

On Terrorism, Violence, and War: Looking Back at 9/11 and Its Aftermath

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“I am not given to hasty conflation, and I am therefore weighing my words when I say terrorists are Nazis.”¹

At a time when Salafist attacks in Europe and Africa are being perpetrated in the name of the Prophet, when the beheading of American journalists is put online by Jihadists at war with the West, when social networks and Fox News have no compunction about showing the unbearable images of the death throes of a Jordanian pilot being burned alive in front of a cheering crowd—thereby spreading ISIS propaganda, we ought to keep in mind that if its forms have changed somewhat over the last fifteen years, terrorist violence is still intent on striking the imagination as much as on destroying bodies.

In hindsight, we can now say those who dated the start of the twenty-first century from September 11, 2001 were correct. A “sequence” was opened that day, and no one can tell when and how it will end. It is now a truism that there was a pre-9/11 time and that we live in a post-9/11 era, when things will never again be as before. And indeed, to paraphrase a famous formula, since that day, a specter is haunting the West, the specter of Islam, and vice versa, it might be added.² Be that as it may, if the terrorist attack, and especially the military retaliation against it, have lent themselves to the most contradictory interpretations, no one has dared to deny the importance of this unheard-of event, one that is “radically new” for Claude Lanzmann,³ a pure event, “the absolute event,” as French philosopher Jean Baudrillard put it.⁴

The magnitude of this drama should not however prevent us from considering modern terrorism as a particular form of political propaganda whose deep meaning is inseparable from the technological nature of contemporary societies. This hyperterrorism functions at once as evidence of the level of vulnerability of technological societies and as an indicator of the inherent fragility of pluralistic democracies. By virtue of its spectacular brutality, it has also acted as a reminder that force, not to say violence, is always and everywhere political action's specific means as *ultima ratio*.

The armed challenge against the modern state's claim to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence partially renews the theme of the yoking of politics and war. Finally, if terrorism is “intrinsically bad” in Jacques Ellul's words, it is not—in itself—a new form of totalitarianism but only a weapon in the hands of various totalitarian groups or regimes. The solutions used to fight it raise in turn the classic question of means and ends. From this angle, and so as to

throw some light on our present situation, we may wonder about the lessons to be drawn from the tragedy of 9/11, first by coming back to the sequence of events as we experienced them at the time, then to examining its consequences, that is, war in its many guises as it ensued, and the questions, both moral and political, it raises on both sides of the Atlantic.

What happened that day? If we try to mentally go back in time, how did we receive and perceive this unprecedented event at the time?

Images of power and the power of images

Beyond what was immediately presented as a declaration of war to America and/or the Western world, or even as the beginning of the first war of the twenty-first century, the first puzzle had to do with the choice of the targets. Their nature. Which came down to asking a series of basic questions: who did what, how, and with what results? And the persistent puzzle of the identity of the perpetrator(s)—the question of who—has tended to eclipse the question of what. The question of how has been literally absorbed by the image—broadcast in a loop—of the Boeings smashing into the towers.

We will come back to the targets' symbolic dimension, but no one could fail to notice that they happened to be sites of power—representations, images of Power. Economic and financial power: the World Trade Center. Military power: the Pentagon. Political power: the abortive attack on the White House. The visual dimension is essential, in the sense that the whole affair was shot through with spectacle—tragic to be sure, but still spectacle, and what is more, televised spectacle . . . viewed live. September 11 marked the comeback, amid fanfare, of CNN time and image.⁵ A comeback that proved very temporary, as it turned out, though not that of Ted Turner's network as such, but of a genre that has been so criticized, in France at least, during and after the Gulf War (1991). The universal spread of images issuing from a single broadcaster, the risk of manipulation and censorship, biased information, the omnipresence of retired generals and security experts in television studios, the muffling of any dissenting voice . . .

For about forty-eight hours, aeronautics, counter-espionage, and international terrorism experts followed each other on our screens, giving the event a feeling of déjà-vu, without however proving able to be up to its magnitude. That very evening, the question was no longer to know whether, but when, the Americans would retaliate. By way of the 24-hour information channel CNN, were we about to relive that obscene spectacularization of war: the sky of Baghdad lit up by bombs that seem like fireworks, air raids shot from the angle of innocent video games?

But let us return to the attacks. What did we see on September 11? *America under attack*, live on all TVs on the planet. The first strike (north tower) took place at 8:45 AM in New York. (2:45 PM in Paris). Nobody saw it.⁶ The second strike (south tower) took place at 9:06, that is, 21 minutes later, as though the first strike's function had been not only to start making victims, but above all to draw the attention of television networks and viewers to the real

carnage that was to follow. And indeed, the attack of the second Boeing could be filmed live by one of CNN's automatic cameras and seen live in the afternoon in Europe and in the evening in the Near East and Asia. "That moment was the apotheosis of the postmodern era," as novelist Martin Amis would later note. But what were, at the time, the effects on us, the unwilling captive audience of the catastrophe unfolding live under our very eyes? Dare we speak, about this predicament, of collateral damage?

Facing death live on television, we do not think, or we cease to, our brain no longer breathing, glued to the spectacular presentness of the images shown in a loop on our screens. The very enormity of the event prevents us from taking our eyes off the set. We become powerless witnesses to the bracketing of some of our "vital" functions, including the critical function. How do we escape the tyranny of the image that hypnotizes our minds? Shocking images leave us in a state of shock . . . We are submerged by images of the catastrophe that are being played and replayed on all stations. The "we" being all the *heavy viewers*⁷ we have become on this occasion.

There is suddenly an impossibility of getting away from such a telegenic drama. After catalepsy, addiction? We are oscillating between two ills: the risk of overdose and a state of withdrawal. The repeated broadcast of those images all witnesses called incredible, unthinkable, unimaginable, ends up creating an extra need for images, as though to authenticate a spectacle deemed "unbelievable," "unreal." Conditioning, addiction, dependency. The sight of these Boeings crushing the towers has generated in the viewer, indignant at so much cruelty, a new need, impossible to admit, a kind of unconscious expectation: that of images of preparations for military retaliation, of planes taking off, of young American military, White and Black, united one and all in the same yearning to avenge their country. In other words, heroic images worthy of the best (or worst) Hollywood fare.

In 1998 already, Edward Zwick's *The Siege* depicted a series of Islamic fundamentalist attacks aimed at New York. Actually, for over thirty years, Hollywood has been flooding screens the world over with disaster movies. From *Airport* (1969) to *The Siege* (1998), through *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), *Towering Inferno* (1974), *Die Hard* (1988), *Independence Day* (1996), and *Mars Attacks!* (1997), the US film industry has been churning out an uninterrupted stream of such spectacular productions. The genre has its rules. The disaster's function is both to reveal and to redeem. It usually allows the timid to act as fearless adventurers, the avowed bad guys to redeem their crimes, while the falsely brave are unmasked and seemingly respectable people behave like total bastards.

By a kind of irony at which History seems to excel, terrorists have turned this ideological weapon or cultural message against its sender. Originally meant as entertainment fiction, the disaster screenplay has been brutally translated to the real world by America's enemies, in a bloody "return to sender"! "It may have been no accident that they chose the language of American movies. They were creating not just terror; they were creating images."⁸ *This time, the scene was real.*⁹ Consequently, CIA experts seek the counsel of Hollywood screenwriters

to anticipate the form new attacks will take. At the movies, disaster also reveals the hero dormant in the *regular guy*.¹⁰ Many Americans actually believe the White House was saved from United Airlines flight 93, the plane that crashed near Pittsburgh, by a handful of amateur sportsmen.¹¹

Symbols of power and the power of symbols

It wasn't buildings that were attacked but above all a metaphor, or symbols, if one prefers. And not just any symbols, but those of US hyperpower, symbols of economic power, of military power and political power. Journalistic clichés always hold their share of truth. "We were aiming at the heart of America." "America hit in the heart." The Twin Towers were indeed the symbolic high place of US economic and financial power. Since it was located a few steps away from the Wall Street Stock Exchange, the press sometimes referred to the World Trade Center as the "Temple of Commerce." The religious connotation also applies to the Pentagon when it is called the *Shrine of War*. As for the White House, it obviously symbolized the seat of power of the head of the most powerful state on Earth. In other words, a sacred place *par excellence*.

In all three cases, attacking those loci of power bearing a high symbolic charge amounts to a sacrilege. By their gigantic nature alone, the twins did indeed look like cathedrals. Besides, even if a confession does not necessarily prove guilt, it will be noted that the presumed mastermind behind these attacks (the "message"'s sender) did confirm, a month after the events, what was still one interpretation among other possible ones. "The true targets were icons of US military and economic power."

By using the term "icons," Osama Bin Laden seems to want to prove Jean Baudrillard right, though he likely never heard of him. "This terrorist violence is not 'real.' It is worse in a sense: it is symbolic."¹² According to Baudrillard, we were all secretly dreaming such a thing would happen, and in their strategy, terrorists know "they can count on our unspeakable complicity." By deliberately positioning himself on the field of the collective unconscious, the French philosopher thus eludes all discussion, but by the same token he cannot make any scientific claim. Al-Qaeda's founder justifies the slaughter of innocents by a political-religious rhetoric that tends to erase the physical reality of the victims to better underline the symbolic power of the targets. Thus, the victims were not targeted as such, but were only guilty of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. This is what killed them. And in a way, Bin Laden kills them symbolically a second time, by denying them their status as genuine targets. What does he care if the destruction of these so-called icons involved the death of thousands of very real flesh-and-blood people?

The day after the drama, on the first page of the French daily *Le Monde*, one could see Uncle Sam as a giant, striding amidst New York skyscrapers, his legs wounded by the first plane's impact. The image was reminiscent of some famous scenes of the movie *King Kong* (1933), especially since the Twin Towers had replaced the Empire State Building in John Guillermin's remake. But it is also impossible not to think of a giant with feet of clay or even

of the Colossus of Rhodes in the peplums of yore. To be precise, if we want to have a measure of the target's symbolic power, we have to remember that the Greek colossus was only 32 meters high, that the Mesopotamian ziggurats that inspired the biblical parable of the tower of Babel were 40 to 100 meters high, whereas the Twin Towers were 420 meters high.

