lies in the Spirit's ongoing disturbance and empowerment as people seek to live in Christ and in the Beatitudes as a witness to what God's final freedom will be like.

Notes

1. Andrew Goddard, *Living the Word, Resisting the World: The Life and Thought of Jacques Ellul* (Paternoster, 2002) has provided a wide-ranging interpretation of the life and work of Ellul.
2. Jacques Ellul, *On Freedom, Love, and Power*, ed. Willem H. Vanderburg (University of Toronto Press, 2010), 222.
3. Jacques Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on His Life and Work*, ed. Willem H. Vanderburg (Anansi, 1997), 107.
4. Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (Seabury, 1973), 162, 165.
5. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 260–61.
6. Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Eerdmans, 1986).
7. Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 2nd ed., trans. Olive Wyon (Helmers & Howard, 1989).
8. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Eerdmans, 1990). Ellul's concern about technology has to do with the instrumentalization of life and a commitment to efficiency as a final goal. He says this "structures modern society" and is so invasive that it leaves us "anxiety-ridden (*Perspectives on Our Age*, 73, 89). But he says that we can live with technology "in the perspective of the Kingdom" (*The Presence of the Kingdom*, 72).
9. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in a Theology of Mission* (Orbis, 1991), James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote, eds., *Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission* (Eerdmans, 1993), F.J. Verstraelen, ed., *Missiology: An Ecumenical Introduction: Texts and Contexts of Global Christianity* (Eerdmans, 1995).
10. Goddard, *Living the Word, Resisting the World*, 50.

11. Ellul rejects the use of violence and is deeply concerned about the misuse of power. The "anarchism" that he promotes is one that "acts by means of persuasion, by the creation of small groups and networks" that denounce oppression and work for freedom and justice. *Christianity and Anarchy*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Eerdmans, 1991), 11, 13.
12. Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*.
13. Goddard, *Living the Word, Resisting the World*, 51.
14. Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 212.
15. Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 126–27.
16. Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age*, 95.
17. Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age*, 103.
18. Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 162.
19. Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age*, 13, 14.
20. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 159.
21. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 160.
22. Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age*, 108.
23. Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age*, 95, 96.
24. Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 193.
25. Ellul speaks about his "known pessimism," but he exclaims: "I am not without hope, not at all." *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 167.
26. Ellul believes that "the Spirit is a power that liberates us from every bondage," and he laments that Christianity has "left the Holy Spirit unemployed." *The Subversion of Christianity*, 12, 13.
27. Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 201–202.
28. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 136.
29. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 136.
30. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 139.
31. Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 190.
32. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 165.
33. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 165.
34. Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 6.

35. Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 208, 209.
36. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 172.
37. Ellul, *What I Believe*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Eerdmans, 1989), 148.
38. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 150, 85.
39. Ellul stresses that in the Incarnation a "profound and instantaneous break has taken place" between the old order of things and the new that has come in Christ. Christians are to live that new order which Ellul calls the "new order […] of the Beatitudes." *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Eerdmans, 1976), 278.
40. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 207, 208.
41. Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 23.
42. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 121, 111.
43. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 126, 122.
44. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 129.
45. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 177.
46. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 179, 177.
47. Walter Brueggemann concurs. He writes: "It is Israel's characteristic strategy of faith to break the silence and so to summon the absent, negligent God of promise back into active concern." *Old Testament Theology: An Introduction* (Abingdon, 2008), 313.
48. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 183
49. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 180.
50. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 190.
51. Ellul in these and related remarks is in the domain of the "dark night of the soul." See St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Dover, 2003) and one man's experience of the dark night: Terry Gatfield, *Benson and the Narratives of the Organic Christian Life* (Morning Star, 2019). The "dark night" invites one to spiritual direction: see Christopher Brown, *Reflected Love: Companioning in the Way of Jesus* (Wipf and Stock, 2012). And to spiritual discernment: see Irene Alexander, *Stories of Hope and Transformation: Mary's Gospel* (Wipf and Stock, 2013).
52. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 189.
53. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 194, 197.

54. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 201.
55. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 204, 202, 210.

Jacques Ellul, Ivan Illich —and Jean Robert

Carl Mitcham

On November 11–13, 1993, the University of Bordeaux hosted a small international gathering on "Technique and Society in the Work of Jacques Ellul." In the closing session of the three days, a frail Ellul made a brief appearance; in light of his death the following May, this must have been one of his last public appearances. Immediately following Ellul, Ivan Illich, who had made a pilgrimage to Bordeaux to participate, gave an extended testimony to the importance of Ellul's work and its influence on his own thinking. In Illich's words, "Ellul continually recaptures the fundamental intuitions of his earliest work, always clarifying them more. His tenacity, humility, and magnanimity in the face of criticism make him an example one must bow to."[1]

Illich, whose *Tools for Conviviality* (1973) was an effort to point toward possible political reforms to address the culturally corrosive expansion of technique, went on to remark on how discovering Ellul's concept in the 1960s enabled him

> to identify—in education, transportation, and modern medical and scientific activities—the threshold at which these projects absorb, conceptually and physically, the client into the tool; the threshold where the products of consumption change into things which themselves consume; the threshold where the milieu of technique transforms into numbers those who are entrapped in it; the threshold where technology decisively transforms into Moloch, the system.

It is not difficult to find references by Ellul to the work of Illich as well. *Le Système technicien* (1977), which revisits and critically extends the argument of *La Technique* (1954), makes four pointed references to *Tools for Conviviality*. Illich's book, Ellul wrote, "has an excellent view of the technological

Mitcham, Carl. "Jacques Ellul, Ivan Illich—and Jean Robert." *Ellul Forum* 72 (Fall 2023): 35–48.

system when he shows that 'the functioning and design of the energetic infrastructure of a modern society impose the ideology of the dominant group with a force and penetration inconceivable to the priest [...] or the banker.' "[2] And "Illich sees [the] connection between technologies perfectly when he shows the correlation between teaching and technological growth, or between the latter and the massive organization of 'health.' "[3]

In January 1992, a year prior to the Bordeaux conference, the *Ellul Forum* published a guest edited issue (no. 8) on "Ivan Illich's Theology of Technology," seeking connections with Ellul's theological studies. In spring 2003, the *Forum* also published "Remembering Ivan Illich and Katherine Temple." Temple had written her PhD dissertation on Ellul under George Grant, the Canadian philosopher heavily inspired by Ellul, and had worked for years at the Catholic Worker house in New York, with which Illich had a spiritual relationship.

As has been the case with Ellul, Illich's life (1926–2002) and work is continuing among a diverse circle of colleagues and friends, of whom Jean Robert (1937–2020) was among the most dedicated. Robert was a Swiss French architect who wrote with equal fluency in French, German, Spanish, Italian, and English, and who in the 1970s immigrated to Mexico and became the designer of such convivial tools as the composting toilet. He does not explicitly reference Ellul in this article—and yet his argument about the transformation of tools or instrumentality into systems clearly echoes and offers a new anthropological perspective on what was a thread running through almost all of Ellul's sociological work. In fact, in another article authored during the same period as the one printed here, Robert makes an explicit connection. He describes Ellul and Illich as authors working "on parallel tracks in their efforts to name the post-industrial Erewhon and to devise concepts to understand its elusive new threats." In their later works both departed from their early

> analyses of "the technological society" and of "convivial tools," respectively, and proposed the word "*System*" to name what lies beyond the age of instruments. Both understood that a unique historical mutation had rendered obsolete the very concepts that had previously allowed them to be unusually acute analysts of the late Technological Age. Both saw the mutation of the technological society

> into the system a betrayal of the vocation of the West, by the West. This vocation is a call to freedom. Tools are compatible with freedom if they are available to both be taken up and put down. This double possibility can only be preserved when tools are strictly limited in power, size, and number.[4]

There is no "International Ivan Illich Association," though there is a website devoted to "Thinking After Ivan Illich," which includes a periodical named *Conspiratio*. Given the encounter between Ellul and Illich, it seems spiritually appropriate for the International Jacques Ellul Society to invite the heirs of Illich to visit.

The following text, written by Robert shortly before his death, owes its existence to Sajay Samuel, who is not only editor of the *Ivan Illich: 21st Century Perspectives* book series published by Penn State University Press, but has also curated a number of Robert's English texts for the *International Journal of Illich Studies*.[5]

Goodbye to Tools: On the Historicity of Technology

Jean Robert

The Critique of Tools in the "After Tools" Era

In the 1970s, Ivan Illich examined the use of modern technologies in four kinds of service institutions: schooling, transportation, medicine, and housing. In each of them he showed that technological tools requiring professional management beyond certain limits infringe upon people's innate and autonomous abilities to learn, walk, heal, or build a roof over their head. Schools muscle out vernacular learning possibilities; cars and public transportation paralyze the feet; doctors crusade against the historic arts of suffering and of dying; housing degrades the art of dwelling into a demand for square feet and housing units. Illich named this destruction of natural and culturally determined abilities by the institutional use of technology "counterproductivity," which he defined as the negative synergy between an autonomous and a heteronomous mode of production.

