JACQUES ELLUL and Technology's Trade-off

WHEN DID "HARD-WORKING, SUCCESSFUL, CREATIVE" BECOME OUR VIRTUES OF CHOICE?

BY DAVID W. GILL

For decades I have been among a relatively small cadre of scholars and teachers who are particularly interested in the work of the late University of Bordeaux sociologist Jacques Ellul. Ironically, the Internet enables us to remain in fruitful contact with each other, scattered as we are all over the planet. The Internet has vastly improved the prospects of our successful preservation and dissemination of Ellul's ideas—many of which are a bold critique of technology.

Is our use of technology a betrayal of our great teacher's legacy? In this centenary year of Jacques Ellul's birth (1912-1994), the 20th century polymath of Bordeaux deserves a renewed and serious hearing, not least on the subject of technology. Ellul is often dismissed as a backward-looking, world-fleeing pessimist, and a superficial reading of his work sometimes invites this response. Ellul's problem with technology was not, however, about this or that machine intruding into our lives. He was not a Luddite or reactionary primitivist. He had electricity in his house and rode in automobiles, and in other ways was not radically distinguishable from his neighbours. So what is important about his challenge that deserves ongoing attention two decades after his passing?

The heart of his critique has to do with two things. First, he criticizes the scope and status of technology in our lives, the way technology has become a universal, dominating, virtually sacred force in our lives and our world. It extends to every region of our world and into every corner of our lives. It is the milieu in which we live. Second, he warns us of the way technology carries with it a

set of values that, especially when ignored or unrecognized, impose themselves on our lives and relationships in ways that are dehumanizing and destructive.

BROAD AND DEEP

Jacques Ellul lived most of his years in Bordeaux, near the Atlantic Coast of southwest France. In a fascinating life that included participation in the Resistance to Nazi Germany and the collaborating Vichy regime, his primary institutional connections were the University of Bordeaux (where he served from 1946 to 1980 as Professor of the History and Sociology of Institutions in the Faculty of Law and Economic Sciences and held a chair in the Institute for Political Studies), and the Reformed Church of France, the heirs of the Huguenots. In addition to his academic work in history and sociology leading to his doctorate and career as a professor, Ellul was a well-educated theologian and biblical scholar, having completed the whole seminary curriculum except for the final capstone exercise with the Strasbourg faculty (displaced to southern France during the German Occupation). For more than forty years, Ellul served not just the university as a distinguished professor but also the church, not just on various committees and commissions but in the local parishes, among the people, as a teacher, preacher, worship leader, and pastor/mentor. All told, he published fifty books, about thirty of which were translated into English. A few Ellul manuscripts have been published since his death in 1994; Patrick Chastenet's *Jacques Ellul on Politics, Technology, and Christianity* and Bill Vanderburg's *Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on His Life and Work* are two accessible, interview-based introductions to the life and work of Ellul.

Ellul certainly belongs near the top of any list of twentieth-century critics of technology's impact on human existence, along with Heidegger, Grant, Borgmann, Mumford, McLuhan, Postman, and Mitcham. Ellul began writing about technique/technology as a general phenomenon and of its profound impacts on politics, the state, economics, communications, art, religion, warfare and the other domains of life as early as the 1930s. In Ellul's little classic on Christian faith and discipleship in the modern world, *Presence of the Kingdom*, his chapter on "The End and the Means" outlines the essence of the problem: what should be "means" (techniques, tools) have become self-justifying "ends" in themselves.

Ellul's most famous and best-selling book *The Technological Society*), a dense sociological and historical study of the nature and broad-ranging impact of technique/technology on human life, was praised by author Aldous Huxley for "making the case I tried to make in Brave New World." *Technological Society* was followed by *The Technological System* and then *The Technological Bluff,* but even these three big volumes barely open the Ellulian analysis that includes such studies as *The Political Illusion, Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes, Autopsy of Revolution, The Humiliation of the Word, The New Demons,* and *Betrayal of the West*. The sheer scope of Ellul's critical perspective warrants our admiration and respect.

Yet Ellul's critique of technological civilization is not just broad, but remarkably deep. Ellul was a first-rate historian. His five-volume *Histoire des Institutions*, long a standard textbook series in France, is exhibit one. But in virtually all of his works Ellul does not just describe what is, he explores what was, and how that helps us understand not only what is but what could be. And while he is first of all a historian of the west, his knowledge of our civilizational antecedents in Egypt, the Arab world, Asia, and Africa adds a richness to the texture of his critique that is rarely found in others.