For a religious fundamentalist, isn't the American skyscraper the modern equivalent of the tower of Babel? "A tower that reaches to the heavens" (Genesis 11). A kind of challenge made by Promethean man against God to assert his power. The skyscraper as Godscraper? The Biblical episode of the tower of Babel does refer to the offence of hubris. Besides, for ultraconservative Christians as for some fundamentalist Muslims, New York is Babylon or Sodom and Gomorrah: a cosmopolitan city of decadent mores deserving destruction and divine punishment. Would it be a slight to psychoanalysis to involve it in a commonplace? The towers as a representation of sexual potency, the skyscraper as phallic symbol? From this standpoint, the attack would be tantamount to a kind of architectural and urban castration. America struck in its manhood, emasculated live by a still-unknown but clearly savage enemy.

On the first page of *Le Monde* on September 13, on the left third of the picture, one could only see the Statue of Liberty and, in the background, a thick black smoke. As though the collapse of the World Trade Center's Twin Towers caused the very symbol of liberty to reemerge. For its part, the special issue of *Time* magazine on the tragedy showed on its front cover the two towers in flames, and on its back cover the Statue of Liberty in front, her arm held high, in dazzling profile against a backdrop of thick black smoke. The image of this unharmed statue unflinchingly overlooking a genuine field of ruin made a strange impression.

Right after the events, there were at least two possible readings of this new skyline. In the absence of any immediate claim, the famous statue appeared in the New York sky as a kind of signature. An attack committed in the name of the right to independence? The liberation of occupied territories, the liberation of the Holy Places, the discontinuation of US bombings in Iraq, the liberation of all the oppressed in the world! This was proof of the need to destroy the temple of Western commerce to put back on the horizon the very symbol of freedom. Or then again, quite the contrary, it could be seen as an illustration of the very failure of the terrorists, who had destroyed buildings and killed innocent people without being able to dent the main, immaterial thing: the spirit of America, her principle, her values, symbolized by this world-famous statue. Besides, if liberty appears as the national religion of the United States—aside from the worship of money, then François Bartholdi's sculpture was its first icon, that is a "symbolic-hypostatic representation," a mere image leading to the origin and as such, ever at risk of lending itself to idolatry.

From this perspective, the Statue of Liberty would have made a much more symbolic target than the Twin Towers or the Pentagon. The target was without a doubt harder to reach, and the message was liable to becoming muddled. For if we take Osama Bin Laden's discourse seriously, the term "icon" may lead us to believe that the target of the attacks was not

America as such but the implicit model she embodies for a handful of corrupt leaders in the Middle East, starting with those of his native country, Saudi Arabia.

Finally, a parallel could be made between the astonishment of Western public opinion upon the discovery of US citizens among Taliban fighters and the current reaction of Europeans as they realize the importance of Jihadist networks leading volunteers to Syria, and especially of French people after the bloody attack aimed at the editorial board of the satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*. Just as the terrorist billionaire and expert in financial circuits could be termed “America’s family secret” or “the president’s evil twin,” according to Arundhati Roy, we may wonder if the kamikaze air pirates who had been living in the United States long enough to blend in were not after all Americans in a sense, by virtue of their lifestyle, and especially, their technological culture?

Communication technologies and the communication of technology

Who could deny that the United States represents the archetype, or even the matrix, of technological societies? In the era of cyberterrorism, the September 11 terrorist attack gives us the opportunity to raise the more general question of the role of technology in modern societies.

The Internet is supposed to have been invented by American engineers and originally used by the army and later by academics who wanted a faster way to exchange information with colleagues abroad. The police investigation seems to prove that the operation’s organizers favored this communication technology to coordinate the attacks. More discreet than the telephone, electronic mail is said to make it possible to hide messages by a combination of cryptography and steganography. The messages would first be coded, and then concealed (in the grey area not visible to the human eye) in the middle of seemingly innocuous photographs (in particular, the most commonplace images on the Web, namely, pornography) and transmitted under the guise of an attachment. According to Ron Dick, Deputy Director of the FBI, not only did the pirates use Internet, but they “used it well.”

As for money, the crux of any war, it will suffice to recall two elements too well-known to be dwelt upon. While the Taliban regime did persecute poppy growers, a sizable part of al-Qaeda’s fortune came from opium trafficking: how to get rich by poisoning infidels! The heroine consumed by US junkies mostly comes from Afghanistan, even as the Bush administration finances the war against drugs in that country. Talk about selling capitalists the rope that will be used to hang them! Second paradox: the ambiguous role, to say the least, played by US banks regularly working on behalf of filthy-rich businessmen from the Arab Peninsula or the Persian Gulf. With a little more curiosity about the precise identity of its clients, Citibank might have refrained from financing the kamikaze pilots based in Florida. At least since the attacks against US embassies in East Africa and the last one to date aimed at the *USS Cole*, a modicum of vigilance was to be expected. Yet Mustafa Ahmad, al-Qaeda’s treasurer, apparently had no trouble transferring funds to the head of the commandos, the Egyptian Mohammed Atta, by way of Citibank’s New York head office.

The terrorist attack against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon is to be set within the global context of technological societies. Over half a century ago, Jacques Ellul showed that the phenomenon of technology was characterized among other things by unity and by totalization.¹³ Technology functions as a network of complex ramifications that wreak havoc with traditional distinctions opposing form and content, or civilian and military. Who, for instance, can guarantee the peaceful use of the nuclear, pharmaceutical, or chemical industry? Aside from the color of its tarpaulin cover, what sets apart a military truck from a civilian truck?

If terrorists now use school supplies (such as box cutters) as part of their arsenal, they also know how to turn an airliner into a weapon of war. We also find this unity of a system made up of interdependent elements in the phenomenon of the chain reactions generated by the September 11 attacks: financial crash, airline company bankruptcies, lay-offs in the aeronautics industry and the tourism sector, cuts in communications budgets, drop in consumption, economic recession. Furthermore, specialization entails totalization. Each one of the parts counts less than the system of connections binding them together. What makes the strength of the technological system is also its weakness. The network structure increases the fragility of technological societies that have become vulnerable by the very fact of their high degree of sophistication.

For modern terrorists, there is no shortage of targets. We may think of Internet viruses, mail-transmitted diseases (anthrax), the poisoning of a city's waterworks or of a major hotel's or hospital's air-conditioning system, not to mention *communications hubs*: airports, train stations, power plants, or nuclear plants. The giant towers in which a midsized city's population is concentrated are the perfect illustration of the fragility of what sociologist Alain Gras has called technological macrosystems.¹⁴ The perpetrators of the attacks on the World Trade Center were well aware of this, as they secured the privilege of appearing to be part of international opinion as the new David striking down the US Goliath.

In our modern societies, technology is ambivalent, since it liberates as much as it alienates. It creates new problems as soon as it resolves them and increases itself through the—technological—solutions it brings. New equipment is already being developed to reinforce air safety. Sooner or later, it is going to be circumvented by a new generation of terrorists, which will in turn give rise to new countermeasures. But technological progress has a price that is not just financial. Its negative effects are inseparable from its positive effects, and this progress always entails a great many unpredictable consequences. To be sure, it is our leaders' duty to try to think of everything in advance. It is no less certain that caution dictates we keep in mind the share of risks inherent in any society based on technological power. It is also wise to be wary of all talk of a neat harmony of security and freedom within the State, as of all those who would combine war and justice abroad. In this respect, the military retaliation's code names, *Infinite Justice* and then *Enduring Freedom*, may be interpreted as the titles of a propaganda film projected by the US government on the world's big screen.

Is war, as Clausewitz stated, “the continuation of politics by other means,” or, on the contrary, is Michel Foucault right to reverse that dictum by making politics the continuation of war? In this particular instance, it has been said—not without justification—that it was “the absence of politics by other means.”¹⁵ But from the afternoon of September 11, the war of images and words had begun. Later on, George W. Bush would term the military action launched in Afghanistan a “battle for civilization.”

The war of words and the words of war

Communication is no doubt to propaganda what publicity is to advertising, but if the outer trappings change, the aim remains the same. Jacques Ellul has shown that, contrary to received wisdom, information (the realm of the Good and of Truth) cannot be so neatly set apart from propaganda (the instrument of Evil and lies). Far from being exclusive of one another, information is the precondition for the very existence of propaganda. Furthermore, propaganda is a necessity for those who govern as well as for the governed. It is a response to a desire for political participation, and it reassures by simplifying a reality made more complex by the mushrooming of information. President Bush’s political discourse is a fine illustration of his ideas.

“Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward. And freedom will be defended. I want to reassure the American people,” George W. Bush declared on Tuesday the 11th, “. . . that the United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts.” Beyond the resort to the classic rhetorical trope of personification, the president’s speech immediately situates itself on the moral plane—the better to shunt away the political dimension: (terrorist) cowardice gets opposed to (American) virtue. It is not a state, it is not a superpower, nor even what some call a hyperpower, which has been attacked, nor even a country, but a value, the fairest and noblest of all: Freedom (embodied by America). The “gaps” left in this discourse are at least as significant here as the ideas expressed. The president does not utter a single word about the foreign policy of “the most powerful Empire in history” (Arno J. Mayer), on its strategic interests in the world, or on its alliances in the Middle East.

The same evening, live from the Oval Office, he continues to omit key aspects: “These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat. But they have failed; our country is strong. A great people has been moved to defend a great nation.” Speaking of murder is again a way to depoliticize by criminalizing the opponent. This is again a way to reassure the population by stirring up patriotic feelings. Great people, great nation. The variations are meant to hammer home the same idea. Redundancy is intended. Bush again uses personification: America has been moved, unanimous to a man! In this context of major crisis, the president is trying to boost the sense of national unity.

“Today, our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature. And we responded with the best of America—with the daring of our rescue workers, with the caring for strangers and neighbors who came to give blood and help in any way they could.” George W. Bush is still

playing on personification: seeing Evil. As though it was absolute evil, and as though it was wholly contained in the images of the attack. The country has seen evil as one would say “it has seen the devil.” To the worst, we answered with the best. The president is expressing here a Manichean view of the world. The blackness of the human soul as opposed to a concentrate of American virtues. This symmetry is bogus insofar as helping victims is an obligation within the framework of modern societies (Welfare State and/or Zorro State) and the actual answer will come later, in the guise of military retaliation.

“Freedom and democracy are under attack,” he states on Wednesday. “This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil, but good will prevail.” George Bush, Sr., used to compare Saddam Hussein to Adolf Hitler. His president son revives the Reagan-era terminology of the *Evil Empire*, which had referred to the USSR, and which now (perhaps unconsciously) reflects his own simplistic—not to say childish—worldview, as though he was announcing a new *Star Wars* episode! Finally, on September 13, he utters the word “crusade” at the very moment when Samuel Huntington’s ideas are being rediscovered¹⁶: a particularly unfortunate choice of words for someone who wanted to avoid conflating Islam and terrorism.

