

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 XXIst 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 added². 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 Lanzmann³, a pure event, “the absolute event,” as French philosopher Jean Baudrillard put it⁴.

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, by first coming back to the sequence of events as we experienced them at the time, to then examine 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 XXIst 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 being 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 image⁵. 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 it⁶. 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 damages?

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 sportsmen¹¹.

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 Ben Laden seems to want to prove Jean Baudrillard right, though he likely never heard of the latter. "This terrorist violence is not 'real'. It is worse in a sense: it is symbolic."¹² According to the latter, 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, Ben 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 m high, that the Mesopotamian ziggurats that inspired the Biblical parable of the tower of Babel were 40 to 100 m high, whereas the Twin Towers were 420 m 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 Gomora: 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 September 13's *Le Monde*, 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 flame, 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 ruins 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 Ben 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 represent 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 that 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 porn pictures) 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 is going to 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 totalization¹³. Technology functions as a network of complex ramifications that wreaks 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 mid-sized city's population is concentrated are the perfect illustration of the fragility of what sociologist Alain Gras¹⁴ has called technological macrosystems. The perpetrators of the attacks on the World Trade Center were well aware of this, as they secured the privilege of appearing to 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 "the continuation of politics by other means" or on the contrary, is Michel Foucault right to reverse Clausewitz's 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 Ben 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. Ben 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, Ben 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 lesser 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.” Ben 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 nations¹⁸.

“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. Ben 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 Ben 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! Ben 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 done¹⁹.” 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 Ben 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*), Ben 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. Ben 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. Ben 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. Ben 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 Ben 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. Ben 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 Ben Laden that was fed to the press and world opinion. Presidential and media rhetoric focused on this scarecrow. Ben 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 persecutions. 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. Ben 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, Ben 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, Ben Laden's physician and counsellor. His favorite weapon, a Kalashnikov (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 Kalashnikov 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 Ben 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 Ben 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 Ben 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 “Ben 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 Ben 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 Ben 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 reality²².” 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 France²³.

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 history²⁴".

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 Ben 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 having 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 Ben 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 on human rights violations in Pakistan and on 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 Ben 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 Ben 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 how, 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 the 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 a just world could not be founded by unjust means, nor a free society by the means of slaves²⁵.

¹ Jacques Ellul, *Les combats de la liberté, Éthique de la liberté*, vol. 3, (1984), 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. The scene was nevertheless filmed by a French amateur film-maker 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, UK: Oxford University Press, 1962).

¹⁸ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 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), 44, [1981].

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

²⁴ Noam Chomsky, “Cette Amérique qui n’apprend rien.”, *Le Monde*, November 22, 2001.

²⁵ Jacques Ellul and Patrick Troude-Chastenet, *Jacques Ellul on Politics, Technology and Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005).

On the Symbol in the Technical Environment: Some Reflections

By David Lovekin

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In “Will the Gospel Survive? Proclamation and Faith in the Technical Milieu,” the Reverend Dr. Gregory Wagenfuhr considers whether the messages of the Gospel in which God is revealed can survive in the technical environment that is all-encompassing. He concludes: “The gospel will survive by God’s grace and power alone. It is the responsibility of Christians to recognize the fundamentally different milieu in which we live and the problems it poses for the understanding and transmission of the gospel.”¹ Christians have always faced problems justifying the gospel in any environment because the gospel is not an environment (milieu), it “. . . is not fundamentally social, natural, or technical.”² Only the individual can be reconciled with God and only

. . . through the mediation of the love of God can one love one’s neighbor. Thus, the gospel is, in actuality, radically destructive to a human society whose unity lies outside God, to natural religions and to the technical milieu. The gospel must, therefore, always be Wholly Other, even as it is translated into each new world. The good news is reconciliation to God mediated only by the person of Christ.³

Thus, God’s message, news from the Wholly Other, would in most societies, by definition, be disruptive if heard at all. Christ, God’s incarnation, was viewed as a criminal and as a trouble-maker to be tortured and executed; his message challenges any society not “unified” in relation to God, Wagenfuhr contends. Christ insisted on a radical love, even for one’s enemies, with an absolute freedom often in opposition to conventional restraints in an embrace of the power of the powerless. Convention typically urges hate for enemies and allows strength only in power and wealth made possible by a freedom flowing from political rules and regulations. Could a message be more ironic? Irony is symbolic—one is saying what one doesn’t mean and meaning it—and overturns a literal use of language, which is the staple of technique. Symbol and metaphor, however, are the backbones of the biblical texts that plague the language and the mentality of a technological society. Why is symbolic language threatening to technique?

Wagenfuhr briefly traces the movement of language, which he takes to be essentially social (he uses Aristotle’s theory of four causes to make this point), as it progresses from the natural milieu to the social milieu to the technical milieu. Language and society transform together forming

three environments (milieus). An environment provides, Wagenfuhr states, “the primary source of life, the primary source of death, and therefore also, the primary experience through which all other experience is mediated. The milieu is all-encompassing, but it is this third point, that of mediation, that is most essential. For in mediating experience, the milieu provides symbol and thus the possibility of language and creativity.”⁴ In the environment of nature, both threatening and beneficent, he adds, “Nature mediated experience and thus gave rise to natural society and natural techniques.”⁵ He claims that nature and various techniques were “mediated through society,”⁶ creating the social. The social and the natural environments are then eclipsed and mediated by technique, which becomes the all-encompassing and a new immediacy deaf to the symbolic message of the gospel. How does this take place? To consider this question I will pursue my claim that technology is a mentality that does not know itself as one, and I will take my own path, which may or may not agree with Wagenfuhr. My emphasis will clearly differ. I am concerned with the nature of the symbol from an epistemological standpoint. I will stand the symbol as word against the image as fact, following Ellul’s advice. The true appears from the contexts of the word as it reaches for a whole; the image as a certainty gestures for the real, which is part of the true. These are dialectical tensions that devolve with the mentality of technique.⁷

The tensions between mind/body, image/word, and technical operation/technical phenomenon are the grounds for this dialectic for which separation and distance enable true knowledge.⁸ The natural world, for the Greeks, was full of gods. Nature as a collection of merely physical forces obeying disinterested laws of necessity is the result of symbolic labor. This labor is the background for the technological society becoming a system and perhaps losing any real sense of society. An environment is an expression of symbolic action, which, then, offers further symbolic interaction as it can become an “other” to itself. Water, for fish, is not an environment in this sense. An environment provides a sense of immediacy and protection but provides grounds for change, for transcendence. The natural world can become the social world, as the natural world takes on the character of “other.” Animals are to be tamed. Housing is to adjust to climate and topography. Laws will appear to allow for the distribution of property. Technique, however, is not an environment, Wagenfuhr notes, but is an immediacy that it does not know itself as an environment having transcended the social. Technology, I will claim, does not know itself as making, as facing an “other.” The “other” becomes the made. What technology makes becomes the real thing. The “other” for technique becomes a problem for conceptual control and manipulation according to mathematics-like methods. It becomes the real by becoming rational, and thus produces in whatever case, the thing-in-itself, the absolutely perfect, efficient, object. The distance between subject and object collapses. The implications for religion, art, or philosophy, purveyors of symbolic labor, are dire. They require a sense of an “other” that is a value beyond technical production and understanding, which have become coterminous.

For example, with Marshal McLuhan's famous Global Village we have a "space" where no one moves about, talking to one another and interacting. Involvement in this village takes place on the couch with remote in hand and with the eye assembling pixels or some electronic *ephemerata*. This environment is a screen of false immediacy that many do not take as "false." The possibility of "Reality TV" waited upon TV becoming reality. "Globalization" does allow making money and wealth, transformed by technique, for those up the technological food chain. No amount of talking to this screen in words and gestures has any effect. Interaction has become symbolic, at best, although the symbols are pre-made, clichés that express what Ellul calls the technical phenomena that are now the technological system. These *ephemerata* are the ghosts of the society that still haunt sensibility and provide a useful nostalgia of a "village." This needs further development.

I

Fundamentally, as a mentality, I stand before some object of which I am aware. Then, I become aware that I am aware, and my experience is divided in two. A goal for knowledge and meaning, then, is to mediate these two dimensions. I want to know the object before me and I want that knowledge to be true. Language and gesture are basic aids in this process. Language, for Ellul, flows in basically two directions: toward the image as a sensual and visual presence and toward the word as an aural invocation. Both aspects become conflated for technique and then combined such that all meaning is reduced to the visual. The aural, initially, gives us a sense of the "around," of a context of meaning beyond that which is before the eye. As Ellul states, a sound behind necessitates a turn of the head. Sound seeks clarification and clarity becomes increasingly determined by the visual, by that which is a certainty before which we stand. Of course, experience commonly shows that the two dimensions never coincide. As much as we write, as much as we televise, etc., meaning, if carefully considered, is always beyond the outstretched hand or magnified gaze.

