

# The Ellul Forum

*For the Critique of Technological Civilization*

July 2001 Issue #27

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## ELLUL & SOCIAL THEORISTS

### From the Editor

Ellul is often listed with the great intellectuals of the 20th century in which he lived. As an indication of his stature, he was debated by the leading academics of his era. Ellul disdained elitism, for himself and others. He disapproved of cultic attention. However, he did engage the theorists of his time--social philosophers, political scientists, economists, theologians, and historians. He knew that ideas matter, and held his own with integrity and passion.

This issue of *The Ellul Forum* sets Ellul in the intellectual context of his contemporaries. Antonio Gramsci continues to be widely cited in the scholarly literature. This issue compares his notions of hegemony and civil society with Ellul's *la technique* and the technological order. Calvin Troup argues for including Ellul among the academics who dominate courses in rhetorical theory and criticism at today's universities--Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Frederic Jameson, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jurgen Habermas and others. Troup challenges his colleagues to take Ellul seriously even though he questions many of the sacred assumptions of their academic heroes.

This issue only introduces a tiny fraction of the important issues at stake. How Ellul's ideas compare with and contradict those of other influential scholars has a host of important dimensions. Over its 14 years, the *Forum* has dealt with many of them and will continue to do so in the future. In the process, the *Forum* recognizes that Ellul himself worked in a large public arena not confined to academics. As described in Issue #25, Ellul's "defining orientation was public life as a whole. His thinking was geared to citizens, church members and consumers." He had a heart for everyday life and the non-specialist. His prophetic voice engaged the community.

And this larger framework we capture in the *Forum's* subtitle, "For the Critique of Technological Civilization." Coming to grips with the technological society and living distinctively within it is our common and public obligation as citizens. It requires collaborative work, international and cross-cultural understanding, and interdisciplinary thinking. The *Forum* is not limited to Ellul but a roundtable on the challenges of the technological order.

Clifford G. Christians, Editor

Henriette Charbonneau, the widow of Bernard Charbonneau, kindly offers two corrections for the article "Jacques Ellul and Bernard Charbonneau" by Joyce Hanks in the January 2001 issue (326) of the *Forum*. First, contrary to Hanks' statement that Charbonneau and Ellul broke with the personalist movement "in early 1937" (p. 4), Mme. Charbonneau correctly states that this rift took place after the 28 July-1 August 1937 personalist congress held in Jouy-en-Josas. She adds that Ellul and Charbonneau began to consider their project of a "free university" during the summer of 1938 rather than after World War II (also on p. 4 of Hanks' article).

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# About the Ellul Forum

## History & Purpose

*The Ellul Forum* has been published twice per year since August of 1988. Our goal is to analyze and apply Jacques Ellul's thought to aspects of our technological civilization and carry forward both his sociological and theological analyses in new directions.

While *The Ellul Forum* does review and discuss Jacques Ellul, whom we consider one of the most insightful intellectuals of our era, it is not our intention to treat his writings as a body of sacred literature to be endlessly dissected. The appropriate tribute to his work is to carry forward its spirit and agenda for the critical analysis of our technical civilization. Ellul invites and provokes us to think new thoughts and enact new ideas. To that end we invite you to join the conversation in *The Ellul Forum*.

*The Ellul Forum* is an English-language publication but we are currently exploring ways of linking more fully with our francophone colleagues.

## Manuscript Submissions

Send original manuscripts (essays, responses to essays in earlier issues) to:

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Please send both hard copy and computer disc versions, indicating the software and operating system used (e.g., Microsoft Word for Windows 98). Type end notes as text (do not embed in the software footnote/endnote part of your program).

Essays should not exceed twenty pages, double-spaced, in length.

Manuscript submissions will only be returned if you enclose a self-addressed, adequately postaged envelope with your submission.

*The Ellul Forum* also welcomes suggestions of themes for future issues.

## Books & Reviews

**Books.** *The Ellul Forum* considers for review books (1) about Jacques Ellul, (2) significantly interacting with or dependent on Ellul's thought, or (3) exploring the range of sociological and theological issues at the heart of Ellul's work. We can not guarantee that every book submitted will actually be reviewed in *The Ellul Forum* nor are we able to return books so submitted.

**Book Reviews.** If you would like to review books for *The Ellul Forum*, please submit your vita/resume and a description of your reviewing interests.

Send all books, book reviews, and related correspondence to:

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# Ellul Versus Gramsci

by Clifford Christians

Radical scholarship today appeals often to Antonio Gramsci. His ideological hegemony is widely considered a framework of unusual power. For many, Gramsci sets the standard for critical theory and propaganda studies.

But this essay contradicts the conventional wisdom by contending that Jacques Ellul has actually given the totalizing view its most sophisticated formulation. While likewise critical, covert in inflection, and all encompassing in his assumptions, Ellul centers the problem on the technological order and thereby offers a more surehanded direction for social change.

## Gramsci's Civil Society

The workers' movement in northern Italy failed after World War I. No insurrection against Fascism developed among the laboring class of western Europe, and Antonio Gramsci had a prison lifetime to account for the defeat.

During student days at the University of Turin he joined the Italian Socialist Party, and wrote for the socialist newspapers *Il Grido del Popolo* and *Avanti*. In 1919 he founded the weekly journal, *L'Ordine Nuovo*, interpreting the Russian Revolution for Italian factory councils and aiming to build working class power.<sup>1</sup> He developed into a formidable commentator whose influence extended far beyond the ranks of the party itself. From 1922-24 he collaborated with the Comintern in Moscow and Vienna, all the while believing the urban and rural poor would unite in rebellion against capitalism.<sup>2</sup> Upon his election to the Italian Parliament in 1924, Gramsci returned home, took control of the Italian Communist Party, wrested it from sectarianism, and molded the ICP toward a mass-based revolutionary force.

But by 1926 the Fascist police had conquered, sentencing him to twenty years behind bars. Doctors had earlier attempted to cure his malformed spine by suspending him for long periods from a ceiling beam; but the treatment left him hunchbacked, and barely five feet tall. Gramsci suffered with nervous disorders and precarious health. He never met his second son born soon after his jail term began, and his wife's nervous breakdown destroyed family contact forever. Prison censorship and the unavailability of books or archival resources crippled him too. Only when Mussolini intervened was he moved terminally ill to the Formia Clinic midway between Rome and Naples where he died a few months later of a cerebral hemorrhage at forty six. Meanwhile, his sister-in-law Tatiana Schucht and cellmate Trombetti had smuggled out thirty-three notebooks via diplomatic bag to Moscow -- 2,848 handwritten pages, published posthumously in seven volumes with arguments impacted on each other, but guaranteeing that this national anti-Fascist hero had become an original Marxist theoretician of historic importance.

To account for the absence of a revolutionary consciousness, Gramsci centered on the profound political transformations of monopoly capitalism. Politics can no longer be understood as a specialized and separate activity, but as a struggle for power permeating social life on all levels. A narrow, legal-institutional state apparatus coercing the masses is inverted in Gramsci's political theory to a protracted "war of position"

over occupying civil society as a whole (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 108-10, 229-39).<sup>3</sup> And the instrument for mobilizing public support into a power bloc Gramsci identified as ideological hegemony. He launched the concept already before imprisonment, but brought it to precision in the isolation of his cell:

What we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major superstructural levels: the one that can be called "civil society," that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called private, and that of "political society" or the State. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of hegemony which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of direct domination or command exercised through the State and juridical government (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12).

By *Prison Notebook 4* hegemony assumes its classic Gramscian dimension as a fusion of economic, moral, political, and economic objectives through ideological struggle. A hegemonic class, in other words, absorbs the value systems of other social groups into its own. Previous ideological terrain is transformed when a common worldview emerges as the "unifying principle for a new collective will" (Mouffe, 1979, p. 191). "Politics thereby ceases to be conceived as a separate specialist activity and becomes a dimension which is present in all fields of human activity . . . There is not one aspect of human experience which escapes politics and this extends as far as commonsense" (Mouffe, 1979, p. 201). A nation-state is not fundamentally a political order but a social system.