Students of Ellul's sociological critique of technique may be tempted to set aside his theological writings as the pious asides of a traditional believer. But this would be a grave error. If his sociological critique is critically important in today's discussions, it is absolutely the same for his theological perspective. In the presence of the sterility and impotence of much of the theological left and the idolatry and betrayal of much of the theological right, Ellul introduces a cross-cutting, third way that is deeply grounded in and creatively inspired by the Word in Jesus Christ and Scripture. His theology, biblical exposition, and ethics breathe the fire of the prophets and the enthusiasm of the evangelists.

So to his sociological critique of technology, Ellul counter-poses a biblical, theological account of radical discipleship in the world. The dialectic Ellul establishes between the two is one of life and freedom. These two meet not in an intellectual resolution but in an existential resolution. In other words, it is in our daily life that the sobering insight of the technological critique and the bold call to radical faith and hope can be lived out in a life of freedom and relationship.

TECHNOLOGY: THE SACRED CENTRE

The first enduring aspect of Ellul's critique of technology concerns its status and function as a (if not the) sacred centre of our existence and culture. Technology (he liked a capital "T" to make this point) refers not simply to isolated, individual machines or methods but to the totality, the ensemble of "means" (tools and methods) characterized by rationality, artificiality, and the quest for efficiency. "Technology" in this broad sense includes computers, cars, and the like, but also human technologies like psychotherapy, public relations, and industrial management. Ellul actually didn't like the word "technology" (he preferred *la Technique*) because it often had a restricted connotation of engineering and machines, and its historical etymology implied "the study of technique" (as "biology" is the study of bios, and "theology" is the study of theos). But as George P. Grant argued, all of our "techniques" have become "technologies" in the sense that they are not merely traditional or intuitive but products of rational, scientific study and analysis. They are "studied techniques" or "technologies" (see *Technology and Justice*).

In *The Technological Society* and many subsequent works, Jacques Ellul detailed the emergence and the universal, global, intensive, and extensive dominance of la technique in our civilization. Technology affects every aspect of our lives and every part of the world. It is the defining characteristic of the general milieu in which we live and think. It is not just that technological tools and machines are everywhere, he says, but that technological rationality dominates our every thought and activity (political, religious, therapeutic, artistic, sexual, and otherwise). In Neil Postman's term, we live in a "technopoly"—a culture surrendered to technology.

Ellul describes the dominant place of technique as "the sacred." In *The New Demons* Ellul argues at length that the locus of today's sacred is technique, and that this is served by what is functionally our myth and religion. Technology is more than just the "principal, central motif" of society—it is "sacred."

Ellul defines the sacred in functional, sociological terms. We detect the sacred in the "standpoint" from which our culture "assigns meaning, purpose and limits." In a world which is difficult and hostile, people (unconsciously, spontaneously, yet willingly) attribute sacred value to that which threatens them, protects them, restores them, and puts them

in tune with the universe (*New Demons*). The sacred "is a mysterious domain in which numerous unseen forces are presumed to act. It is the concentration of all that threatens and saves man." It is "the unimpeachable, inviolable order to which man himself submits and which he uses as a grid to decode a disorderly, incomprehensible, incoherent world that he might get his bearings in it and act in it."

What is sacred in a culture is given absolute value. It is untouchable and cannot be called into question or criticized. To establish something as the sacred, Ellul says, is "a despairing call for mastery over that which escapes [us], for freedom in the midst of necessity"—and "an affirmation by man of an order in the world." The sacred furnishes us with reference points, a set of guidelines, a means to discriminate, a way to organize our action, a kind of "geography" of our space, an interpretation of our time, and a way of integrating individuals into the group.

For most of human history, nature was the milieu that became the origin and object of the sacred. Sometimes society also acquired a sacred character. But, Ellul argues, the "novelty of our era is that man's deepest experience is no longer with nature . . . From the moment of his birth, man lives knowing only an artificial world . . . Man's fundamental experience today is with the technical milieu . . . and with society. . . Society now becomes the ground and the place of the forces which man discerns or feels as sacred, but it is a society turned technician, because technique has become the life milieu of man."

Technology is now felt by the people as a sacred phenomenon: intangible, supreme, unassailable. "All criticism of it brings down impassioned, outraged, and excessive reactions" and even panic!—just as infidelity and profanity toward the older gods was once intolerable. For consumers, rather than a crucifix or sacred grove, it is things like the automobile, television, and computer that now symbolize and incarnate the sacred in everyday life; "everyone has the sacral feeling that no experience is worth anything unless they have these powers in their homes." The technicians who create technology carry out their work "adoringly" because it represents the domain of the sacred.

Further, technology is viewed as "the instrument of liberation for the proletariat . . . Technology is the god who saves." Do we have medical problems? Technology will solve them and heal us. Technology will make us safe. It will protect us. It will provide for the needy. Do we suffer from drought? Not prayer but reservoirs, canals, cloud-seeding, and drought-resistant plants promise the salvation to which we instinctively now turn. The list of such examples of techno-salvation is endless.