There is an endless supply of such declarations, fraught with simplistically Manichean binaries: good versus evil, democracy versus archaism, civilization versus barbarism, light versus darkness, good guys versus bad guys . . . Osama Bin Laden was perfect in the part of the bogeyman, an evil genius heading a radical Islamic version of the Spectre international crime syndicate in the James Bond franchise.

As though echoing the president’s Freudian slip (?), on the same Manichean mode opposing the Umma (the Muslim nation or the community of believers) to the rest of the world, al-Qaeda’s leaders would answer him on Sunday, October 7, less than two hours after the beginning of US–UK strikes on Afghan soil. “The crusade war promised by Bush has effectively started,” said the spokesman of the political-religious sect. After having called to jihad, he referred to those “thousands of young people who want to die as much as Americans want to live.” The authentic Muslim was described by those “madmen of God” as the one who cares about respecting his faith more than his own life (here below). This is a recurrent theme in the discourse of radical Islam: the cause is worth sacrificing one’s life for it, and the mujahedeen are not afraid of dying. Bin Laden’s words belong to this logic.

“America has been hit by Allah at its most vulnerable point, destroying, thank God, its most prestigious buildings.” “There is America, full of fear from its north to its south, from its west to its east. Thank God for that.” Throughout his statement, Bin Laden refers to America and not to a specific country, the United States; America not as a continent, but as an evil entity. Aside from omnipresent references to God, it deals with the “most vulnerable point” (the Achilles’ heel or the giant’s feet of clay) and “prestigious” buildings (prestige, honor, humiliation: this confirms that the targets were primarily symbolic in nature). “There is America, full of fear” —of God, of course!

“What America is tasting now is something insignificant compared to what we [Muslims] have tasted for scores of years.” The rhetorical device of legitimization consists in presenting the bloody attack of September 11 as a fair turning of the tables, or better yet, as the suffering inflicted was supposedly far less than the suffering endured. It is all about having the victim appear as the executioner, and justifying to public opinion—especially but not exclusively among Muslims—an operation consisting in making anonymous office clerks, ordinary people, including Muslims, pay for the consequences of the US government’s foreign policy. Hence the importance of the resort to the generic term America. Personification makes this sleight of hand possible. It is not thousands of US citizens who have been killed, wounded, bereaved, or simply traumatized . . . but **America**, an abstract and evil being along the lines of the “Great Satan” trope once used by Ayatollah Khomeini’s Iran.

“Our nation [the Islamic world] has been tasting this humiliation and this degradation for more than 80 years. Its sons are killed, its blood is shed, its sanctuaries are attacked, and no one hears and no one heeds.” Bin Laden is addressing this still-imaginary nation that it is the point to build. He speaks in its name. He speaks about it, to it, and to its enemies. In doing so, he starts to make it exist for real . . . in hearts and minds or in mental representations. This is how you “do things with words.”¹⁷ It is all about getting from the potential nation (at the time, over 1.2 billion Muslims spread around the world) to the actual nation. If one agrees to define nationalism as society’s self-worship, let us not forget that it is not nations that beget nationalisms, but nationalism that creates nations.¹⁸

“And when God has guided a bunch of Muslims to be at the forefront and destroyed America, a big destruction, I wish God would lift their position.” In accordance with al-Qaeda’s usual strategy, the attack was not overtly claimed. Bin Laden rejoices at the operation’s success, without however suggesting he was involved in its inception. He feeds doubt by denying the enemy any detailed admission. We may see this as abiding by the line followed from the beginning of the struggle between the Taliban regime and the US government: invoking the lack of evidence to justify refusing to give over Bin Laden. This argument would become a shibboleth in Islamic countries: “If Osama is indeed responsible for the September 11 attacks, why doesn’t America provide the evidence?” But the trope of admission and definite evidence is mostly aimed at Western public opinion, and it makes sense within the framework of human justice. But the message has a second addressee: Muslim public opinion, at which the main message is aimed, namely, that the real instigator of the September 11 attack is none other than God Himself! Bin Laden only happened to be His humble spokesman or His modest interpreter.

“And when those people have defended and retaliated to what their brothers and sisters have suffered in Palestine and Lebanon, the whole world has been shouting, as the unbelievers and hypocrites have done.”¹⁹ The word “retaliate” is meant to legitimize the attack. It was, after all, an act of self-defense. Muslims are oppressed by Americans; it is normal that they defend themselves. The reference to Palestine belatedly appeared in Bin Laden’s discourse so as to increase his potential for sympathy. Anti-Zionism constituted a powerful vector for the unification of Muslim public opinion, well beyond the Near East and Middle East. This aim

was reached if we recall how his popularity rating shot up in Arab streets and among part of African youth. In the context of the second Intifada (the *Aqsa intifadeh*), Bin Laden instrumentalized the Palestinian cause. He was careful not to say that the PLO had condemned the attack and that Yasser Arafat got himself filmed in the midst of giving his blood as a sign of solidarity with American victims.

“They (Americans) are debauchees who supported the executioner against the victim and the unjust against the innocent child. God gave them what they deserve.” This transparent allusion to US support for Israeli policies refers to a TV report²⁰ that had deeply troubled international public opinion, showing the death of Mohammed al-Durah (12 years old) during exchanges of fire between Tsahal and Palestinian Security Forces on September 30, 2000. Bin Laden hammers in the notion that terrorists have done nothing but execute Allah’s will.

“These events have split the whole world into two camps: the camps of belief and the camps of disbelief!” This simplistic discourse contrasts with the complexity of the real. Bin Laden’s message constitutes the reverse mirror image of George W. Bush’s message: “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” But if the former claims to be fighting **injustice** (in the name of Islam), and the latter to claims to be defending (“enduring”) **freedom**, their discourses are partly interchangeable. Bin Laden claims freedom for all oppressed Muslims, and Bush leads his war of reprisals to enact justice.

The oath of al-Qaeda’s founder will be met a month later by that of the US president in front of the UN General Assembly: “[. . .] *their hour of justice will come*. [. . .] I make this promise to all the victims of that regime: the Taliban’s days of harboring terrorists, and dealing in heroin, and brutalizing women are drawing to a close. [. . .] We have a chance to write the story of our times—a story of courage defeating cruelty, and of light overcoming darkness.” The two speakers share the same Manichean view of the world. We are dealing with a genuine instance of mimetic rivalry as per René Girard’s theory.²¹ The similarity can even be found in unexpected areas such as health. President Bush publically swears he has not caught anthrax, while Bin Laden explains to the Pakistani press that his “kidneys are working fine.”

“Every Muslim should **arise** in support of his religion, and now the wind of change has blown up to destroy injustice on the Arabian Peninsula.” Americans who rise are thus met by Muslims who arise. The Arabian Peninsula is a holy land, because the Prophet was born and lived in Mecca. Bin Laden criticizes Saudi leaders for tolerating the presence of infidels (US military stationed since the Gulf War) near the holy places of Islam. “And to Americans, I say to it and its people this: I swear by God the Great, America will never . . . taste security unless we feel security and safety in our land and in Palestine.” We have here a sort of mutual figure for constructing the monster. In the hours following the terrorist attack, it was only the name of Osama Bin Laden that was fed to the press and world opinion. Presidential and media rhetoric focused on this scarecrow. Bin Laden did his best to stick to this part, not without talent, it must be said. As an inspired prophet of Allah, he reveled in striking the pose of the lone champion of justice challenging the Empire by himself.

War of images and images of war

Beyond the threats uttered against America, on Sunday, October 7, 2001, the success of the PR operation consisted first in the contrast between our snowy screens, on which we saw nothing of the US and UK air strikes in Afghanistan but a few green dots in the pitch dark night, and the sudden appearance in broad daylight of Public Enemy No. 1, having finished his diatribe and sipping tea in front of his cave with a prophet's serenity. If we may dwell a moment on non-verbal communication, the audiovisual staging of this discourse could only cause dismay in the Western viewer used to other codes. It aroused in him a sense of fascination/repulsion, or at least, of troubling otherness. By contrast, in Islamic lands, it helped reinforce the aura of the charismatic leader.

A cave in the desert as sole backdrop. Muslims the world over know that Mohammed hid for three days and three nights in a cave near Mecca, to escape from his enemies who had sworn to kill him. In his time, the Prophet harangued the people to ask it to renounce the cult of images and worship the One God. His clan (the Hashemites) was then undergoing persecution. As the target of the hostility of oligarchies and polytheistic religious leaders, Mohammed then had to flee Mecca, and was forced to go in exile first in Abyssinia, then, during a second emigration (the Hijra), to the oasis that would become Medina. Bin Laden today, like the Prophet long ago, has also been expelled from his country of Saudi Arabia (1991), and then from the Sudan (1996), before finding refuge in Kandahar, among the Taliban. Mohammed also had to hide before his cause triumphed through force of arms: in 630, at the head of 10,000 troops, he had returned to Mecca as a victorious warlord.

Hands folded, eyes half-shut, in a meditative pose, Bin Laden is quietly seated on his heels in the midst of the other cross-legged bearded men. The bodily position is in conformity with the Muslim rites codifying the five daily prayers. He assumes the posture of both sage and warrior. Just like the Prophet! A religious man's beard. Military fatigues and white turban. A kerosene lamp is set on a rock, at the back, aligned with the Egyptian Ayman Al-Zawahiri, former leader of Islamic Jihad, Bin Laden's physician and counsellor. His favorite weapon, a Kalakov (AK-74), taken from a Russian soldier in combat, leaning against the cave wall, is visible, but only in the background during much of his talk. It is there as a reminder of Jihad, and perhaps also of the fact that Islam in its heyday triumphed by the sword. In his previous propaganda tapes, the al-Qaeda leader maintained his reputation as an intrepid horseman and a sharpshooter. The Kalakov also calls to mind the victorious war against the Red Army. Message: Muslims are going to defeat the US "paper tiger" as they have defeated the Soviet Great Satan.