Gramsci defines ideology as a conception of the world "which becomes a cultural movement, a 'religion,' a 'faith,'" implicit in all "manifestations of individual and collective life" and producing practical activity. Given this definition, "the problem is that of preserving the ideological unity of the entire social bloc which that unity serves to cement and unify" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 328). And Gramsci insists that a power bloc in advanced capitalism does not merely impose its ruling ideology on the subservient. An extensive struggle is essential to forging control, "first in the ethical field and then in that of politics proper" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 333). Whereas coercion may be the province of the State apparatus, hegemony in civil society is an ongoing and historically contingent process of containment, of mobilizing diverse ideological elements into a coherent discourse and common set of practices. For Gramsci, in its normative meaning, hegemony is the "political, intellectual and moral leadership of the working class over all anti-capitalist sectors" (Mouffe, 1971, p. 15). But that normative sense cannot obscure historically contingent and unpredictable outcomes in constituting social power.

Hegemony is not the always, ever-present, guaranteed position of dominance of a ruling class or a dominant social bloc. Rather it represents the struggle of such a bloc to articulate a variety of social and ideological practices within a "structure-in-dominance" so as to achieve a dominant social alliance to exert

leadership, direction and authority over a whole social formation, including over the dominated classes within it (Grossberg and Slack, p. 89).

The road to hegemony is creating consensus by a revolutionary dialectic of disarticulation and rearticulation -- coopting rival hegemonic principles and colonizing the popular consciousness into a controlling worldview. Intellectuals who organize the web of beliefs which infuse civil society are particularly crucial as a social force, and intellectuals were Gramsci's (1971, p. 5-23) starting point in the prison notebooks. Through intellectuals, broadly understood, the ideology that wins the war of position becomes exercised through all available hegemonic apparatuses: schools, churches, the media, art and architecture, the legal system, economic activity, and even the name of the streets (Mouffe, 1971, p. 187). The hegemony of a particular historical bloc occurs when there is intellectual and moral unity on the fundamental questions that drive the struggle, thus creating the dominance of "a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups" and constituting an organic popular unity for the life of the state as a whole (Gramsci, 1971, p. 182).

In recapturing a non-instrumental and permeating politics, Gramsci contributes substantially to theoretical debates in Marxism. Orthodox Marxism defines ideology as false consciousness directly determined by relative class position. Rather than reducing hegemony to inculcation by an already constituted class power, Gramsci understands it as a terrain on which social groups acquire consciousness of themselves. Thus he rejects a unified ideological subject -- for example, "the proletariat with its 'correct' revolutionary thoughts or blacks with their already guaranteed anti-racist consciousness." He favors instead "a multifaceted... complex, fragmentary and contradictory conception" of pluralistic selves (Hall, 1986, p. 22). Moreover, in the Marxist tradition Gramsci develops a total and radical critique of a mechanistic, shrunken economism in which a society's economic foundations alone are determining. The Second International presumed that capitalism's collapse followed inevitably from economic contradictions; believing in economism, Gramsci concluded, was the root cause of the massive worker defeats.

As an alternative to such reductionism in which political and ideological factors become epiphenomena, Gramsci substitutes a philosophy of praxis. In hegemony a national popular culture becomes dominant, with ideological superstructures primary and the economy determinant in the last instance. Likewise, Gramsci's hegemonic collective renounces a strict corporatist conception of "class-belonging aimed at cultivating pure proletarian values." As a result, "Gramsci has left us much more than a theory of politics: in fact his legacy to us is a new conception of socialism" (Mouffe, 1971, p. 15). He was a political journalist lacking the general theoretical scope of Emile Durkheim or Max Weber, but without him "Marxist theory cannot adequately explain the complex social phenomena which we encounter in the modern world" (Hall, 1986, p. 6). Gramsci is a major starting point for critical theorists who integrate the culture-politics relationship. His enlarged state combining a system of coercion plus consent has opened the way for understanding how power operates in the social order. Chantal Mouffe (1971, p. 188) insists that the Prison Notebooks anticipated Althusser: "The material nature of ideology, its existence as the necessary level of all social formations and its function as the producer of subjects are all implicit in Gramsci."

Mouffe's post-Marxist theorizing with Ernesto Laclau (1985, p. 4) "goes far beyond Gramsci," yet they rank Gramsci "of capital importance" nonetheless. Raymond Williams (1977, pp. 108-14) devotes a chapter to him. Policing the Crisis, a key text in the history of cultural studies, represents Stuart Hall's return to Gramsci. As Hall characterizes it, cultural studies had been struggling over two dominant paradigms, the one semiotic or intersubjective (represented by Raymond Williams) and the other structuralist in character (represented principally by Althusser). Gramsci releases us from a dead-end debate, enabling us to identify power conceptually while deeply grounding it in concrete historical conditions. As a practical consequence for Hall, Gramsci's hegemony brings ethnicity and gender decisively into our analysis. Todd Gitlin (1979) has organized his understanding of entertainment and news around Gramsci. John Fiske (1987, pp. 40-41) quarrels with some of the applications, but does not question hegemony's conceptual power.

In order to critique Gramsci adequately, this expanded body of work with all its trajectories ought to be included in the assessment. But given his seminal role and in order to deepen the argument, I concentrate on Gramsci's framework itself. He is clearly a heavyweight in Marxist political theory regarding the modern state. Every serious critical theory of public opinion formation finds hegemony inescapable. But Gramsci also serves as a philosopher of social transformation, and in this arena I find his framework fundamentally flawed.

For all of his sophistication in integrating power, politics, and discourse, Gramsci includes no philosophy or sociology of technology. His social theory does not radically account for the impact of twenty-first century technology on ideological formation.<sup>4</sup> And it is this lacuna that Jacques Ellul fills in a distinctive manner without sacrificing political vibrancy.

#### Ellul's Technocratic Culture

Ellul's political activism matches the intensity of Antonio Gramsci. He participated briefly in the Spanish Civil War, joined the Paris riots against the Fascists, and openly opposed the Vichy government in 1940 until he was dismissed from his professoriate at the University of Strasbourg. During World War II, along with Camus, Malraux, and Sartre, he was a leader in the French Resistance, operating from a small farm outside Paris. After liberation, Ellul worked for three years as the deputy mayor of Bordeaux concentrating on commerce and public works. On the national scene, he spearheaded a group of intellectuals who forced the French government to withdraw from Algeria.

While Gramsci's crusades landed him in prison, Ellul spent the bulk of his career (1947-1980) as a Professor in the Institute of Political Studies at the University of Bordeaux -- specializing in the history and sociology of institutions, Marxism, Roman law, technology, and propaganda. Ellul's assessment of political involvement becomes integrated with his historical and theoretical analyses of social institutions, leading him to a different conclusion about twentieth century culture than Gramsci's. Instead of the latter's civil society, Ellul focused on technocratic culture.

Ellul developed the argument that the technological phenomenon decisively defines contemporary life. We can no longer divide society into capitalists and workers as Gramsci did; the phenomenon is completely different and more abstract. We now have technological organizations on one side and all humanity on the other -- the former driven by necessity and human beings demanding freedom. Ellul insisted that we read the

world in which we live, not through the window of capitalist structures, but in terms of the technological order. From Ellul's perspective, we have now entered a technological civilization. Technology is not merely one more arena for philosophers and sociologists to investigate, but a new foundation for understanding the self, human institutions, and ultimate reality. A society is technological, Ellul argues, not because of its machines, but from the pursuit of efficient techniques in every area of human endeavor. Unlike previous eras where techniques are constrained within a larger complex of social values, the pervasiveness and sophistication of modern techniques reorganize society to conform to their demand for efficiency. Scientific techniques are applied not just to nature, but to social organizations and our understanding of personhood. Civilizations across history have engaged in technical activities and produced technological products, but modern society has sacralized the genius behind machines and uncritically allowed its power to infect not just industry, engineering, and business but also politics, education, the church, labor unions, and international relations.

Ellul's concern is not primarily with machines and tools but with the spirit of machineness that underlies them. In his view, modern society is so beguiled by technical productivity that it unconsciously reconstructs all social institutions on this model. Because of their extraordinary prowess, modern techniques tend to subordinate all other, less efficient values to their requirements. As a result, all appearance of change created by techniques remains fundamentally an illusion. In this sense, for Ellul, finding freedom in a technological civilization is in essence a religious problem. Unable to establish a meaningful life outside the artificial ambience of a technological culture, human beings place their ultimate hope in it. Seeing no other source of security, and failing to recognize the illusoriness of their technical freedom, they become slaves to the exacting determinations of efficiency. The transition to a technological society is for Ellul (1989, pp. 134-5; cf. 1980) more fundamental than anything the human race has experienced over the last five thousand years.