Illich not only denounced the "radical monopoly" that schools establish upon learning, cars and highways upon movement, doctors upon caring, and architects upon dwelling. He also focused attention on how the symbolic power inherent in the institutional use of modern technologies frames our fundamental certainties and creates the "axioms" out of which our "social theorems" are generated. Schools are dominated by professional teachers and professionally controlled boards; cars and highways are the products of engineering; in the medical encounter, doctors diagnose illnesses, prescribe medicines, and the medical profession has the power to sue unlicensed practitioners and to subpoena suspects of medical self-help; architectural associations define the standards that your house must obey and protect their members against self-builders. In every case, the encounter between the user and the professional and/or its design and standards shapes perceptions that are appropriate for a client or, in the case of medicine, a patient. Illich studied the client-professional relation as the cast in which, around 1970, the self-perception of most modern human beings was coined. He called this coined demand for professional services an "imputation of needs" that contributed to "the professionalization of the client."

From the beginning, Illich had the intuition that medicine stood out in this analysis, but it was not until two decades later that he could see clearly why: the certainties of the technological age affected medicine much later than any other profession. In medicine, counterproductivity took such dimensions that Illich had to adopt a new technical term to define it: "iatrogenesis." In *Limits to Medicine*, he documented clinical, social, and cultural iatrogenesis, that is, the professional generation of a multifaceted misery. Medicine had become an enterprise pretending to abolish the art of suffering by means of a war against traditional self-perceptions. Only so could it convince patients that the pursuit of happiness manifests itself as a quest for health. Thanks to the shift through the perception-shaping power of medicine, Illich could see education, transportation, health care, and housing institutions as four examples of mega-machines aiming at laundering the *conditio humana* of its tragic dimension.

Illich understood very early that his analysis had two sides: on the one hand, he had to propose a theory of technology in which there would be a

special case for its modern, industrial variety. On the other hand, he had to study the "sociology" of the special groups that monopolized society's most potent tools in order to produce services. These groups are generally called professions. The institute whose foundation he inspired and which Valentina Borremans headed from 1964 to 1974, CIDOC, became the world's leading place for the critical study of professions. Since the professions controlled the services that were supposed to meet the clients' needs, the professional was but an operator of a service-producing "tool." This correspondence to the contemporary belief that, when you are sick, for instance, you go to a doctor, who uses the tools or instruments of his profession to reestablish some disturbed function in your organism.

In later years, however, Illich was self-critical about the ingenuity with which he had put in the same bag hammers, schools, hospitals—that is, material devices and institutions—and expressed regret for having so misled the best minds among his listeners. He, and some others, had then crossed a watershed beyond which it was no longer possible to think in these terms:

> I was not aware of this watershed when I wrote many of my earlier books, and I am at fault for having persuaded some very good people who read me seriously that it makes sense to talk about a school system as a social tool, or about the medical establishment as a device.[6]

Nonetheless, he never changed a word of his early works. I sometimes suspect that his self-critique was in part a rhetorical device that he used to point to the epochal threshold that he, like many of his usual interlocutors, had crossed. Illich spoke of people who had abandoned the secular hopes of industrial society, of new agnostics who recognized one another, sometimes by their gait, more often by their laughters and their silences, but were unable to give names to their new perceptions:

> The people who speak to me, as opposed to those who spoke to me twenty years ago, recognize [… that they are in] a world, not the future world but the present world, which is built on assumptions for which they haven't found the appropriate names yet.[7]

But at the time of *Tools for Conviviality*, it still seemed reasonable to put in the same category a device that can be taken in the hand and a service agency, because both appeared as means to reach personal goals, which was

also congruent with the way the public at large perceived tools and institutions. This conflation simply revealed that the essence of an institution as well as of a tool could be expressed in the same way: a hammer was a device for nailing, and a school was a social arrangement for learning. Another way of saying it is that tools and institutions were understood as instrumental causes of the achievement of goals. In hindsight, the epoch in which you could not speak intelligibly about what happened to you without ushering in some instrumental causes of your predicament can be called the epoch of dominant instrumentality. Illich did not yet question this epochal mind frame. However, against the industrial "system's" tendency to foist bureaucratic controls and dependencies onto the relation between man and tool, he stressed autonomy (personal or communitarian), conviviality, and equity.

Conviviality required tools of the right size, while equity required defining limits to the tool's inputs and outputs. According to these two criteria, everything that could be causal in the attainment of goals could be called a tool, though to be good, a tool had to obey negative design criteria that set limits to its size, its inputs, and its outputs. Within these limits, a tool could maintain a harmonious morphological relation with the body and its natural powers. Such an equitable and convivial tool—be it a material device or an institution—would foster its user's autonomy and so be the contrary of an industrial tool. The opposition between convivial and industrial tools was illustrated by the contrast between a bicycle and a car. Beyond certain critical thresholds of size, power, and management, material tools as well as service institutions such as schools, highways, or hospitals inevitably became counterproductive. In retrospect, counterproductivity can be understood as a deviation from their "tool" quality, so *Tools for Conviviality* appears today as a defense of the "toolness" of tools, a plea for an equitable and convivial instrumentality conferring autonomy on the users of all kinds of tools. At the time when he wrote the book, Illich did not question tools *per se*. Instead, he proposed remedies for outsized instruments—whether objects or institutions—that, by exceeding critical thresholds, had come to produce exactly the contrary of what was expected of them. He defined a kind of dimensional envelope of the "toolness" of tool. The remedies to counterproductivity were politically defined limits destined to reestablish

and preserve the right proportion in size, accumulated power, or degree of necessary management. Whether remedies that would restore the "tool-ness" of systems can still be envisaged today will be discussed at the end of the article. In the light of Illich's latest reflections, this would require limits to size, power, and management, but above all a restoration of the distance or distinction between any tool and its user. If schools, for example, maim their students' autonomous-learning capacity and discourage autodidacts by putting them on meaningless tracks, not only their size and power must be reduced but their obligatory character must be questioned, for, if you cannot leave the school when you want, it is not a tool: the critical distance or the distinction between you and the school system has been suppressed, and you cannot decide to "take" or to "leave" it. You have become a *homo educandus*, a client glued to the educational institution that claims to serve you.[8] Comparable reflections apply to other big service agencies such as hospitals and transportation systems. What would the restoration of that distance mean in a social order whose fundamental principle seems to be the systemic suppression of it? Illich's notion of an institutional inversion might still enlighten this debate.

As Illich himself recognized later, in the 1960s and 1970s, he did not think of questioning the concept of instrumental cause or instrumentality itself: "Now, I'm the author of a book called *Tools for Conviviality*. When I wrote that book, I also believed that the idea of a tool as a means shaped to my arbitrary purpose had always been around."[9]

To summarize, when he wrote that book, Illich still thought that (1) tools have always been around (or, which is saying the same, that instrumentality is a natural category), (2) everything that "is shaped to my purpose" is a tool, and (3) as far as they can be used by people for their personal purposes, institutions are also "tools." Around 1980, however, he started to question some of the very assumptions of his previous books on tools and institutions. He also noted that others were undergoing a change in feelings and conceptions that echoed his. I'll try to summarize how Illich saw this change in his and many of his friends' perceptions and how he associated it with a historical watershed. The mutation of the professional-client relation will, once again, be the model.

"Before" the watershed, Illich already perceived that the relationship between the professional and his client shaped the client's auto-ception or self-perception. This shaping of perception resulted from an imputation by the professional of who the client was and an interiorization of this imputation by the client. In the case of medicine, this imputation implied a diagnosis, a prescription, and the threat of some sanction in case of a breach of the rules. The typical patient interiorized professionally imputed needs of health care by claiming his right to diagnosis, analgesics, preventive care, and medicalized death. A university student became a *homo educandus* by swallowing the suppositions of the school board and conceiving himself as a producer-consumer of knowledge. A car driver became *homo transportandus* by swallowing the car that paralyzed his feet and thus becoming a chauffeur of himself. In short, the patient "interiorized" the medical diagnosis; the student the school system; the driver the traffic system; the resident of an assigned housing the architects' standards, and they became respectively *homo iatrogenicus*, *homo educandus*, *homo transportandus*, and *homo castrensis* (billeted man). Yet, according to his instrumental perspective, Illich could still think of each of them as of somebody who could stand at some critical distance to the great institutions of health, education, transportation, or housing. Illich thought the typical consumer of services as "someone who stood [or: could choose to stand] in front of large institutions with the idea, at least, that he could use them for the satisfaction of his own dreams or his own needs."[10]

This "someone" was a citizen who—at least in the rich parts of the world—believed that, by claiming a right to his privilege, he provided grounds for its extension to everyone. The allusion to the satisfaction of "dreams and needs" clearly indicates that Illich thought that institutions, like domestic hammers or bicycles, ought to be at the service of personal intentions. Yet the important words in the phrase are "who stood" or who could still stand in front. When a hammer offers itself to you, you confront it with the capacity to take it or leave it. In his early books, Illich spoke thus of material tools and institutions in front of or at a distance from which you could stand to decide if you wanted to take them or leave them.