In *The Humiliation of the Word*, from which I have been drawing, Ellul maintains that language stemming from the image proceeds according to the ways of logic that posit identities and deny contradictions.⁹ From the standpoint of sight I see that a red apple is not both red and not red at the same time. But to read the apple from the perspective of the word, red apple may also be the apple of temptation. The tempting apple then suggests other aspects, particularly with the understanding that most really red apples in super markets are the results of chemicals and additives. Words, then, may become symbols and open to dimensions that invite contradiction and dispute. There is no contradiction in seeing the red inviting apple as also not inviting, as dangerous to my health. Thus, for Ellul, the symbol opens us to a dialectic between viewer and object such that the object as object is questioned. Its "reality" may demand more "truth." In the technological society logic is used to provide means for manufacture, commerce, and life committed to the image that is not known as mediation. Symbols remind us of what the image lacks. The symbols of the Gospel are cases in point. The Hebrews understood that God could

not be reduced to an image and that even His name was not to be pronounced. God was the Wholly Other against which all “others” stood. Symbolic language and sign language—the language of the image—are both representations given the awareness of being aware that one is aware. The “other” enables this awareness. Thus, ignorance is important for knowledge, allowing it to grow. Even though God cannot be known except through scriptures embedded with contradiction, knowing this is a step toward knowing the limits of knowledge: knowing what one does not know, as Socrates would remind. As such, the technological society does not know what it does not know, having reduced knowledge to what is before it, to that which it has made without allowing such making takes place. How does this happen?

To recapitulate, for Ellul, the mediation that produces an environment involves the encounter of an ‘other’ by a subject, a mentality that evokes a symbol or silence, submission, or avoidance. An environment or milieu is produced through such an encounter with symbolic energy and weight. Ellul states:

Man cannot have a relationship with another save by the intermediary of *Symbolization*. Without mediating symbols, he would invariably be destroyed by raw physical contact alone. The ‘other’ is always the enemy, the menace. The ‘other’ represents an invasion of the personal world, unless, or until, the relationship is normalized through symbolization. Very concretely, to speak the same language is to recognize the ‘other’ has entered into the common interpretive universe; to display recognizable or identical tattoos, for example, is an expression of the same universe of discourse.¹⁰

Thunder and lightning in nature say nothing until they issue the voices of the gods, which in turn lead to social and institutional instantiations directed or observed by the gods. How, then, does a social or natural environment mediate without first being mediated? How does a milieu provide a symbol when it is the result of symbolization? Of course, any aspect of experience can become an ‘other.’ Perhaps this is a matter of definition or perhaps it is a matter of perspective and priority. I believe it is at least an epistemological issue, as I will explain. For example, what is it for something to call out to be noticed and named? How is significance established?

The human appears in a world that is separate from view, from understanding. Another world apart from the world that appears requires the ability, “. . . to imagine a dimension other than that of the immediately sensible—a universe of which he is the constituent and where he continues to reinterpret and to institute new things—he becomes also the master of the real world.”¹¹ We can then reconfigure Wagenfuhr’s three environmental conditions: life, death, mediation. We have awareness and a sense of being, and then a sense of non-being or threat, or Otherness, and then perhaps a mediation with possible symbolization. The imagination and memory are crucial in Ellul’s account, making an historical interpretation and reinterpretation possible. Mediation obviously requires separation that, in turn, provides a history and narrative beyond mere fact, the domain of the image. Facts are made and not simply given. Indeed, *Factum* means making.

Ellul states: “I have demonstrated that the aristocracy in primitive Rome could not have emerged except by the process of symbolization.”¹² Against the materialistic claim that money, physical courage, and power established hierarchy for patrician families, Ellul contends that hierarchy was tied to “some primordial ancestral hero celebrated for his excellence.”¹³ Further:

his great deeds were collected, transformed into an epic *account*, and then reconstructed in such a fashion as to become symbolic. At this moment, a double movement is produced: one moves towards the heights, further from the origins, as the eponymous ancestor becomes the concentration point of symbols and is attached to a higher symbolic origin. This results in a god—goddess or demigod who is established symbolically as the true origin and as the explanation of the progenitive power of the ancestor.¹⁴

Thus, a double movement produces a present that is connected to a past that constructed it. The Roman present was constructed by the symbol, which surrounded their present. Materialistic explanations of the past beg the question of meaning and environment that is established by technique where the true is reduced to fact, a present with no meaningful past, no transcendental ground of explanation, a bad infinity, which I will later develop.

Roman society, Ellul observed in his *L’Histoire des Institutions*, was built upon a “sacral ground” where all was of an undifferentiated piece: “The Roman sacred is at the same time both religious and magical. It is religious in that it worships the transcendental powers and it is magical in that it utilizes these powers which are immanent.”¹⁵ The gods were not true others but were located in nature that was, nonetheless, transformed to give a symbolic meaning that opened up the social world with formative and creative language beyond the merely representational. The strong man or woman attained strength through ancestral myths and stories. These stories are not true because they are factual but are true because they involve the making of the fact and the recollecting of that making. The true has not become a simple narrative but is a part of it like the fact.¹⁶ In this way a whole precedes a part but is then part of a larger whole, and so it goes. The notions are in some degree relative but not wholly so.

The triad of Jupiter, Mars, and Quirinus provided a locus for Roman institutions and values. These gods and goddesses were found in nature as well. Jupiter was the god of light and the god of trees, as well as the god of Roman law. Mars was the god of war and strife who established the military. Quirinus was the god of fecundity, the god of earth, water, and plants who established agriculture. These gods are true symbols in the above sense, having double and triple significance. They help to provide the true inclusive of facts of Roman civilization.¹⁷ Jupiter was not merely the god of mere lightning—a flashing in the sky. Ellul writes:

It is not because there is thunder and lightning that man invents the sacred. Man made the thunder the source of meaning and of limitation because the world has to have an order,

because action has to be justified. With a spontaneity, an “instinct,” as inescapable as those he could have for hunting and fishing, man “knew” that he could not justify himself, that he could not tell himself that he was right . . . neither can he say to himself that it is he who establishes an order in the world whereby he can locate himself.¹⁸

The true is made by the human out of parts, of certainties given in experience without meaning and direction. The symbol makes these meanings and quests for meaning possible. It is no surprise, but is ironic, that materialistic accounts arise in a technological culture in denial of the symbol that made technology possible. The sacral world where all is of a piece and rife with symbolic making involves an imaginative separation and account of that unity that produces irrevocably a diversity. And this suggests that an environment is never simply a given. Or rather, a given is, by definition, that which is yet to be named, to be represented.

The myths that established past societies are taken as falsehoods. The dictates of “reason” and efficient methodology take precedence with the transformation of objects, means, methods in the production of technical phenomena, which, like clichés, suspend and obviate the symbol and its crucial labors while leaving a vacuum, a great absence, in their wake. The technical phenomenon is the result of reducing objects, means, makers, and made to the schemas of logic and method that destroy the possibility of true critique, analysis, or creation. The possible is replaced with the necessity of progress achieved only by the accumulation of moments trapped in a vicious immediacy. The maker no longer stands before the made. The true becomes the made, only to flounder in the immediate, a present with no past, no context, and thus no true meaning. In brief, and metaphorically speaking, Coke becomes the real thing, as those with memory know; reality is what technology makes.

Technique is a mentality that pursues absolute efficiency with a mathematics-like method. It becomes an absolute in the denial of absolutes. Ellul states:

This rationality, best exemplified in norms, and the like, involves two distinct phases: first, the use of “discourse” in every operation [under the two aspects this term can take (on the one hand, the intervention of intentional reflection, and, on the other hand, the intervention of means from one term to the other)]; this excludes spontaneity and personal creativity. Second, there is the reduction of method to its logical dimension alone. Every intervention of technique is, in effect, a reduction of facts, forces, phenomena, means and instruments to the schema or logic.¹⁹

The technical mind stands before a technical operation like cutting a tree, like paddling a boat, and asks: how can this action be perfected? First, the tension between mind and body is cancelled. Too many variables intervene. The strong can cut faster and deeper, can row faster and harder. A mathematics-like method produces the way of subverting difference in all ways. A cannot be both A and not A. Perfection will require producing identities. A language of

logical discourse intervenes grounded in Aristotelian logic. A motor will undermine bodily difference to fell the tree and to power the boat. With the use of such techniques the distance between mind and body lessens. No longer are the objects of nature directly at hand. Attention is now shifted to the device, and a sense of body is co-opted.²⁰

Soon, the distinction between the natural and artificial disappears. Coke becomes the real thing. Choices are made automatically on the basis of quantity become quality. More is always greater. Devices proliferate as operations and objects are subjected to “perfection.” A trip down a soap aisle in a supermarket shows how many ways emulsification can be made more efficient by the laboratory and by advertising. In one sense all are identical with the difference that some are newer and in different packages. Clichés announcing such perfection and progress abound. Moral and ethical judgments are summarized simply: that which can be done will be done. Cultural difference like bodily difference goes the way of all other forms of symbolization. Zen temples are as strange and disorienting to Japanese citizens as they are to visitors from other countries. At this point of technical development, Ellul states, technique becomes the sacred. It can no longer distinguish what it has made from what it has not made.

