

## **“Bringing Ellul to the City Council: A Council Member Reflects on how Ellul has Guided his Work”**

Interview of Robb Davis by Mark D. Baker

Robb Davis holds a master’s degree in public health and a Ph.D. in population dynamics from Johns Hopkins University. He has over twenty years’ experience in international development in the field of maternal and child health and nutrition. He was the executive director of the Mennonite Central Committee. He contributed an article to the *Ellul Forum* (#46). He is fluent in French and reads Ellul in French. He was elected to the Davis, California, city council in June, 2014 and began serving as mayor of Davis in July 2016. In addition to his role in city government he also dedicates a significant amount of time to work on issues related to homelessness and restorative justice in relation to youth crime.

Mark D. Baker, professor of theology and mission at Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary, interviewed Robb on July 7, 2016 as part of the conference of the International Jacques Ellul Society. What follows is an edited version of excerpts of that session, including two of the questions from the audience.

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**Mark:** It would be surprising to many that an enthusiastic reader of Jacques Ellul would run for political office. How did Ellul’s work factor into your decision to run for city council?

**Robb:** I’ll start by that saying Ellul arguably is the reason I became involved in city politics. Maybe even more surprising than my claiming to have run for office on the basis of something Ellul said, which many might consider to be paradoxical, is that I am also a Mennonite. I wasn’t just trying to break some molds. I had spent about 25 years travelling the world. I was a technician, dispensing wisdom to many villages and communities all over the planet—45 different countries. I started reading Ellul, and Patrick Deneen, and they started challenging me about living and acting locally. I realized that I didn’t know anything about my hometown Davis, California. So about 7 years ago, I stopped travelling. I decided not to get in an airplane anymore. And that changed everything, and not always in a good way. Because when you make a decision like that, all of a sudden everything that your identity is tied up in is no longer there. People in my hometown didn’t know me. When I started digging into my hometown I realized that the brokenness that I had experienced other places was actually more profound in Davis, California. We had a veneer of privilege and beauty, and not too far below the surface we had serious problems of addiction and homelessness and racism and exclusion. And the more I got involved, the more I realized that acting locally is really not fun. I didn’t really want to look at it. I wanted to leave, actually, but I stuck it out. While staffing an overnight shelter I saw firsthand

how we fail as a society to treat mental health, how we fail as a society to deal with addiction, and how these things are syndromes that leave people broken, and our solutions are to toss the problems over to the nonprofits to try to figure out a solution. So what I want to say about that experience, and where I really drew from Ellul quite a bit, was the idea of the flourishing of intermediating entities outside the state. The state was incapable, even at a local level, of really effectively dealing with these problems. Into the interstices into the breach, came these small organizations. My commitment at that time was to try to work with them to make them stronger, to help them plan, to try to take some things I'd learned in my trips around the world, and to try to bring them into the community. And of course in a situation like that sometimes you do that for a while, and you're asked to be on a commission, you're asked to be on a task force, and then somebody knocks on your door one day and says, "Maybe it would be useful for you to run for office." I didn't believe that I should or could do it. And my main concern was some things that were raised today at this conference about power. Could I go into politics and authentically bring some solutions? The thing that pushed me towards the decision was the idea that perhaps in that role, and this gets back to power, I could encourage the flourishing of these intermediating agencies in the community. I could encourage them. Because one reality of being a political leader is, when you pick up the phone and say to someone, "Come to a meeting," they'll come. They will. I thought, "Maybe I can bring people around the table who aren't talking to each other, maybe I can bring the school district together with the police department, together with the city, to do a restorative justice program."

Another key factor that led me to run was born out of something I read in Ellul: "A key fact of this civilization is that more and more, sin has become collective and that the individual is constrained to participate in it." (Ellul, *Présence au monde modern*, 1948, p. 19—Robb's translation). I was talking to a friend of mine, and we realized that if we had someone in office who was engaging in regular confession about our participation in that collective sin, maybe that would be helpful to a community. And so I've tried to make it my practice to be confessional.