In the Grip of Systems

In his later reflections however, Illich realized that we had entered an epoch in which the distance, the space between a "tool" and its user that allowed the latter to take or leave the object that offered itself as a tool, was no longer warranted. In absence of this distance or space, you can no longer ponder if you want to take the object or leave it. It is "it" that takes you: the "tool" is no longer a tool, but a system. By Illich's definition, the fading of the distance between "tools" and you is the criterion by which to characterize the epochal change that started in the 1980s. So, the change about which he speaks as the end of "dominant instrumentality" and of "images" is also, in a way, the end of dominant space. When you could stand at a distance from a device like a hammer and decide if you were going to take it or leave it, you were in space: space belonged to the age of tools. When you feel taken, engulfed, "sucked" by a device like Windows, you are in the age of systems, in which there is no space left between you and what you perhaps still call "tools."

Illich acknowledged Max Peschek, an old student of his who led a seminar in Bremen over "the fundamental mistake of Ivan Illich," to have admonished him about his "error" in *Tools for Conviviality*. "What Illich did not understand, according to Peschek, and he is certainly right, is that when you become a user of a system, you become part of the system."[11]

In the 1980s, "after" the watershed, Illich understood that people were absorbed by artifacts or institutions that they could no longer hold at a distance and from which they could no longer distinguish their hand or their body. This mutation requires new concepts. In absence of that distance, space, or distinction, there can be no tools anymore but only systems that integrate you, "suck" you in. On the other hand, for all of the second millennium of European history, tools were not only around but it was also impossible to think without assuming their omnipresence. Illich's notion of a change of era implies that we can no longer think the world in which we now live as a vast bench offering us all kinds of tools for our purposes. In other words: tool and instrument are no longer adequate categories for thinking what is presently happening to us. And this goodbye to tools is also—and for the same reason: the fading of distance, space, and distinction—a goodbye to

images: when people let themselves be swallowed by a world conceived as a system, this world can no longer be represented in images, because an image presupposes a standpoint, that is, some "soil" under the feet and a distance between an eye and an object. An image implies that the observer and the observed are in the same space, in which the observer stands (on his standpoint) in front of, vis-à-vis, the observed object. In a world of images, space can still be called locative space, because it locates the eye and the object between which the image can be a medium. In the System Age, the distance that allowed one to situate oneself in front of the object he might take as a tool in his hand or as an image in his gaze is suppressed. A systemic world is made present to people's fantasy by a show of seductive random sequences of visual stimuli that are not images but what Illich, after Uwe Pörksen, called visio-types. Yet, without the possibility of "standing in front" to decide—which also means to distinguish—,

> the possibility of political engagement, and the language of needs, rights, and entitlements, which could be used during the 1960s and 1970s ceases to be effective. All one can wish for now is to be freed of glitches […] or to adjust inputs and outputs more responsively.[12]

Only so long as some standpoint vis-à-vis the reality was still possible could people feel that they had some power. The discourse on responsibility typical of these years reflected people's trust—already greatly an illusion—in the power of institutions and the possibility of their participation in them.

"After" the crucial passage from instrumentality into systems, Illich saw what happened to the typical client who had let himself be swallowed by a world conceived as a system. This world could no longer be represented—which always implied an extrinsic view, that is, a consideration-at-a-distance—but was experienced intrinsically as an interrupted flux of sensorial stimuli. In the new era, choice and decision, and responsibility, have lost any meaning. The characteristic human being has become someone who has been caught and swallowed by one of the tentacles of the social system. For him, there remains no hope to participate in the creation of something worthy of being hoped for.

> Having been swallowed by the system, he conceives himself as a subsystem, frequently as an immune system. Immune means provisionally self-balancing in spite of any change in environmental con-

> ditions. Fantastic talk about life as a subsystem with the ability to optimize its immediate environment—the Gaia hypothesis—takes on a gruesome meaning when it is used by someone who has been swallowed by the system to express his self-consciousness.[13]

In such a world, where the distance between an artifact and its user no longer exists and the gaze no longer has a standpoint, whatever seduces you into taking it as a means to ends, or into looking at it, is not the artifact's "tool quality" or "image quality," that is, its capacity to help you meet your ends or provide you with a representation of the world you live in. It's a form of seduction, for which there is not yet a name and to which Illich ascribed a religious character. In the religion of the system world, personal purposes and goals are illusory. The system world is no longer instrumental or representational, and to keep saying that it is a world of tools and images is to fail to understand its novelty. Yet, if Illich is right in perceiving that some twenty years ago we had crossed a major watershed, it must not have gone unnoticed by other thinkers.

The "Postmodern" Diversion

In the radio interview that David Cayley conducted with Illich shortly before his death, Cayley repeatedly invites him to acknowledge a convergence between his position and what is called postmodernity or postmodernism. For instance, Cayley once and again asks him if he agrees that "the most common way to speak of that new sense of being on the watershed is to call it the beginning of postmodernity," or if the terms "postmodern," "postmodernism" could suggest "a return to a pre-instrumental innocence."

In his responses, Illich compared such questions with baits that his interviewer was throwing him in order to make him speak on fashionable topics such as postmodern poetry, novels, and philosophy, on which Illich had nothing to say. At other times, however, he took Cayley's instigations as questions on the transformation perceived by many of his friends and interlocutors, and upon the discussion of which the term "postmodernism" had established a kind of radical monopoly.

> How has that passage, that mountain we came across in the 1970s, affected our sense of—I use the word for lack of anything better—

> timelessness and spatiality and frontier—the three inevitably go together. Now in order to speak about this transition, this transformation, the transmogrification to which you allude—we both know what you are alluding to even though we are not quite certain precisely what we are speaking about, and that's one of the difficulties in this particular conversation—in order to understand this transmogrification, I at least have to look at it historically.[14]

Is not what had happened to tools and images—to "technology" and "representation"—namely, the loss of the critical distance, the distinction between body, hand, and tool or eye, standpoint, and object, now also affecting philosophy, literature, poetry, architecture? Postmodernism is a way of talking in which the speaker seems to know the box he is alluding to, yet the box has no outside from which he could see it and he is not quite certain either of what there is in the box. What does remain of philosophy in the age after tools, images, and space? For me, more than the postmodernist's answers, this question invokes George Gamow's Flatland. The fallen man who slowly wakes up after having been almost beaten to death might perceive that, sucked by the soil, his body is part of it like a corpse. However, if he finds the strength to stand up, he will distinguish himself from the mud in which he lay unconscious for so long. In space, at a distance, the soil will acquire a relief, curvatures: here the gutter into which he had been thrown, the road pavement, the embankment of a railroad. Perhaps the police will want to survey the site of the assault, take measurements of its particularities. Such measurements of the soil's curves can be called extrinsic, taken from a distance that maintains the distinction between the soil and the body.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, physicists announced that the three-dimensional space in which we experience our bodies to be immersed is actually curved in a way that we cannot perceive because we are "glued" to its curvature: no extrinsic measurement can be taken of it. To explain to laymen like me how we can take intrinsic measurements of our invisibly "curved" world, Gamow invited us to imagine a purely two-dimensional universe, Flatland. Like us in our "three dimensions," Flatlanders would be glued to their two-dimensional space, unable to perceive its curvature (imagine that Flatland is a sheet of paper that, "from outside," you can bend at will). The only way for Flatlanders to take a measure of Flatland's

curvature, Gamow taught us, is to take it intrinsically, by verifying if the Pythagorean theorem holds and evaluate local curvatures as deviations from it. I don't know if I understood Gamow correctly, but it seems to me that what he suggests is that Einstein's geometric reconstruction of gravity as local curvature of a four-dimensional manifold or "space" is the equivalent of what Flatlanders were supposed to be doing in Gamow's tale. Postmodernism is a multidimensional Flatland that can be experienced only intrinsically, in the sense that it abolishes all the distances that allowed you to distinguish yourself from it.

In my studies—strongly influenced by Illich's work and conversations with him—two changes of the sense of the *ubi*, the "here" and the "now," mark the beginning and the end of modern times:

> (1) the passage of my somatic presence (my carnal "here") within a cosmic order to the location of my body in a universal container, a passage that I define as the transition from a *topocosmos* to a locational space;
>
> (2) the demise of locational space by the suppression of extrinsic distinctions and hence of particular standpoints.

Conceptually, space had always been a box: unbound because lacking an enclosure, thus "beyondless," but boxing all what exists simultaneously and, according to Einstein, finite. Yet, due to the limited power of the feet, even in locational space every place had always had a beyond in the walker's perception. Albrecht Koschorke stresses the "*aporia* of the horizon" in a world without a beyond because all frontiers have been trespassed and all once-unknown territories explored and conquered. It is another way to express that the demise of all frontiers also marks the end of critical distance, "extrinsic" considerations, and finally of locational space itself.