But Osama Bin Laden could not have played Spectre's Blofeld without the complicity of the 24-hour news channel Al-Jazeera, and especially without the herd mentality of Western TV networks, converted to the one religion of profit and thus to the competition for ratings. In the name of national defense, from the very next day, the executives of the main US networks were brought to heel by the government after a moment of aberration. Under the fallacious pretext that al-Qaeda videos could contain coded messages aimed at triggering new terrorist

attacks, the White House asked the big US networks to screen all images provided by Qatari television before broadcasting them. The result no doubt exceeded the expectations of the national security advisers, since images of Bin Laden disappeared from the screens for all intents and purposes. Self-censorship was also a factor in the print media. Whereas in its October 1 issue, the cover of *Time* magazine showed only Bin Laden with the caption “Target,” over the following weeks one had to carefully scrutinize the pages inside to find paltry excerpts of his declaration of war on America.

Philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy expressed the opinion of many Frenchmen when he called Al-Jazeera “Bin Laden’s network.” From a Western standpoint, the accusation was not without grounds, but it needs to be qualified. It is a fact that until Kabul fell to the Northern Alliance, “the CNN of the Arab world” enjoyed a monopoly position that forced the whole world’s TV networks to rebroadcast its images strapped with a wide strip indicating their origins. But it is just that Al-Jazeera found itself in Afghanistan in a position comparable to that of CNN during the Gulf War. Whereas CNN is still viewed by international public opinion as a purely “made in USA” cultural product like Coca-Cola, its correspondent had been the only one allowed to remain in Baghdad. The Iraqi regime had thus given exceptional means to Peter Arnett, who enjoyed exclusivity as a trade-off with censorship. But because CNN showed the whole world the damage caused by US bombings among the civilian population, it was accused of playing into Saddam Hussein’s hands.

The same thing happened to Tayssir Allouni, the only reporter allowed to remain in the Afghan capital before the military balance of power was reversed. Dwelling on misdirected strikes and civilian victims, lingeringly showing corpses in the villages bombed by the US Air Force, only relaying the words of Kabulis denouncing this war against Islam, making a display of Bin Laden’s own children armed to the teeth and singing the praises of the “emir of believers,” Mullah Omar, against a backdrop of the wrecks of helicopters and planes supposedly downed by the Taliban, the reporter made Al-Jazeera very unpopular with Washington. Accused by US authorities of broadcasting al-Qaeda propaganda, the Arabic network responded with a retrospective shown in a loop, featuring mutilated faces on hospital beds, crippled children and disfigured babies, all maimed in the name of this so-called “battle for civilization.” For its part, CNN’s executives forced employees to tag every image of civilian victims of US bombings with this ritualistic reminder: “The Taliban are protecting terrorists who are responsible for the death of 5,000 innocent people.”

If Al-Jazeera has not managed to convince Westerners of its neutrality by refusing to decide between “the war on terror, as America says” and “the war against the infidels, as al-Qaeda says,” the land of press freedom and the First Amendment has beaten all records when it comes to controlling images. In the name of its soldiers’ safety, the Pentagon has even extended its grip to photographic documents. During half of the conflict, due to a lack of independent journalists on location, any media wanting to illustrate the US presence on the ground had to be content with only the images of US commandos taken and selected by the Defense Department.

The patriotic fervor unleashed right after the attacks was not limited to the boom in sales of the Star-Spangled Banner. While, in contrast with the Vietnam conflict, the American press has, if anything, been given to self-censorship, journalists have been accused of endangering the lives of “our boys” by providing the enemy with exceedingly accurate information. A petty, slanderous accusation when one knows that said information came from briefings or the website of the Pentagon’s PR department, but this type of delusion says a lot about the expectations of much of the public. The newspapers that dared publish pictures of Afghan babies killed by US bombs were pelted with insults. The concept of “collateral damages” is acceptable, but just as long as it remains at the level of a disembodied abstraction!

Jacques Ellul was right when he described the complicitous relationship uniting the propagandist and the propagandized. The average citizen has no taste for seeing photographs of slaughtered infants when President Bush himself has spoken of the struggle of Good against Evil, led by a nation that is decidedly good and peace-loving, but that is hated because it is misunderstood. Announcing military strikes on the same day that Bin Laden made his threats on TV, Bush had promised: “At the same time, the oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of America and our allies. As we strike military targets, we will also drop food, medicine, and supplies to the starving and suffering men and women and children of Afghanistan.” But since the small yellow containers holding food rations were the same color as the explosives scattered by cluster bombs, the latter were easy to mistake for the former. How many additional victims were there compared to how many lives saved? The “humanitarian” balance sheet of these very telegenic drops might have turned out to be a cruel exercise for its sponsor, but was the aim to persuade the whole world of American goodness or to maintain the good conscience of the supporters of this war, already a vast majority in the country?

“The word is only relative to Truth. The image is only relative to reality.”²² Jacques Ellul reminds the image consumers we are, rendered bulimic since September 11, that it would be wrong to mistake the real for the true. While the word has to do with truth—and thus also with lies—the image can completely stick to reality without being true. Sight makes us see the obvious, while the word, ever uncertain, excludes it.

War against democracy and democracy at war

War compels each of us to choose sides. It orients our gaze, conditions our visual memory, makes us see what we want to see, and forget the images that do not fit our interpretive framework. Propaganda reassures, because it filters, orders, and simplifies. But it would be the height of intellectual presumption to believe that (deceptive) propaganda is reserved for ordinary folks and (genuine) information to the élite. It would likewise be very naive or cynical to believe in the discourse of *just war*. As Ellul reminds us, there is no such thing as just wars, only necessary wars!

The US counter-attack was not the war of *Freedom* against *Terrorism*, but that of a Western state legitimately defending its power interests in the name of values that have a claim to

universality. First of all, freedom cannot wage war, even when one goes to war in its name. Violence is always the province of necessity, that is, freedom's antithesis. Secondly, terrorism is a highly subjective notion, which can refer to very different realities. We may recall that the Nazis used it to discredit the Resistance during their Occupation of France.²³

Not being able to prevent wars, international organizations have had to fall back on codifying wars. The member states of the European Union have defined as terrorist "any act . . . intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to certain persons, and provided its purpose is to intimidate a population, or to compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing something." Who could swear that this definition does not include the bombings and embargo undergone by the populations of Iraq, Iran, and Syria? As is his wont, Noam Chomsky offers a critique that is even more merciless to the powerful: "In practice, terrorism is violence committed against the United States—regardless of the perpetrators. One would be hard-pressed to find an exception to this rule in history."²⁴

Article 51 of the United Nations Charter recognizes an inherent right to legitimate defense in case of armed aggression. This right then raises the issue of the *proportionality* of the response. The Geneva Conventions make a distinction between civilian and military objectives and tend to proscribe the disproportionate use of force. The problem with proportionality is not limited to its legal dimension and obviously raises issues of a moral nature. Carpet-bombing strategies have generated deep discomfort even among those best-disposed toward the United States. The means used in Afghanistan in December have given rise to remorse among the very people who, in a burst of legitimate emotionalism, had claimed themselves to be "all Americans now" in September. Was it necessary to burn down the haystack to find the needle? Under the pretext that Bin Laden was as difficult to look for as a needle in a haystack, did one have the right to burn down the whole haystack and part of the field too? With all-out bombings of a country already ravaged by war and famine, all that was achieved was adding more victims to the victims. The tons of bombs dropped around Tora Bora have caused the death of numerous civilians.

President Bush pretended to have just discovered the appalling plight of Afghan women. By a neat historical irony, he was thereby unwittingly using as justification for his war the arguments invoked in 1979 by Georges Marchais, leader of the French Communist Party, to greet the Soviet intervention: putting an end to a feudal regime that demeaned women. And yet, the violation of human rights in general, and of women's rights in particular, not to mention the scandalous destruction of the giant Buddha statues of Bamyán, had not prevented the US administration from negotiating with the Taliban until July 2001, holding out international recognition of the regime against the handover of Bin Laden. In the background for this was the oil lobby, so dear to the Bush clan, and its interest in Central Asian oilfields. From a strict *Realpolitik* standpoint, future events were to show it would have been more judicious to help the Taliban's main adversary: Commander Massoud.

Still at the level of realism, suffice it to recall that the main instigator of the September 11 attacks was long a valued helper of the United States, armed and trained by the CIA, ready

to do anything in the struggle against international Communism. By equipping his troops, e.g. with Stinger missiles, the Americans made him a victorious hero of the struggle against the Soviets in Afghanistan. For reasons of his own, the creature turned against his creator after the Gulf War. Our enemies' enemies are not always our friends after all!

Along these lines, the partnership of mutual convenience tying Washington to Islamabad has led the US to close their eyes to human rights violations in Pakistan and the illegal production of a nuclear weapon, symbolically termed "the Islamic bomb" by President Ali Bhutto himself. Without the help of the Pakistani government as subcontractor of US interests in the region, without the help of its "volunteers" and secret service, the Taliban could never have taken Kabul. Because they were still thinking in Cold War terms, the United States supported the Pakistani military that put in power the Taliban, who then protected Bin Laden's networks. The idea was British, the financing was Saudi, the execution was Pakistani, but the design of this time bomb can be laid at the doorstep of the US government. There can be no question here of using a historical explanation as a kind of underhand justification. No actual or supposed crime of the US government can pretend to excuse the horror of the attacks. There is no need to invoke Dilthey or Weber to make clear analytical distinction between explaining, understanding, and justifying. The best propaganda, which is to say the most technically efficient one, is not built upon lies, but using incomplete or partial data.

In the name of anti-imperialism, a number of intellectuals were quick to disclaim any solidarity with American reprisals by invoking the United States' iniquitous policies in the Near East and their cruelty to the Iraqi people. But the Israel-Palestine conflict does not explain the September 11 attacks any more than the Great Depression explains the Holocaust. Besides, one would be hard-pressed to cite the name of a single European statesman who did more than Carter and Clinton to try to bring back peace to this part of the world. As for Iraq, those who speak of the children who died as a result of the embargo—by outrageously inflating already frightful figures: 600,000 according to UNICEF, from 1 to 1.5 million according to their own statistics—never mention the fate of 150,000 Kurds who were exposed to chemical and biological weapons at Saddam Hussein's will. In a single day, March 17, 1988, his army gassed a city of Iraqi Kurdistan, causing the death of 5,000 civilians in the throes of atrocious agony. You cannot criticize the Americans for not having a policy and at the same time make them responsible for all the evils of this world. If, as bleeding hearts believe, terrorism is the symptom and not the disease, if the economic hardships arising from neoliberal—and hence American! —globalization is its sole source, then one would have to explain why Bin Laden was a Saudi billionaire and not a Sahelian peasant.

