Review

JACQUES ELLUL, **The Technological System.** trans. Joachim Neugroschel. (New York: Continuum, 1980).

CLIFFORD G. CHRISTIANS and JAY M. VAN HOOK, eds. **Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays.** (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981.)

Each of these recent publications, for a very different reason, is likely to win for French technophobe Jacques Ellul a more favorable reception than he was accorded when his earlier study of technology (1954) appeared in English as *The Technological Society* (1964). In that Vietnam War era of big cars, moon shots, the electronic battlefield, and rising social expectations, almost no one in this country took seriously Ellul's warning that a technological transformation of society should be viewed critically. Since then Ellul has not changed, but we have. Watergate-related bugging, Three Mile Island, Love Canal, and a lot more point mainly to symptoms of a flaw in our technological society. OPEC and the oil embargo, declining competitiveness of such major industries as steel, transportation, electronics point to systemic disorders that will not quickly go away. In this context, an appeal grounded in more traditional religious values is likely to be better received. And perhaps rightly so.

Neugroschel's generally adequate translation of *Le Systeme technicien* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1977) makes available in English what is perhaps one of Ellul's most important books written over two decades after his widely criticized but probably seldom read study of "La Societe technicienne." Ellul now reassesses the impact of technology on society. And, in spite of some very knowledgeable updating of his earlier ideas, he does not leave his current readers with many more reasons to love modern ways than he had their predecessors. Deeply engrossed in his own cultural world, Ellul nonetheless reaches out (via translations, at least in the case of English-language works) to learn what others have had to say on the subject of his 'pet peeve'. And in the process he displays a rather fascinating love-hate attitude towards what Americans, against his advice, persist in calling 'technology'. What produces this love-hate attitude is, however, not so much linguistic or even metaphysical as it is starkly political. For, Ellul does seem resigned to—and, in the case of the computer, fascinated by—technical advances as such. These he seems prepared to accept and perhaps even occasionally applaud as simply inevitable, whatever his own aesthetic or even ethical inclinations might prefer to have come out otherwise. This would seem to suggest—in the American setting (witness the debate over abortion) it is deemed obvious—that recourse to governmental regulation might be an appropriate means of preserving something of what one values and fully expects otherwise to lose. But at this point Ellul's French distrust of government takes over, and he brands any effort to use government to control technical advancement as an inordinate quest for power, technocratic in orientation and characteristically socialist, ultimately not only futile but productive of more harm than good.

Like few other writers on this subject, Ellul cannot be approached seriously without paying careful attention to his terminology. This is in part a problem of his own making but it is also due to peculiarities of French usage as compared especially to the American idiom. However facilely Americans take on 'technology' as a objective real-world subject matter of our research, the French equivalent of this term,

according to Ellul, can only refer to a generalized study perhaps recognizable as what some of us have come to call "philosophy of technology." Ellul, in any event, sees himself here as an empirically-bent sociologist, so will have none of that for himself and would that other less critical French intellectuals were equally as precise in their choice of terms (32-33, 290). Not only would he regulate French usage, but he relies on that usage to criticize the German, Habermas (ch. 4, n. 7), and even to inform American writers that when they speak of 'technology transfer' they are in fact talking about a transfer of *discourse about* technology (196-97). What *he* means by *"la technique"* can be very handily translated by our word, as we have chosen to use it, *technology*. This Neugroschel has chosen to do, with Ellul's permission (33), and I shall do the same hereafter. I am encouraged in this by Ellul's acknowledgement that only Americans have really grasped (in practice) what he calls "le systeme technicien" and its rules (159). (This encouragement may be of limited value, however, since Ellul also thinks we paid for our warring in Vietnam without seriously disrupting or economy (ch. 12, n. 17).)

The key to understanding this work in contrast to his earlier study, is to appreciate that he is now relying heavily on the notion of a *system* to make his point. As he says at the outset, the development of a technological society (*"la Societe technicienne"*), the concept of which he studied 25 years before, has already been achieved. What he, therefore, now wants to identify is the dominant (incorrectly translated as 'chief') force or factor in this society (French ed., 7; English, 1). In taking up this question he is very conscious of the heavy criticism his earlier work received for apparently portraying technology as inevitable. So what he now does is draw a neat distinction between the technological society and the technological system; and for all practical purposes his entire book can be construed as an analysis of the interrelationships between these two.

He defines a system as a set of elements so related to one another that a change (*"evolution"*) in one element provokes a change in the set, or wholem and a modification of the whole has repercussions on each element (77). Latent Platonism aside, this definition—which Ellul links to that of Talcott Parsons (77, 84)—provides the basis for his claim that technology is a system, in that each technological factor thereof is interconnected with all other technological factors "before it relates to non-technological elements" (80). What this means, in effect, is that technology, understood as a systematic whole, can be controlled only as a whole. But for Ellul that seems scarcely possible.

What is at stake here is Ellul's attempt to wriggle out of charges that he is a deterministic or, what comes to the same thing, a fatalist with regard to technological development. No, he replies, I am not, because there is more to society than just the technological system. What this 'more' is, however, is not really all that clear, at least not in this work.