All That Comes to an End Had a Beginning

What Cayley insisted on calling "the beginning of postmodernity" Illich invited him to see as "the end of the age of dominant instrumentality." What now comes to an end, "at least in the mind, and the feeling, and the body and the breathing of some people" is the age of tools and tool-making,

of instruments: it is the age of instrumentality or of technology. And if it comes to an end now, it had a beginning. The certainties that are fading today "are of a kind for which the Middle Ages and the times before had no sense or taste." So there was an epoch in which the certainties of existence of our youth—such as space and time, the here and the beyond, tools and images—were conditions for thinking and speaking in an intelligible way. And there must have been a time before it, in which people resolutely turned their backs on such certainties.

Notes

1. English translations of both statements can be found in *Technology in Society* 17, no. 2 (1995): 231–38.
2. Jacques Ellul, *Le Système technicien* (Calmann-Levy, 1977), chap. 4, note 22.
3. Ellul, *Le Système technicien*, chap. 6, note 4.
4. Jean Robert, "Beyond Tools, Means, and Ends: Explorations into the Post-Instrumental Erewhon," in Glen Miller, Helen Mateus Jerónimo, and Qin Zhu, eds., *Thinking Through Science and Technology: Philosophy, Religion, and Politics in an Engineered World* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2023), 244.
5. Consult the *International Journal of Illich Studies* 6, no. 1 (2018) and 8, no. 1 (2021).
6. David Cayley, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as Told to David Cayley* (Anansi, 2005), 77.
7. Cayley, *The Rivers North of the Future*, 221.
8. The point where he had dropped out: a hierarchy of drop-outs.
9. Cayley, *The Rivers North of the Future*, 72–73.
10. Cayley, *The Rivers North of the Future*, 162.
11. Cayley, *The Rivers North of the Future*, 78.
12. Cayley, *The Rivers North of the Future*, 162.
13. Cayley, *The Rivers North of the Future*, 163.
14. Cayley, *The Rivers North of the Future*, 180–81.

Review of *The Culture of Cynicism: American Morality in Decline*

Jason Hudson

Richard Stivers, *The Culture of Cynicism: American Morality in Decline*. Wipf and Stock, 2023.

This 1994 book by Richard Stivers has been republished by Wipf and Stock with a new introduction. *The Culture of Cynicism* is a stimulating work that traces the ebbs and flows of American morality, from its roots in the Enlightenment, through its assimilation to industrialism, and finally to the technological morality of power in the twentieth century. In his introduction, Stivers suggests that his thirty-year-old analysis holds true for technology today. I agree; *The Culture of Cynicism* is profoundly prescient and is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the impact of technology on morality and the modern Western psyche.

Despite his claim that today's technology and those considered in his book are of a quantitative, not qualitative, difference (viii), Stivers leaves the reader to make the connections. He examines, for example, the influence of '80s and '90s television series, such as *Cheers* and *Married with Children*; but he has not edited this edition to demonstrate the qualitative links between phenomena of a quantitative difference. The reader must fill in the interpretive lacunae. An example that feels particularly cogent is this statement about the mechanization of daily life:

> My use of technique objectifies my abilities, just as the other's use of technique reduces me to an abstraction, to an object. Simultaneously technique fragments the personality because of the multiplicity of techniques. Each technique draws upon a different self; each

Hudson, Jason. Review of *The Culture of Cynicism: American Morality in Decline*, by Richard Stivers. *Ellul Forum* 72 (Fall 2023): 49–54.

> technique employed by the other turns me into a different object, a different abstraction. (93)

Though written before the widespread availability of mobile phones, it could just as well apply to the performative nature of social media or the quantification of daily experiences by wellness and dating apps. However, that kind of analysis is left to the creativity of the reader.

On one hand, the failure to bring the analysis into the present is a weakness. Some contemporary readers will likely snicker at the dated references or his condemnation of rock-and-roll music. On the other hand, I suspect that I found the reading experience stimulating precisely because I had to draw many of the ideas into the present myself. The need to trace the gap between 1994 and 2023 invites the reader into the analysis and asks her to try on the critical framework to see if, in fact, it holds.

Stivers demonstrates a deep knowledge of Jacques Ellul's thought. Students of Ellul are likely to find Ellul's ideas explicated with a clarity and depth that will enhance their own understanding. More importantly, Stivers presses Ellul's thoughts forward by bringing key ideas from Ellul's work into conversation with cultural criticism, political theory, and sociological research. Stivers's voice and critical framework are clearly present as well. His subject mastery is clear. This alone makes the book valuable for those seeking to think deeply about Ellul's analysis of technique.

Perhaps the strongest example of Stivers pressing beyond Ellul is his examination of the movement from the social to the technological milieu. He shows how an economic morality, dominant in the nineteenth century, gave way to a technological morality in the twentieth. Ellul's understanding of these shifts is central to his overall thesis about the technological age. Stivers, however, adds layers of depth to Ellul's account by presenting the material, sociological, and psychological conditions under which these shifts occurred and the effects they had on the moral imagination of each emerging era.

Stivers begins his moral genealogy in the Middle Ages and moves through the Reformation and Enlightenment. Given his ultimate concern for American morality, he slows his examination to trace what he sees as America's

central moral symbols, success/survival and health/happiness, through industrialization and into the twentieth century. In chapters 2 and 3, he maps these moral symbols onto a fascinating historical account of technological ascendency. "By the 1830s," he writes, "the idea of success had been translated into a moral program" (22). Economic success was interpreted as an indicator of virtue. But a shift occurred at the turn of the century toward collective notions of success, technological success propelled by the myth of progress. The success/survival aspect of technological morality is propelled by organizational technique and bureaucracy. The twentieth-century emphasis on collective success shifts the focus for individuals toward health and happiness, primarily through adjustment. Here again, readers will hear strong echoes of Ellul. What Stivers calls the ephemeral and compensatory aspects of a technical morality (adjustment), Ellul calls "human technology." These methods are meant to help humans adjust to the "abstract and impersonal nature of a society dominated by technology" (3). Stivers understands these ephemeral aspects of technological morality to be established by public opinion and peer-group norms.

Public opinion and peer-group norms lead to Stivers's extended analysis of media and television. Here his analysis is both dated and prescient. In many ways the psychological conditions of television have come into full bloom with social media and on-demand streaming. In this section, "From the Moral to the Visual: The Compensatory," Stivers again demonstrates a deep engagement with Ellul. He explores the relationship between truth and reality in relation to television as his key example of modern visualization. Stivers takes up complex ideas that are central to Ellul's *Humiliation of the Word* and presents them with a clarity that makes them seem obvious. He also shows how the flattening-out of truth into reality leads to meaninglessness. Language in a technological age is objective (technical) or purely subjective, and the interpersonal connections that are needed for meaning-making erode.

In the absence of meaning, we are left with mere spectacle and a cynical, nihilistic morality whose central value is power. Here again Stivers's analysis proves profoundly prescient. His insight into the technological morality of thirty years ago not only holds true, it seems to explain the modern day

more accurately. For example, when the political right in America applauds the dismantling of tradition and institutions, and the left wields the bloated power of mega-corporations, we are witnessing the erasure of meaning and the valuation of power. Political discourse, so diminished by television, has been reduced to meaningless spectacle by social media. Stivers could not have anticipated how the decades following his work would continue to prove his thesis painfully accurate.

I will begin considering the weaknesses of *The Culture of Cynicism* by reaffirming my praise. Stivers's writing style is difficult. Despite sections of the book moving chronologically, it is not organized by linear argument. Rather, Stivers circles back to the same ideas, adding shade and nuance as he explores various historical or technological phenomena. At times he illustrates his ideas with appeals to literary fiction. At times he appeals to cultural examples contemporaneous with his writing. Without a clear methodology or systematic outline, the writing feels meandering. Nonetheless, the reader will have a sense that Stivers's critical framework is highly technical and rigorous. The reader can picture Stivers at a chalkboard, drawing a complex diagram of how the compensatory and ephemeral relate to peer-group norms and images, or how economic morality moved through precise phases, giving way to technological morality. However, his cyclical writing style makes it difficult to recreate this framework, at least upon one reading. Still, it is worth the effort; his framework is accurate and helpful.

I conclude with two more criticisms. The first is less substantial but not inconsequential. The title does not adequately reflect the book's content. There is no prolonged examination of cynicism as a concept. The argument builds to a brief mention of cynicism in the concluding pages. However, even there, the term is coupled with nihilism, which he calls cynicism's "twin disease" (180). Technology, power, consumerism, and meaninglessness all feature more centrally in the book's overall thesis. This does not undermine the validity of the book's arguments. Nonetheless, readers will be disappointed if they expect to find in these pages an argument focused on cynicism as a central component of American moral decline.