Terrorism presents a terrible dilemma to democracies, by condemning them either to betray their basic principles or to disappear at the enemy's hands. To resist as political regimes here and now, they have no other choice than to make a mockery of the values that found them as a normative ideal. Curtailment of civil liberties, witch hunts in the press and pressures on the media, arbitrary arrests, extension of police custody for foreigners, establishment of exceptional justice and military tribunals, searches of vehicles and people, large-scale

development of phone tapping (including of “friendly countries”), and e-mail monitoring. Even within a legal framework (US Patriot Act, security law in France) and with the assent of a public opinion all too eager to trade in its freedom against a return to order, the drift to a security state at home contradicts the democratic spirit just as much as violations of the laws of war abroad. This war was no doubt inevitable even if it was not likeable, but it was in no way a just war; for if there are just causes, there cannot be just wars. “The noblest ends assigned to war are rotten by war,” as we are reminded by Jacques Ellul, for whom not only the end does not justify the means, but the means corrupt the ends. The nobler the ends are said to be, the crueler the methods to reach them will be. The whole discourse of the US government consisted precisely in justifying the use of inhumane means in Afghanistan as retaliation for an “aggression against all mankind.” As we know all too well, politics is not an industry based on morals. Machiavelli taught us that in politics, force is just when it is necessary. In the same sense, Weber taught us that in politics, we do not always get the Good through the Good. Ellul, who emphasizes the catalytic function of Christians, this peculiar role of sheep among wolves, and who advocates not only non-violence, but non-power, could never have shared Weber’s admiration for that character in Machiavelli’s *Florentine Histories* who declared that those who preferred the greatness of their City to the salvation of their soul ought to be congratulated. Ellul for his part never tired of proclaiming that a just world could not be founded by unjust means, nor a free society by the means of slaves.²⁵

¹ Jacques Ellul, *Les combats de la liberté, Éthique de la liberté*, vol. 3, 1984, p. 166.

² Claude Liauzu, *Empire du mal contre Grand Satan. Treize siècles de cultures de guerre entre l’islam et l’Occident*, Armand Colin, 2005.

³ Director of *Shoah*, Jean-Paul Sartre’s sometime secretary and director of the review *Les Temps Modernes*.

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, (Verso, 2003), <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-baudrillard/articles/lesprit-du-terrorisme/>

⁵ In symptomatic fashion, the 24-hour Qatari news network Al-Jazeera would promptly be termed “the Arab world’s CNN” by French news media.

⁶ The scene was however filmed by a French amateur filmmaker, whose images were broadcast by CNN only around midnight local time..

⁷ In English in the original.

⁸ Neal Gabler, “This Time, the Scene Was Real.” *New York Times*, September 16, 2001.

⁹ In English in the original.

¹⁰ In English in the original.

¹¹ The very title of the French documentary by Thomas Johnson: *Vol 93, les nouveaux héros de l’Amérique*, reflects this viewpoint very well.

¹² Jean Baudrillard, “L’esprit du terrorisme.” *Le Monde*, November 3, 2001.

¹³ Jacques Ellul, *La technique ou l’enjeu du siècle*, Armand Colin, 1954.

¹⁴ Alain Gras, *Grandeur et dépendance, Sociologie des macro-systèmes techniques*, Presses universitaires de France, 1993.

¹⁵ Jean Baudrillard, art. cit.

¹⁶ Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*, 72.3 (Summer 1993): 22–49.

¹⁷ John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford University Press, 1962.

¹⁸ Ernst Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford, 1983.

¹⁹ On this concept, see <http://www.cultures-et-croyances.com/etude-le-concept-de-lhypocrisie-dans-la-morale-islamique/>

²⁰ http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x5qhp7_la-mort-de-mohammed-al-dura_news

²¹ René Girard, *Achever Clausewitz*, Flammarion [2007].

²² Jacques Ellul, *La parole humiliée*, La Table Ronde, 2014, p. 44, [1981]

²³ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*. Basic Books, 1977.

²⁴ Noam Chomsky, "Cette Amérique qui n'apprend rien." *Le Monde*, 22/11/2001

²⁵ Jacques Ellul and Patrick Troude-Chastenet, *Jacques Ellul on Politics, Technology and Christianity*, Wipf and Stock, 2005.

The Prophet of Cuernavaca: Ivan Illich and the Crisis of the West
By Todd Hartch, Oxford University Press, 2015

Reviewed by Peter Escalante

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Ivan Illich, idiosyncratic Catholic priest, dissident theologian, and philosopher, is known primarily for his series of short phenomenological essays illuminating some aspect of modern life. Like Agamben's archaeology, his method in these aims to reveal the deep imaginal underpinnings of modern life. It is easy to get the impression from the essays that he was a calmly panoptic intellectual, though a passion for justice obviously warms his writing.

His life was tempestuous and often frustrated but always self-directed, perhaps even self-willed, and by no means merely incidental to his intellectual work. Even his death was a gesture of a piece with his life-work; he died of an extremely painful and disfiguring facial cancer. Illich in fact wrote his sophisticated essays in much the same way, and for much the same sort of purpose, as Subcomandante Marcos writes his communiqués, as Las Casas wrote his remonstrances. Thus this well-written and very attentive biography is long overdue and a welcome arrival.

And it is relentlessly biographical, steadily eschewing the temptation to become merely a chronology of his life or an exegesis of the essays, or to take too forward a position of its own regarding Illich's remarkable itinerary. This is very helpful, because, as Hartch makes very clear, Illich is not so much difficult to understand in his writing as, rather, extremely difficult to recognize in his role, and only close attention will reveal the motive idea of the man.

The key thing Hartch notes, and rightly, is that Illich was a Christian priest and a missionary of the Catholic Church. The great and perhaps insuperable difficulty of Illich's mission was that the Catholic Church as he conceived it was dramatically different from the institution that goes under that name, and thus he was not a missionary of the ordinary sort and was in fact perhaps wholly unrecognizable as one.

The book is an extended consideration of this project and this predicament. Hartch traces throughout all of Illich's moves his willingness to position himself outside the hierarchical bureaucracy but still within not only charism but even office of minister and missionary (despite his radical critique of institution and mission as actually existing forms), his cultivation of convivial associations, and his teaching, a single missionary and reforming motive.

Hartch very helpfully explicates Illich's critique of the modern West and of the clerical bureaucracy which he regarded as its matrix and exemplar, as not simply a cry of protest but also a prophetic call toward convivial communion. In Illich's own eyes, he was a missionary not "from" the West, but rather to the West, and sent from the Catholic Church that he distinguished sharply from the organization that holds the name as a trademark. This is a really remarkable

insight into Illich and illuminatingly unifies his life and works. Although the book is very responsibly and consistently biographical, for this reason I think it can also serve as a very fine introduction to the Illich's thought.

The book ends by recounting his many failures and frustrations, many of which were due to the unrecognizability of both his mission as mission and his church as church. In the extremity of the near-unrecognizability of his mission, and in the radicalism of both his analysis and his personal risk, Hartch sees Illich as assuming the mantle of prophet. As is often the case with prophets, his short-term failures seem to be spectacular. In particular, the reformed convivial and conciliar church, whose way Illich hoped to make clear through his ferocious critique of Roman Catholic missions, never appeared; what grew in the field he cleared were seeds planted by Protestant missionaries, whose churches, although plural and more populist, were nevertheless as institutionalist in their way as the Roman Church. And within Rome itself, those inspired by more hopeful readings of the texts of Vatican II were immediately re-circumscribed within the official institutions. Most painfully, perhaps, Illich ends up with fewer and fewer interlocutors, finding himself largely alone. But Hartch sees Illich's mission as leaving lasting testimony for those who wish to hear it.

Ellul, Machiavelli and Autonomous Technique

by Richard Kirkpatrick¹

Richard L Kirkpatrick attended Connecticut College and Johns Hopkins University. He studied Ellul and Machiavelli under the guidance of Professor F. Edward Crazz, author of *Nicholas of Cusa and the Renaissance*, and other works. This piece is dedicated to him.

* * * * *

“In spite of the frequent mention of Machiavelli’s *Prince*, the truth is that until the beginning of the twentieth century no one ever drew the technical consequences of that work.”² Jacques Ellul thus remarks without elaboration in *The Technological Society*, although he had more elsewhere to say about Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), as appears below. While many have noted a “technical” dimension to Machiavelli’s thought,³ none has considered it specifically in light of Ellul’s conception of “autonomous technique”—deterministic technique that is “self-directing.” Ellul’s main study was the “technical system” as a civilizational phenomenon, the historical origins of which he found in the eighteenth century CE⁴. Thus, Machiavelli—two hundred years before then—was unquestionably far from the fully realized “technical system” in its modern maturity, and extreme contemporary acceleration. Ellul, however, glimpsed in his thought early characteristics or symptoms of the phenomenon of technique applied to humans—“a lightning flash,” as one scholar put it, “long before the main storm.”⁵ This chapter presents Machiavelli’s pertinent line of thought and brief extracts from the *Prince*, the *Discourses*, and his letters,⁶ then draws the technical consequences in Ellul’s terms.

Niccolò Machiavelli

“On many occasions,” Machiavelli wrote,⁷ he considered a dilemma, in sum: You consistently do your will and reach your intended ends when you adapt yourself and match your “modes of proceeding” (*modi del procedere*)⁸ to changes of fortune and of the times. Everyone, however, has a given nature, so you are *unable* to adapt as needed. Fortune and the times change, but you, stuck in your nature, do not—to your ruin. When Machiavelli counsels you “to use” the lion and to use the fox,⁹ he knows it is impossible—the fox is no more leonine than the lion is vulpine; the same inflexibility is to be found in humans, whose stubborn natures obstruct their wills.¹⁰ We get in the way of our own goals.