To begin with, Ellul tells us that the technological system is "installed" in a technological society (18), but in such a way as not to control it or subsume it in its entirety:

> *[W]e must not confuse the technological system and the technological society. The system exists in all its rigor, but it exists within the society, living in and off the society and grafted upon it. There is a duality here exactly as there is between nature and the machine. The machine works because of natural products, but it does not transform nature into a machine. Society too is a 'natural product'. At a certain level, culture and nature overlap, forming society, in a totality that becomes a nature for man. And into this complex comes a foreign body, intrusive and unreplacable: the technological system. It does not turn society into a machine.* It fashions society in terms of its necessities; it uses society as an underpinning; it transforms certain of society's structures. But there is always

> something unpredictable, incoherent, and irreducible in the social body . . . . Saying that technology is the determining factor of this society does not mean it is the only factor! (p. 18; italics in the original.)

Ellul picks up the negative connotation of "a foreign body" elsewhere in the book, when he goes so far as to say that technology exists, and can only exist, in a social body like a cancer in a biological body (80). This curious simile Ellul would presumable not want to be understood as being value-laden, since he defends his abstraction *"la technique"* precisely on the grounds that it transcends the preferences of optimists and pessimists alike (29-33). Neutral as it may be, however, technology inhabits the social body in such a way that it itself constitutes an environment (ch. 2) and indeed even an all-inclusive environment, as witnessed in society's unwillingness to limit the speed capabilities of automobiles even though excessive speed is known to be the principal cause of highway deaths (37). the inconsistency of such reasonable concerns on the part of an author who rejects governmental intervention is only exacerbated by his further insistence that technology includes any means to any end so long as it is considered the most efficaceous at the time in question for the task to be accomplished (26; see also 43, 170).

This may, however, explain why he says that any attempt on our part to "detechnicize" our society "would be like primitive forest-dwellers setting fire to their native environment" (82). It may also explain why he discerns "a kind of pressure on what is backward that compels it to advance" (French ed., 300; English, 273). And why he portrays technology as a system consisting of mutually interacting technical components the combination of which engender new objects and new methods "necessarily, inevitably" (91). And this all comes about, he says, "almost unintentionally" (*presque sans volonte deliberee"*) (French ed., 321-22; English, 292). The qualifying adverb here becomes almost a retreat into phenomenology when he defines what he means by the technological system's self-aggrandizement: "Everything occurs *as if* the technological system were growing by an internal, intrinsic force, without *decisive* human intervention" (209; italics in the original; see also 214-15).

Ellul allows for an apparent exception to this process by acknowledging that the technological system is not so universal as to include the Third World to any significant degree (178ff.) But he is quick to assert that people of the Third World, for better or worse, will survive only if they do become part of the technological system (182-83). He also temporizes by nothing that, although the technological system construes all problems and difficulties as being technical in nature, not all are as yet being so construed (49).

Ellul, in other words, is apparently as deterministic as his critics ever accused him of being, except for the fact that he must be understood as describing a process which, although inevitable, has not yet achieved a culminating status. Indeed, he devotes a goodly number of pages to the question of what such a culminating state of affairs might be like. In the meantime, however, he sees the over-all process subject to both "internal" (304-9) and "external" constraints, the latter being due mainly to human psychology (294-300) and to economic realities (300-304). All this not withstanding, Ellul still comes to the conclusion that the question of human choice is the key issue which his deliberations bring to the fore (310-25).

What makes all of this inordinately problematic are Ellul's views about the role of the computer and government in regard to the technological system. In a certain sense, the computer comes off as the hero of this book, while government comes off as the villain. If this were strictly true as stated, however, we would be living in a simple world indeed. In the interest of subtlety, then, it may be said that for Ellul the computer constitutes the single ingredient that makes fully possible now what before could only be remotely approximated through government bureaucracy.

Government, accordingly, might now be considered redundant and anachronist
And indeed, Ellul seems to view government as the gathering place of techni
incompetents who busy themselves with ill-conceived projects for steering technolo
towards goals wrongly deemed by them to be appropriate (136). No such progra
matic goal-setting is possible, in Ellul's opinion, and to prove his point he cit
examples (and only examples) of where a government-determined goal for technolo
proved disastrous (130-37, 267, 299-300).

The desire to exercise such control over technological development derives fro
a quest for power (69); and technology, according to Ellul, is simply a means to pow
(189). Hence the process of government bureaucratization ("Etatisation,") (55-5
tends rather naturally towards technology (134-35). The goal of technology, in Ellu
analysis, hardly seems attainable (267). But he is quite prepared, it seems, to brar
any movement in this direction as being counter-productive, if not socialistic (29
see also 13).