### Critical Consciousness

The absence of a critical consciousness is the enemy for Ellul as it was for Gramsci. But rather than resistance in the face of political coercion and consensus, Ellul centers on defying the technological imperative. He is not calling for opposition to technological products, but to technicism. He is not a medievalist, a neo-luddite, or an anti-technologist. The issue is the psycho-political imaginary universe which humans constitute and reinforce. A critical consciousness entails that we desacralize technology, and we free our language from technological metaphors. Those empowered with a critical consciousness condemn technicism. The essential condition for social transformation, is destroying technicism as unacceptable worship of a modern god. The empowered resist the idolatrous attitudes, intentions, and aims that drive technology forward. They condemn unqualified worship of the technological enterprise for its own sake. Against an overweening technocratic mystique that ridicules the spiritual as invalid, a culture must be developed in which questions of meaning, life's purpose, and moral values predominate. To demythologize technology effectively means to sever at its root the blind faith that technological prowess will lead to one achievement after another. It drives home the contrast between a technology touted as humanity's best hope for the

future and one of limited means to achieve particular ends, between a technology that becomes an end in itself and an instrument in achieving chosen ends. Ellul (1964, p. vi) castigates the mind-set that is "committed to the quest for continually improved means to carelessly examined ends." He opposes the powerful phenomenon of machineness as a dehumanizing force and exposes it as contrary to the norms of love and justice.

Technicism in politics insists on direct participation as the catchword for effective government. Through sophisticated communications technology, everyone can share in the decision-making process and finally achieve in practice the popular democracy long heralded in theory. Electronic hardware, we are assured, can provide accounts so detailed, swift, rich and accurate that at last people will bring their "intelligence to bear on resolving the central problems of society" (Westin, 1971, p. 1). In that spirit, technicists anticipate a vast decentralization of political authority made possible by mechanized information networks. By contrast, Ellul regards direct democracy--in all its variations--as a dangerous delusion which actually resolves nothing since the fundamental issue lies elsewhere, embedded in the nature of technology itself.

Being liberated from technicism is not merely a question of message, but of the medium as well. There can be no isolated, neutral understandings of technology as though it exists in a presuppositionless vacuum. Instead technology proceeds out of our whole human experience and is directed by our ultimate commitments. Technology is value-laden, the product of our primordial valuing activities as human beings. It not only arises as technology interacts with political and social factors, but emerges from the basic fact that technological objects are unique, not universal. Any technological instrument embodies particular values which by definition give to this artifact properties that other artifacts do not possess.

Gramsci's social theory, sharpened in the teeth of Italian Fascism, generates a rich conceptual capital: hegemony, traditional and organic intellectuals, civil society, passive revolution, historical bloc, and transformism. These motifs invigorate socialist theory across a broad spectrum; but they are still centered on political transformation within monopoly capitalism. On the other hand, Ellul's technocratic culture, situated in terms of the broad patterns of history, forces advanced industrialism to the forefront. Even if Fascist hegemony were replaced by progressive democracy, Ellul (1971) would argue, or Stalinism by enlightened socialism, without a radical reversal of the technicism in those political orders, the revolution is illusory. And in the process of orienting the debate around technology, Ellul builds up a repertoire of crucial distinctions about technology and its role in the body politic.

Ellul is thus more detailed and precise than Gramsci regarding the enemy identified by a critical consciousness. And while both emphasize resistance, Gramsci's opposition involves an ongoing struggle without guarantees. Ellul's resistance is as stridently oppositional but aims in a normative direction. One label for Ellul's (1969) strategy is radical nonviolence, a careful decision to withhold some vital part of self, a conscientious exclusion of all physical and psychological violence. The critical matter for Ellul, as it was for Max Weber (Mayer, 1943, p. 128), is withstanding a pre-emption, protecting oneself from "the parcelling out of his soul, from the supreme mastery of the bureaucratic way of life." Ellul does not advocate ideological or pietistic pacifism, but our taking deliberate exception to today's

monolithic apparatus. He (1967b, p. 221) does not recommend that we abandon all interest in the *res publica*, "but on the contrary... achieve it by another route, come to grips with it again in a different way, on a more real level, and in a decisive contest." Pre-emption is the initial phase, not the conclusion.

Ellul places himself in that powerful tradition of moral philosophy, self-realization ethics, where effectiveness emerges only from opinions fundamentally altered, lives nourished deeply at a fresh source, reordered patterns not under *la technique's* tutelage. However, Ellul is very careful here. Our choices are always existential ones, their precise content freely determined at each new moment of decision. Any prefabricated programs may simply be another realm of necessity which prevents our liberation. Thus Ellul does not construct a fixed model, always insisting instead that we think out for ourselves the meaning of our involvement in the modern world.

Certainly we should be concerned about cataloguing various forms of oppressive power -- sexual, economic, psychological, and political. However, Ellul continually asks how we can empower people instead. He understands how easily we make people cannon fodder for our own self-styled revolutions. He deals with personal issues, but not at the expense of structural ones. He merely insists that we must first fill our own political space before our revolutionary action can mean anything. Ellul presents a theory of non-oppressive praxis, but it is systemic, too. The question is how we develop a process of social transformation that is totally opposite in character from *la technique*.

The revolutionary axis is at the interstices of institutions. While most social institutions are oppressive and warrant confrontation, Ellul believes that for any groundswell to continue we must build a new culture. The revolution can only be nurtured in the open spaces, that is, within voluntary associations, among families and neighborhoods and tribes not completely bureaucratized by the political and economic elite. It is futile to presume an entire restructuring of the political-industrial system in the absence of vital insurgency at the interstices. Only an infrastructure autonomous from dominant power will develop the appropriate conscientization -- as long as it is not seen merely in negative terms as retreat or a hostile barricade. Ellul is concerned that sub-groups be agents of activism and not just centers of contemplation or protest. To argue against action at the interstices rather than at the institutional center, Ellul believes, entails fullscale destruction and bloodshed, and may even be a misguided primitivism.

### Conclusion

A cultural shift is evident currently in the humanities and social sciences, though the axis on which a theory of culture turns remains in dispute. Is it hegemony or technicism? Or could it be ideology (Stuart Hall), meaning (Clifford Geertz), the public (James Carey), symbol (Ernst Cassirer), moral order (Robert Wuthnow), the dialogic (Paulo Freire), liminality (Bernard Lonergan), or interpolated self (Louis Althusser)? While not defending technology as the central problematic of culture vis-à-vis its competitors, this essay at least exemplifies how cultural theory with a technological epicenter operates.

My intention has not been to treat Gramsci and Ellul in evenhanded terms. I indicate Gramsci's central influence among those with a totalizing view, but do not elaborate on the ways his disciples have applied and patched up the theory. Nor should I be misunderstood regarding Ellul's legacy. His weaknesses in detail

and with sub-units are obvious, and I have shared elsewhere in articulating the criticisms myself.

Yet I have entered enough of the argument to indicate how the technological imperative can be integrated into our theories of culture. The failure to do so becomes particularly obvious when a solution is articulated. I believe Ellul gives us a solid framework within which to plot our future course. Gramsci indicates the contradictions in capitalist societies, while Ellul brings all technological cultures -- capitalist and socialist -- under the same urgency to confront technicism. Gramsci saw his task as reconstructing political philosophy. In Ellul's scheme, our compelling need at present is not merely a political theory but a theory of technology which encompasses politics in its philosophical purview.

It would be appropriate to conclude that these two paradigms represent antinomies in the sense that both sides can be justified independently as internally consistent. No mighty fulcrum or grand experiment stands outside of them to render a final judgment. Yet Ellul's focus on technicism--in contrast to Gramsci's ellipsis between economism and statism--avoids three crucial weaknesses.

First, Gramsci leaves us trapped in the distributive fallacy. He places intellectuals in the vanguard, though Gramsci's broad scope includes all clearthinking humans across the social spectrum and not merely the academic bourgeoisie. But such admirers as Alastair Davidson (1977, pp. 254-5) have noted an increasing elitism in Gramsci's appeals, especially after 1930. On the other hand, Ellul (1965, pp. xvi-xvii, 110) maintained that intellectuals are even a readier mark for sociological propaganda than ordinary citizens. Their self-styled superior discernment beguiles them into the subtle trap of *la technique*. Nothing in Gramsci's social philosophy precludes it from the distributive fallacy where one strategic slice of the social structure represents the whole. Even though for him every normal person is rational--hence an intellectual, broadly speaking--only some of them actually have an intellectual function. What in Gramsci's ideological hegemony guarantees that his enlightened cadre, or, if not them, a revolutionary working class, or a persecuted minority, or a panopoly of protestors--violent and benign--are not made universal by a faulty logic of substitution?