As objects become concepts, concepts become objects with no limit. The technical society embodies what Hegel called the bad infinity.²¹ Perfection, an absolute, and an infinity, requires members. But how is membership determined? If perfection is the absolutely efficient, which is defined by mathematical method, then new methodologies and products are required: the value of “the one best way” prevails. But, the one best way is always a step away. Either efficiency is a term with no content—never achievable—or an abstraction that always requires a new member. There is no criterion for membership that stands apart from the series. This problem besets most attempts at conceptualizing any infinity. The idea of the counting numbers must go beyond one more counting number, for example. $N + 1$ reaches for that understanding. An infinite series of counting numbers cannot be just one more number. Further, the infinity or the absolute must not merely exist outside the group as an empty class concept. Number could not mean a class of no number at all. This would explain nothing of the particulars it pretends to group. The notion of number must include any number without being exhausted by it. As Kurt Gödel showed, a mathematical system cannot be complete and consistent at the same time. Once determined, a member of an infinite series cannot define the series because some member will always be left out. This problem infects concept formation of all kinds. Consider the well-worn theological problem of how a God can be an infinite Wholly Other who is a creator of that which is and a being who provides the creation meaning and yet be totally outside of that creation. If God is simply what his creation is not, He is meaningless to that creation beyond being an absolute negative, an empty class concept. For Ellul, God’s meaning and message is ongoing and is one that invites human participation, but how is this possible given the above framework? If God is Wholly Other, how is this otherness even “other” as meaningful beyond being merely negative. An account or theory is meaningful in terms of what it includes and does not exclude (apologies to Leibniz).

Ellul understands that his God, albeit unknowable, has to be known to be so. The contradictions of biblical literature provide symbols being symbolic. They require constant interpretation. Neither God nor the truth change but our views of them do. Wagenfuhr's question of whether the Christian gospel survives begs the question of which gospel we have in mind. Ellul indicated the need for the gospel to be interpreted continually, but he also insisted that this occur individually with a belief continually seeking faith. The Gospel, or any holy text, invites reduction to the sacred. The Bible is not a machine, Ellul insists. Faith, for Ellul, indicates a totality surrounding any belief that can swerve, correct, and amend errors of elisions. Belief remains alone until it seeks substance, context, and coherence. The whole, or a totality, precedes the parts in logic, in experience, in theology, and certainly, in philosophy. Analysis of any kind is always separation.

II

The important dialectic between image and word, fact, and meaning, collapses. Meaning considered above involves a tension between members of a continuum and the notion that defines it. If the notion becomes just one more member, it loses meaning. The symbol, however, absorbs the space between the meaning and meant as a presence of absence. The absent is the concern for the symbol.²² The image, a totality before the viewer, supports the Aristotelian logic that empowers the technological rationality of logical self-identities. God could not be both imminent and transcendent from this strictly logical point of view reinforced by the visual world, a strict logic of exclusion. Inclusion will be made up in a bad infinity where a meaning is produced by adding members. Repetition is not imitation, which suggests a transcendent, a type and form, a meaning outside the meant.²³ The creation of the technical system involves the linking of techniques such that no one technique is the cause of any other. The system predominates making a social reality impossible.

As I stated earlier, technique cannot be symbolized because it cannot know itself as other. As Ellul states in *The Empire of Non-Sense: Art in the Technological Society*,

Technique cannot be symbolized for three principle reasons. First, it has become the universal mediator, and because it is itself a means . . . it is not the object of symbolization but rather it is also, by its power, outside of all other systems of mediation. It is, in the second place, a producer of a communal sense. The communal act today no longer relies on the support of the symbolic but rather on a technical support (the play of media, for example). Simply technique establishes a non-mediated—an immediate--relation with man, who, in the past felt a strong need to distance himself from nature, but technique seems not to require such a distance. It seems to be the direct extension of the body. Who has not heard it said that the tool is merely an extension of the hand? Thus, we pass from an organic world, where symbolization was an adequate and coherent function in relation to the milieu, to a technical system where the creation of symbols has neither place nor sense. What symbols are necessary are produced out of technique itself.

Television or advertising offer abundant symbols of technique but those come from the very working of technique itself. Therefore, the technical milieu is never understood because symbolization is excluded. And, from this fact, art, the foremost minion of symbolization, finds itself chaotic and torn between its “vocation” and that to which it can no longer aspire: an environment made up of discrete pieces belongs to structuralism but not to symbolization.²⁴

Technique, then, is self-mediating, which is no mediation. Meaning reduced to structure renders meaning meaningless. Change becomes mere change, repetition. The time of the digital clock, a series of nows. In ten minutes I can drive to the market, I can brush my teeth, comb my hair, and lotion my body; in ten minutes I could get a civil service wedding, and I could wish, while dying, friends and lovers goodbye. All mean the same by the clock in the space of technique.

III

We cannot step into the same river twice, as Heraclitus said, until we named the river and understood it to be a metaphor for time and experience as flux (*panta rhei*).²⁵ We could step and run and step and run until we ran into the Aegean Sea and drowned. With the notion of *panta rhei*, everything flows. Ellul commends Heraclitus with this phrase for being near the truth.²⁶ Instead of claiming the truth to be relative as the flux metaphor might seem, Heraclitus inserts the power of the *Logos*, the word, a meaning that conjoins opposites. Ellul states, “If truth is truth even beyond the limits of our grasp and our approximations, it *exists*. And that settles it. In observing vanishing reality, Heraclitus says something that does not vanish, and his statement falls within the scope of truth.”²⁷ Thus, before the symbol a presence is portended, a finite to be woven from symbolic cloth, to be conceptual about it. To be more existential, a river extends over rocks, that in Norman Maclean’s hands, become words:

Then in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise.

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it.

The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

I am haunted by waters.²⁸

On the river, soul and body are one in a two count rhythm of loading and unloading the fly rod; this count is not clock time but the time of becoming one with mind, body, water, and sky, all the elements. In the pre-Socratic world in which Heraclitus lived, nature and the elements were

spiritual, embodying *physis*, far removed from our ideas of physics and the physical. Heraclitus's nature as *physis* also expressed *Moira*, destiny and fate. The gods were still in all things, as Thales proclaimed. Nature was not the field of dreary natural law and necessity.²⁹ Maclean evokes this sense of nature where words and rocks correspond and evoke the great flood, a tragic retribution. Maclean's beloved brother Paul, an artist with the fly rod, was beaten to death, perhaps over a gambling debt. His brother could not appreciate his value as an artist, and Norman realizes that he could not understand him, not understand his father, not understand the many people he lived with and loved. And then he understands that this is why he wrote this story with words reaching out to the beyond.

Words are God's gifts, Ellul stated:

God speaks. Myth is born from this word, but rarely is it heard directly and never conveyed just as it is received, because human beings cannot speak God's words. Myth is the analogy that enables us to grasp the meaning of what God has said. As discourse constructed to paraphrase the revelation, it is a metaphor that should lead the listener beyond what he has heard.³⁰

With our words we try to say what we mean; if we knew fully what we meant, we would neither speak nor write. Because we do not know we use the symbolic language best suited toward that purpose. We try to understand what we can barely understand hoping that others will hear, will read, and will help us. And, in so doing, we embrace the divine as it is, to us, available.

¹ Gregory Wagenfuhr, "Will the Gospel Survive? Proclamation and Faith in the Technical Milieu," *Ellul Forum* 57 (2016), 11.

² Wagenfuhr, 11.

³ Wagenfuhr, 12.

⁴ Wagenfuhr, 12.

⁵ Wagenfuhr, 12.

⁶ Wagenfuhr, 12.

⁷ I first developed the notion of a technical mentality in David Lovekin "Jacques Ellul and the Logic of Technology," *Man and World* 10 (1978): 251-272. More fully, this examination continues in David Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (Bethlehem, PA and London and Toronto: Lehigh University Press, 1991), 82-116, hereinafter cited as *TDC*.

⁸ I discuss more fully the technical operation and the technical phenomena in *TDC*, 152-187.