In this as in all his observation and reading, Machiavelli presents examples of “the actions of great men.”¹¹ Two of his favorite ancient exemplars of modes of proceeding were Hannibal the Carthaginian and Scipio the Roman—opposites: Scipio used the mode of “love” with “piety, fidelity, and religion,” Hannibal, the mode of fear, with “cruelty, perfidy, and irreligion.”¹² Both

were successful, but changing times and fortunes might have required reversal: Hannibal to adopt the mode of love, and Scipio, fear, or yet other modes. These men, however, being unable to adapt themselves and their modes, would have failed. As Professor Ferroni summarizes:

The guarantee of happiness and success can be offered, in Machiavelli's anthropology, only by the individual's capacity for adapting his particular nature to the variations of Fortune, and thus of repeatedly "transforming" the modes of proceeding, according to the directions of these variations. If Fortune moves continuously between extreme and opposite poles, we will be able to match her only if we also know equally well how to shuttle between extremes, only if we are always ready to reverse our own mode of proceeding (if, in sum, we succeed in "transforming into the contrary").¹³

One of Machiavelli's well-known attempted answers to the problem is *virtù*,¹⁴ a force of nature to match capricious Fortuna, by "beating her and holding her down."¹⁵ *Virtù* is a personal gift—ancient, atavistic, and, as Machiavelli knows, rarely to be found. *Virtù* is extraordinary, personal, natural—the "modes of proceeding" are abstract, universal, impersonal. "Modes" do not much matter to those having "great *virtù*" or "extraordinary *virtù*,"¹⁶ but few have *virtù* at all, and fewer still have it in abundance. "The operations of greatest *virtù*" are things of the past.¹⁷ If *virtù* is not in your given nature, you cannot hope to acquire it. Besides, a savage who possesses *virtù* may flex it without consulting Machiavelli. *Virtù*, the natural force, does not answer Machiavelli's procedural problem—to find modes accessible to those who understand (*intende*) and who "know" fortune and the times,¹⁸ so that they always (*sempre*) reach their ends successfully.¹⁹

Another of Machiavelli's responses to the problem is pretense, but only to disguise personal qualities in yourself you cannot change or to simulate qualities you do not have. As to morals, you need not "have them in fact" but only "appear to have them," and it may be advantageous sometimes even "to be" so. "But the mind must be framed in a way that, needing not to be, you can know how to change to the contrary."²⁰ When, as here, *seeming* and *being* elide, the old dilemma recurs.

As Professor Najemy explains:

Particularly thorny for Machiavelli was the philosophical conundrum of agency and contingency . . . The unpredictability of events, the irrationality of history, and people's inability to deviate from their inborn nature and inclinations (all of which flow into what he meant by fortune) caused him to wonder where and how agency, or free will, could determine or influence the outcome of events (which is at least one important sense of Machiavellian *virtù*) . . . If, in theory, random variation and

unpredictability can be tamed either by prudence or impetuosity, in practice *both methods are rendered inefficacious by the prison of unchanging individual natures that occludes the required flexibility*. In his poetry and letters Machiavelli recasts the problem by relocating the “variation” of fortune in both nature and human nature, and thus no longer only in external randomness . . . [T]his theoretical dilemma . . . never ceased to trouble him.²¹ (emphasis added)

Machiavelli scholar Professor Atkinson adds, “The question would continue to haunt him.”²²

Culminating his long search for accessible and consistently effective modes of proceeding, Machiavelli was led in a radically new direction—“dans d’étranges domaines,” as Ellul calls the realm of the technical bluff.²³ In Machiavelli’s letter dated April 29, 1513, the main subject is the latest in political news, the truce between the king of France and Ferdinand, king of Spain. Machiavelli exhaustively argues both sides of the case—that Ferdinand was wise in his modes, then, with equal facility, the reverse: that he was unwise. Machiavelli ventures a third alternative:

One of the modes (*modi*) for holding on to new territories and for either stabilizing equivocal *minds* or keeping them hanging and irresolute is to arouse great expectations of oneself, always keeping men’s *minds* busy with trying to figure out the end (*fine*) of one’s decisions and one’s new ventures. The king has recognized the need for this and has employed it to advantage . . . He has not tried to foresee the end (*fine*): for his end (*fine*) is not so much this, that, or the other victory, as to win prestige among his various peoples and to keep them hanging with his multifarious activities. Therefore he has always been a spirited maker of beginnings, later giving them that end (*fine*) which chance places before him or which necessity teaches him.²⁴

The reader may well wonder if the theory makes “any coherent sense” and consider it, as Machiavelli himself allowed, a stingray “sold with its tail lopped off,” that is, a “fish without head or tail”—in the vernacular, “without rhyme or reason”²⁵ or “higgledy-piggledy.”²⁶ We have however two versions of the letter, one draft, one final; the great epistolographer says what he wishes, how he wishes.

Ferdinand reappears as an exemplar in the *Prince*, in which Machiavelli promises to deliver the “effectual truth” (*verità effettuale*).²⁷ By attacking Granada, Machiavelli writes, Ferdinand

kept the minds of the barons of Castile preoccupied; while thinking of that war, they did not think of [political] innovations.²⁸ By this means (*mezzo*), without their realizing it, he acquired great prestige and authority over them . . . Thus he consistently planned and executed great projects which have always kept the minds of his subjects in suspense and wonder—concentrated on the outcome (*evento*) of

events. His moves have followed so closely one upon the other that he has never given men an ample enough interval between his exploits to work quietly against him.²⁹

A hypothetical figure comparable to Ferdinand appears in Machiavelli's *Discourses*. Machiavelli notes that "men are desirous of new things."³⁰

This desire, therefore, opens the doors to anyone in a province who makes himself the leader of an innovation: if he is a foreigner, they run after him; if he is from the province, they gather around him, augmenting and favoring him so that however he proceeds he succeeds in making great strides in those places.³¹

This "Innovator" may be a reformer, seditionist, or busy politician. His innovations are much like Ferdinand's "beginnings" and "great enterprises." Ferdinand makes up his nominal "ends" as he goes along; Machiavelli's Innovator has no identified ends at all. He has no name. Machiavelli gives no exemplar among men past or present. In neither the Innovator nor Ferdinand does Machiavelli identify *virtù*; they do not need it. Nor do they need to dissemble to succeed. Constant action itself blinds people, or, as spectacle, fascinates them. The success, "needing not to be" anybody, is, literally—nobody. In sum, this idea is a perfect example of "autonomous technique" in the thought of Jacques Ellul.

Jacques Ellul

Ellul's conception of "autonomous technique" illuminates Machiavelli's novel thoughts on Ferdinand and the Innovator. Technique becomes autonomous, Ellul explains, when one "method [*méthode*] is manifestly the most efficient [*plus efficiente*] of all the other means [*moyens*]," —at that crux— "the technical movement becomes self-directing . . . The human being is no longer in any sense the agent of choice . . . He does not make a choice of complex, and, in some way, human motives. He can decide only in favor of the technique that gives maximum efficiency [*le maximum d'efficience*]."³² Autonomous technique "is an end in itself . . . Technique obeys its own determinations, it realizes itself [*elle se réalise elle-même*]."³³ Ellul teaches that, from "the moment efficacy [*l'efficacité*] becomes the criterion of political action," no one can choose [*ne pourrait choisir*] by any other criterion. Ellul writes that Machiavelli "does in fact conclude that politics is autonomous. Doctrine enters only when he tries to establish general rules [*une politique générale*] and formulate the political courses that he considers the most efficient, having first established efficiency as a value . . . Machiavelli really demonstrated the Prince's role, above all, is to be effective [*efficace*]. By doing so, he introduced a new perspective, revolutionized his time, introduced efficiency [*l'efficacité*] as a value."³⁴

When discussing Machiavelli's "theory of prestige and of diversion," Ellul cites the passage of the *Prince*, quoted above, on Ferdinand and adds:

The prince must first ensure his prestige by psychological means, and secondly he must divert the attention of his opponents and of his subjects on questions that impassion them while he himself acts in another domain . . . Although Machiavelli did not devote a special chapter to propaganda, one can say that it is everywhere in his work, that he is the premier theoretician of propaganda (*le premier théoricien de la propagande*), and that his theory is famously encapsulated: “to govern is to make believe (*gouverner, c’est faire croire*).”³⁵

After a long, frustrating effort to mediate possibility and necessity, ends and means, Machiavelli’s “philosophical conundrum” is not solved but erased. Machiavelli’s Ferdinand and Innovator are entrained in modes of proceeding that are autonomous, self-directing. Ferdinand circles endlessly:

- His means are to keep people guessing about his end, so
- He takes actions without seeing their end, because
- His end is to keep people guessing.

The stingray with its tail lopped off is circular, and circles have no “end.”³⁶ Ferdinand undertakes ceaseless actions without seeing their ends as the means to hold people in “suspense and wonder” about his ends; nobody can make “head or tail” of him. Ferdinand’s “ends” are whatever happens. In the *Discourses*, the Innovator has no stated ends whatsoever; he does nothing but innovate—*what* is unspecified. “However he proceeds he succeeds” —*to what purpose* is unspecified. He fascinates people—*why* is unspecified. Spectacle and fascination are technically related,³⁷ and both support Ferdinand’s dominion of everyone’s minds.

For both Ferdinand’s “great enterprises” and the Innovator’s “great strides,” unnamed ends have disappeared into technique, which is its own end. To adapt Ellul, Ferdinand and the Innovator have set out “at tremendous speed—to go *nowhere* [*vers nulle part*].”³⁸ Machiavelli’s technical “modes” in the political world are what Ellul calls “make believe” or “*Le Bluff Technologique*.”³⁹ Ellul scholar David Lovekin explains that Ellul’s technique “is always artificial . . . and abstractive.”⁴⁰ Machiavelli anticipates our own technically abstract vocabulary as applied to humans: modes, procedures, operations,⁴¹ managing.⁴²

The solution to the means-ends problem that so vexed Machiavelli, in the revolutionary terms of autonomous technique, is technically “sweet.” For Ferdinand and the Innovator, the “effectual truth” (Machiavelli) and the “means absolutely most efficient” (Ellul) have no ends. Says Ellul: “the ends have disappeared, or they seem to have no connection with means . . . The means no longer has any need of the end . . . [Technique] goes where every step leads it, an implacable monster which nothing can stop.”⁴³ Paradoxically, Machiavelli intended the modes of proceeding as a way to preserve “our free will”⁴⁴ (*el nostro libero arbitrio*),⁴⁵ but autonomous technique is

deterministic: Ellul's technical man (*l'homme technicien*) is "absolutely no longer an agent of choice [*n'est absolument plus l'agent du choix*]."