My second critique is more substantive. Stivers's concluding moral vision is underdeveloped and ultimately falls flat. He concludes, "What is required,

then, is a life-affirming ethic […] of non-power and freedom" (180). He further explains that this ethic is a revolution against technological morality. He clarifies that the change he advocates cannot come by "resurrecting traditional values. It will come from the attempt to live out as nearly as possible an ethic of non-power" (181). He does not clearly define non-power nor how and where this ethic is to be lived, aside from the rather vague assertion that it is a life-affirming ethic that radically opposes technological civilization. Though earlier in the book he is clear that he is concerned about the move away from Christian morality, he is not clear in the end if his vision for non-power is grounded in Christianity or another ethical framework.

Perhaps Stivers intended his reader to take up these concluding concepts and follow them forward in Ellul. However, wanting the theological depth that Ellul brings to these concepts, I was left wondering why we should embrace non-power. What virtue drives us to non-power? Stivers runs into the age-old ethical problem of making an "ought" of an "is." He describes the loss of meaning, hopelessness, commodification of lifestyles and relationships, moral valorization of power, and so on. Certainly, these are moral problems. But a futurist may argue that we are experiencing a difficult but necessary transition phase that will give way to a welcomed technological morality in which ambiguities are reduced and compensatory pleasure and meaning are supplied *ad infinitum* by commodities. Conversely, Ellul grounds his ethic of non-power in Jesus's example. It is a particularly Christian calling and is not grounded in any good outside the Word of God. Ellul's ethic is not effective. Like sheep presenting themselves to wolves, those who take up an ethic of non-power can have no assurance of success. They must only trust that God's strength will be perfected in human weakness.

The failure to develop the central moral claim is indeed a weakness of *The Culture of Cynicism*. However, Ellul has developed non-power across several works, most notably *The Ethics of Freedom*, *To Will & To Do*, and *If You Are the Son of God*. Stivers cites Ellul frequently. Because non-power is so central to Stivers's conclusion, it may have been worth acknowledging that the concept he merely introduces can be explored further in Ellul.

I offer these criticisms because this book is worthy of deep engagement. It will greatly help anyone who wants to think seriously about our technological age and its moral underpinnings. While Stivers's book can stand on its own merit, its strengths are made stronger and its most significant shortcomings are mitigated when it is read as a companion to Ellul's work.

Review of *Propaganda 2.1: Understanding Propaganda in the Digital Age*

John Fraim

Peter K. Fallon, *Propaganda 2.1: Understanding Propaganda in the Digital Age*. Cascade, 2022.

This work by media professor Peter Fallon offers a unique perspective on the ambiguous topic of propaganda. Fallon is professor of journalism and media studies at Roosevelt University in Chicago and active in the Media Ecology Association. Media ecology is the study of media, technology, and communication and how they affect human environments.[1]

Few books on propaganda have been written from a media-ecology perspective. In *Propaganda 2.1*, Fallon provides a framework for better understanding modern propaganda by tracing the evolution of propaganda from its origin in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* to the present, through three distinct eras. The first era lasted two thousand years, from the fourth century BC to the beginning of the twentieth century. The second era spanned the greater part of the twentieth century. The third era is the digital age. Each era of propaganda has a close connection to the media and communication technologies of its time. As propaganda evolved across these eras, the essential locus of propaganda moved from the content of a message to its context: from the message to medium.

Fallon locates the beginning of propaganda as a technique in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Rhetoric established two-way communication, in which one tries to control others' ideas and actions through persuasion. Interactive communication changed to mass communication in 1440 with the invention of Gutenberg's printing press. The publication and distribution of Martin

Fraim, John. Review of *Propaganda 2.1: Understanding Propaganda in the Digital Age*, by Peter K. Fallon. *Ellul Forum* 72 (Fall 2023): 55–62.

Luther's ninety-five theses in 1517 was the first important event of mass communication. However, Fallon locates the roots of modern propaganda in the Vatican's establishment of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (1622). For nearly half a millennium, he says, "we rarely recognized propaganda except when associated with religious controversy" (xxv).

Fallon notes that propaganda at the beginning of the twentieth century was still deeply rooted in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and methods of persuasion. For almost two thousand years, the technique was little known outside the small group of scholars who could read Greek. But the ideas of *Rhetoric* were made available to English readers in 1909, when *Rhetoric* was first translated into English. The persuasive techniques of the book found greatest influence in the new disciplines of advertising, sales, and public relations. Aristotle's methods found a rebirth in an industry seeking to create a society of mass consumers.

Propaganda was further developed as a technique during World War I through the efforts of Edward Bernays (Freud's nephew), Harold Lasswell, George Creel, Walter Lippmann, and Edward Filene. Jacques Ellul, explicating this period, writes, "The aim of modern propaganda is no longer to modify ideas, but to provoke action."[2] For example, the Committee on Public Information (CPI) was created during World War I to influence US public opinion and provoke action in support of the war effort.

When Ellul wrote in 1962 that "the propagandist must utilize all of the technical means at his disposal—the press, radio, TV, movies, posters, meetings, door-to-door canvassing,"[3] he was describing what Woodrow Wilson intended when he assigned George Creel to create and head the CPI. In just over twenty-six months, from April 14, 1917, to June 30, 1919, the CPI used every medium available to create enthusiasm for the war effort and to enlist public support against the foreign and perceived domestic attempts to stop America's participation in the war. This was the first intentional use of the US government to covertly manipulate the minds of its citizens.

Propaganda began to shift away from persuasion in the middle of the twentieth century, with systems and information theory and the publication of

Norbert Weiner's *Cybernetics* in 1948. With systems theory and cybernetics, propaganda was no longer an isolated message but a part of a feedback loop within a system containing inputs and outputs.

Two important components of information and systems theory are entropy and redundancy. Entropy is the degree of randomness or disorder in a system and is part of the natural tendency of all ordered systems to move toward disorder and chaos as energy dissipates. Redundancy is the opposite of entropy and is the rule-based part of a system that allows order and predictability. It is the part of a message not determined by the sender: repetition, amplification, parallel-channel reinforcement, and structural redundancy. Unlike entropy, redundancy is a human invention, developed to bring clarity to human communication. Entropy is an inevitable force of nature. In effect, redundancy is a set of techniques invented by humans to fight the forces of entropy.

Fallon follows the evolution of propaganda—under the influence of systems theory—toward its flowering into what he calls propaganda 2.0. In many ways, Fallon's understanding of modern propaganda centers on Ellul's work. Fallon opens his book by explaining that his goal is not to improve upon Ellul but rather to "conform Ellul's analysis to the contours of our digital landscape" (xiv). Ellul's model demands a rethinking of propaganda after the influence of systems theory and cybernetics.

Fallon gives a brief presentation of the key characteristics and categories of Ellul's analysis of propaganda: the conditions, necessity, and the psychological and sociopolitical effects. In *Propaganda*, Ellul challenges some common notions, such as that education is the best defense against propaganda. Ellul shows the opposite: education is a prerequisite for propaganda.

It is apparent that by 1954 Ellul had become a believer in the systems thinking of Weiner. For Ellul, propaganda was systematic. The technological system strives to maintain balance, momentum, and structural integrity. Propaganda plays an integral part in the technological system, making it consistent and predictable (redundant) regarding human behavior, which by its nature tends to be inconsistent and unpredictable (entropic).

A key component of the new systematic propaganda was the creation of what Ellul called "total propaganda," which refers to his idea that mass society must always use all technological means at its disposal. Individual technologies address specific dimensions of a propagandized message in its own way, thereby giving the illusion of a diversity of messages. For example, movies can entertain us and appeal to our emotions by the symbolic evocation of mythic themes (bravery, patriotism, undying love, transformation through hardship, etc.), while televised sports provide credible support for the value of competition—a central, fundamental value of the technological society. News programming allows us to feel involved in the public life of society, to form opinions about current issues. Entertainment diverts our attention from the harsher realities of life in the technological society. Nevertheless, the apparent diversity is an illusion as each instance serves the singular purpose of creating a predictable human response through propaganda.

Propaganda 2.1 (The Twenty-First Century)

Ellul died in 1994, before the advent of propaganda 2.1. While the model for propaganda 2.0 in the twentieth century was the certainty of redundancy, the model for propaganda in the twenty-first century, the digital age, is the uncertainty of entropy. It is the age of decentralized information, in which we are exposed to diverse and often paradoxical points of view. It is the difference between centralized control of information based on a one-to-many model, and a completely unregulated, multidirectional, free flow of information.

One of the conditions of the modern world is anxiety. A main factor creating anxiety is the breakdown of the uniform narrative (or information redundancy) that sustained propaganda 2.0. The model of systematic, total propaganda described by Jacques Ellul is a system of maximum redundancy. It is a system based on the mass manufacture and distribution of uniform bits of information, a system embodying a one-to-many flow of information. All media in the system of propaganda work together and reinforce one another.

In the digital age, people are exposed to diverse and often paradoxical points of view. As Fallon notes, propaganda 2.1 is a model of competing propagandas, of uncertainty and doubt. It is a model of seemingly infinite information and extremely high amounts of randomness and entropy.