⁹ Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), hereinafter cited as *Humiliation*. I discuss the problem of the image and the word more fully in *TDC*, 188-220.

¹⁰ Jacques Ellul, "Symbolic Function, Technology, and Society," *Journal of Social and Biological Structures* (3) (July 1978), 210, hereinafter cited as "Symbolic."

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- ¹¹ Lovekin, *TDC*, 97.
- ¹² Ellul, “Symbolic Function, Technology, and Society,” 212.
- ¹³ Ellul, “Symbolic,” 212.
- ¹⁴ Ellul, “Symbolic,” 212.
- ¹⁵ Jacques Ellul, *L’Histoires des Institutions*, vol. I, Lovekin translation. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955), 220-221.
- ¹⁶ *Humiliation of the Word*, 123.
- ¹⁷ *L’ Histoires des Institutions*, 220-221.
- ¹⁸ Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1975), 55.
- ¹⁹ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1965), 78-79. I have amended Wilkinson’s translation with a phrase in brackets that he left out.
- ²⁰ See Lovekin discussion of the characteristics of technique discussed here and following in *TDC*, 152-187.
- ²¹ I discuss this at great length in *TDC*, 98-105.
- ²² See *TDC*, 97-98.
- ²³ See Samir Younés, “Jacques Ellul and the Eclipse of Artistic Symbolism,” in *The Empire of Non-Sense: Art in the Technological Society*, trans. Michael Johnson and David Lovekin, with Introductory Essays by Samir Younés and David Lovekin (Winterbourne, Berkshire, UK: Papadakis Press, 2014), 7-19, hereinafter cited as *Empire*.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 66. Also see my discussion of technology, art, and the symbol in “Looking and Seeing: The Play of Image and Word—The Wager of Art in the Technological Society: A Revision,” *Bulletin of Science, Technology, and Society* 32 (4) Fall, 2012, 273-286.
- ²⁵ *Humiliation*, 39.
- ²⁶ *Humiliation*, 40.
- ²⁷ *Humiliation*, 40.
- ²⁸ Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 104.
- ²⁹ See F. M. Cornford’s marvelous *From Religion to Philosophy: A Study in the Origins of Western Speculation* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965).
- ³⁰ *Humiliation*, 106.

Security, Technology and Global Politics: Thinking With Virilio

By Mark Lacy. Routledge, 2015. 168 pp. pb.

Reviewed by Jacob Rollison

Jacob Rollison is PhD candidate at the University of Aberdeen. He is the author of *Revolution of Necessity: Language, Technique, and Freedom in the Writings of Jacques Ellul and Slavoj Žižek*, forthcoming from Atropos Press.

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It has been said that a significant challenge for those introducing Ellul for the first time is “to persuade sensible people not to throw it down before they have negotiated even the first ten pages.”¹ This challenge applies equally, if not more so, to the Italian-born French theorist Paul Virilio, and it is a challenge which Mark Lacy has constructively navigated in this concise volume.

Lacy is a Lecturer in Politics and International Relations (IR hereafter) at Lancaster University, UK, who has published variously on intersections of security, IR, politics, and art. This book is intended for an academic readership, primarily in the English-speaking world, who are not familiar with Virilio (or the terrain of continental critical thought to which he more or less ‘belongs’) or who are likely to misread and dismiss him (as they might Ellul) as an outlying, pessimistic, rhetorician so insistent on questioning that he doesn’t give many ‘satisfying’ answers. Lacy’s stated audience of technology, politics, and IR students will likely find it especially worthwhile.

Lacy begins with a short biographical introduction to Virilio and his works. For Ellul Forum readers not familiar with Virilio, a short word of introduction:² the son of an Italian immigrant to France, a ten-year old Virilio was profoundly shaped by witnessing the bombing of his hometown of Nantes in occupied France during WWII—rendering him a self-named “child of total warfare.” A radical leftist (but against Marx), a practicing Catholic, a student of architecture, media, war, aesthetics, philosophy, and ‘dromology’ (his term referring to studying the increase of *speed*, his most constant theme), an activist, artist, and teacher with a large body of work from the 1960s to the present—one can both understand why he requires an introduction for the average reader, and recognize some Ellulian similarities.

Lacy follows this with a section on how to read Virilio, warning readers that Virilio’s *style* might be the biggest difficulty in reading him. “Virilio writes like a French Science Fiction Existentialist,” Lacy remarks, and he’s not wrong.³ Readers who enjoy the rhetorical jabs occasionally landed in Ellul will likely find the heightened pace and pithy power of such punches in Virilio’s hyperbolic style an exhilarating force, though sometimes exhausting and perhaps excessive.

Here (and throughout the work) Lacy carefully introduces Virilio interestedly but fairly, arguing for his relevance for contemporary political/IR thinkers while cataloguing critiques of Virilio along the way. Lacy focuses on the political dimension of Virilio's thought, a focus which sets his apart from other introductory volumes.⁴ A central value which Lacy finds in reading Virilio is the critical questioning which he performs and to which he drives his readers; as such, Lacy's volume is in part the charting of his personal journey reading Virilio and his resulting path. But he also aims for a synthetic course through Virilio's works, "a body of work that is often difficult to 'access' simply by reading one or two books."⁵ The majority of the work follows these two paths alternately and links them together, including contemporary political and pop-cultural references along the way (and situating Virilio against other continental thinkers like Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Agamben, and Baudrillard).

He splits the body of the text into two parts, corresponding to overriding themes of Virilio's corpus. Part I addresses "The endo-colonization of society," a term signifying both the end of nation-state expansion through colonization of external geographic territories, and what Virilio views as its replacement, the turning-inward of the 'military class' on its own population, driven by ideologies of health, security and consumerism, presupposing a "degraded political culture."⁶ Part II focuses on the "Integral Accident," Virilio's term for destruction which emerges by virtue of the networks of our society. Virilio's focus on the accident—on the form of destruction created by the inevitable eventual breakdown of every new invention—lends to his perceived pessimism. Virilio's conceptual vocabulary receives proper elucidation throughout; Lacy focuses on terms such as 'chronopolitics'—the post-geographical politics of 'real-time' surveillance, 'democracy of emotion'—a 'synchronization' of emotions which "reduces the world to fear, panic, and insecurity," 'siege psychosis'—a fearful obsession with security and fear of 'dangerous otherness', and others.⁷ These terms function (similarly to Ellul's *la technique*) as "a vocabulary or set of concepts to help us make sense of the world around us."⁸ Lacy also highlights how, despite the apparent political despair Virilio drives us towards, he ultimately considers himself a 'revolutionary'—he is interested in looking at the world through "an unfamiliar gaze," looking at problems head on in order to move past them.⁹ We might say that Virilio aims to enact a shift in perception, creating awareness of the ways we are shaped by the world around us; Lacy finds and critiques these things in his own life.

Lacy's work admirably provides a 'sensible' entry to Virilio's work for many readers who might never encounter it. Virilio's works (and thus Lacy's book) should be of interest to Ellul Forum readers not least for common themes too substantial and numerous to detail here. In making Virilio more widely palatable, Lacy necessarily dulls some of the stylistic edge which makes Virilio so incisive. This is understandable: he's trying to bridge a gap between the apocalyptic critique of a French radical and a more tame, academic, and institutionalized readership, between Virilio and the fearful, anxious, integrated, and security-obsessed society he describes.

In his conclusion, Lacy suggests that Virilio’s “profound hope” “comes from his ‘method’, his commitment to our capacity to keep asking questions...”¹⁰ In light of the similarities between Ellul and Virilio, and Ellul’s insistence that his sociology would have driven him to suicide without the hope his theology offered, Lacy’s attribution of Virilio’s hope only to a method of questioning—and not to something as subversive to modern categories as the “hope against hope” of his theology—comes off as going beyond the rhetorical ‘dulling of an edge’ and borders on taming Virilio’s radical position.¹¹

¹ John Wilkinson in his introduction to Ellul’s *The Meaning of the City*. Ellul, Jacques. *The Meaning of the City* (Vancouver: Eerdmans, reprinted by Regent College Bookstore, 1993), xii.

² Some of this paragraph, and its quote, come from this *Vice* interview with Virilio: “Paul Virilio”. Interview by Caroline Dumoucel. Available at https://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/paul-virilio-506-v17n9, accessed Jan. 13, 2016.

³ Mark Lacy, *Security, Technology and Global Politics: Thinking With Virilio* (London: Routledge, 2015), 6.

⁴ See footnote 66 on page 24.

⁵ *Security, Technology and Global Politics*, 19.

⁶ *Security, Technology and Global Politics*, 27.

⁷ *Security, Technology and Global Politics*, 40.

⁸ *Security, Technology and Global Politics*, 145.

