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To Honor Jaques Ellul

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Ivan Illich
TO HONOR JACQUES ELLUL

It is an honor and great joy for me to be invited by Daniel Cérézuelle to participate in this act of homage.

Professor Ellul - I would much prefer to say, "Master Jacques" ... I have been moved by your comparison of a master with an ox which, in pulling the plow, opens a furrow. I have striven to follow you in a filial spirit, making all the false steps which that implies. I hope you accept my harvest and can recognize some flowers among what might seem a mixture of noxious weeds.

I can thus express my gratitude to a master to whom I owe an orientation that has decisively affected my pilgrimage for forty years. In this sense, my debt is unquestionable, and I was recently able to verify this in a very specific way.

To prepare my presentation for this meeting, I wanted to read about twenty of Ellul's books, those that had heretofore escaped me. My student and friend José María Sbert made his library available to me, and there I discovered at least half of them; further, he had copiously annotated some volumes, even to the point of underlining whole paragraphs. After spending a few evenings immersed in this treasure, I was astounded by the freshness and vivacity with which, over the years, 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.

The present scholarly meeting at Bordeaux furnishes us with a unique opportunity to acknowledge the unity of his thought. Some of us have read him as a great commentator on the Bible, others, as a philosopher of technology. But few have seen him as the man who simultaneously challenges the reflection of both the philosopher and the believer. He reminds the philosopher of technology, who studies patent, observable phenomena, to be aware of the possibility that his subject may be too terrible to be grasped by reason alone. And he leads the believer to deepen his Biblical faith and eschatological hope in the face of two uncomfortable and disturbing truths, pointing out that each has the character of "extreme historical strangeness":

- First, it is impossible to compare modern technique and its malevolent consequences with the material culture of any other society whatever;
- Second, it is necessary to see that this "historical extravagance" is the result of a subversion of the Gospel - its transformation into an ideology called Christianity.

His work, from the first essays on the history of institutions and propaganda to the studies of a poetically-infused exegesis that crowns it, convinced me of this: The unique character of the time in which we live cannot be studied rationally if one does not understand that this age is the result of a corruptio optimi quae est pessima (corruption of the best which turns out to be the worst). This is why the regime of la technique, under which both the Mexican peasant and I live, forces one to confront three troubling issues:

- "This regime has given birth to a society, a civilization, a culture which, taken together, are the clear inverse of what we read in the Bible, of what is indisputably found in the text of the Torah, the Prophets, Jesus and Paul."
- It is not possible to account for this regime if one does not understand its genesis as growing out of Christianity. Its principal traits owe their existence to the subversion that I have just mentioned. Among the distinctive and decisive characteristics of our age, many are incomprehensible if one does not recognize a pattern: An evangelical invitation to each person has been twisted historically into an institutionalized, standardized and managed social objective.
- Finally, one cannot analyze this "regime of technique" with the usual concepts that suffice for the study of other societies. A new set of analytic concepts is necessary to discuss the hexis and praxis of the epoch in which we live under the aegis of la technique; living virtuously and acting well require a new understanding of character and behavior in technological society.

In a direct and clarifying manner, Ellul has made us face this triple aspect of a "completely unique historical extravagance." Whatever word one uses for it - culture, society, world - our actual human condition is a strange outgrowth of Christianity. All the constitutive elements are perversions derived from this ideology. Since, in a sense, they owe their existence to Revelation, one can say they are the complementary inverse, the negation of divine gifts. Further, on account of what Ellul recognizes as their historical strangeness, they are often refractory to philosophical or ethical critiques.

This is clearly seen when we wish to raise ethical questions. Manifestly, the moral term, evil, is not applicable to documented events such as the Shoah, Hiroshima or the current attempts at artificial reproduction of human-like creatures.

These repugnant, abominable, horrifying enterprises cannot be debated. One cannot make them grammatical subjects. Every enquiry about such things, whether they are feasible or not, just or unjust, good or evil, legitimizes the status of inexpressible horror.