On the other hand, he does not approve of what he takes to be a neutralist stance o
the part of a French bureaucrat involved with standardization (*"normalisation"*). H
favors changing the course of studies required of government trainees (159-60). An
he would require standardization for interfacing peripherals and computers (163
And other examples as well. As for computers, however, he is less optimistic tha
Alan F. Westin that society can control computers with laws (106-107). Nonetheles
Ellul is manifestly fascinated with these wondrous new tools, and shows a goo
laymen's familiarity with their development through four generations (73-75, 28
285). And what is the role of computers in a technological system? Their role i
nothing less than providing the means whereby such a system can in fact be systematic
to a degree unimaginable 25 years earlier when only government bureaucracy could b
imagined as a possible means of uniting disparate sectors of activity (101-102; see als
7). But, given Ellul's endemic distrust of government, this computer-based system
izing of its functions must leave the sensitive reader in a state of bittersweet ambi
valence with regard to the future.

And so, indeed, Ellul would leave the reader—the reader, that is, of his "socio
logical" views about technology, which, he says, can only point to where things lef
to themselves will take us. When, on the other hand, Ellul views technology from
"theological" point of view, he comes to the conclusion that human beings—at leas
those of them who are Christian—do not need to follow where things would lead
them, but might actually change the seemingly inevitable "course of social evolution'
(Christian/Van Hook, p. 18). Drawing upon his one-time fascination with Marxism
Ellul relies upon a dialectic of opposites to suggest a mechanism for change. But, he
says, in an Epilogue in the *Interpretive Essays* book, there is no dialectic *within* a
technological system. So a dialectical factor must be found outside of that system
in "a *revealed* transcendent," this latter being, he goes on to say, "the unavoidable
result of the twofold flow of my research, sociological and theological" (308).

It is undoubtedly this openness to a transcendent which Ellul finds revealed in the
Bible that has attracted the attention of most of those who contributed an 'inter-
pretive essay' to this collection. With few apparent exceptions, the essayists are all
not only Christian but fundamentalist if not Calvinist in orientation. As students of
Scripture and/or church history, most seem particularly interested in how Ellul
draws upon biblical revelation to make sense of the modern world. But Ellul, like
Kierkegaard before him, resists any Hegelian-like temptation to effect a neat and tidy
correlation between the biblical teachings and modern realities. Indeed, his fascina-
tion with dialectic leads him to endorse this "tension," this "confrontation" as a
necessary condition for effecting any improvement in the way things are.

Just how a Christian's contact with the transcendent might transform a techno-
logical society is by no means obvious, nor are the essayists in agreement on this

crucial question. For, as is also evident in *The Technological System*, for Ellul it is government that causes technology to be troublesome. So if the Christian is going to make a difference he or she must do so somehow in relationship to government. How, then? Martin E. Marty, a church historian, chides Ellul for not trusting God's ability to keep things under control (13). John L. Stanley, a political scientist, reads Ellul's *The Political Illusion* as embracing Proudhonian anarchy and syndicalism (71, 77) and inviting Christians to become "committed technocrats," i.e., "committed participants in totalitarian domination" (83; see also 84). Vernard Eller, who views Ellul as a modern Kierkegaard, calls attention to Ellul's "seminal article" in *Christian Century* (1968) in which Ellul called upon Christians to "struggle against" existing structures and create new ones, they being "absolutely the only ones who can attempt it—but here too on condition that they start from zero" (61). Co-editor Jay M. Van Hook interprets Ellul to be calling upon Christians to "desacralize," and perform a peace-making role in, politics. Kenneth J. Konyndyk, a philosopher at Calvin College, says, on the other hand, that Ellul is a pacifist and the state is founded on violence (265), so a good Christian's participation is "reduced to the role of partisan spectator; or perhaps on some occasions he may be a cheerleader" (266). But Stanley finds in Ellul's urging Christians "to force the gate" an unintended openness to coercion that is reminiscent of the earlier views of Georges Sorel in his *Reflections on Violence* (78-79).

To all of this Ellul replies in the Epilogue by expressing his gratitude for "the seriousness and depth" of the collective efforts. He explains in some detail "the central place" in his work of dialectic, as he has learned it from Marx and Barth (292). What has resulted, he says, is "both an instrument of knowledge and the possibility of progression through a crisis" (306). But, he complains, "no one is using my studies in correlation with one another, so as to get at the heart of our crisis in a conscious manner, based on a Christian understanding of it" (307). It may be safely predicted, given the ideological bent of our current political scene, that writers will be found to take up this challenge. And they will be helped considerably in their task by David W. Gill's concluding Ellulian bibliography (which unfortunately has overlooked the work of David Lovekin).

In retrospect, what most strikes the reader of these two books is that Ellul's "dialectic," biblical as it is, simply does not work for the non-believer, who has only his "instrument of knowledge" to go by. Nor will this state of deprivation be alleviated if Ellul follows through on his promise to consider next the *dysfunctions* of the technological system (18; see also 326). What hope then for the increasingly denounced "secular humanist"? Such a one, I would suggest, might still find reason to believe that human beings can still cope with the technological juggernaut by simply visiting any of a number of large grocery stores in Ellul's homeland and watch people in the rear of the store refilling their bottles with table wine, six at a time, at automatic spigots which do the job for less than fifty cents a bottle. This, one might reasonably assert, is technological revolution with a heart. Nor are other examples all that difficult to find. And what they perhaps suggest is that Professor Ellul has been looking too somberly to be able to see bright things that are right before his eyes.

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