If the technical solution seems irrational—autonomous technique inverts reason and creates a rationality of its own, which Ellul names "unreason." As he explains: "The desire . . . to rationalize human behavior will *always* lead to a point of reversal and an explosion of the irrational . . . We have here a kind of monster. Each piece is rational but the whole and its functioning are masterpieces of irrationality . . . There is a process which leads on from apparently sane and acceptable premises to irrational conduct and plans."⁴⁶

In Ferdinand and the Innovator, the apparent absurdity and irrationality of Machiavelli's modes of proceeding are irrelevant to technique, which for Ellul is "the triumph of the absurd," culminating in "ultimate idiocies [*ultimes sottises*]."⁴⁷ Just as autonomous technique subverts free will, the engine of Machiavelli's modes, it also subverts reason, one of the few standards usually observed by the otherwise infamously subversive Machiavelli.⁴⁸ To adapt Benedetto Croce's famous observation by substituting "technique" for "politics": "Machiavelli discovers the necessity and autonomy of *technique*, of *technique* that is beyond, or, rather, below, moral good and evil, that has its own laws against which it is useless to rebel."⁴⁹

Ellul explains that "the system presupposes a more and more thorough interrogation of each element, including man, as an object . . . a manageable object [*d'objet maniable*] . . . in this inhuman universe [*univers inhumain*] . . . Modern man, having been dehumanized by means, [has] himself become a means."⁵⁰ Ellul approvingly quotes a commentator: "Technique has nothing to do with inner life except to abolish it [*l'abolir*]."⁵¹

Scholars have observed the phenomenon in Machiavelli's actors, subjects, and objects. They are "raw material."⁵² "Have not all readers of Machiavelli felt how his heroes have no inside?" "The image is all, the reality nothing." The prince "must make himself a person with no qualities whatsoever . . . a cipher, possessing no qualities, either bestial or human, as his own . . . The prince never *is* this or that, he *uses* this or that quality . . . A void at the center of the *Prince* marks the absence of the prince himself." Humans are, in a word, "zero."⁵³ These are "the technical consequences," in Ellul's terms, to be drawn from Machiavelli's *Prince*.

¹ My thanks to David Lovekin and Jeffrey Shaw for help shaping this paper.

² Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*. Translated by John Wilkerson (New York: Vintage, 1964), 232.

³ An early twentieth-century example, perhaps one Ellul had in mind, was Carl Schmitt, *Dictatorship*, 6–7, cited in J. McCormick, *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 129–130 (finding in Machiavelli “purely technical interests . . . technicity”). S. Ruffo-Fiore, in *Niccolo Macchiavelli: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Greenwood, 1990) collects many articles and books touching on Machiavelli’s “technical” approach and “technique.” Some interpreters of Machiavelli have equated or conflated the terms “technical” and “scientific” (e.g., Hughes in “The Science of Machiavelli”). Also see Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 153, under the caption “The Technique of Politics,” for a comparison of Machiavelli with Galileo. The interpretation of “Machiavelli the Scientist,” which flowered mid-twentieth century (see C. Singleton, “The Perspective of Art,” *Kenyon Review* 15 (1953)), was widely criticized. See also Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958), 20 as well as his “Three Waves of Modernity,” *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays*, edited by Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 86–87. In nuanced passages, Ellul considered “science” and “technique” to be related, but he regarded technique as a separate phenomenon, and, in its modern stages of extreme acceleration, to have precedence over science. My observations on Machiavelli in this piece are strictly limited to the terms of Ellul’s conception of “autonomous technique.”

⁴ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*. Translated by Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Continuum, 1980), 79 and Jacques Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on His Life and Work*. Edited by Willem H. Vanderburg (New York: House of Anansi, 2011), 29–30.

⁵ F. Edward Cranz, *Technology and Western Reason* (New London, CT: De Litteris, 1980), 24.

⁶ Citations to the *Prince* are by chapter numbers, and to the *Discourses* by book and chapter numbers, which are standard in all editions.

⁷ J. & P. Bondanella, *Niccolò Machiavelli, Discourses on Livy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 281 (*Discourses* 3.9: “Io ho considerato più volte”). See also R. Ridolfi, “*I Ghibibizzi al Soderini*,” *La Bibliofilia* 72 (1970), 53, a critical edition of the text at Nicolo Machiavelli *Opere*. Edited by M. Martelli (Florence: Sansoni, 1971), 1082–83; see also the tercets on Fortuna at *Opere*, 978, lines 103–05, 112, 112, 114, 126; G. Inglese, *Machiavelli Capitoli* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1981), 122–23; M. McCanles, *The Discourse of Il Principe* (Malibu, CA: Udena, 1985), chapter 25; *Opere*, 1136–39, 1252–56 (April 29, 1513 letter to Vettori); *Opere*, 295–96 (*Prince* 25); 211–14 (*Discourses* 3.8–9); 226–27 (*Discourses* 3.21).

⁸ As translated by H. Mansfield in *Machiavelli: Discourses on Livy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) and in Mansfield’s *Machiavelli: The Prince* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁹ For the composite man-beast, the centaur, see E. Raimondi, “The Centaur and the Politician,” in Ascoli & Kahn, *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 145–60.

¹⁰ Richard Greenwood, “Machiavelli and the Problem of Human Inflexibility,” in *The Cultural Heritage of the Italian Renaissance: Essays in Honor of T. G. Griffith*, edited by C. Griffiths & R. Hastings (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1993), 196.

¹¹ The quoted passage is from Machiavelli’s dedication of the *Prince*.

¹² Ridolfi, “*I Ghibibizzi al Soderini*,” note 6. Book 3, chapter 21 of the *Discourses* is titled “Whence It Arises that with a Different Mode of Proceeding Hannibal Produced Those Same Effects in Italy as Scipio Did in Spain.” *Discourses* 3.21.

¹³ G. Ferroni. “‘Transformation’ and ‘Adaptation’ in Machiavelli’s *Mandragola*.” In *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, A. Ascoli & V. Khan (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 19.

¹⁴ For a start on the enormous bibliography of *virtù*, see Mansfield, *Machiavelli: Discourses on Livy*, 315–16.

¹⁵ *Prince* 25.

¹⁶ *Discourses* 3.21.

¹⁷ *Discourses*, preface to book 1.

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- ¹⁸ Ridolfi, “*I Ghibibizzi al Soderini*,” note 6. “Et veramente chi fussi tanto *savio* che *conoscessi* e tempi e l’ordine delle cose et adcomodassisi ad quelle.” Martelli, *Machiavelli Opere* 1083a (emphasis added).
- ¹⁹ *Prince* 15; *Discourses* 3.21.
- ²⁰ *Prince* 18 (emphasis added).
- ²¹ John M. Najemy, *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 11.
- ²² James B. Atkinson, *Niccolo Macchiavelli: A Portrait*, in Najemy, *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, 18–19.
- ²³ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), xvi.
- ²⁴ James B. Atkinson & David Sices, *The Sweetness of Power: Machiavelli’s Discourses & Guicciardini’s Considerations*. (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002), 235 (emphasis added).
- ²⁵ John M. Najemy, *Between Friends: Discourses of Power and Desire in the Machiavelli–Vettori Letters of 1513–1515* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 126.
- ²⁶ James B. Atkinson & David Sices, *Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), 236, 506.
- ²⁷ *Prince* 15.
- ²⁸ Rinaldi, *Machiavelli, Opere*, volume 1, 345, note 17, explains the political connotations of “*innovazione*.”
- ²⁹ *Prince* 21 (emphasis added).
- ³⁰ *Discourses* 3.21: “*gli uomini sono desiderosi di cose nuove*.” (Martelli, *Machiavelli Opere* 227a); *Discourses* 1.37: “*gli uomini sogliono affliggersi nel male e stuccarsi nel bene*.” (Id., 119a)
- ³¹ *Discourses* 3.21.
- ³² Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 80 (“*les autres moyens*” appears in the original French).
- ³³ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*. Translated by Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Continuum, 1980), 125, 141. See also Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, 243.
- ³⁴ Jacques Ellul, *The Political Illusion*. Translated by Konrad Kellen (New York: Knopf, 1967), 69–70.
- ³⁵ Jacques Ellul, *Histoire de la Propagande* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967), 47–48.
- ³⁶ F. Montanari, *La Poesia del Machiavelli* (Rome: Studium, 1968), 70 (“*circolo della necessità . . . la legge fondamentale della tecnica*”).
- ³⁷ Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, xvi, 323ff. See also Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*. Translated by Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), for a discourse on the primacy of spectacle in the technical system.
- ³⁸ Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*. 2d ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 56 (emphasis in the translation).
- ³⁹ Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, xvi.
- ⁴⁰ David Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1991), 160. See also, F. Chiapelli, *Studi sul Linguaggio del Machiavelli* (Florence: F. Le Monnier, 1969), 45–46 for an explanation of the comparably abstract character of Machiavelli’s prose.
- ⁴¹ *Discourses* 1 preface; the *Ghiribizzi* of 1506, supra n 5.
- ⁴² *Prince* 9; *Discourses* 3.40.
- ⁴³ Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 54, 59, 60.
- ⁴⁴ *Prince* 25.
- ⁴⁵ For the crucial importance of the will in Machiavelli, see Singleton, “The Perspectives of Art,” 176.
- ⁴⁶ Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, 108, 169, 221 (emphasis in the original).
- ⁴⁷ Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, 197, 381.
- ⁴⁸ While variations on *ragione* in Italian have a number of different connotations, Machiavelli’s uses emphatically include *ragione*’s noetic sense. See the glossaries in Mansfield, *Machiavelli, The Prince*,

134 and Mansfield, *Machiavelli: Discourses on Livy*, 339–40. See also April 29, 1513, letter, supra, n. 6: “I do not want to be prompted by any authority but reason (*ragione*),” and, from Mansfield, *Machiavelli, Discourses on Livy*, 1.58: “I do not and I never shall judge the defense of any opinion by reasons (*ragioni*) without recourse to either authority or force to be a flaw.” Atkinson & Sices, *Machiavelli and His Friends*, 233.

⁴⁹ B. Croce, *Politics and Morals* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1945), 59. “*Machiavelli scopre la necessità e l'autonomia della politica, della politica che è di là, o piuttosto di qua, dal bene e dal male morale, che ha le sue leggi a cui è vano ribellarsi.*” The essay “*Machiavelli e Vico*” was first published in 1924.

⁵⁰ Ellul, *The Technological System*, 12, 46, 112, and Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 55.

⁵¹ Ellul, *The Technological System*, 119.

⁵² Schmitt, *Dictatorship*, 6; McCormick, *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism*, 131.

⁵³ Singleton, “The Perspective of Art,” 180; McCanles *The Discourse of Il Principe*, 105–06 (emphasis original); J. Barish *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 97–98; Montanari, *La Poesia del Macchiavelli*, 69; see Jeffrey Shaw, *Illusions of Freedom: Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul on Technology and the Human Condition* (Eugene OR: Pickwick, 2014), 6, quoting Carl Mitcham: “technology . . . is largely an unthinking activity.”

