

Technology and Transcendence

Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on His Life and Work, by Jacques Ellul, *New York: The Seabury Press, 1981. 111 pp. \$10.95.*

THE IMPASSIONED THEME of this book, like that of *The Betrayal of the West* (1978) and of much else that Jacques Ellul has written, is: "We are faced either with technology as our fate or the existence of the transcendent." In order to explore and develop this central theme of his life's work, Ellul draws upon Barthian theology (although that *specific* theological position is not as essential to Ellul's position as he seems to think); a critically appropriated Marxism (the "Marxism of Marx," and understood in such a way as to include transcendence); extensive knowledge of and reflection upon

history, both past and contemporary; an active engagement in French political and social and intellectual life over a period of some forty years; and the skills of a superb and exciting polemicist (more evident in *Betrayal*, but also present here).

What does Ellul mean when he speaks of "technology as our fate"? He asserts first of all that power and the reproductive capacity of value (so important to Marxist analysis) are no longer tied to capital. They are, rather, now "inherent in technology." Marx would have been concerned with technology rather than capital if he had made his analysis today rather than in the nineteenth century. By this "technology" (*la technique*) Ellul means the "technological phenomenon, the [comprehensive] reality of the technological" as the exploration of efficient methods applicable to the full range of human activities, e.g., economic, athletic, artistic, governmental, personal, and so on.

We have, Ellul maintains, "reread" the world in terms of *la technique*, with the period around 1945 being a watershed in this respect. From the time of the eighteenth century, however, technology in the West has been qualitatively different from that of previous periods because for the first time technology was self-consciously and systematically oriented to efficiency. We have now come to the point where it is no longer adequate to say that technology is dependent upon science. That is too simple. Rather, technology takes on a life of its own; "technological innovation is not necessarily the fruit of a new scientific discovery, but most often is an internal, intrinsic development of technology itself." The explosive developments in computer technology are currently the most striking example of this. Thus technology has an intrinsic power of self-augmentation because there is no criterion superior to efficiency. Correspondingly, and this is developed more extensively in *Betrayal*, "There is no self-regulation [or self-criticism] of any kind in the technological system."

In all of this the theme of "technology as our fate" is manifested. Technology is not "just a practice; it also presupposes values—an intellectual or a spiritual attitude consistent with the demands of technology." Thus, Ellul points out, it is frequently and correctly stressed that technology reduces work. "*But this is based on the conviction that we are meant to work all of the time.*" Ellul also points to the all-inclusive quality of technology by demonstrating that it is a system of interlocking systems and, closely related to this, that it is "virtually an epistemological instrument" allowing us to know and to understand better our all-inclusive technology.

There is more which must be said concerning the presuppositions and implications of Ellul's view of technology. First, however, it will help to convey the texture of this book and of Ellul's writing generally if a small sampling is made of the insights arising out of his position. Concerning the importation of Western technology by Iran and other Islamic nations, Ellul observes that "nothing in a society remains intact once technology

begins to penetrate." Efficiency and the obligation of work have no place in Islamic society, just as the authority of the religious and tribal structure have no place in technology. Once the technological process starts, the traditional system is inevitably replaced in its totality. It is futile for the Islamic fundamentalists to force the United States or Russia to leave their country; they should ask technology to leave. Gandhi was "right" about that. There are, however, no more Gandhis.

Concerning the efficiencies to be achieved through genetic technology, Ellul strikes a fundamental note in his position as he writes scathingly:

It is now possible to have . . . the elimination of chance, including the chance involved in procreation (O blessed genetic technology, now we can produce the ideal man!); a strict distribution of tasks and advantages; endless repetition, yet complete stability, [in effect a utopia]. . . How well met the utopist and the technician are! Utopia will be the agent that carries the technological imperative into the souls of men. It enables the technician to make men believe they are at last achieving a society based on equality, because utopias are egalitarian, and that dreaming is being restored to its rightful place, because utopias are always presented as embodying the dreams of mankind. But here again we see the vicious hypocrisy of utopianism in pretending to be the opposite of what it really is, for utopias are by their very nature anti-dream.

More comprehensively, Ellul's critique of technology enables him to take a distinctive and incisive position in relation to the "truly poor." Who are the "truly poor" in a world dominated by *la technique*? Not necessarily those who do not have money, but certainly those who do not contribute to the purposes of technology—most simply, those who are not efficient. The aged, for example, even those who have sufficient resources, are often poor because they are utterly alienated in a society driven by *la technique*. Or, various ethnic groups (such as the Harki tribe in

North Africa or the Kurds in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey) whose culture is dominated by traditional values have no place in a technological society. They contribute nothing; serve no cause. No one knows or cares about them; they are completely expendable; they are nothing to us and hence are truly poor. Many examples of the truly poor are given in *Betrayal* in page after page of fierce, telling polemic, reflecting a degree of involvement with the poor which might be missed in the briefer, more systematic, and restrained statements on the same issue found in *Perspectives on Our Age*. Through all of this there runs a stinging critique of the Left that argues convincingly that for the Left the poor have become simply pawns for the furtherance of *la technique* as that is appropriated by Communism.