Second, Ellul brings the media technology literature into our calculus, while Gramsci unwittingly sides with those who presume technology is neutral, merely a tool which can be applied rightly or wrongly. I find that definition deficient in scope; technology is a cultural activity driven by our ultimate commitments (Christians, 1989). If technology does not exist in blank space but arises from our worldviews, then an ethical framework becomes a self-evident need for orienting the technological process responsibly. Ellul puts a theory of normative technology squarely on our agenda, and that is a scholarly task the ideology and hegemony literature tragically undervalues. Ironically a value-saturated view of technology is more compatible with Gramsci's hegemony than the neutral view which he adopts by default.

Third, Ellul opposes technological necessity to human freedom. Thus in communication theory, the radical alternative entails a dialogic model of communication and such a theory is alien to Gramsci. Through language we continually re-enact our humanness and maintain a social order. When our everyday discourse is coopted by technological, mass-mediated symbols, we become complicators in technocratic culture. And as the Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin argues correctly in *The*

*Dialogical Imagination*, only oral language under those circumstances represents a dependable source of opposition and struggle.

For Ellul, the technical artifice is decisively new. Thus Gramsci's theorizing, for all its revolutionary intent, is anchored in a previous era. The realities of modern technology create a firestorm of complicated issues at present. Global information systems are redefining national boundaries and economic structures. Ellul's penetrating discourse strikes at the heart of today's conundrums and paradoxes. While we never encounter truth pure, Ellul orders the territory around theoretical insights of the highest magnitude.

#### Notes

1. Turin was a sophisticated laboratory for Gramsci's writing and analysis during this period. It was home of Italy's most advanced industry—armored cars, airplanes, and Fiat tractors. More than ½ million of its population were factory workers in 1918, and the city was rocked with labor revolts between 1912 and 1920.
2. Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith (Gramsci, 1971, p. xlvii) conclude: "Until more is known about Gramsci's life and activity in Moscow (May 1922 - November 1923) and Vienna (December 1923 - May 1924), it will not be possible to reconstruct fully his political biography for these crucial years."
3. For elaboration, see Gramsci's (1971, pp. 206-276) essay "State and Civil Society." For a review of the ambiguities in his use of this distinction, see Anderson (1977). For detailed autobiographical accounts, see Ellul (1981b, 1982, 1989).
4. For the general failure of ideology theory to anticipate fully modern technology, see Gouldner (1976).

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# *Include the Iconoclast: The Voice of Jacques Ellul in Contemporary Criticism*

*by Calvin L. Troup*

Continental theorists of the postmodern era have become “must reads” in courses on rhetorical theory and criticism (Ivie, 1995, p. 266). A common, though not exhaustive, list of theorists and critics who appear in anthologies and syllabi for such courses includes names like Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, Frederic Jameson, Jacques Lacan, and Jean-François Lyotard. These thinkers have influenced scholarship in the field of communication and rhetoric, most evidently in the advent of critical rhetoric and what has been termed the “ideological” turn in criticism. The recent debate between critical rhetoric and textual criticism reflects the intellectual authority vested in continental versions of postmodernism among practicing critics and theorists in the field. Work in contemporary rhetorical theory and criticism demands a certain fluency with the ideas of French and other continental postmodernists. Serious rhetoric scholars have read their works.

Contemporary rhetorical theory stands to gain what Kenneth Burke refers to as “perspective by incongruity” (Burke, 1954, pp. 69-70) on the continental postmodern canon of theorists by including Jacques Ellul’s *Humiliation of the Word*, in which Ellul argues against many of the basic assumptions of postmodernism, calling poststructuralism an error. In this essay I raise the question about Ellul: Can and should we include such an irreverent voice in any canon of contemporary rhetorical theory? Theorists we venerate, he considers as colleagues to be engaged and challenged; he addresses their ideas as idols for destruction.

Ellul’s perspective integrates two decisive factors. First, his novel sociological ideas on technique and the technological system offer a radical reorientation to ideological, social, and cultural issues and to that which drives them. Second, he advocates human speech as a continuing paradigm for language, an ancient assumption in a postmodern context. From these axiomatic commitments, Ellul presents us with a novel incongruity: he suggests that poststructuralists are not revolutionary but are in ideological lock-step with the forces of technological society—bureaucracy, domination, and oppression.

### Canonicity, Textuality, and Absence

A number of ironies emerge from the status of postmodern theorists among communication scholars. First, to canonize the works of people considered “canon smashers” is no small paradox. Barthes and Foucault have provided some of the most elegant arguments proclaiming the anonymity of texts and the demise of “authority” (Barthes, 1989, p. 716; Foucault, 1989, p. 724). Furthermore, the canon of postmodern thinkers is just as certainly imposed by people in authority (professors, publishers,

editors, etc.) and just as effectively excludes texts that might rightfully be included, as any canon of literature (or speeches) that has ever been authorized. Scholars still argue about the value of the chosen theorists’ contributions and debate the comparative quality of interpretations in the secondary literature. Today, the portion of our work in contemporary theory and criticism that deals with postmodernism—especially French postmodernism—orients itself to language based on thinkers who concentrate primarily on writing and literary texts, paying little attention to spoken public discourse (Davis and Finke, 1989, p. 718). While French masters give us a diversity of perspectives and places from which to theorize and criticize discourse, on the question of the relationship of speech and writing they share a predisposition to prioritize the written text over the spoken word.

In the “Father of Logos,” among other places, Jacques Derrida makes a case for giving precedence to writing and textuality over speech. Although Derrida may be the most explicit apologist for the superiority of the written word, the ascendancy of textuality has already been mentioned as commonplace within the canon of French postmodernist intellectuals introduced at the beginning of this essay. Derrida, the father of deconstructionism, argues in “The Father of Logos” that writing need not come to speech “like a kind of present offered up in homage by a vassal to his lord” to have its value assessed by speech (pp. 750ff.). Indeed, textual discourse emerges as the only means of assessing the value of speech, which Derrida correlates with fatherhood. Speech (the father) presents itself as speaking from a point outside language, “But the father is not the generator or procreator in any ‘real’ sense prior to or outside all relation to language” (p. 753). Roland Barthes, similarly, states that the limit condition of human language is the written word, not the spoken word. In *S/Z*, Barthes lays out his assumptions about language in reference to semiotics, saying that the science of semiology must finally acknowledge itself as “writing” (p. 8). In his theorizing, Barthes (1989) concerns himself exclusively with “text,” a two-dimensional field of written discourse (pp. 714-715).

The third irony is the virtual absence of oppositional voices being taught alongside postmodern critics and theorists of discourse to counter the simple equation of all discourse with text and the critical primacy of written over spoken language. In many if not most cases, critics must begin with a text, and in that regard the directives above are entirely unobjectionable. However, the only voice in the textbook quoted above is the voice of the critic. The focus of critical attention is always a “text.” The lack of questioning on this point suggests the possibility that when we visit and elevate the canon of French



postmodernism in courses on contemporary theory and criticism, we risk assuming the priority of written text over spoken word *without ever explicitly raising the question*, one that has been crucial for our field and throughout the history of rhetoric.

My purpose, in the remainder of this study, is to consider this third irony, and to propose Ellul's *The Humiliation of the Word* as one voice we could employ as interrogator of some of the most popular works from the continental canon for courses in contemporary rhetorical theory on the distinction between the written and spoken word. Iconoclast or not, we stand to gain much by including Ellul in our theoretical-critical dialogue, especially when considering the ideas of Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan.