Those are extreme examples. Reading Ellul makes one understand that the immersion of daily life in a milieu technique places one no less beyond good and evil.

Let us look at one example: the technology that pulls the soil out from under everyone's feet. The world has become inaccessible if access signifies the result of pedestrian action: Transport monopolizes locomotion in such a way that feet, given us for a pilgrimage on earth, atrophy into appendages of the accelerator and brake.

Among the hundreds of seemingly trivial examples of the person's "humiliation by technique," I will cite one in which I find a kind of humor. My church loudly denounces preservatives that frustrate the natural functioning of one organ, but she cannot envisage the equally powerful frustration of another, which one sees in the analogy between rubbers and tires! By applying Ellul's concept of la technique to both, thus seeing that both must be declared contra naturam (against nature), my church could take the lead in the resistance to Moloch - all the way to martyrdom. I am ashamed of a pope who limits his strong condemnation of technical perversion to the privacy of the bed, but refuses to preach the application of the natural law to Mercedes and jets. As Ellul has often made clear, if the subversion itself is not rationally comprehensible, the general blindness to it is certainly not less.

All these horrors, major and "minor," derive their ontological status from the fact that they are exactly the subversions of what Ellul calls "X" and what I would openly name, divine grace.

When a half century ago Ellul first published his prophetic analyses, it was evident that the rational integration of Ellul the Calvinist and Ellul the sociologist was beyond the comprehension of a majority of his colleagues. But now, at least, many understand that his profound rootedness in faith enables him to confront the darkneses that the rootless habitually gloss over.

Already in his study of propaganda, he made us see that modern men are so terrorized by the flight from reality that they surrender themselves to atrocious debaucheries of images and representations in order not to see. They manipulate media to simulate an even more sombre pseudo-world, using this to construct a protective veil against the darkneses of the constructed world in which they find themselves. Over the years, this absence of reality has become even more stupefying. This situation - the obscurity engendered by the media - has been well studied by my friend, Didier Piveteau, who proclaims himself Ellul's student.

More and more, people live their lives as in a nightmare: They feel themselves ensnared in unspeakable horrors, with no means to wake up to the light of hope. As in certain nightmares, the terror transcends the expressible. Ellul's recognition of the established status of globalizing technique allowed him to foresee in the 1950s what today is palpable but now irremediable. What surrounds us today is implicit in his analysis of la technique. Before this assembly, made up of attentive readers of Ellul, and at the conclusion of two days' intense exchanges, it would be absurd for me to elucidate this notion, original and of capital importance in his work. I prefer to narrate some circumstances in which the notion has furnished a decisive help to one Ellul reader - and, if he accepts me as such, his student.

La technique entered my existence in 1965 in Santa Barbara, the day when, at Robert Hutchins's Center, John Wilkinson gave me a copy of The Technological Society that he had just translated, following up on the strong recommendation of Aldous Huxley. Since then, the questions raised by the concept of la technique have constantly reoriented the examination of my relation to objects and to others.

I have adopted this Ellulian concept because it permits me to identify - in education, transport, 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 is decisively transformed into Moloch, the system.

During ten good years after my meeting with Professor Ellul, I concentrated my study principally on that which la technique does: what it does to the environment, to social structures, to cultures, to religions. I have also studied the symbolic character or, if you prefer, the "perverse sacramentality" of institutions purveying education, transport, housing, health care and employment. I have no regrets. The social consequences of domination by la technique, making institutions counterproductive, must be understood if one wishes to measure the effects on the specific hexis - character formation, and praxis - possible actions, de facto defining the experience of modernity today. It is necessary to face the horrors, in spite of the certain knowledge that seeing is beyond the power of our senses. I have successively analyzed the hidden functions of highly accelerated transport, communication channels, prolonged educational treatment, and human garaging. I have been astounded by their symbolic power. That has given me empirical proof that the Ellulian

category of la technique, which I had originally employed as an analytic tool, also defines a reality whose origin is found in the pursuit of an "ideology of Christian derivation."