Technology, then, whether of the Left or the Right, is a third schematization of human alienation that has been added to the two traditional alienations imposed by political and by economic coercion. The full destructive power of technology, however, is not fully expressed in pointing to its power of uncritical self-augmentation and to its inducing of a new form of human alienation. The further and most important point that Ellul wants to make is that technology, while undoubtedly a product of the West, is a fundamental betrayal of the West. As Ellul argues in *Betrayal* and elsewhere, the West came into existence because of the three basic and intimately related discoveries of the individual, of freedom, and of a particular form of reason. Technology progressively voids each of these three hard-won discoveries.

First, the individual. "Technology [*la technique*] is an objectifying power . . . [which leads to] the suppression of the subject." If one is a good technician, at whatever level, it does not matter who one is. While the individuals who make up the truly poor are those who are most decisively suppressed, we are each and all of us the intended target of suppression because no one counts. What counts is control, of and through interlocking systems. Nevertheless, for some reason we continue to consider ourselves as individuals, as subjects. Even "[Michael] Foucault has not stopped using the first-person pronoun.

He still says 'I'." (One watches the infighting amongst French intellectuals with amusement and wonder.) Thus we discover ourselves at variance with the technology to which we are so deeply committed. On the one hand, this is a sign of health but, on the other hand, this internalized conflict increases the destructive power of technology.

Second, freedom. Freedom is manifested most fundamentally when the individual in a centered or integrated act of the total person affirms some good or goal. In technology, however,

there is the suppression of meaning; the ends of existence gradually seem to be effaced by the predominance of means. Technology is the extreme development of means. Everything in the technological world is a means and only a means, while the ends have practically disappeared. Technology does not develop toward attaining something. It develops *because* the world of means has developed. . . .

It is this lack of any fundamental goal, of any meaning, that results in the self-critical component being absent in technology. There is nothing to affirm and thus nothing in relation to which the individual might make that self-discovery which is the irreplaceable basis of freedom and self-criticism.

The drive of technology toward utopias is another way of indicating the destruction of freedom by technology. Utopia is the dream which does not dream because it is devoted to endless repetition and hence to the suppression of freedom. Although Ellul does not use the example, B. F. Skinner's *Walden II* is such a utopia; an antidream; a neoarchaism devoted to the eternal return of the efficient technological system. Either way, whether through the elimination of goals and the quest for the meaning of an unfolding future, or through the sterilization of meaning in the creation of the utopias of *la technique*, meaning and specifically historical meaning is suppressed and the West is betrayed.

Third, reason. If the individual, freedom, and history, as these have been understood in the West, have been suppressed, then it follows that reason as that has been under-

stood in the West has also been suppressed. More precisely, the component of reason devoted to measuring and controlling (Paul Tillich's "technical reason" leading to "controlling knowledge") has become all-determinative. The resulting chaos is clearly implicit in *Perspectives*: "Each person is a creature of passions, of flesh and blood, a creature of impulses and desires. Hence, when a person lives in a purely rational framework, it is impossible to be happy." It is in *Betrayal*, however, that this position is stated explicitly and roundly and powerfully. In technology

Only what can be weighed or numbered or measured exists. But is it not evident that the little word "only" contradicts reason? Reason was meant to be the measure of man's unmeasurableness, the rein on his hubris, the straight line that could be walked. It was to be the compass, chart, and sextant that would enable the captain to plot the right course for his ship, but it was not meant to deny the unpredictable wind that pushes the ship forward! On the contrary, if reason were to be itself, it must suppose the constant action of the underground forces that give it being and keep it honest, and the existence of the fountain whence the stream of possibilities flows forth. Yet, exalted by the discovery of this marvelous tool, man went to extremes and denied the very thing that gave him life.

It is this "unpredictable wind," these "underground forces," the fountain with its "stream of possibilities" which gives life to us and to all that we do, including (insofar as it has life) our technology. This is Ellul's way, and a good way, of speaking of the transcendent. The denial of the transcendent is the denial of the individual, freedom, meaning, history, and reason; and vice versa. It results in a self-imprisonment, a self-immolation, a bound will, which is traditionally known as sin or idolatry.

If one is to break out of this self-imprisonment, this sin, one requires an "outside reference point." Such a position gives one a perspective on our age, enabling one to name the idols. If one can name one's idols, then that in itself gives one some degree of free-

dom from them. The idol's name in our day, says Ellul, is technology. For Ellul this outside reference point is faith in Jesus Christ: "on the one hand it is only by living this faith in Jesus Christ that I could do this analysis of society, and on the other hand, my analysis of the technological world demanded a more and more vigorous faith from me and an increasingly exact theological knowledge."