### Sacralization and Desacralization

Debunking, demystifying, demythologizing, and desacralizing are prime critical activities in the modern/postmodern world. Among postmodernists who hold to post-structuralist views of language (like Barthes and Derrida) such critical moves are the logical outworking of their philosophical commitments about language and meaning. They deny any transcendental meaning, and attempt through critical acts to depose the idea that foundational and essential meaning can ever exist, in language or otherwise (Eagleton, 1983, pp. 130-138). Demythologizing and the other critical activities noted above assume that the sacred emerged to account for the unexplainable, the fearful, and the uncontrollable things in the world (Wennemann, 1991, p. 238). This sociological perspective, which Ellul affirms, considers as sacred "whatever form of power human beings believe themselves to be dependent on for their existence and well being" (Fasching, 1991, pp. 82-83). In this sense, Ellul shares much in common with the postmodern theorists mentioned so far.

However, critics who purport to liberate us from antiquated or oppressive ideas of the sacred often presume that deliverance means escape from the sacred altogether into a rational, non-religious world (Wennemann, 1991, p. 240). Ellul advocates liberation but denies the existence of a non-religious world. He argues that one sacred replaces another and that the desacralizing agent becomes the new sacred (Fasching, 1983, p. 83; Wennemann, 1991, p. 240). Ellul distinguishes between the sacred and the holy. The sacred is a construct of human society of which religion is one manifestation while the holy is Wholly Other than human society. Therefore, critics may "demystify" a traditional religion and replace it with a new sacred—one which may look nothing like traditional religion. But the human cycle of sacralization and desacralization has no effect on the holy. In other words, Ellul critiques the corruption of human religious institutions without relinquishing ultimate, transcendent meaning. Holy and sacred are antonyms for Ellul because people construct the sacred through language, but the holy is not a human construct (Fasching, 1991, p. 88). However, Ellul argues that the successful subversion of religious institutions has not eliminate the sacred or rampant religiosity. Ellul calls the new sacred *La Technique* (Lovekin, 1991, p. 89).

The form of consciousness Ellul calls "technique" circulates around the dual poles of technology and politics, which became sacred in late 20<sup>th</sup> century society (Fasching, 1991, p. 83; Wennemann, 1991, p. 243). Ellul's critique of technique gravitates toward current questions regarding speech, writing, language, discourse, and symbols in his later work. For example, David Lovekin's work is based primarily on *The Humiliation of*

*the Word*. In this work, as in others, Ellul (1985) argues that technology and politics have been enshrined in the wake of technique's desacralizing presence:

Our reality is no longer nature, the gods chosen for us to see are those of the technical and political world. They are the gods of consumerism, power, and machines, and they range from dictators to atomic piles. Now everything is invested with an extra dimension: it is not lived reality, but since this reality is visualized, it is magnified, idealized, and made sacred, through the symbolization accomplished by the mass media (pp. 228-229).

*The Humiliation of the Word* engages the issue of the impact technique has had on human communication; particularly the study of human language, symbol, and discourse. Ellul focuses his attention throughout his work on the effects of technique on language and meaning. He identifies structuralism and what we refer to as post-structuralism as the application of technique to language and considers their effect on communication and the human communication from this unique vantage point.

### Technique and the Critique of the Structuralisms

In the *Humiliation of the Word* Ellul raises a crucial issue for rhetorical theory and criticism that we may not be accustomed to thinking about: How do structuralism and/or post-structuralism affect our assumptions about spoken language and speaking? Ellul claims, in a variety of ways, that people who build their theories of communication on structuralist and post-structuralist assumptions hate language and the spoken word and, although they take language very seriously, apply technique in an attempt to subdue it entirely (p. 165).

Ellul moves toward this claim by beginning with the enduring question of the comparative value of speaking versus writing. He comes down squarely on the side of the spoken word (p. 1). Speech is the exclusive and definitive human language, that "ushers us into another dimension: relationship with other living beings, with persons. The Word is the particularly human sound which differentiates us from everything else" (p. 14). By contrast, "The written word is continually repeated and always identical; this is not possible for the true word. Ask the person speaking with you to repeat the explanation he has just given, and it will be different. But you can reread a page" (p. 44). The inability of the written word to provoke dialogue signals its secondary status to speech: "The word is, of necessity, spoken to someone.... It calls for a response" (p. 16).

The status of spoken versus written language should be a contested issue among rhetoricians in communication departments. By canonizing the likes of Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan as guides, we may have implicitly adopted a position that works to manufacture reams of text efficiently at the expense of neglecting the dynamics and meaning of human speech in the process. Ellul calls this condition "logorrhea" and suggests that technique demands the decisive rupture between speaker and word, finally accomplished by post-structuralism (pp. 156-157). He says specifically in *The Technological System*:

Language has to take on an objectivity permitting it to correspond to the objectivity of the technological system....The "one," and "it," the field (all Lacanism, etc.) is purely and

simply magianism—just as incidentally, the style of Lacan, and so many other writers, is—very significantly—sheer incantation. It is a *mechanical* expression of the compensatory reaction by the technological system. But on the other hand, language must itself be integrated into the system in order to play its role. Hence, the structuralist studies of language, which are precisely characteristic of that technicization; hence, likewise, the trend toward viewing the text as an entity in itself, an object. And the orientation toward focusing on *how* one says something rather than on *what* one says, in order to demonstrate technologically. Here, Roland Barthes is very directly one of the reducers of language to its function of compensating for the technological system (pp. 115-116).

Nevertheless, Ellul does not argue that depositing the word by image is impossible, but that speech in all its once-comprehensive fullness has been emaciated efficiently by the dominance of the image. He further argues that intellectuals, far from defending the human, spoken word, have overseen its demise by unwittingly applying the technical imperative for visualization to language. Ellul identifies the technical imperative as the driving force of technique which insists that “when a technological possibility exists, it must be applied” (1985, p. 148). The application of technique to word is structuralism/poststructuralism.

#### The Obedience of Poststructuralists to Technique

Ellul argues that poststructuralist theories of language are not anti-modern but hyper-modern. They demonstrate technique—a child of modernism—at work. We noted earlier that the authors under consideration tend to privilege written texts over speech. The significance of the assumption in favor of writing is that written text is an image of spoken language that “has placed the word in an ambiguous and defensive position” (Ellul, 1985, pp. 160-161). Technique can arrest, observe, and analyze text, which is impossible with the spoken word.

An advocate for the primacy of written text over the spoken word might dispute the distinction between speech and writing, claiming that the voice is every bit as material as the written word (Eagleton, 1983, p. 130). But a living voice is not material and does not “mean” merely by signs. The human voice is not digital. It may be digitized and analyzed as text via writing, printing, or audio recording—subjected to technological manipulation. But the voice itself and the meaning it carries cannot finally be subsumed under the simple process of “difference and division.” A living human voice cannot be captured. Any honest analyst must contend with the fact that what is being analyzed is only a material trace. The issue rests exactly here: that the voice must be nothing more than material if technique is to control it. The equation of word and text apparently subjects the word to complete human control. If we can control words by techniques, we can then make pronouncements about their meaning or meaninglessness and definitively explain why. As Ellul (1985) comments:

The word has become image: the word made for computers, dominated by writing, inscription, and printing, and changed into a thing, into space and something visible. Now

it must be seen to be believed, and we think we have finally fathomed all of language when we apply a semiotic diagram to it (p. 160).

By transposing text for speech as the paradigm for human language, technique sets us up to accept the image as not only real, but also as the truth about language. Then we interpolate the “truths of language” learned from writing back into the realm of the spoken word and human reality (Ellul, 1985, p. 141). In other words, we analyze an artificial image to examine the realities and truths of human life, neither of which textual analysis can provide as such.

Part of Ellul’s iconoclastic tendencies show in his insistence that although poststructuralists may not be aware of it, they appropriate semiotics as the truth about language. He implies that the poststructuralist move is not a bold stroke against the status quo establishment, but a reinstatement of the technical imperative. In the early seventies he was already taking the offensive: “Structuralism is in no sense an intellectual advance, a better way of understanding. It is a reflection of the current human condition in this closed and organized society” (Ellul, 1974, p. 6). In one of his last books, he continues to press the point home:

The word always refers to something beyond it. A phrase apart from the speaker and hearer has no meaning. What gives it value is the secret intention of the speaker and the individuality of the heart. In other words, language is never neutral. We cannot analyze it objectively. It depends on the makeup of those in dialogue, and it is inseparable from these persons. We can engage in as many analyses as we like; the essential point escapes us (Ellul, 1989, p. 27).