Digital Vertigo: How Today's Online Social Revolution Is Dividing, Diminishing, and Disorienting Us

By Andrew Keen, St. Martin's Press, 2012

Reviewed by David Lovekin

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Keen begins with a reference to Alfred Hitchcock's remark, ". . . that behind every good picture lay a great corpse" (1). Keen notes that Hitchcock's *Vertigo* is a film about a man in love with a corpse. Keen then moves to the corpse of Jeremy Bentham, British philosopher, founder of utilitarianism, and visionary of the prison—the Panopticon—who died 1832 and whose body ended up in London's University College. The body is in a mahogany case with folding glass doors and is seated in a chair with a walking stick across its lap. The head is made of sculpted wax. The construction is labeled an "Auto-Icon." Bentham, it seems, had made an image of himself. Keen writes that the idea for his book came to him as he stared at the cabinet in the university building on Gower Street, with a Blackberry in one hand and a Canon digital camera in the other (2). He had come to London from Oxford, where he had been at a conference titled, "Silicon Valley Comes to Oxford," with Reid Hoffman, Biz Stone, Mike Malone, Chris Sacca, and Phillip Rosedale, social media experts and entrepreneurs. Against prevailing views, Keen argued that social media like Facebook, LinkedIn, Zynga, etc., have not brought us together, have not made us wiser, and have left us in a place devoid of history and a clear sense or a present, or at least that's my read on it.

The thesis of Keen's book is that social media have made us images of ourselves, absolutely real fakes in the realm of the *Hypervisible*, to cite Umberto Eco (14). We are imprisoned in the image (with a nod to Foucault's treatise, *Discipline and Punish*, on Bentham's prison and to Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. In fact, we nod to many citations—37 pages of endnotes in a 232-page book. I do not mean this as a criticism but as an observation; much social criticism has become journalism. To know is to be loaded with information, although, as Keen maintains, information is not necessarily knowledge. Facts require wisdom for interpretation. He tentatively writes, "I UPDATE, THEREFORE I AM" (12). Thinking better of it, he adds, "I UPDATE, THEREFORE I AM NOT" (15). What is and what is not are often conjoined.

The strength of the book lies in the metaphor between the prison—the house of inspection—and the movie house. Finding all come together in the entombed body of Jeremy Bentham is ingenious, though not without problems. Keen states that Bentham willed his body to University College, and then put himself on display, an exemplar of utilitarian greed at his death, in 1832. A website for University College, however, attempts to dispel several myths about Bentham. Bentham had no real connection—other

than as a spiritual father—to the university. Further, he had willed his body to his friend Thomas South Smith. The body was to be dissected in the interests of public health and the greater good, the goal of utilitarianism. Bentham's motives, thus, were not clearly selfish. Finally, the body was then moved to University College in 1850. Warning: some of this information was found on a website. Providence may enter in failure. History dogs most claims. Keen's facts may be wrong while being nonetheless on track. There are no facts, finally, without a story.

His over-riding contention is that the image has come to control, and that pleasure, as it was for Bentham, is the greatest good that is now found in the image. The image is like Narcissus's mirror—a presence without depth, the locus of society's current pleasure that obscures the importance of history and speculation. Beneath surfaces lie more facts. The true, I believe, is the whole, to invoke Hegel and Jacques Ellul, neither of whom are in Keen's entourage. The box of our auto-iconhood is larger and more complex than Bentham's. Again, *what is* often resides in *what is not*.

We suffer, Keen claims, from digital vertigo, not unlike Scottie Ferguson, the detective in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, who has been hired by industrialist Gavin Elster to shadow his wife, Madeleine, who is acting strangely and distant. Elster's mistress, Judy Barton, has been hired to impersonate Madeleine. Elster knows of Scottie's malaise that he will use in a plan to murder his real wife in a faked suicide. Elster tells Scottie that his wife feels she is possessed by a great grandmother—Carlotta Valdez, who did commit suicide—and Gavin wants to know what she does with her day. We see Judy, the fake Madeleine, buying flowers, traveling to Valdez's tomb, and then sitting in a gallery before a painting of Carlotta. The flowers and her hair are a near perfect match. She appears captivated by the image, but it is Scottie who is transfixed.

She travels to the home, now a hotel, where Carlotta lived, and then goes to the Golden Gate Bridge and jumps in the water. Scottie rescues her, takes her home and dries her out, and falls in love—in love with her image, it turns out. They spend time together, go to a forest and wax on about history and nature, and end up in a small church in San Juan Bautista. Judy appears possessed. She runs into the church, with Scottie following, up a winding staircase. He suffers vertigo, as does the viewer, and is unable to get to the roof, where Elster and Judy are hiding with the real Madeleine, who has been killed. Scottie sees her body fall by a window; he is traumatized and then institutionalized. He suffers, the doctor says, from acute melancholia and is unable to speak.

Apparently cured, he returns to San Francisco where he finds Judy, abandoned by Elster. He begins to date Judy and forces her to dress and to look like Madeleine. Clearly he is in love with an image. Judy asks him what he wants—confused, guilty, and frightened—and he says, “We could just see a lot of each other.” I have here fleshed out a bit more than Keen, but his analysis is useful and sharp.

Judy seems to give in to Scottie's obsession, but then absentmindedly wears a necklace that Carlotta wore in her portrait. They race back to the church, with Scottie saying, “There's one last thing I have to do, and then I'll be free of the past.” Of course, his past

is a fake past: a past he has helped fabricate, and from which he is a victim. He forces the truth on Judy while pushing her back up the staircase, the scene of the crime. As the tension builds, and as Judy recoils from Scottie's accusations, a nun appears from the shadows and frightens Judy, who falls from the roof. "I heard voices," and "God have mercy," the nun says. Keen notes that Scottie has been in love with a corpse who is an image. I add that Judy is both image and woman who cannot come together, and she dies for it. Scottie is finally in possession with a past that he cannot possess. Such is a present without a past.

Of course, we, the audience of spectacle, like Scottie, are in love with movies, with real fakes who often guide and direct our desires and our lives. We have become detectives in the mazes and mansions of advertising, hoping to solve the crimes of embodiment, of appearing and being less than perfect; we wish to become American Idols on stage, to be worshipped in a Being that is to be seen, the essence of techno-being.

Between the discussion of Bentham's prison and auto-icon and the film *Vertigo*, Keen explains social media further. Web 3, a development of Web 2, provides the ultimate prison in which we willingly wear the shackles of *being seen*. The Facebook of Mark Zuckerberg—where everyone will be united in frictionless sharing, where what we read, think, do, hope, and dream—will be our auto-icon (63). We will all share together in the once mythical global village forecast by Marshal McLuhan, in a nostalgia for the future (112–113). We become images far and wide. Our cell phones, our computers, our navigation devices, which are no longer separate, give away our locations, our buying preferences, and even our political proclivities (40). Sherry Turkle, one of Keen's favorite sources, writes, "We have so many ways of communication, yet we are so alone" (58).

Attempts at political rebellion, Keen contends, are often co-opted. The much-touted Arab Spring failed in lack of leadership and direction (72). Many had their "say," their 15 minutes of fame, but the movement went away, like the changing of channels. The same appears to have happened with Occupy Wall Street (71). The police have now come to peruse Facebook accounts.

Aware that modern viewers' lack a sense of history, Keen shows how the development of the transistor led to Silicon Valley and to the monopolies of hardware, which also led to the hegemonies of software, to the gods of social media (41–45). In all cases, Keen contends, the masses do not financially benefit (74–76). Instead, they become more efficient shoppers. Communication leads to the largesse of the few, who promulgate the myths of sharing and togetherness. Zuckerberg's Law is that in each year twice as many people will begin to share (58). This law is echoed in Gordon Moore's law that the number of transistors on a computer chip would double every two years (96). In turn, architecture takes a turn toward transparency, visibility. The 1851 Crystal Palace, together with Bentham's prison house, the space of inspection, embody these concerns (136). Much more is connected and inferred. Keen is a genius of analogy. For example, he connects Elster's mahogany desk with Bentham's mahogany cabinet. All serve to

show the universality of the move to visibility, which leads to separation and ultimately to enslavement (85).

Strangely, Keen holds individual and social character to be at fault (107). Technology is off the hook, regarded simply as a collection of tools, machines, and devices (106–107). He does invoke the problem of genesis: is it character that influences practice, or does practice—like tool using—influence character? Ellul could have helped. As Ellul explains throughout his works, technique is a mentality brought to bear on multiple elements of western civilization after 1750. The symptoms of this mentality are the reduction of all to images and to the silencing of the word. That is, the logic of identity trumps the logic of metaphor and contradiction. One cannot be both something and another opposing thing at the same time. Judy Barton cannot be a salesperson from Kansas, the mistress of Elster, and Madeleine at the same time, and yet she is. Keen is what he uploads (his social being), and yet he is also his privacy, his silence, and his words that invoke a dimension like history that surrounds and gives meaning to a present. This is the domain of the word, what he is not, that has been eclipsed by the image. The photograph, we can remember, is a *slice* of life, no matter how much it moves, to continue the corpse metaphor. But like any concept, it will be an abstraction. For Ellul, concepts are embodied and then forgotten, are technical phenomena parading automatically, geometrically, and endlessly in a manufactured and false paradise where what can be done will be done.¹ Bentham's cabinet and prison would make sense in this spread of technology, where the body is disciplined, contained, and constrained.

Vertigo begins with a mouth trying to speak filling the screen; then in an upward pan we see two eyes looking left and then right; and then one eye fills the screen, widens, and then the film unfolds in a spiral that ultimately explains Scottie's vertigo—he is unbalanced bodily, gravitationally, linguistically, and socially. He simply wants to look at Judy and to revisit a fake history that was his undoing. His world collapsed into the images of Madeleine that define and ultimately kill Judy Barton, who, tragically, is what she is not. A nun has the last word.

Technology disembodies, as Ellul has shown, and turns them into Facebook images and virtual friends with no substance beyond fascination, as Keen understands. Born in North London and educated both in England and America, Keen did his stint as an entrepreneur in Silicon Valley; his venture Audiocafé.com failed, but his interests in the impact of internet activity have not. His insights could be strengthened if joined to those of Ellul and moved beyond a journalist's collection of data. A larger history of technology is needed to go beyond Bentham's box and even beyond Foucault's prison (Foucault, of course, does visit the asylum and the clinic in *The History of Madness* and in the *Birth of the Clinic*.). The metaphor of a digital vertigo then can be more fully fleshed out.

¹ For a more detailed account of Ellul's logic of technique, see my *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1991).