Research on the symbolic function of technique in our time, begun by Ellul, continues to provide clarifying insights. Here I am reminded particularly of his reflections on magic and religion. Among modern thinkers, Jacques Ellul has always been one of a select few who understand that the place of the sacred is now occupied not by this or that artifact, but by la technique, the black box we worship.

The disembodiment seen, for example, in the loss of my feet, is more directly the result of this worship than ecological damage. Therefore, rational priority today seems to demand that one begin with an examination of the effects of la technique on my flesh and senses before looking at current and future damages to the environment.

I have, then, attempted to explore the seductive power that the intensive dedication of modern enterprises to la technique exercises over my mode of perception. In fact, not a year passes, during the quarter century since Wilkinson gave me Ellul's book, that I do not detect a hitherto unperceived propensity to deny the reality of living in service to the Techno-Moloch. Existence in a society that has become a system finds the senses useless precisely because of the very instruments designed for their extension. One is prevented from touching and embracing reality. Further, one is programmed for interactive communication, one's whole being is sucked into the system. It is this radical subversion of sensation that humiliates and then replaces perception.

We submit ourselves to fantastic degradations of image and sound consumption in order to anesthetize the pain resulting from having lost reality. To grasp this humiliation of sight, smell, touch, and not just hearing, it was necessary for me to study the history of bodily acts of perception. Not only Biblical certitudes, but also medieval and classical truths concerning sensible perceptions have been subverted to the point where an exegesis of ancient texts must first overcome insurmountable conceptual and physiological obstacles. Allow me to give an example, albeit extreme.

To tear out one's eye when it gives scandal is an evangelical mandate. And this is an action that has always inspired horror. It was comprehensible, however, in a scopic regime where the eyes emitted a visual cone which, like a luminous organ, seized and embraced reality. But such animated eyes no longer exist - except metaphorically. We no longer see, enveloping reality by means of a cone of rays emitted by our pupil. The regime of seeing through which we perceive today turns the act of sight into a form of registration, working very much like a camcorder. Eyes that no longer ravish reality are hardly worth tearing out.

Such iconophagic - image-devouring - eyes are worthless:

- to found hope on Biblical reading;
- to apprehend the horrors of the technological wall, the digitalized curtains that separate me from reality;
- finally, to find joy in the only mirror in which I can discover myself, the pupil of the other.

The subversion of the word by the conquering eye has a long history, a part of the history of technique in the world of Christianity. In the Middle Ages, this overthrow took the form of replacing the book written to be heard - reading was done aloud - by a text that addressed itself to the silent

look. Parallel to this technogenic inversion of sensory priorities, the chapel - the place for devout reading, was separated from the aula - the place for scholastic reading. This portentous division marked the end of a millenium of lectio divina (monastic reading), the principal way reading was experienced.

And, concomitant with this architectural separation of the place of prayer from the place of study, the first - to my knowledge - institution of higher studies, the university, appeared. Here, the cultivation of abstract thought totally eclipsed the culture of the senses. This is not so much a disjunction between fidens quaerens intellectum (faith seeking understanding - theology), and intellectus quaerens fidem (understanding seeking faith - philosophy), as between asceticism and logical analysis. This latter separation permitted the emergence of a civilization in which Ellul has so much difficulty making himself understood. From him who follows the furrow he traces, he expects - as he has written - a devotion to virtue that would give one the courage and strength to pursue the analysis of reality in conditions that he has called "desperate," a situation that makes one feel hopelessly impotent.

Therefore, it appears to me that we cannot neglect the disciplined recovery, an asceticism, of a sensual praxis in a society of technogenic mirages. This reclaiming of the senses, this promptitude to obey experience, the chaste look that the Rule of St. Benedict opposes to the cupiditas oculorum (lust of the eyes), seems to me to be the fundamental condition for renouncing that technique which sets up a definitive obstacle to friendship.

(Based on an address given at Bordeaux, November 13, 1993.)