He makes his case most clearly in the *Humiliation of the Word* stating that “by making the word an object, we elevate excessive scientism to its highest point;” that semiotic study of language reduces it to an exclusively visual project; and that structuralism is the mode and method consistent with visual images (pp. 153, 159, 165). Much detailed analysis of the intricacies of Ellul’s argument with structuralism/poststructuralism could be laid out, however for the purposes of this essay, I will concentrate on the primary issues he raises in his critique of familiar postmodern icons.

#### Iconoclast at Work

Ellul states, without hesitation, that the poststructuralist ideological complex fits comfortably within technological society. His project is to rescue the “degenerate” word from the prison house of technique. He argues that language cannot be reduced to a visual code or system of visual signs (Ellul, 1985, p. 4). Further, he posits the direct link between speaker and language, a link that Derrida holds up for derision, as the affirmation of personality and security of the existence of meaning (pp. 24, 39). Language doesn’t speak itself, people speak language (p. 16). In all of this, Ellul presents an enigmatic view of language, allowing that how language actually functions is mutable—that the connections of personality and meaning and the way language functions in a society can change and be altered—but he maintains a strict line on the appropriate perspective on and use of language. For instance, in his comments on Lacan’s play with language he concludes by saying

This [free play with signifiers] is a frightening step to take, and its effects have spread to the entire language: you can do anything, and make words say anything. You can construct any discourse with them: they do not defend themselves. But our very human life—and not only our reason or our intelligence—is profoundly altered by this process (Ellul, 1985, p. 165).

Obviously, Ellul is not concerned, like E.D. Hirsch (1967) might be, that one just cannot do what Lacan does with language (pp. viii-ix). Ellul is concerned with the consequences when society and language get to the point where one can do such a thing, as though it were a liberating activity. Again, he defies the now-conventional wisdom that targets language as the source of oppression and looks to deconstruction, and various other post-structuralist strategies as revolutionary and freeing. He parrots disgust at being born into language as violating his supposed right to linguistic self-construction, “I am forced to enter a prefabricated scheme; I am taught to speak according to a certain model. Scandalous!” and then continues his parody saying, “Language is an instrument of oppression and alienation used by the ruling class to keep the oppressed classes in bondage” (Ellul, 1985, pp. 173-174). But he dispenses with these commonplaces as “para-Marxist” employing a mechanistic and rigid concept of language and the word, mixed with a certain ignorance of the history of revolutions and the role of language in them. To the contrary, he argues that the expressed hatred of the word accomplishes the goals of the ruling classes—neutralizing challenges and promoting propaganda, which depends on a lack of clear referents to work effectively (1985, pp. 175-177). But he cannot easily shake the pervasiveness of the anti-language sentiment:

We are left with a nagging question: however did these things manage to come into being—this collection of clichés (hollow but thought to be profound!), this hatred of language, and this simplistic equation: “established discourse = ruling class = language”? (1985, p. 181).

In his answer to the question he gestures toward Foucault, “the lunatic’s language suddenly seems fascinating because it fails to transmit any idea or continuity.” Later he argues more extensively that the fascination with the asylum testifies to “the basic catastrophe of our society: human solitude and the technicalization of relationships” (Ellul, 1985, pp. 181, 372). He lauds the motive of such studies that attempt to open language up and destructure social stereotypes, but judges that they fail because the “passion for the language of mental illness destroys reasonable language” and instead “produces utterly closed discourse” (p. 373). This points to Ellul’s primary attack on poststructural theory at its basic, linguistic level. He says, “The rupture between the speaker and his words is the decisive break” (p. 157).

This puts Ellul also directly at odds with Roland Barthes, over the issue of whether or not language is an open or closed system. Barthes (1974) asserts that no place exists outside of language; Barthes is also a major proponent of the notion that language writes subjects into existence (p. 8). Ellul further denies any importance to meaning, finding the interesting question to be how language works, not what it says (1980, p. 116). Again, Ellul notes how this point suggests that Barthes marches to the beat of technique:

We want to see how a thing works: the process of circulation and deformation. As we indicated above, the process is what matters. It just so happens that this is what interests the technician. Finalities do not concern him, nor does meaning! Without knowing it, structuralists are possessed by the spirit of technique (1985, p. 170).

Ellul ends up affirming that language is an open system, one that is neither totalizing nor immutable. People speak, and language is more elusive than can ever be captured in writing. Not held captive to technique, it is not subjected to analytical vivisection in the sense that anyone can ever declare it to be meaningless or deconstruct it. Of course a text can be constructed and deconstructed, it simply does not follow that such operations can be performed on language, which is the hope that the word offers to people in relationships of all kinds, including people suffering injustice and oppression. The word Ellul loves cannot be found on a page, it can only be heard.

### Inclusion

In this essay, I have traced some of the basic moves Ellul makes to desacralize poststructuralism as an icon of the sacred technique and have highlighted a few direct connections to a few prominent and influential authors in our canon of contemporary theorists.

That Ellul argues for a radical Word that integrates faith, theology, ideology, and language may challenge students of rhetoric, should they assume that a relationship between faith, language, and rhetoric belongs only in the rhetoric of religion or theology courses. Ellul (1989) himself declares elsewhere that his views of speech, word, and language are grounded in faith in God and the incarnate Word, “because the God I believe in is Word. Hence every human word is for me decisive and irreplaceable” (p. 23). These commitments are deeply intertwined and unmistakable, leading some readers of the *Humiliation of the Word* to declare Ellul a typical protestant iconophobe (Jay, 1993, p. 14). But the reasons for adding Ellul to the canon of contemporary theory are not primarily religious. In fact, in his own way Ellul is more intensely anti-religious than the voices of poststructuralism.

I have attempted to weave together an argument for the inclusion of Jacques Ellul with his poststructuralist colleagues in the study of contemporary rhetorical theory for a few simple reasons. First, he raises the substantial issue of the precedence of speech versus writing and contests the assumption of a number of influential poststructuralist in his stand for speech as paradigmatic. Second, he engages the issue of whether language is a closed, totalizing, universal object—the same in every place and time—from a provocative perspective. Third, he defies the conventional wisdom about the comparative value of certain theoretical authorities in contemporary rhetorical theory and criticism.

Finally, he advocates a robust role for rhetoric that values the word, speech, and its necessary role in rescuing society from the brutalizing grasp of bureaucracy and self-validating technology. He promotes public dialogue and believes it can be meaningful; more and less than a mask for the will to power. He is rigorous in his consideration of theory and a friend of criticism:

Criticism is the preferred domain of the word. In its relations with images, the word is called

on to criticize the image, not in the sense of accusing it, but in the more basic sense of separation and discernment of true and false. This is one of the noblest functions of the word, and discourse should relate to it (Ellul, 1985, p. 34).

Clearly, to include Ellul's *Humiliation of the Word* in the canon of contemporary rhetorical theory and criticism is to risk dialogue with an interlocutor who would question many sacred assumptions and perhaps be rejected as impious. Of course, the benefit is in advocating that good minds should take such risks.

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# Book Reviews

## ***Technology as Magic: The Triumph of the Irrational*** by Richard Stivers New York: Continuum, 1999

Richard Stivers provides insights into the practices of magic in the context of technology and its social and psychological consequences. Connecting technology and magic, two disparate phenomena that on the surface seem totally unrelated, makes for a refreshing intellectual journey.

With Ellul's *Technological Society* as his primary inspiration, he constructs a paradigm that juxtaposes the human experience grounded in spiritual ritual with modern and postmodern promises of social, managerial and political efficiency. The result, Stivers fears, is a world falsely enlightened through magical slights of hand with the purpose of adjusting humans, "to a technological civilization, to bring them in line with technical progress" (p. 8).

Illustrating that Ellul's seminal ideas still resonate with twenty-first century problems, Stivers argues in his introductory chapter that today's managerial techniques have social and

psychological consequences that result in efficient ordering of our world, an order that for the most part is almost invisible to the unwary observer. Examples include corporate models that are designed to beguile and herd employees with scientific and humanistic management techniques inspired by administrative magic. Citing best-selling authors Robert Greenleaf and Peter Drucker, he suggests that scientific, statistically measurable techniques are, "actually a means of manipulating employees into being servants to their managers . . . Psychological techniques such as these, I argue, are forms of magic" (pp. 10-11).

Stivers does more than simply expose the problems. He provides counterpoints and countervailing arguments. He suggests that human activity that is truly qualitative cannot be measured and predicted. He cites Henry Mintzberg, who goes against prevailing management technique by advising that the most valuable kind of information in organizations is intuitive and holistic, informal and nonstatistical.