⁹ *Security, Technology and Global Politics*, 150.

¹⁰ *Security, Technology and Global Politics*, 150.

¹¹ Virilio mentions this theological ‘hope against hope’ in the interview listed above. To be fair to Lacy here, Virilio mentions his faith, but rarely discusses its relation to the rest of his thought at length. In general, Virilio certainly isn’t at pains to explain himself in detail—his style addresses the reader more as an enigmatic provocation.

Dialectical Theology and Jacques Ellul: An Introductory Exposition

By Jacob E. Van Vleet, Fortress Press, 2014. 239 pp. pb.

Reviewed by Paul Tyson

Paul Tyson is an honorary assistant professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Nottingham. He is the author of *Returning to Reality: Christian Platonism for Our Times* (Cascade Books, 2014).

* * * * *

Ellul is a seminal figure in 20th century philosophy of technology scholarship. Two of Ellul's books – “The Technological Society” and “Propaganda” – are recognized classics in the field. Even so, Ellul's work tends to be treated in a rather piecemeal manner and not considered as a whole. To Van Vleet, this tendency to cherry pick a few key ideas from Ellul's work, and only from his recognized philosophy of technology classics, profoundly distorts a fair appreciation of Ellul's work. Most noticeably, those who only read Ellul's above classics readily tend towards the entirely erroneous view that Ellul was a technological determinist.

There is no excuse for failing to notice the centrality of dialectical theology to Ellul's understanding of *technique* and *propagandes*. In his preface to “Propaganda” Ellul notes that whilst he sees propaganda as a necessary feature of modern technological society, he does not “worship facts and power”; indeed, he maintains that because a “phenomenon is *necessary* means, for me, that it denies man: its necessity is proof of its power, not proof of its excellence.” Here, the unstated dialectical partner to determinist material necessity is indeterminate spiritual freedom.

Because he studies necessity from a place ‘above’ necessity, key features of Ellul's conceptual outlook are simply invisible to those who do “worship facts and power”, to those who approach the study of society without any theological appreciation of freedom. Yet it is here, in his dialectical theology, that Ellul is most keenly differentiated from Marx, Durkheim and Weber. Because of his *theology* Ellul's careful analysis of the necessities of modern technological society transcends what it is possible to think of within classical sociology.

Van Vleet has given us an accessible and solid introductory synthesis of the key ideas in the major works in Ellul's expansive corpus using dialectical theology as the hermeneutic key unlocking its unity. If one is already acquainted with Kierkegaardian dialectical theology, this key itself is not

novel. What is still bracing to the conceptual categories of our times, though, is reading Ellul's sociology as grounded in theology. This approach is entirely within the ambit of both Ellul and Kierkegaard, and contemporary scholars such as John Milbank. Indeed, sociology itself, as influenced by 19th century counter-enlightenment thinkers and 20th French theorists, is increasingly open to theology. Van Vleet's text will be particularly valuable to those sociologically interested in Ellul, but not familiar with dialectical theology.

There are, of course, some serious perils involved in seeking to write a clear and systematic synthesis of an inherently dialectical, even paradoxical, thinker's work. Van Vleet performs this tricky dance with real grace and stylistic ease, maintaining a lightness of accessibility undergirded by solid scholarship. This is a beautiful example of what a fine introductory exposition can achieve. But one does not 'master' Ellul by this means, and nor is a mastery of Ellul Van Vleet's intention.

Van Vleet offers us a conceptual entrée gently acquainting the intellectual palate of the non-dialectical and the non-theological with the exotic flavours of Ellul's outlook, and a basic appreciation of how his theological flavours should – and should not – be combined for satisfying intellectual digestion. But the point of the entrée is, of course, the main meal to follow. After reading Van Vleet, I do think that the social scientist, or the thinker interested in contemporary French scholars influenced by Ellul, will far better understand Ellul's classic texts. This sort of appreciation will open up those interested in the philosophy of technology to the importance of dialectical theology in the work of Ellul and in the work of thinkers like Henry, Virilio etc., who also have a profound theological sensitivity grounded in the 'phenomena' of the mystery of humanly experienced reality, at the same time that they see the disturbing necessities of our technological situation.

In sum, Van Vleet's book has everything a good introductory exposition of Ellul needs – solid scholarship of the entire major corpus, clarity and accuracy in presenting a synthesized overview of core insights and ideas, and a clear exposition of the key interpretive dynamics of Ellul's dialectical theology.

Note: This review is a substantially revised version by the author, originally published in *Cultural Politics*, Volume 11, Issue 2, Duke University Press.

Will the Gospel Survive? Proclamation and Faith in the Technical Milieu

By Gregory Wagenfuhr

Rev Dr G.P. Wagenfuhr is a Presbyterian minister currently serving as transitional pastor of the United Presbyterian Church of Cañon City, Colorado. He is author of *Plundering Egypt: A Subversive Christian Ethic of Economy* (Cascade, 2016), a book that offers a critique of any and all possible economic relationships from the perspective of a biblical Christian faith. It looks at the history of economic relations in different times and how these economic perspectives have influenced human world-construction, juxtaposing a robust theological engagement to show where economic reasoning has influenced Christian theology, and how a gospel of reconciliation can truly subvert economics. He earned his PhD in Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Bristol (2013). His thesis was entitled, "The Revelation of God in Christ as Desacralising Reorientation to Milieu in and beyond Jacques Ellul." He received his M.Div. from Westminster Theological Seminary in 2009 and his B.A. in Philosophy and Ancient Languages from Wheaton College in 2005. His website is gpwagenfuhr.com.

Abstract

Ellul's concept of technique grows throughout his writing, to the point that he begins to see technique as the milieu in which modern people live. Because experience is mediated through technique, technique gives content to symbol and it alters language in all its aspects: its form, its content, and its purpose. If God's revelation is in his Word and language itself is fundamentally altered, can the gospel survive translation into the technical milieu? Is the gospel subverted by the very means used to communicate it? This paper briefly examines the alteration of language in the technical milieu and the social milieu in which the Word of God was revealed in Scripture. It is then argued that the technical milieu subverts communication of the gospel, but... no more than the social milieu in which it was delivered.

Presented to the International Jacques Ellul Society conference, 2012 at Wheaton College

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Ellul's concept of technique grows throughout his writing, to the point that he begins to see technique as the milieu in which modern people live. Because experience is mediated through technique, technique gives content to symbol and it alters language in all its aspects: its form, its content, and its purpose. If God's revelation is in his Word and language itself is fundamentally altered, can the gospel survive translation into the technical milieu? Is the gospel subverted by the very means used to communicate it? This paper briefly examines the alteration of language in the technical milieu and the social milieu in which the Word of God was revealed in Scripture. It is then argued that the technical milieu subverts communication of the gospel, but . . . no more than the social milieu in which it was delivered.

Introduction: The Progression of Technique

Jacques Ellul is perhaps best known for his critique of technology. Barring the problem with the translation of 'technology' for *la technique*, that Ellul himself addressed,¹ there is the further issue that his conception of the role and character of *la technique* grows throughout his career. Unfortunately, many of his readers tread not beyond the confines of a select few books and thus fail to understand this progression of thought. Nor has this progression been well documented in summaries of Ellul. The phenomenon of *la technique* is, at times, understood by Ellul to be the dominant force in society in the 20th century. Thus, around the time of *La technique ou l'enjeu de siècle* (1954) / *The Technological Society* (1964), Ellul considers his understanding of technique to be analogous with Karl Marx's conception of capital as the dominant social force or factor in the 19th century.² Later in Ellul's thought, however, technique becomes something larger than a social phenomenon akin to capital. Ellul introduces his sequel to *The Technological Society*, *Le system technicien* (1977) / *The Technological System* (1980) in this way:

Technology is not content with *being*, or in our world with being the *principal or determining factor*. Technology has become a system . . . Twenty-five years ago, I arrived at the notion of the "technological society"; but now, that stage is passed.³

Thus, Ellul begins to see that technique is a whole system, something larger than a dominant factor within a social system. Chapter two of *The Technological System* explains how technique is the milieu in which people now live. It is a decade later near the end of his writing career when Ellul finally pieces it all together. In *Ce que je crois* (1987) / *What I Believe* (1989), Ellul devotes four chapters to an all-encompassing metanarrative of human history in which technique features as one of three milieux in which humanity has lived. Technique, then, is not just one phenomenon amongst many, a system governing social life, but is the world in which humanity lives.

Whereas the generally accepted metanarrative of philosophy in the West proceeds through the premodern, modern, and postmodern, I have argued elsewhere that Ellul's metanarrative of three milieux provides a better account of history than a rational-centric narrative.⁴ This account of "the human adventure" is the most important interpretative lens through which one must read Ellul's works; most important because it integrates the totality of his idea of *la technique* in its material and spiritual realities and explains its development on a grand scale.