Ellul points to the functionally religious character of technology. Religion (like myth) is an expression of the sacred. Religion draws people together in a common worship of the sacred. In corporate worship, we can express our praise and thanksgiving, our awe and adoration for our gods. We can sit at the feet of our priests so that our minds are further enlightened and our hearts are more firmly and passionately fixed on our gods. We hear testimonies of miracles and of salvation provided by our gods. No profanity or unbelief can be uttered as we gather in faith, hope, and love. If this piety is failing us, it is our fault—which we should promptly confess, and then depart with renewed resolve to exemplary discipleship. The "church" of technology is crowded with passionate, faithful believers: "Whenever anyone suggests that technology presents certain disadvantages people rush to its defense . . .This good is set forth as a thing not to be challenged . . One can call everything in our society into question (including God), but not technology" (*To Will & To Do*).

Neil Postman, in *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, underscores Ellul's argument that our culture is firmly in the grip of technology. And in his *The End of Education* Postman makes the point that technology plays a religious role:

> At some point it becomes far from asinine to speak of the god of Technology—in the sense that people believe technology works, that they rely on it, that it makes promises, that they are bereft when denied access to it, that they are delighted when they are in its presence, that for most people it works in mysterious ways, that they condemn people who speak against it, that they stand in awe of it, and that, in the born-again mode, they will alter their lifestyles, their schedules, their habits, and their relationships to accommodate it. If this be not a form of religious belief, what is?

TECHNIQUE/TECHNOLOGY, VALUES, AND ETHICS

So for Ellul the first point is the god-like sacred status and function of technology in our culture. But what follows from this sacred is an ethics, a set of life-guiding values. The old rabbis used to say about the Decalogue that there are not ten commandments but rather one commandment and nine corollaries. Thus, if Yahweh is God ("I am the Lord your God—you shall have no other gods before me") then Sabbath matters (God rested from his creation), life matters (do not destroy a life that belongs to God), and so on. Our gods determine our goods! The same logic shows up here. If technology sits in the sacred place, it will imply an ethics. For people today, Ellul writes in *To Will & To Do*, technology is "not merely an instrument, a means. It is a criterion of good and evil. It gives meaning to life. It brings promise. It is a reason for acting and it demands a commitment."

In his introduction to ethics, *To Will & To Do*, Ellul analyzed the character of technological morality. What are the basic characteristics of this technological value system? Since technology is precise, exacting, and efficient, it demands of people that they be efficient, precise, and prepared. It is a morality of behaviour, not of intentions—it is solely interested in external conduct (older moralities often addressed intentions and attitudes as well). It is a morality that excludes questioning and rigorously commands the one best way of acting (older moralities countenanced the agony of moral quandaries and questioning).

What are the ethical values embedded in technology?

Normality. We are not called upon to act well (as in other moralities) but to act normally, to be adjusted. To be maladjusted is a vice today. "The chief purpose of instruction and education today is to bring along a younger generation that is adjusted to this society."

Success. "In the last analysis," Ellul says, "good and evil are synonyms for success and failure". Morality is based on success; the successful champion is the moral exemplar of the good; if crime is bad it is so because "it doesn't pay"—that is, it is unsuccessful.

Work. With the overvaluation of work come self-control, loyalty, and sacrifice to one's occupation, and trustworthiness in one's work. The older virtues having to do with family, good fellowship, humor, and play are gradually suppressed unless they can be reinterpreted to serve the good of technique (so rest and play are good if, and because, they prepare you for more effective, successful work).

Boundless growth—in the sense of continuous, unlimited, quantifiable expansion. "More" is thus a term of positive value and moral approval, as are the "gigantic," and the

"biggest." "In the conviction that technology leads to the good" there is no time or purpose for saying "No" or for recognizing any limits or for impeding the forward advance of technology.

Artificiality is valued over the natural; nature has only instrumental value. We do not hesitate to invade and manipulate nature—whether that is the space program, deforestation and industrial development, animal farming, water resource "management," genetic experimentation, or whatever. We have little respect for the givenness of nature in comparison to our valuing of the artificial.

Quantification and measurement. Despite Einstein's nice comment that "everything that can be counted doesn't count and everything that counts cannot be counted," our technological society insists on quantifying and measuring intelligence (IQ), success (church attendance, salary levels), personality traits (Meyers-Briggs, and so on).

Effectiveness and efficiency. The measurably ineffective or inefficient are replaced or despised—think of Frederick Taylor and scientific management.

Power and speed. Weakness and slowness are only valued by eccentrics.

Standardization and replicability. Technology demands that people adapt to machines. The universal impulse of technology privileges platforms that link the parts together. The eccentric is only of interest in a museum.