By narrowing the term magic to mean "an attempt to influence, predict and control the future" through symbolic means, Stivers does a convincing job of connecting magic with

science and technology. Symbolic words and actions of magic "work according to the principles of persuasion, retribution and causality" (p. 42). They provide an "indirect or symbolic link between information and outcome." Here is where Stivers invokes Ellul's theory of the three milieus: nature, society, and technology. The nature of the magic you practice changes with the milieu you live in, because magic deals with the most powerful force in your milieu. The most powerful force is different in each of the three milieus. In our technological milieu, our magic acquires the image and aura of technology, but the function and effectiveness of a placebo.

The most powerful of magics in our technological milieu is the mass media. In terms of emphasis, Stivers gives more than double the coverage to his advertising critique compared with public relations. He might have given the invisible magic of public relations a more critical examination. Although he addresses its power and influence, he fails to recognize that public relations may be more influential than advertising. Audiences tend to be more skeptical of advertising and they always know its source. In contrast, people readily accept public relations messages as more credible. Indeed, compared to advertising, public relations should have been characterized as the more magical slight of hand because consumers believe most of their daily news is coming from the media rather than from a company or institution.

Stivers makes a convincing argument that advertising symbolically links consumption to happiness. Not only does advertising sell technological products; it promotes the notion of commodification of all things human. It creates a magical Disney-like kingdom of happiness framed in the milieu of consumption. "Advertising's magic is the visualization of the commodity for spiritual consumption. In the process, human beings become objectified as commodities, and as such are equal to their image. Ultimately, human image becomes more important than lived reality itself" (p. 121). Stivers transfers this argument to the topic of celebrity as "crucial to advertising, celebrities are themselves first and foremost commodities" (p. 122). Citing Kierkegaard, Stivers questions the ethics of celebrity worship in advertising because it capitalizes on the deadly sin, envy: "envy is the negative unifying principle" in celebrity worship in advertising.

Television and other mass media are less important than advertising in Stivers' view. He proposes that television "programs are ads for advertisements" (p. 40). Television programs also sell the philosophy underlying the technological milieu by focusing on forms of power, sex, and violence.

Perhaps Stiver's most promising critique centers on the magic that emanates from the institutions of higher learning. He laments the humanities that were at one time a preparation for reflective participation as citizens and for intellectual labor. Our evolution into an industrial society is now infatuated with the magic of simulated images and the requirement for high-salary careers rather than soul satisfying intellectual labor or even manual labor. "The public, business, and parents demand technicians, and we give our customers what they want" (p. 208).

Many scholars would agree that the modern university is becoming almost completely technical and magical in its administration, teaching, research, and student services. "Our educational administrators are magicians par excellence as they recycle models and magical practices from the business world, including various assessment and accountability measures and planning exercises" (p. 208). The distressing conclusion is that in our magical, technologically driven universities we give our students the impression that all knowledge can be quantified,

precisely measured, and most importantly, reduced to logic and rationalism without the intellectual labor of critical examination.

A key point Stivers revisits throughout his text is that the technological society, with its drive for efficiency in all things, has corrupted language and eroded its symbolic, ritual value. In its place, magical techniques fill the symbolic vacuum by weakening language and they fill it in such a way as to reinforce the hegemony of the technological society, a society that Stivers urges us to resist in his admonitions throughout the book.

On the whole, Stivers does an excellent job of revitalizing the Ellulian premise that people must remain awake and alert to recognize that democracy is elusive, and that it is a human enterprise, not a technologically efficient machine run by untouchable political celebrities. He concludes with an admonition that the struggle is not against technology, but against a technological system of production and consumption. "Without magic, technology would have no fatal sway over us. It is here that the struggle for freedom must begin" (p. 212).

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### *Technology and the Good Life?*

Edited by Eric Higgs, Andrew Light, & David Strong  
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Critics and theorists who take on the mantle of 'philosopher of technology' do so at the risk of having their best thoughts ignored, certainly within the larger field of philosophy. Editors of *Technology and the Good Life?* illustrate the point by describing a volume that the United Kingdom Royal Institute of Philosophy published on the theme of philosophy and technology. Despite the stated purpose to have respected philosophers address concerns about technology relevant to their work, "there is not one reference in any of the papers in the volume to any of the prominent members of the Society for Philosophy and Technology, and thus, we can assume, to any of the prominent philosophers who have considered themselves doing philosophy of technology" (p. 372). The impacts of contemporary technologies continue to emerge as "the most pressing issue of our age" (p. 2). Yet, those commentators who are specifically committed to forming "discriminating judgments" about the character of technological practices discover that the subfield they have created and advanced is placed "curiously on the sidelines" (p. 5) when visible and influential disciplinary discussions involve their subject matter.

An even more fundamental concern inspires the contributors to *Technology and the Good Life?*. This is the limited success that philosophy, or any other scholarly discipline, has had in enlarging the current, constricted public discourse that surrounds technology. Albert Borgmann, whose seminal works in philosophy of technology are the subject of the collected essays in this volume, declares a "task for philosophy" that the editors endorse, "to engage the public more broadly in a reflective conversation about matters of great concern to all" (p. 20). The essays assembled here attempt to model for readers what such a reflective conversation about technology should look like as it attempts to address broad questions about human well-being. Extending beyond their own project, the editors envision

that the eventual dialogue “must be much more widespread than a debate among a handful of academic specialists.” This volume proves to be a fruitful start in this direction.

The goal of active public involvement is a difficult one to achieve. And the contributors’ own reservations must be taken seriously about whether intellectual advances in the “discipline of philosophy” (p. 20) can be made more relevant to the public “task of philosophy,” particularly as it may entail actively intervening in the apparently irresistible trajectory of technological developments within contemporary society and culture. Accordingly, the contributions brought together in this volume are characterized by a shared concern to clear an intellectual space where the limiting preoccupations of mainstream philosophical traditions can give way to more public forms of discourse. The project encompasses a rethinking of technology in its socio-cultural, economic, political, and ecological significance, as well as in its overall impacts on the spirit and ethos of our age. The scope and seriousness of this effort, which inspires the volume, deserves attention and appreciation.

The choice of Albert Borgmann’s work as the thematic focus for the essays was both deliberate and fortuitous. A year-long series of conferences, workshops, and seminars culminated in a 1995 gathering in Alberta, Canada devoted to the topic of “Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life,” which is also the title of Borgmann’s major treatise on technology. The fortuitous aspect is that the tenth anniversary of the appearance of Borgmann’s book, published in 1984, coincided with the intensified interest in his subject matter that the sequence of programs and discussions occasioned among the relatively small, but dedicated, philosophy of technology community. The chapters of this volume began as presentations at the Alberta workshop and are brought together for publication under five major headings that provide a survey of the field along with appreciative and critical paths into Borgmann’s work.

The first section, “Philosophy of Technology Today,” summarizes a trajectory of work originating with Jacques Ellul, Martin Heidegger, and Lewis Mumford, continuing through the related and often derivative writings of Herbert Marcuse, Daniel Bell, Langdon Winner, Bernard Gendron, David Noble, Andrew Feenberg, Hans Jonas, and Don Ihde, to arrive at Borgmann’s “neo-Heideggerian” perspective in *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, (TCCL). Borgmann’s work, and especially his theory and analysis of the “device paradigm,” are viewed as a crystallization of major themes that have inspired this lineage of thinkers.

Considering the significant disciplinary barriers and public challenges confronting philosophy of technology, Borgmann’s work takes on a two-fold relevance for the field. First, he provides an assessment of the philosophy of technology in specific relation to a central question that concerns all of philosophy, namely, the character and quality of the good life. Second, Borgmann frames his philosophical discussion in terms of “extratheoretical questions of practice” (p. 320) focused on “our bonds of engagement with things.” Thus, Borgmann points the direction towards greater disciplinary rigor in linking technological themes with broad philosophical traditions. And, most promising from the standpoint of interest in the transformation of technological practices, his philosophy has the potential to “appeal to a very wide audience partly because it illuminates our shared, ordinary everyday life, such as with

things and devices, and partly because the issues it probes cut across the full range of the disciplines” (p. 7).