2. Three Milieux

For Ellul, a milieu is characterised by three things: it is the primary source of life, the primary source of death, and therefore also, the primary experience through which all other experience is mediated.⁵ The milieu is all-encompassing, but it is this third point, that of mediation, that is most essential. For, in mediating experience, the milieu provides symbol and thus the possibility of language and creativity. These three milieux of Ellul correspond to the three epochs of prehistory, history, and post-history.⁶ In the natural milieu, human beings were most benefited and threatened by natural causes. Nature mediated experience and thus gave rise to natural society and natural techniques. To oversimplify, human relations existed in highly naturalistic ways—for the purpose of survival and biological thriving. With the dawn of history and the development of the city, society itself begins to be the totality of experience. Nature and technique are mediated through society and are thus social. Nature exists for the purpose of the social groups. Technique is social and is utilised for social ends. Finally, with the end of history comes the technical milieu. Ellul's most famous book *The Technological Society* was an expression of the transition between the social and technical milieux. In the technical milieu, nature and society exist for the purpose of technical development and all experience will increasingly be mediated through technique. Thus, *la technique* is not an isolated set of phenomena that can be identified as 'alien' and eradicated. *La technique* is the interpretative framework of human life.

This is increasingly evident in the details of life. The separation of the food consumer from the production of food is increasingly broad. Even basic food preparation is highly mediated through technology. Food consumption was not so long ago a highly social affair, in the technical milieu, food consumption is technical—fast, efficient, oriented more around data on how much of what to eat in a day to be healthy than on a display of personal wealth and taste to garner social status. Nature is utilised for technical progress. To even experience untouched nature requires the use of technological transportation and in many countries is completely impossible. We have to experience a 'transport' in the spiritual sense; we have to exit the world in order to experience nature. Indeed, our very conception of the world as 'ecosystem' demonstrates that we conceive of the natural world in technical terms.

Society is also mediated through technique and technology. It is increasingly impossible to participate in society without Internet access. Communication with other human beings is increasingly mediated through techniques that alter the form and content of conversation. This helps form a technical people, a people who have no time for small talk, no time for pleasantries and politeness, but who have time only for the almighty *Fact*.⁷ Pragmatism is the philosophy of technique. The technical person, the human resource, uses language to communicate information and data.

The mediation of nature and society through technique raises a plethora of important questions. What implications does the technical milieu hold for the revelation of God in Scripture and the proclamation of the gospel? Will the gospel survive translation into the technical world? What is theology without knowledge of God and how can that knowledge of God be knowable except through revelation? Thus, the problem of revelation in the technical milieu must be raised prior to any moral or practical questions. If the gospel is modified by the transition of milieux, if it cannot survive this translation, nothing remains but the remnants of an outdated religion that no longer serves a vital social function.

3. Revelation as Social

The revelation of God, in Ellul's account of history, falls clearly within the social milieu. That this is the case is evident from a number of points. First of all, both the Old Testament and the New Testament lie within the social milieu. Their respective and evolving situations are almost entirely social. That is, their primary institutions are social institutions, e.g. marriage, tribe, family, nation. Their concerns for justice are social, relating to the widow, the orphan, the outcast, the poor. In the technical milieu justice and morality are mediated through technical concerns, such as efficiency, utilitarian ideas, maximisation of productivity with minimum of effort.⁸

The Bible, taken as a grand narrative, is a concern of God and his reconciliation with an ever expanding group of people. It is relational and therefore it seems that the application of 'social' to this message is fitting. Ellul prefers the term *la rupture* instead of the Fall precisely because he sees the gospel as concerned with rupture and reconciliation of relationship.⁹

Ellul argues, for example, that Jesus is the rider on the white horse of the book of John's Apocalypse. Jesus, on his reading, exists within history as that which gives history meaning. Only Jesus has the power to open the book of history and make it meaningful.¹⁰ Because Jesus is the meaning of history, for Ellul, and the social milieu is the period of history, it seems that Jesus was incarnate within the social milieu. If Jesus is the meaning of history, and the technical milieu abandons history,¹¹ it follows that Jesus has no real meaning in the technical milieu. Jesus, and God for that matter, is at best irrelevant to the technical mindset.

Ellul argues such a point in *Humiliation of the Word*. The Word of God is humiliated by the *de facto* triumph of the image, especially in the contemporary technical world. And, to devalue the word is to devalue the incarnation, as Ellul explains:

Since all Christianity depends on the incarnate Word, the Word made flesh, we must say that there is no Christian faith outside the Word; our description of the God who speaks points to what is specific and particular in Christian revelation . . . If we devalue the Word even a little, we are rejecting all of Christianity and the Incarnation.¹²

Clearly, Jesus belongs in the social milieu and has little possibility of communicating to us in the technical milieu. After all, as we continually separate ourselves from our physical bodies by the creation of 'avatars' on the Internet, why should we want an incarnate God?

One final point to make to demonstrate the seemingly social nature of the gospel is to simply point out that key concepts of Scripture seem to be social. God is love.¹³ How can we understand the love of God, its patience, kindness, selflessness, when 'love' to us is a technical action that we make happen by the gratification of the flesh? Sex, as Ellul notes in *New Demons* is treated as a sacred of transgression of technique, but in the process is itself transformed into technique.¹⁴ Ellul also explains the seeming liberation of sex and the love relationship by technique as slavery to technique in *Ethics of Freedom*.¹⁵ In this situation, the love of God must be understood from a functional perspective, i.e., what can it do for me, for humanity? What purpose does the love of God play for the furthering of the technical milieu?

Community is an evergreen term used in Christian circles. The church is seen as God's community to be active in the human community. What most contemporary writers have failed to see is that neither community nor individualism are fitting descriptions of any alternatives in the technical milieu. What does the church mean to a massified humanity?¹⁶ The meaning of 'church' is evident by its *de facto* division along socioeconomic or professional lines. The church may be viewed as a functional entity rather than a social identity, as such it risks becoming a social *resource* rather than the living body of Christ.

Prayer is a further concept that Ellul noted was modified in the technical milieu. *L'impossible prière* or *Prayer and Modern Man* is a look into the possibility of prayer in this world. Ellul observes that the foundations of prayer are fragile, that the reasons for it seem lacking in a secular world of "man come of age."¹⁷ Prayer is empirically inefficient and ineffective. It may provide some psychological benefit, some psychosomatic healing, but technology and advanced technique is mainly responsible for the provision of daily bread, for healing, for the means of life and the source of death. Technique is the benefactor and malefactor, that which may bless or curse. Prayer to a God outside this milieu seems irrelevant and is demonstrably ineffective. Prayer, thus, becomes seen as a technique. Prayer is a function, a means to some further end.¹⁸ Ellul combats this by celebrating the death of the former naturalistic and religious reasons for prayer because he believes prayer can be recovered for the Christian for what it truly is--an expression of freedom.¹⁹

Thus it is seen that certain concepts intrinsic to Christian revelation have been modified such that, though words remain, the symbolic world through which they are mediated has changed. But if specific words have changed, how has language changed from the social milieu to the technical? For, if symbol and language themselves have been modified, how might a message delivered in social terms to a social milieu be translated into the technical milieu? And can this be done successfully without a subversion of its message?

4. Symbol—Language in the Technical Milieu

As a milieu, technique is immediate. This means that experience of the natural and social worlds are mediated through technique. The linguistic consequences of this mediation are profound. Language is essentially a social entity. It exists for social ends. If truth is always and everywhere only expressible by language, and language is social, truth is social. The mediation of truth through technique leads to the submission of truth to the purposes of 'fact.' For Ellul, there is a categorical difference between truth and fact that corresponds to the difference in word and image, or language and reality.²⁰ Truth, we might say, is existentially relevant, it is interpretation and application. Fact is objective and meaningless.²¹ In the technical milieu truth becomes quantitative and subjected to fact.²² In this way language itself is modified by its integration into the technical milieu. Ellul writes:

Linguistic studies (and not just structuralism) tend more and more to reduce human language to a certain number of structures, functions, and mechanisms giving us the impression that we now understand this strange and mysterious phenomenon better than before. But what modern linguistics really does is to reduce language in such a way as to make it fit neatly into this technological universe, trimmed down as an indispensable communication for the creation of the system. Language is losing its mystery, its magic, its incomprehensibility.²³

Language, if it loses its incomprehensibility and mystery, leads to non-symbolic communication, communication that is efficient but dull. In Orwell's famous *1984*, he introduced a similar concept that he called 'newspeak.' Though Orwell's vision remains unfulfilled in a great number of ways, he did understand the importance of language on the pattern of thought of people. 'Thoughtcrime' could become impossible by the elimination of difference and distinction in the definition of words. What Orwell missed, which is the reason Ellul preferred Huxley's *Brave New World*,²⁴ is that this reduction process is not conscious, violent, anti-sexual, or eliminating of the semblance of freedom. Rather, as with Huxley's account, people are trained in a language that corresponds to and integrates one into a particular milieu from birth. The technical milieu alters the formal, material, instrumental and final 'causes' (to use Aristotle's terms) of language, as I will now explain.