The expression of Ellul's Christian faith is heavily indebted to Karl Barth, whose stress is upon God as "Wholly Other," as He who descends of his own initiative, as one who does not meet but rather contradicts our own "religious needs." (Ellul finds some "utterly remarkable" sympathy for this general position in a letter written by Marx late in his life to one Charles Ruge.) The God proclaimed by Barth, Ellul correctly claims, cannot be used by men and women. Technology integrates itself into every phenomenon that arises, and a God who can be used will be drawn into the technological system and rendered inconsequential. What we therefore need, and what Barth's theology implicitly affirms, is "a transcendence in order to escape [technology]. Only something that belongs neither to our history nor our world can do this . . . something . . . that technology cannot assimilate, something it will not be able to eliminate. . . ." It is through a faithful adherence to the address of this God that we are given a liberating perspective on technology, and in being liberated receive ourselves as individuals who are not defined by the system. This is a liberation which is a project, a future-oriented process of meaning in history, for it is "*always begun anew*." This liberation "brings promise in the sense that no matter how mad history may appear to us, it is situated within God's promise and it does lead to the Kingdom of God." In these ways our reality is altered by God through Jesus Christ. Christians are to take this seriously in word and action, as Ellul clearly does himself.

Concretely what do Christians do as they inevitably live out their lives within a technological society? Ellul's proposals, wisely, are very modest. ("I do not believe in global action.") We should, first of all, not reject technology (even if we could), but rather

enter into a critical acceptance of it. This means that while we are to submit biblical texts to scientific critique, at the same time we are from the perspective of the Christian faith to enter into a critique of the deification of the technological world. If we stop believing in technology for its own sake, stop fearing it, then we will destroy the basis for its power over us. This will assist us in witnessing "that because God is God, because God is love, there is always a future. Even if today the future appears totally blocked, even if we no longer understand, even if we cannot foresee anything—which is certainly our situation—the future is possible and positive." Ellul is exactly right in taking just that stand.

In evaluating Jacques Ellul's work, at least three observations should be made. First, Ellul is not, and does not claim to be, a theologian in the sense that he has devoted a major part of his life to the systematic study of some branch of theology. One does not turn to Ellul for systematic, self-conscious theological reflection. His presentation of Barth, however, is not only accurate but also completely adequate for Ellul's purposes because he has so thoroughly and passionately appropriated that magisterial theology. Ellul properly complains about Barth being considered "old fashioned." Many persons, including myself, consider that Barth's theology is not as adequate to the present as some other possibilities. It is, however, adequate for Ellul, and therefore the charge of "old fashioned" is properly an impertinent charge from Ellul's perspective.

Second, and I consider this a strength of Ellul's work, I cannot see that Barth's theology is uniquely integral to Ellul's work. What is essential is that Ellul's work should be undergirded by a theological position which makes a strong affirmation of God's transcendence, pays serious attention to the free and reasonable human subject within a genuinely historical context, and is broadly incarnational. Thus, Tillich's neo-orthodox theology, on balance, meets these criteria as well as Barth's neo-orthodox theology. The understanding of human freedom and reason so central to Ellul's position is identical with Tillich's own position. However, the passion

and strong doxological character of Barth's theology makes it somewhat more congruent with Ellul's own character and work. Alternatively, the contemporary German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg's work meets all three of the criteria essential to Ellul's work, is even closer to Ellul in the area of human reason and freedom, and is marked by a great concern for the relationship between Christian revelation and science. Other possibilities exist, including the theology of Paul Ricoeur, although that theology is much less accessible than Barth's. None of these other possibilities is less compatible with Ellul's Marxism than is Barth's theology. The only area in which one might argue for a necessary connection between Ellul's work and its Barthian underpinning is in the iconoclastic character of both bodies of work, but then all theologies with a strong sense of the transcendent are inherently iconoclastic.

All of which is to say that the alliance between Ellul's work and Barthian theology is an accident of historical circumstances. The strengths of Barth's theology he draws upon to good effect, as has been discussed. Some of the widely known weaknesses of Barthian theology, for example the Barthian insistence on a sharp division between Christian faith and all other religions, come over into Ellul's work and mar it in a minor way. (There are other and better ways to maintain God's transcendence.) Other weaknesses, for example the strong confessionalism of Barthian theology, is partly ignored by Ellul because it does not serve his purposes, and is partly overcome by Ellul's broadly phenomenological and inductive method.

Finally, and most significantly, it needs to be said that Ellul's project of the past thirty years is highly distinctive, most needful, and accomplishes what it sets out to achieve. The project is a thorough and comprehensive analysis of culture from a firmly held, clearly stated, and strongly biblical theological perspective, enriched by a critically appropriated Marxism. Its central organizing concepts are the negative and archaeological one of technology (*la technique*) and a positive and teleological one of the Kingdom of God. Its particular strengths are, first, that its theological perspective consistently and rig-

orously informs every stage of the argument, rather than being made in some way peripheral as is so often the case. Second, Ellul analyzes a wide range of cultural phenomena (politics, sexuality, economics, and arts, and so on) in detail and depth. He does not talk about culture in general. Third, the radical iconoclasm arising out of his strongly transcendental position enables him to be devastating in his criticisms of both the Right and the Left. In short, it is a distinctive approach to the theology of culture that, while it seeks to liberate us, is not "liberation theology" (with its inclination toward global action), and although it is informed by Marxism it is not akin to the theologies arising out of Christian-Marxist dialogue that have a penchant for utopias and the Left. Ellul wishes to announce the Good News that undercuts the pretensions of the Right and the Left, and he does so. We are in his debt.

Reviewed by W. TAYLOR STEVENSON