Technological moral values, in general, are instrumental rather than intrinsic. These values become our criteria for decision and action (replacing such maxims as "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," "Love your neighbour as yourself," and "Treat others always as ends, never as means"). They become our virtues of character so that the good person is one who is a normal, adjusted, hard-working, successful creator and manager of the artificial (replacing the "just, wise, courageous, and temperate" classical ideal and the "faithful, hopeful, loving" Christian ideal).

ASSESSING THE ELLULIAN PERSPECTIVE & LEGACY

How shall we assess Ellul's account of technological religion and morality? While Ellul generally overlooks the positive contributions of technology (he says the positive side has hordes of evangelists and apologists already), and the details of his arguments are sometimes debatable, the general outlines of his approach are, I think, clearly on target.

But what do we do? Ellul says we should "profane" and desacralize false gods and idols. Treat them as ordinary and profane, joke about them, ignore them, refuse to sing their praises or bow down to them, limit their presence and position in our life (and organization). Question them. There is a time to attack and mock a false or predatory god. To get free, we may need to taunt it, profane it, take its name in vain, commit sacrilege, and brashly break its commandments. Words must be accompanied by actions. Choosing not to upgrade our computer when we could, declining to watch television, forbidding on-line research for a paper, sneering at and ignoring SAT scores (and their "re-norming") as a definition of student ability—these are some meagre ways of saying "No" to the techno-god. As Ellul has written, saying "No" is an act of freedom.

But to resist effectively, "No" may be the first word but it is not enough. As in the story of the "new demons," exorcising a demon or two without filling the vacuum is a hopeless strategy. This is where the Christian Ellul would challenge us to put the living God on the throne of our lives and make sure that in our daily lives He is functioning as our Saviour, Lord, and God. It is in asking and praying "Thy kingdom come," that Technology will no longer be king and might in a humble way serve the true King. It is in saying to God, "Thy will be done" that we have a leverage point and perspective to discern whether technology can be a useful tool in service of that divine will. The challenge is not to kill technology but to move it from the throne to the "tool box" of our lives.

Once the God-question is resolved, the ethics questions can be addressed. What values, traits, and guidelines will flesh out the implications of having the biblical God on the throne of our lives, careers, and businesses? That adventure begins by a study of the word and the acts of God, especially as incarnated in Jesus Christ. The more we live and breathe from this source, the wiser will be our decisions and choices to adopt, deploy, or reject specific technologies in our daily lives. We cannot limit our agenda to flogging the technological beast. If technology is moved from the throne of life to its tool box, it can serve as a valuable set of tools in a free and responsible existence. Many technologies can and do serve us well as tools in our quest for a meaningful and moral life. Technologies can be good servants in a life that is responsibly aware of reality, and that occurs within meaningful relationships to a power higher than technology and to a community of friends. Technologies work best as supplements to such a living reality; they work worst as a replacement of virtual reality.

I don't view myself as any kind of paragon of virtue in these matters. But for my own research, study, and learning, I do value and use the Internet and almost every day do some kind of search. I also still buy and read books and scribble my notes in them, and I read newspapers and magazines that will expose me to topics and perspectives I might not have thought of (hugely important in an era where many listen only to sources that reinforce their existing interests and prejudices). I listen to and watch a certain amount of mass media, but I resist spending more than a couple hours a day doing so because I don't want these media to take away my time for reading, thinking, and interpersonal conversation. I resist or refuse heavily commercial programming. I invest as much as I can in interpersonal conversation and friendship and in face-to-face classes and discussion groups, formal and informal. I never write or publish anything without asking colleagues to read it and then getting together to discuss how it could be better.

As a teacher, I do like using PowerPoint and having access to technologies such as YouTube clips. I actively email students and accept only electronic documents for assignments so I can email them back with comments inserted. But I also have a tradition of insisting on "Fifteen Minutes with Professor Gill" for all my classes. This is sometimes a huge chunk of my time, but I insist on at least this minimum of face-to-face interaction with each student, which has had a great impact. Yet in some classes, I find that regular periodic online discussions have contributed greatly to our community and learning. I still resist (and so far have avoided) teaching purely online courses, though hybrid courses are a good option much of the time.

I am never the first guy to buy a new version of a computer program or still less a new technological tool. I want to see how it works for a while. I want to do my work, not fool with tools. I have no illusions that technology is an unmitigated good in life; technology is ambivalent, two-sided, with an upside and downside, a trade-off every time.

We can laugh and poke fun at technology (and its acolytes and worshippers); it is not god, not by a long shot. We can deliberately waste time having a beverage and long conversation now and then. Choosing to walk and cycle more and drive less, eating a more natural and less industrial diet, choosing not to submit our lives and our eventual deaths to the lordship of medical technology—these are other examples of practices in a life that is not centred on a sacralised technology and its value system. Technology is a good tool, but an unworthy god.

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