Perhaps more than anything else, propaganda 2.1 is characterized by paradox. Marshall McLuhan, for example, saw this paradox in his observation that the world was becoming a "global village" through the propagation of media technologies.[4] The electronic global cloud of information tended to make humans seem special and distinct and at the same time reduce them to insignificance as one of a mass in the global village. Another example is that while there are far more opportunities for learning in such a connected, global environment, much of the new information encountered in the entropic system is questionable and false. Fallon says, "It becomes, then, our responsibility to sort through it, weigh it, evaluate it, and either accept it or reject it" (104).

Surprisingly, propaganda 2.1 retrieves the interactivity of propaganda 1.0. Individuals can become not only passive receivers of information, but active creators and distributors as well. If, as McLuhan insisted, media act as extensions of the senses, the internet represents the extinction of the senses across the globe. While the internet may be the global extension of mind, the mind is a complex and chaotic phenomenon. As Fallon observes,

> Anyone who promised that the Internet was going to release us from the oppressive mass manipulation of the id and the superego that we've lived under since the days of Edward Bernays and extend only the balanced ego was, purely and simply, lying to us. The same genomic mutation that released creative expression, intellectual ferment, and serious debate also opened the door to reactionary close-mindedness, blatant ignorance and racism, flame wars, lies, and bullying. (109)

The paradox of propaganda 2.1 is represented by two views of the internet: cyber-utopian and cyber-dystopian. Cyber-utopians have a religious zeal about the emerging cyber world. They believe the future will be increasingly better, because humans have digital tools to design and engineer a better world.

In the early years of the internet, the cyber-utopians were predominant. Perhaps the most influential preacher of the posthuman cyber-utopian gospel was Ray Kurzweil. He coined the term "Singularity" to describe "a future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed" (116). The Singularity represents the merger of our biological thinking and existence with our technology, resulting in a world that is human but transcends our biological limitations.

Other leading cyber-utopians were Nicholas Negroponte and Kevin Kelly, co-founder of *Wired* magazine. In his book *What Technology Wants*, Kelly not only champions machine intelligence but also anthropomorphizes the internet, referring to it as a sentient being, an "intelligent superorganism."[5] Kelly's view echoes that of the twentieth-century French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who believed evolution is a divinely directed process with a clear and unambiguous direction, of ever-increasing organization and complexity, whose fulfillment is the fulfillment of all creation—the Omega Point.

Cyber-dystopians are now dominant. They fear the technological future. One of these prophets of digital doom is Andrew Keen, a Silicon Valley insider who rethought his early fascination with the internet and now calls it "the greatest seduction since the dream of world communism" (124). Keen's 2015 book, *The Internet Is Not the Answer*, is a scathing critique of a world created by utopian speculation and optimism about the promises of the internet. Among his economic charges, he argues that the internet has become a central cause of the growing gulf between rich and poor and the hollowing out of the middle class. Rather than generating more jobs, the digital disruption is a principal cause of unemployment. Rather than creating more competition, it has created new immensely powerful monopolies such as Google and Amazon. Rather than creating transparency and openness, Keen says the internet is creating a panopticon of information-gathering and surveillance, by which users are commodified and sold. Rather than creating more democracy, it empowers the rule of the mob. Rather than fostering a renaissance, it has created a culture of voyeurism and narcissism.

Fallon notes that of all the recent cyber-utopian or dystopian literature, Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows* is perhaps the most trenchant and significant, and certainly the one most grounded in empirical science. Carr relies on recent studies in neuroscience to support his argument that the internet is changing the structure of our brains, damaging them. This growing body of research supports the argument that the internet threatens to undo much of the development that reading generates in the human brain.

Fallon goes on to provide a tour of some of the phenomena of this new media landscape. He discusses such subjects as privacy and social media, the freeing of information, the influence of WikiLeaks, and characters such as Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning, and Edward Snowden. He discusses the net-neutrality movement and the movement to nationalize the internet and the electromagnetic spectrum. He contends that the FCC's pre-1984 definition of public interest needs to be restored.

Near the end of his examination of propaganda 2.1, Fallon calls for more deep reading. If we are to be responsible citizens in the era of propaganda 2.1, he argues, we must know how to think more critically. Information is important in the construction of knowledge, but information alone does not constitute knowledge. Paraphrasing the French polymath Henri Poincaré, "Knowledge is built of information in the same way a house is built of bricks; but an accumulation of bits of information is no more knowledge than a pile of bricks is a house" (163). In effect, there has to be a specific structure or organization of information, as well as a context within which to fit those pieces of information, before one has knowledge. Without these, all we have is profoundly entropic noise.

In the concluding chapter, Fallon articulates a profound ambivalence about the internet and other digital technologies in propaganda 2.1. On the whole, he finds himself more skeptical than enthusiastic about the digital revolution. He places himself in the camp of cyber-dystopians. He worries that the internet is a

> Trojan horse that ransacks our most precious and secret belongings when we welcome it into the privacy of our homes; or that we're becoming gadgets, mere appendages of the technologies that ought to be serving us; or that the easy retrieval of concise snippets of

> decontextualized information is hurting our ability to think deeply and critically; or that, rather than liberating us, the internet is morphing into a tool of government surveillance and oppression; or that the chaotic and constantly changing nature of digital information is destroying whatever remnants of a unifying and coherent narrative our culture ever had. (166)

While Fallon claims his book was written as an addendum to Ellul's *Propaganda* to "update and adjust the ideas found in that book for the twenty-first century" (xiii), he is also greatly influenced by McLuhan. In fact, the crux of Fallon's investigations is the synthesis of the contributions of McLuhan and Ellul, namely McLuhan's invisible environment of medium and Ellul's all-encompassing technique. An important question Fallon raises but does not answer is whether propaganda 2.1 might best be understood through the lens of media ecology and Ellul's thought.

I find it immensely hopeful that the elusive subject of propaganda is being viewed from the perspectives of media ecology by many in the International Jacques Ellul Society. Fallon, likewise, calls us to a new understanding of propaganda found in the confluence of Ellul's and McLuhan's ideas.

Notes

1. The theoretical concepts were first proposed by Marshall McLuhan in his 1964 work *Understanding Media*, and the term "media ecology" was introduced by Neil Postman in 1968.
2. Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (Vintage, 1973), 25.
3. Ellul, *Propaganda*, 9.
4. Cf. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964).
5. Kevin Kelly, *What Technology Wants* (Penguin, 2011).

Review of *Jacques Ellul and The Technological Society in the 21st Century*

David Lovekin

Helena M. Jerónimo, José Luís Garcia, Carl Mitcham, eds. *Jacques Ellul and the Technological Society in the 21st Century*. Springer, 2013.

In June of 2011, an international bilingual conference, "Rethinking Jacques Ellul and the Technological Society in the 21st Century," was held at the Instituto de Ciências Sociais of the University of Lisbon, Portugal, to honor the legacy of Jacques Ellul. This volume contains some of the papers from that conference, which was hosted by Helena Jerónimo and José Luís, who provided the chapter "Fukushima."

Seventeen essays are grouped into three sections: "Civilization of Technique," "Autonomous Technology," and "Reason and Revelation." Section one, largely theoretical, examines the nature of technical reason and its effects on language, on culture, on productivity, on the nature of human freedom, and on the environment. Section two considers propaganda and truth, the cyber world, the out-of-control technological ordering, and its environmental impacts. Section three investigates Ellul's thought in relation to theological, ecumenical, and mythical sensibility. Ellul's thought is wide and deep and speaks to a variety of mentalities and socialities awake to the human condition so greatly challenged. The question of human freedoms and determinisms are at stake. Ellul's *The Technological Society* (1964) was a translation of the French *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* (1954). Technology was humanity's wager, bet, stake of the twentieth century. The wager continues.

Lovekin, David. Review of *Jacques Ellul and the Technological Society in the 21st Century*, edited by Helena M. Gerónimo, José Luís Garcia, and Carl Mitcham. *Ellul Forum* 72 (Fall 2023): 63–73.

In the lead essay, Carl Mitcham examines the reception *The Technological Society* had in the United States that exceeded the interest in France. Ellul's critique of technology appeared along with the critiques of Karl Jaspers, Lewis Mumford, José Ortega y Gasset, Sigfried Giedion, and Martin Heidegger that flourished between the 1930s and 1950s. Criticisms of technology were in the air. The Europeans took to task the effect technology had on human life, culture, and tradition that resonated with Marxism. Americans were not primarily moved except with the critiques of Herbert Marcuse. The American transcendentalists and naturalists such as Emerson, Thoreau, Muir, and Rachel Carson offered a critique of technology in relation to nature and the environment that is still alive and that provided an audience receptive to Ellul.

Though influenced by Marx, Ellul hoped to do with "technique" what Marx had done with "capital." Ellul's critique provided a holistic view of the "technical phenomenon" that transformed "technical operations" into an "organizing logos" (22) and that had taken over human activity in all dimensions—political, economic, religious, social, etc., with an emphasis on "etc." This *logos* moved through rationality, artificiality, automatism, self-augmentation, monism, universalism, and autonomy, what Ellul calls the "characterology" of the technical phenomenon (22).