4.1. Transition from Social Language to Technical Language

Formal Cause of Language

Language is social. The form of language, as it has been known throughout human history, is social. The form language has taken, its grammatical structure, its symbols, have corresponded to the needs of society. As Ellul noted, milieu is that which gives language its symbolic content and thus makes language possible. Symbol can be classified into Ellul's three milieux: the natural, social and technical. The non-human world gives innumerable symbols. But these symbols acquire meaning, not by the natural features themselves, but by the meaning superimposed by a social group. Claude Lèvi-Strauss, for example, points out how colour symbolism is ambiguous.²⁵ The ancient Jews associated the sea and deep waters with chaos and fear, whereas seafaring people tend to use its symbols positively, as life-giving and fertile. The point is, even though symbol exists within the milieu, its meaning is fixed by usage within a group, rather than within the milieu itself.

In the technical milieu, however, the form of language is no longer social. Instead of usage providing meaning, meaning becomes more and more objective, resting more in a lexicon and set syntax than in usage. Language in the technical world becomes increasingly standardised, objective and technical, with meaning increasingly lying within the word itself, rather than in the intention of the subject or in the relationship of speaker and audience. Rather than a form of social interaction between subjects, language becomes a form of information transfer. Language is taken to be equivalent to reality, insofar as it is a transmission of data, rather than a communication of truth and value. That is, the qualitative and evaluative component of language so prevalent in social discourse is supplanted by quantitative fact. Indeed, it may be fitting to suggest that the postmodern call to remember subjectivity inherent in language and communication comes at precisely the time when it is in most danger of disappearance.

Material Cause of Language

The material cause of language is social. The matter, substance or essence of language is social. Communication between subjects is, in itself, a representation of the subject itself. One's word is one's bond. *Communication* is about the coming together of individuals in a type of community. The very act of communication requires the loss of difference, requires common ground to be formed, common experience to be shared.

In the technical milieu, however, the matter, or substance of language is technique itself. Ellul says of communication, “Technology is the support of inter-human communion. But this communion, no longer symbolic, has turned into sheer technological communication.”²⁶ The mediation of the technical milieu sterilises language, demonstrating that the essence of language becomes technical itself. Technology, in contrast to older forms of mediation, is univocal, superficial, but stable. It involves clear and orderly mediation, but without playing or evoking, without remembering or projecting. It is a truly efficient medium, and it has imposed itself in lieu of poetic mediations. It sterilizes all around itself anything that could disturb that rigor.²⁷

Thus, the material cause of language is itself no longer social. The form and content of language is increasingly technique itself in a universal self-augmenting way. Again, this does not mean that language loses its social aspects, but that the social aspects are heavily modified by mediation through technique.

Instrumental Cause of Language

The instrumental cause of language is society. That is to say, society itself is the instrument by which language exists. Language comes by means of society. It develops through common usage in distinct social and geographical groups. Language is delivered via society. Society provides the means by which speaking, listening and comprehensibility is possible. Through a process of socialisation a child or foreigner is integrated into the group by means of learning the language.

In the technical milieu, however, language becomes an instrument of technique. Technique is the means by which language acts are constructed. Communication is increasingly only possible mediated through communication technologies. To be integrated into the world, one need learn fewer social rules, fewer shibboleths, and more universal forms of expression via information technology. Learning basic computer and Internet skills is more socially important than learning the subtleties of formal conversation. Language, therefore, becomes an expression of technique rather than an expression of society.

Final Cause of Language

The final cause, or purpose, of language is social. Language exists so that people might communicate with each other, might move interaction beyond the purely physical to the emotional and intellectual. Without language, human civilisation is impossible. It is not without accident that tower of Babel narrative expresses the disempowerment of humanity by

confusion of language.²⁸ This narrative is not to be understood as an aetiological myth for the presence of different languages, but is a statement on the confusion of language. It is less about the speaking, more about the power that mutual comprehensibility and human unity brings.²⁹ Language exists for the purpose of building human community and society. In order for communication to be a possibility there must be common ground. In order for there to be common ground, there must be a willingness on the part of individuals to assume positions and identities otherwise alien. Agreement, community, communion, are made possible by language.

In the technical milieu, however, with a biological-functional definition of human ontology, the growing uniform and global human identity makes the social functions of language increasingly superfluous. Language increasingly exists for the purpose of function-performance. Jargon and computer programming language are only two obvious examples of this. A more subtle example is the moralisation of language often called ‘political correctness’. Just as blasphemy was formerly a serious crime, so now the use of socially divisive terminology is sometimes criminal. This is not for the purpose of social cohesion, but because language exists for the purpose of technique. By the use of technical language former controlling social identities such as race or nationality are systematically eliminated. Tolerance is always and everywhere a devaluation of formerly held values by submission to a higher value. Thus, instead of creating a social identity through language, language works to minimise social identity by the prioritisation of technical function. Technique necessarily devalues identities deemed irrelevant to function.³⁰

Language—that means by which people may come together as one—has, in many ways, reached its zenith in our own time. Global human unity has never been more a reality than it is today. As the number of distinct social groups and cultures die away in the face of monolithic technical anti-culture,³¹ traditional forms of language have been and will become irrelevant. Language is thus fundamentally altered in its form, its essence, its instrumentality, and its purpose.

4.2. Spiritual Dimensions

This transition from social to technical language is not simply a material fact without spiritual value. Language is bound to spirituality and the fundamental change in milieu is also spiritual. As, Ellul says in *The Humiliation of the Word*:

Human sovereignty is due more to our language than to our techniques or instruments of war . . . Naming something means asserting oneself as subject and designating the other as object. It is the greatest spiritual and personal venture.³²

Language is humanity's greatest spiritual venture, and when this venture is turned toward technique, technique becomes endowed with sacral qualities that make technique all-pervasive. This is the dialectic of milieu that is so essential to understand. The milieu is dialectically dependent upon humanity as well as being external to and above people. That technique is a human creation is obvious. That it has become a milieu is perhaps less obvious. But, if it is truly an all-pervasive milieu then it must be our responsibility, is indisputable. Of vital importance is what Ellul says in *New Demons*, "It is not technique itself which enslaves us, but the transfer of the sacred into technique."³³ Technique is not the enemy, our spirituality conditioned by *la rupture* is. And, if language represents this spiritual power, as Ellul has said, the fact of the technical milieu seems to be deadly to the Word of God. The adoption of this milieu means that the significance of the incarnation has been undone by humanity. The Word of God that came to dwell among us in a relationship for the purpose of reconciliation has been robbed of its symbolic relationship to ourselves. By removing from ourselves that last possibility of communication with God, we systematically deny his Word a presence in our world.

It is not as though the technical milieu removes speech or relationships. Rather, the technical milieu mediates all aspects of life through technique. This means that the gospel is conceived in technical terms. Evangelism occurs for results. Jesus becomes a means to an end, whether that be social justice, psychological well being, divine moral approbation, a prayer-answerer, the giver of the Holy Spirit who works miracles of healing and wealth-creation, etc. Ellul well speaks of faith as meaningless in *Living Faith*.³⁴ Following Dietrich Bonhoeffer,³⁵ he thinks that faith in Jesus Christ must always be ultimate,³⁶ which means that it can never exist for any reason other than itself.

But, if faith is truly meaningless, purposeless, and therefore always only an end in itself, such a thing is inconceivable in the technical milieu wherein ends do not exist, but only means and means become their own ends.³⁷ *The Word of God turned into means ceases to be the Word of God.* The Word of God as means makes the 'God' of this phrase to be ourselves deified. For if the revelation of God truly is self-revelation in Jesus Christ, our possession of it, our ownership, our *use* of it makes us to be masters of it. This leads us to the main question--can the gospel survive translation into technical language in the technical milieu? To attempt an answer, it is expedient to observe what the technical gospel looks like.