Paul Durbin, in his overview essay, directs attention back to the appearance of Ellul’s *The Technological Society* (particularly the 1964 English translation), as a founding moment for philosophy of technology. Ellul provided seminal, systematic treatment at the level of theory of what had begun to worry philosophers and social commentators as practical and political concerns: “negative impacts of nuclear weapon systems, chemical production systems, the mass media and other (dis)information systems” (p. 38). In addition, *The Technological Society* took seriously the call for intellectuals not only to philosophize but also to intervene in the technological formation of a “new milieu” for contemporary society by discovering means to “live out our freedom in the deterministic technological world we have created for ourselves” (p. 39). Reception of Ellul’s work was conditioned, as Durbin remarks, by the fact that his was “[a]mong the first broadly philosophical works to say to those early philosophers of technology (myself included) that this might be a difficult struggle” (p. 38). Overlooking the “dialectical nature of Ellul’s thinking” (p. 39), many were left asking “how can we act, given Ellul’s pessimistic thinking?” Durbin leaves open the question of how one should respond to Ellul’s position on “technicized society as an unmitigated disaster, inimical to human freedom” (p. 46). However, he supports the case for focusing attention on Borgmann by observing that while “an Ellulian school has persisted for twenty-five years, so far it has produced no other thinker of note” (p. 44). Might Borgmann be that next seminal thinker?

The chapters in part two and part three of the volume, “Evaluating Focal Things” and “Theory in the Service of Practice,” explore various ways in which Borgmann’s critique of the “device paradigm” and his advocacy of “focal things and focal practices” take up the challenge. The device paradigm is a sensitizing concept that highlights the technological “transformation of our material world” (p. 28) that has occurred since the advent of industrialization. Under the influence of this paradigm, engagement with “things” -- which have “ties to nature, culture, the household setting, a network of social relations, mental and bodily engagement” (p. 29) -- is replaced by the “machinery ... of the device,” which “makes available a particular commodity” in a manner that encourages pervasive concern with “mere means and mere ends.” The resulting technological dependencies entail the loss of a capacity to appreciate fully “that practices ... [can be] ... experienced as good in their own right and useful too.”

The focal things and practices that Borgmann wants to recover are cooking a meal; chopping wood for the hearth; fishing for trout; arts and crafts of producing painting and pots; long-distance running over a natural course; backpacking through wilderness; grooming, training, and riding a horse. Contributors take up these themes in chapters that consider the ideal of focal commitments in its broad contours and in specific manifestations.

The discussions often focus on philosophical concerns that could seem overly technical were it not for the authors’ unifying determination to demonstrate how philosophical inquiry can enhance our capacities to evaluate and to make discriminating judgments about everyday tensions between the technological device and the focal thing and practice. For example, Lawrence Haworth’s (pp. 55-69) explication of four

different models for understanding how focal practices/things are counterposed to machinery/commodity (“parallelism model,” “guarding model,” “internal goods model,” “synthetic model”) proceeds to evaluate these models in relation to Studs Terkel’s narratives of ordinary occupational lives. Haworth points out how people create layers of meaning for work as a focal practice, often striving “against the odds” (p. 67) that the imperative “to earn a living” can be transformed into a practice “worth doing provided only that it is done right.”

Similarly, Gordon G. Brittan, Jr. directs his reflections on “the two great concepts of moral philosophy, excellence (*arete*) and happiness (*eudaimonia*)” (p. 75) towards consideration of such concrete examples as “the case of the rural doctor whose ‘engagement’ in the practice of medicine is threatened by the use of expert diagnostic systems [which] reduce her role to that of a mere go-between” (p. 85). In common with other contributors who blend theoretical with practical concerns in their essays – e.g., Larry Hickman on the Deweyan model of education (pp. 89-105); Carl Mitcham on how sacraments confer character in Buddhist and Christian traditions (pp. 126-148); Philip Fandozzi on the potential of films to critique devices and to celebrate focal practices (pp. 153-165); Paul Thompson on farming as a foundational, even “salvific” focal practice (pp. 166-181); Jesse Tatum on design as the possibility of choosing focal commitments (pp. 182-194); Eric Higgs on ecological restoration as an instance of such design (pp. 195-212) – Brittan concludes that Borgmann’s work, by identifying the “special hallmarks of our freedom” as our engagement with focal things and practices, displays distinctive value for “reopening” consideration of the conditions of the good life in a “‘devicive’ world” (p. 87).

Part four, “Extensions and Controversies,” views Borgmann’s concepts and examples in the light of contemporary issues raised by feminist thought (Diane Michelfelder, pp. 219-233), postmodern critiques of the ideal of focal realism (Douglas Kellner, pp. 234-255), and cyborg ‘mythology’ with its celebration of irony and ambiguity (Mora Campbell, pp. 256-270). Chapters by Thomas Michael Power (pp. 271-293) and Andrew Feenberg (pp. 294-315) help to distill the concerns expressed about Borgmann’s work into questions about the underlying “fundamentalism” (Power) or “essentialism” (Feenberg) that Borgmann arguably evinces. Power focuses his commentary by means of a response to Thompson’s earlier chapter on farming. Arguing against an “economic fundamentalism” (p. 288) that valorizes what are seen as “quintessential focal practices” such as those that directly support human biological survival, Power argues for a more pluralistic conception of focal values. He emphasizes how “it is within that margin of safety where we are protected against imminent loss of life that our art, thought, play, love, and hope evolve into human cultures” (p. 289). Power acknowledges that here he stands on common ground with Borgmann who advocates “communal celebration built around focal things and practices” (p. 291). But he also raises the further question of how the determination should be made about what it means to commit oneself *appropriately* to focal things and practices. Citing Borgmann’s dictum that “In a finite world, devotion to one thing will curb indulgence in another,” Power urges a broader critical perspective on how social institutions “structure the choices so that only the truly heroic and saintly can afford to make the right choices” (p. 292). If our “moral failures” are aided and abetted by the economic and social institutions that

provide context for actions, then we need to comprehend the processes at work and to challenge them politically so as not “to lash at ourselves and our neighbors as we sink into the cynicism and sullenness Borgmann rightly decries.”

Andrew Feenberg carries critique of Borgmann further, arguing that “Borgmann’s conclusions are too hastily drawn and simply ignore the role of social contextualizations in the appropriation of technology” (p. 301). Among the examples Feenberg cites is the “Prodigy Medical Support Bulletin Board devoted to ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or Lou Gehrig’s disease)” (p. 302). Carrying discussion back into the deep thickets of philosophy of technology and the lineage of thinkers that the book began with, Feenberg questions how the Heideggerian position from which Borgmann’s work derives would account for such contemporary instances where the technological medium “opens doors that might have remained closed in a face-to-face setting.” Feenberg concludes that “[w]hen modern technical processes are brought into compliance with the requirements of nature or human health, they incorporate their contexts into their very structure, as truly as the jug, chalice, or bridge that Heidegger holds out as models of authenticity” (p. 313). On the basis of this claim, Feenberg envisions the possibility of technological support for “reskilled work, medical practices that respect the person, architectural and urban designs that create humane living spaces, computer designs that mediate new social forms.” Feenberg concludes with a note of skepticism about whether Borgmann’s philosophy is adequate in itself to point the way “from essentialism to constructivism,” which is the path that Feenberg believes we must follow towards “general reconstruction of modern technology so that it gathers a world to itself rather than reducing its natural, human, and social environment to mere resources.”

Borgmann has the opportunity to respond to Feenberg and other contributors in a Postscript, which includes the editors’ “Afterword” (pp. 371-374) and Borgmann’s “Reply to My Critics” (pp. 341-370). This valuable chapter provides the opportunity for Borgmann to summarize the prospects for reform he envisions in “The Completion of the Philosophy of Technology.” Borgmann argues that the rise of technology’s promise “is not the transhistorical cause of technology but its first epiphany” (p. 347). Accordingly, technology’s mature ‘epiphany’ must embody a “new cosmology” (p. 369). Conceiving the future as a new Atlantis, Borgmann figures “focal things as islands, once the high country of an ancient continent and still anchored and connected with one another beneath the surface of technology.” Will we be able to raise this lost world and make it new again? Will our steps be steady as we travel its terrains with reformed technologies rescued from being mere devices?

It may be too much to expect of a philosophy of technology that it should provide answers to such questions. Nevertheless, the reflections that Borgmann’s work has inspired in *Technology and the Good Life?* represent a valuable initial mapping of the world of meaning that Borgmann believes we should conscientiously seek, obscured beneath the depths of our technological involvements.

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