Ellul's *La Technique* had been in print in France for ten years before its English translation as *The Technological Society* in 1964 with the support of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, California, founded by Robert Hutchins, former president of the University of Chicago. Initially, in 1961 a reading group was formed at the urging of Aldous Huxley to discuss *La Technique*, and member John Wilkinson decided to translate it with the Center's support. Distinguished sociologist Robert K. Merton provided a foreword recommending it. Its popularity spread among social critics of many stripes.

After World War II, American exceptionalism arose with the praise and worship of technology. The consumer society was in full bloom. Ellul also attracted leftist Protestant religious groups. Jim Holloway of the Committee of Southern Churchmen and editor of *Katallagate: Be Reconciled* was influential. *The Presence of the Kingdom* was translated in 1951 and a spe-

cial issue of *Katallagete* was published in 1970 with essays by Christopher Lasch and Julius Lester. Will Campbell and Jim Holloway continued to rally the religious in response to civil rights and anti-nuclear forces.

I have simplified Mitcham's detailed account to his conclusion that, currently, Ellul appeals to Christian Critical Social Theorists and Secular Political Demythologizers. Ellul has sparked no mass movements, Mitcham concludes, but, as Frédéric Rognon notes, Ellul's thought has influenced the spiritual and intellectual journeys of many individuals, and this is appropriate: Ellul, "faithful to the Kierkegaardian matrix, spoke to each individual as a unique person irreducible to another, in order to lead her or him to make free, responsible existential decisions" (187). This volume reflects the engaged thought of many individuals drawn to the Ellulian task. For reasons of time and space, I select three essays that continue and expand my current research and that also support the dialectic within and between Ellul's studies.

In "On Dialectic," Ellul insists that his work be read dialectically: theology and sociology are in harmonious conflict, which is a contradiction but a necessary one. Necessity for Ellul is the negative necessary for a positive, which is a temporary synthesis (292–97). Hegel's and Marx's dialectics (in Ellul's view) fail in positing syntheses but are valuable in identifying contradictions from which we learn (294–97). History is replete with failures, which Ellul chronicles theologically and sociologically, but from which he concludes:

> If the technological system is total then this factor has to exist outside it. But only the transcendent can be outside it. For me, then, the transcendent is, in the concrete situation in which technology has put us, the necessary condition for the continuation of life, the unfolding of history, simply the existence of man as man. This transcendent, however, cannot be a self-existing one. It has to be a revealed transcendent if man is to have reason and opportunity to launch upon a dialectical course in spite of the autonomy and universality of technology. […] I am simply pointing to the unavoidable result of the twofold flow of my research, sociological and theological.[1]

George Ritzer, in "The Technological Society: Social Theory, McDonaldization and the Prosumer," questions the role of reason in Ellul's analysis,

which Ritzer takes to be too totalizing. Daniel Cérézuelle, in "Technological Acceleration and the 'Ground Floor of Civilization,'" identifies technology as a force that weakens fundamental levels of communication and symbolization that are basic to human life. Langdon Winner, in "Propaganda and Dissociation from Truth," understands propaganda as essential in a technological society that, beyond appearance—and because of appearance—is fragmented and fragile. Politics was, for Ellul, the grand illusion, devoid of a true dialectic but drowning in the ephemera masquerading as necessary. No dialectical launch there. Fox News is shown as paradigmatic to a malaise of funneling falsehoods into a sleep of reason, the procrustean bed of technique. I will suggest that Ellul's notion of technical rationality is essentially reifying, in turning concepts into objects and objects into concepts, canceling a sense of an "other," an energizing negative. Symbolization requires an "other" to do its work, making culture and self-knowledge possible in the fundamental symbols of myth, language, and science as dialectical constructions requiring the negative, the other. Technical rationality is inimical to all three, although it is made possible by them; these origins are denied or forgotten. Propaganda first and foremost has to convince a populace of the superiority of politics, supported by technique, with images silencing words. I hope to make these essays speak to one another as they have spoken to me.

I

Ritzer's theory of "McDonaldization" is an extension of Weber's theory of rationalization. Ritzer criticizes Ellul for not openly dealing with Weber, a fault that could be laid at many feet; Jonathan Swift's battle of the books is never-ending. Ritzer chooses efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control as explaining his version of technology's hold. Efficiency becomes a fixed goal above others, such as tradition and a respect for the variety of human interactions in a social space, a workplace. Predictability and exactness follow, in the reduction of procedures to rules. Calculability emphasizes quantity over quality. And control results in a subordination of humans to tools and objects to be manipulated. These could have been suggested by Ellul's characterology, and Ritzer acknowledges a similarity.

However, Ellul is chided for not seeing the positive sides of each; sometimes it is good to calculate, to be efficient and predictable, and to be in control (38–40). Further Ritzer is "maddened" at what he takes Ellul's tendency to reify and totalize (41–43). Ritzer thinks this is a modernist's problem. I think, modernism aside, that Ritzer does not quite understand technique as an intentionality, a subject before an object that reifies and totalizes in the presences of "otherness." Ritzer writes: "[Ellul] was critical of the fact that in the pre-modern era there 'was no great variety of means for attaining a desired result, and there was almost no attempt to perfect means which did exist'" (36). Ellul was not critical of the pre-moderns and their means as operations (which Ritzer does not clarify) but did regard the perfection of efficient means as essentially technological, wherein lies the problem and the beginning of reification and totalization and the meaning of rationalization as it extended through the "characterology." Curiously, later he writes that Ellul claims that earlier societies were free of technique (42–43) and that Ellul thought it would be better to return to an earlier time (43). Ellul makes no such claim or hope for a return. Ritzer sees Ellul unwilling to elaborate on what he means by rationality although he gives it pride of place in his characterology and should have described more fully the distinctions that fall within various techniques (40–46).

Ellul is clear that all cultures have techniques, understood as technical operations, things that are done, such as typing on a keyboard, chipping an arrowhead, dressing a deer, and brushing one's teeth.[2] Traditions, aesthetics, moral tendencies, pragmatic concerns are transformed with the appearance of rational judgment, in the quest for absolute efficiency to rid the contradictions rife in the eyes of science and mathematics. Nature and traditions are no longer imitated. The human does not fly by flapping arms and imitating birds but by applying Bernoulli's law explaining air pressure. Any operation can appear before technical consciousness and judgment to perfect and to conceptualize. There can be a technique of brushing one's teeth, of swimming, of all measure of exercise, which was understood well by the Nazis, who organized youth camps, or by concerned parents. Technology or technique may be either good or evil. Below, I have included in brackets a phrase that Wilkinson left out of his fine translation.

> In technique, whatever its aspect or the domain in which it is applied, a rational process is present which tends to bring mechanics to bear on all that is spontaneous or irrational. This rationality, best exemplified in systemization, division of labor, creation of standards, production norms and the like involves two distinct phases: first the use of "discourse" in every operation [under the two aspects, this term can take (on the one hand, the intervention of intentional reflection, and, on the other hand, the intervention of means from one term to the other)]; this excludes spontaneity and personal creativity. Second, there is the reduction of method to its logical dimension alone. Every intervention of technique is in effect, a reduction of facts, forces, phenomena, means, and instruments to the schema of logic.[3]

Ritzer rightly warns of the irrationality of the rational, which technical rationality seeks to obviate. Technical rationality is irrational, Ellul showed, as the principles of logic and calculations of all kinds co-opt the cultural and historical traditions that made science and mathematics possible. Where would Descartes have been in his search for the clear and distinct without his "evil genius," who ushered in a transcendent but all-present God?

In Ellul's definition of rationality[4] above, note the dialectic between word and image, subject and object, mind and body. The divisions and contradictions have to be present to be canceled. Also, the tension between the rational and the irrational belies their conflation. Ellul's history of technique was the history of human failure to become God-like. In the pre-technological world, a failed tool required a more skillful user. The tool of applied reason to be worked by anyone turns the worker into anyone, a mere A defined by being a not-A, which is what the technical mentality desires: the proliferation of technical phenomena follows. A concept is never its object or the original awareness that brought it about. Perfection is beyond reach, and knowing that takes it to another level. Without transcendentals such as beauty, goodness, and truth, what would perfection mean: one more blip on the screen? Artificial calculations with unpredictable results, independent of any transcendental judgment wherever they take root, are still artificial human attempts, regardless of whatever deified mantle such as efficiency they might wear. The totality of method is all there is: reason divides and divides and seeks syntheses, but the true evades all the specific attempts

to reveal it. Evasions are part of the true. A-to-the-right or before-A will always be not-A. What A is not, remains. The scandal of logic is the lack of proof for its efficacy. Current mathematicians of the Gödelian stripe are wary of any attempt to absolutize mathematics. The uncertainty principles, like death, hang over us all, prosumers or not. Production, no matter how it is spun, is still not consumption in an ordinary sense. If we define production in the technological sense of nothing made by no one for nobodies, it might apply with no worries about sense.