4.3. The Technical Gospel

The gospel is viewed through the lens of technique, which is little more than means and an ensemble of means.³⁸ A technical gospel delivers quantitative and measurable results. The gospel or the Word of God becomes a resource for life, for social justice, for ideological

justification, for spiritual revitalisation. Religion becomes another means to maintaining the efficiency of the human resource by the semblance of freedom. The gospel *via* technique, then, is very different from the gospel *via* society insofar as the Word of God is used to encourage and justify human technique. The technical gospel is one in which the content of Christian proclamation becomes about technique itself. Not just religious technique, though the recent revival of "spiritual disciplines" is telling, but in technical religion as well. This is a gospel of human progress, of humanity working with God for the redemption of the world. This notion of stewardship is resource-oriented and it asks questions of efficiency and progress. It is a gospel oriented to answering the questions of the day, e.g. ecological concerns and economic distributive justice, questions the gospel itself is not *primarily* addressing.

One brief example of the technical gospel is useful. Stewardship, though once the domain of economics in theology, has spread to ecology and personal ability. In this way the natural world and the individual human are seen as resources that must be utilised in a managed and efficient fashion. The focus on vocation or calling further views the individual as a functional unit that must be utilised in the one best way for the kingdom of God. Stewardship often fails to ask the question that must come prior to its standard question of how to act responsibly with the resources at hand, that is the question, "How did we get the resources we have?"³⁹ Furthermore, stewardship tends to economise or resource the non-economic and thus devalue the human individual or the natural world itself. The question must be asked, "Is this properly a resource?" before it is asked what might be done with it. True management of 'capital' must always question what rightly qualifies as 'capital.'

5. Conclusion—Will the Gospel Survive?

Will the gospel survive the technical milieu? Does it need radical new translations? In actuality, such translations have long been underway. Faith in Jesus Christ has always been subverted in human reality. In the natural milieu, the revelation of God said that nothing had spiritual value unless given to it by God, that the sun, moon and stars were not gods and had only natural impact on human affairs. In the social milieu Jesus was the one who came declaring that he came not to bring peace, which is what religion so earnestly desires, but a sword of division.⁴⁰ He came to cast a fire on the earth, to divide social groups down to even the family unit.⁴¹ In the technical milieu, Jesus is the one who claims that he is the way himself, not that he is the way to somewhere, but that he is himself a unity of means and ends. Jesus is the way to the Father, but is also one with the Father.⁴² As such, the gospel to the technical world must be a dual proclamation. On the one hand, we proclaim that Christ does not provide the means to any further end, e.g. justice, peace, material prosperity, etc. On the other hand, we proclaim that Christ is the one and only means to liberation from the sacralisation of technique that has so modified human relationships.

Thus, the Ellulian conclusion: the gospel has been de-incarnated and militated against for as long as it has been revealed. The social form of Christianity was not a golden age, rather, the social milieu had its own very pernicious forms of subversion, many of which Ellul well documents.⁴³ The attempt at the subversion of Christian faith is a fact rooted in the notion of incarnation itself. God is revealed in weakness, in the Word. The Word is terribly alterable, its meaning difficult to solidify. The world to which symbols refer changes dramatically.

Thus, though the incarnation was an historical event, the world to which Jesus came is different from our own in ways more radical than many are prepared to consider.

The gospel will survive by God's grace and power alone. It is the responsibility of Christians to recognise the fundamentally different milieu in which we live and the problems it poses for the understanding and transmission of the gospel. Can the gospel be translated into the technical world? It already has been and yes, it is a radical subversion of the gospel. But this is not necessarily a new situation insofar as the gospel has been subverted throughout its history by the social milieu in which it was revealed. The solution, therefore, can in no way be a re-socialisation of the gospel. To attempt such is not only quixotic, but creates a utopian golden-age vision of the past that is radically naïve.

The gospel is not the milieu; it is not the transmission of the milieu. The gospel is not fundamentally social, natural, or technical. The good news of God in Christ is reconciliation, but this is not social insofar as reconciliation to God cannot be mediated through human societies. This reconciliation has at its root the relationship between the individual and God. It is by means of this individual and unique relationship that the church is formed. That is, only through the mediation of the love of God can one love one's neighbour. Thus, the gospel is, in actuality, radically destructive to a human society whose unity lies outside God, to natural religions and to the technical milieu. The gospel must, therefore, always be Wholly Other, even as it is translated into each new world. The good news is reconciliation to God mediated only by the person of Christ. Thus, we cannot approach the technical world with a technical gospel, the social world with a social gospel, the natural world with a natural gospel. Neither can we approach the technical world with a social gospel, as is being done currently. Rather, we approach the world with the person of Christ as the one who interrupts the technical world by his incarnation.

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- ¹ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Continuum, 1980), 24.
- ² Jacques Ellul & Madeleine Garrigou-Lagrange. *In Season, Out of Season: An Introduction to the Thought of Jacques Ellul* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 176. cf. also "On Demande Un Nouveau Karl Marx." *Foi et Vie* 45, 3 (1947).
- ³ Ellul, *The Technological System*, 1.
- ⁴ Wagenfuhr, Gregory. "Postmodernity, the Phenomenal Mistake: Sacred, Myth and Environment." In *Jacques Ellul and the Technological Society in the 21st Century*, ed. Helena M. Jerónimo, José Luís Garcia & Carl Mitcham (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013).
- ⁵ Jacques Ellul, *What I Believe*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 99ff.
- ⁶ Ellul, *What I Believe*, Part II.
- ⁷ Jacques Ellul, *A Critique of the New Commonplaces*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Knopf, 1968), 202ff.
- ⁸ Ellul notes that there is a kind of technical anti-morality present in the technical milieu. Technique tolerates no morality, but has an order of its own that creates a 'morality' of its own. See Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Knopf, 1964), 134.
- ⁹ Andrew Goddard, *Living the Word, Resisting the World: The Life and Thought of Jacques Ellul* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 62ff. Goddard succinctly summarizes Ellul's theology as one of rupture and communion.
- ¹⁰ cf. Jacques Ellul, *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 177ff., chapter 5.
- ¹¹ Ellul titles his chapter on the technical milieu "The Posthistorical Period and the Technological Environment." See Ellul, *What I Believe*, 133.
- ¹² Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 51-52.
- ¹³ 1 John 4:8, 16.
- ¹⁴ Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 75ff.
- ¹⁵ Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 482ff.
- ¹⁶ For Ellul on the massification of humanity cf. Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 333-34.
- ¹⁷ A favorite critique by Ellul of Bonhoeffer. cf. e.g. Ellul, *A Critique of the New Commonplaces*, 67-81. Ellul, *The New Demons*, 20.
- ¹⁸ Popular Christian teaching and campaigns bear this out, e.g. "PUSH: Pray Until Something Happens." Prayer is thus seen as a means to any end, but that it is effective in bringing something about.
- ¹⁹ Jacques Ellul, *Prayer and Modern Man* (New York: Seabury Press, 1970), 99ff.
- ²⁰ Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*.
- ²¹ Ellul, *A Critique of the New Commonplaces*, 202-206. In *Commonplaces*, Ellul criticises an attitude of submission to fact by noting that bowing to fact is a justification of fate and a

denial of the unique human capacity to reject the sovereignty of fact.

²² Ellul, *A Critique of the New Commonplaces*, 240-49. Ellul critiques the proposal that all science is quantitative or mathematical by observing that taking only one side of the division between numerical and non-numerical, or quantitative and qualitative, will necessarily exclude the possibility of the qualitative in order to use the method. Thus, the method simply reproduces its presuppositions.

²³ Ellul, *The Technological System*, 49.

²⁴ Ellul, *What I Believe*, 137. Though Ellul is also skeptical about many features of this work. See also Jacques Ellul & William Vanderburg, *Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on His Life and Work*. 2nd revised ed. (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2004), 54-56. See also Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 337.

²⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 64-65.

²⁶ Ellul, *The Technological System*, 36.

²⁷ Ellul, *The Technological System*, 37.

²⁸ Genesis 11:1-9

²⁹ cf. Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, trans. Dennis Pardee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 19.

³⁰ Whether one is black or white, male or female, homosexual or heterosexual, Christian or Muslim, is completely irrelevant for the vast majority of technical functions. What becomes essential now is a functional human ontology that views people as 'human resources.'

³¹ "Culture exists only if it raises the question of meaning and values. In the last analysis one might say that this is the central object of all culture. But here we are at the opposite pole from all technique. Technique is not at all concerned about the meaning of life, and it rejects any relation to values." Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, 148.

³² Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, 52.

³³ Ellul, *The New Demons*, 206.

³⁴ Jacques Ellul, *Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in a Perilous World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 157ff.

³⁵ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

³⁶ Ellul, *Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in a Perilous World*, 116ff.

³⁷ cf. Ellul, *The Technological Society*.

³⁸ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 19.

³⁹ Cf. Jacques Ellul, *Money & Power*, trans. LaVonne Neff (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press), 1984, 30.

⁴⁰ Matthew 10:34.

⁴¹ Luke 12:49-53.

⁴² John 14:6-9.

⁴³ Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).