To become aware of something is to enter a world of intention; to become aware of that awareness is to inhabit another space and time. The two will never be identical. The one requires the other in a dialectic. Ellul's hope was to awaken the sleeper on the procrustean bed of technique and to stop the loss of limbs and disembodiment under the gaze of technical intention. Ellul's characterology is an exploration of the physiognomy of technical intention, allowing the reader to ask: is it so, or no? Meat on the fire pit is not the meat on the stove, which requires an energy source and techniques to devise it and then to deal with the resultant pollution. Techniques at the restaurant or at the drive-in usher in difference as well, requiring roads, vehicles, insurance of all kinds, and methods and propaganda for influencing those who have left home that it's OK to eat crappy food they did not make. They can look at pictures of food on the wall or in the menu and can bide their time with televisions and smartphones.

Ritzer's explorations more finely tuned would be welcome. Techniques can be both good and evil. Choosing crappy food, as long as it is a choice, is part of freedom's purview, as is the determining of "crappy." Ritzer's hope of meaningful engagement occurring with internet expansions, and of finding a welcoming space between the islands of McDonalds-like prosumption, might be the hope of failed dialectical reason or a fulfillment of the hope of technical reason (44–46). We can wait and see, but likely the image triumphs.

II

Daniel Cérézuelle notes Ellul's worry that technology de-symbolizes, and he draws upon Karl Marx, Ivan Illich, and Ernst Cassirer to further Ellul's

case. Worrisome is the war on what Braudel called the "ground floor of society" (64). Sociologists and economists typically ignore the place below monetary culture and material commodification (64). This "vernacular economy" provides behavior patterns, know-how, norms, and values—in short, complex social rules—that are symbolically acquired (64). If this realm is not ignored, it is typically considered inexhaustible, to Cérézuelle's concern. Why is there so much poverty, inequality, and misery in developed countries? The welfare state can provide only material comfort, leaving aside the spiritual dimension, the symbolic realm.

The symbol makes culture possible through helping to develop a sense of self-autonomy and emotional expression, a feeling of embodiment in space and time through traditions and rituals and transpersonal interaction, and an awareness of limits that enable civility in word and deed. Technology inhibits these sensibilities, turning workers into anybodies, emphasizing the values of monetization and commodification over individual worth, disembodying the space and time beneath technical life that make life itself possible, and accelerating time needed to obtain social and personal skills such as nutrition. Making and acquiring symbols takes time and space. Symbols are a spiritual matter that lose ground in the energized materialism of technique. According to Cassirer and Ellul, symbols mediate the human between the oppositions of the natural world and the social world, for the self to become. The technological world poses the issue of opposition as a place of means without ends, which is not to say that oppositions such as pollution do not assert themselves. Even scientists and technicians, from time to time, have to do the dance of cleaning house.

On the ground floor, essential symbolic learning begins. A mastery of body in time is fundamental, along with communication skills that prefigure an emotional self-discipline and an acceptance of law and authority. In all cases, an "other" is required. As Cérézuelle states, "I distance myself from my immediate experience and feeling in order to express them in words through the conventions of language" (65). This ability opens to the realm of the possible. Note that words as symbols refer, distance, and integrate, something symbols can't do in a technological society, Ellul will insist.[5]

After the industrial revolution, the depletion of nonrenewable resources is a concern, but so is the weakening of symbolic resources. Cérézuelle lists anxieties over a lack of time and money, over a general decline of polite behavior and a respect for authority, and over a rise in violence, together with a disregard for maintaining dwellings and nutritional well-being, as evidence of an erosion of the ground floor (68). Material causes are suggested: accelerated social change, monetization and commodification of daily life, and a replacement of symbolic forms by technical planning, methodologies, and procedures. Some intellectuals deny the loss of symbolic life as a problem and instead see great hope in technological advance. Worry not about limits, they insist. Let technology cure the problems it has created (70). But the ground floor can't be ignored. As in the above consideration of technical rationality that aborts in endless advance or in the empty exhortations of efficiency, tangible goals beyond repetitions and instances must be obtained and maintained somewhere. That somewhere is culture, Cassirer would urge.

Cérézuelle comments that the symbol is a creation not from necessity but from a specifically human force "that elicits the commitment of the self in the world in a way that is emotional, sensual, and carnal as well as intellectual" (71). And further:

> Outside of this form, […] matter has no meaning. Meaning is first; the symbolic form gives a easing to the elements of reality; it organizes action and knowledge. This is true not only for scientific knowledge but also for technical action and the culture of daily life. The utilitarian approach to technology, which is misleading insofar as it assesses technology in terms of objective needs, naturally elicits a technical response to associated ways of thinking. (70)

The symbol in its transcendence from the material world opens to the realm of possibility and choice. Cérézuelle states, "Symbols are the condition of freedom: Humans can choose only because they can symbolically consider several possibilities that have different meaning and values" (65). A is never simply not not-A. The realm of metaphor and contradiction is the beginning of a narrative and perhaps of thought itself. For Ellul, God is both omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, and also enters history, suffers human misery, and limits his power.[6] God's power is present in self-limitation.

By distinction, the human person works in the world of the finite that is defined by an absolute that is present in human failure but encouraged by possibility, by the imagination, memory, and the capacity to negate. Even God is a being defined by what it is not. Following Ellul, I would suggest that distinction between words and images is a clue to understanding any absolute. The apparent creativity of science and technology depends upon the very factors that technology abhors.

III

To read and to hear dialectically is to be dialectically. "To be is to resist," Ellul might say. The ground floor of being takes place in relation to seeing and hearing, in oppositions intertwined.

A sound behind is greeted with a turn of the head. Sight—that which is before me as a sensuous presence—wants to locate what is behind, Together they contribute a fullness that is weakened in the technological society, Ellul states.[7] We can't see contradiction—a blue being not-blue—but we can say it, write it, and think it, with some struggle. But any word does not stop me from looking. To the contrary. The more we hear, the more we might look, in fact. "Fact" comes from *factum*, which means "made." And making means bringing what is not yet into being. This is a sense of making that I would offer as pre-technological, a sense of ourselves as a maker or a made. Does looking have the same effect?

Langdon Winner, in his discourse on propaganda, might say no. We are a culture addicted to images, and, quoting media critic Danny Schecter: "The more we see, the less we know" (110). But there are also words. Winner asks us to consider the Fox News slogan "We report, you decide." Those who watch Fox News do not want to know, and this Fox News clearly decides. Ordinary language fails. The viewers want to believe, Winner suggests (103–10). Words typically invite doubt and discussions, but words or images turned into clichés do not. Ironically, the word "cliché" entered into English as a printer's dab, which made a sound as it was pounded into a surface.[8] The other slogan, "Fair and balanced," is a no-brainer. If that were true, the hardcores would not watch.

In *The Political Illusion*, Ellul reveals how politics as debate and disagreement no longer exists. Instead, images and clichés dominate.[9] A true *sensus communis*, a "ground floor," is gone. To regain one, Winner suggests, we need to return to face-to-face discourse, in words owned and shared by individuals, for and in a common good, beyond the realm of technique (113). And I think all Ellulians would agree.

The variety and the depth of the papers in this volume are remarkable. As Ellul said at the beginning of his bibliography of *The Technological Society*, books were meant to be read—not just consulted. That is why there is a "we" of thinkers who are puzzling beliefs and the possibilities of seeking a true that is a whole.

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Notes

1. Jacques Ellul, "On Dialectic," in *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. VanHook (University of Illinois Press, 1982), 308.
2. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (Knopf, 1964), 19–22.
3. Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 78–79.
4. See my discussion on technical rationality in David Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (Lehigh University Press, 1991), 157–76.
5. Jacques Ellul, *The Empire of Non-Sense: Art in the Technological Society*, trans. Michael Johnson and David Lovekin (Papadakis, 2014), 30–31.
6. Ellul, "On Dialectic," 299.
7. Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Eerdmans, 1985), 9–11. See my discussion of this in *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness*, 207–14.
8. See *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness*, 207–208.
9. Jacques Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, trans. Konrad Kellen (Knopf, 1972), 40, 219.

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About the International Jacques Ellul Society

The International Jacques Ellul Society, founded in 2000 by former students of Ellul, links scholars, students, and others who share an interest in the legacy of Jacques Ellul (1912–94), longtime professor at the University of Bordeaux. Along with promoting new publications related to Ellul and producing the *Ellul Forum*, the Society sponsors a biennial conference. IJES is the anglophone sister society of the francophone Association internationale Jacques Ellul.

The objectives of IJES are threefold:

Preserving a Heritage. The Society seeks to preserve and disseminate Ellul's literary and intellectual heritage through republication, translation, and secondary writings.

Extending a Critique. Ellul is best known for his penetrating critique of *la technique*, of the character and impact of technology on our world. The Society seeks to extend his social critique particularly concerning technology.

Researching a Hope. Ellul was not only a social critic but also a theologian and activist in church and community. The Society seeks to extend his theological, biblical, and ethical research with its special emphases on hope and freedom.

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