**Mark:** How did Ellul influence your campaign, how you ran?

**Robb:** In *The Technological Society* Ellul, commenting about propaganda, states: "Whether technique acts to the advantage of the dictator or the democracy it makes use of the same weapons, acts on the individual, manipulates his subconscious in identical ways, and in the end leads to the formation of exactly the same type of human being" (375). What I saw is that people running for office even locally were using propaganda for very, very specific ends, which is the building of allegiance toward themselves. They have around them people using propaganda to do one basic thing: build allegiance toward that figurehead. Why? Because it's a lot easier to raise money when you can invite someone to pay \$300 a plate at a table around a leader than it is to give it to some disembodied political party or university. So right out of the gate, I was being told, "You've got to sell yourself. This is about you, Robb. This is about your image; this is about what you've done in the community." And I knew I couldn't do that. I mean, I could have done that, but I felt like that was idolatry. That the real problem with propaganda is that it creates

allegiance towards something that's not God. And I am a follower of Jesus. So I struggled with that.

When I was discerning whether to run or not, through a long series of conversations others helped me understand that it came down to two things. Could I run a campaign where I could be honest about my limits? And the limits of political power? I brought that commitment into the campaign, but my campaign team said, "Do not ever talk about that." I wrote an essay that I put out on a local news blog, without telling my campaign team, and it was entitled, "I'm going to disappoint you." What I was trying to say is, "you are projecting on me many, many hopes. You are projecting on me your desires. I'm going to disappoint you. Because there's no way I can fulfill those needs." So that decision to not listen to my campaign team, and to actually get them upset, was an intentional act to try to communicate that I did not have solutions to these problems. That all I offered was the ability to try to bring people together, to try to work together to solve some of the issues.

**Mark:** With the campaign team, was it one time you did this, and they said, "Robb that's stupid," and then it was over, or was it ongoing conflict with them?

**Robb:** It was ongoing conflict, but not about everything. For instance, I made a commitment during the campaign that my political career begins and ends in Davis. So I am committed to localism. I'm committed to this bioregion. I'm committed to naming the giftedness of the people in this town and drawing on that giftedness to solve our problems. I'm committed to understanding the natural resources, to solving conflict locally. So I laid that out and I said, "This is my commitment, that I will not seek higher office." My campaign team was okay with that.

I think the reason I won, even though I did not always follow the counsel of my campaign team, is that we knocked on every single door in the community and I held almost 40 face-to-face meetings around tables in neighborhoods where we sat and listened to people. And, oh my goodness the fear and the trauma I encountered in a privileged community like Davis; you would be shocked by what people were afraid of. And all they wanted was someone to listen.

**Mark:** Let's return to your comment about confession for collective sin. Can you give an example of how you do that?

**Robb:** I am asked to speak frequently at different events. Recently I spoke at a demonstration against Bakken crude oil coming through our town by rail. It is very volatile and there have been railroad accidents and explosions in other places, killing many people and causing significant environmental destruction. What I mean by public confession is standing in front of a group of environmental activists and saying, "You know the oil company is not going to the Bakken formation to make our lives miserable. The oil-producing company is not going to the Bakken shale to give us heartache, or to challenge our goal of local control of land use. They're going to the Bakken shale because we're telling them too. We're asking them, we're begging them, our

society, our lifestyles are drenched in oil. That's why they're going." Now, that's my public confession of my participation in systemic sin. We're raping Canada's timber to build houses in California. We've despoiled the Ecuadorian rainforests to drive our cars. We need to say that; we need to acknowledge that. And I've felt like I could make a commitment to do that. And in the end to be confessional to acknowledge my role in the systemic.

**Mark:** Ellul wrote: "The first great fact which emerges from our civilization is that today everything has become 'means.' There is no longer an 'end;' we do not know whither we are going. We have forgotten our collective ends, and we possess great means: we set huge machines in motion in order to arrive nowhere" (Jacques Ellul, *Presence of the Kingdom*, p. 63). How have you observed this?

**Robb:** Two months after I was elected an MRAP, Mine-Resistant Armored Personnel Carrier, arrived in our town. It looks like a tank without a turret. It was surplus military equipment sent by the U.S. Government at the request of our police department.

**Mark:** Sent to your town and many others. . .

**Robb:** Many others. Hundreds of towns across the United States. I asked, "We need a tank?" And the police said, "Yes. We need it for lone shooter events were somebody's hiding and shooting. We need it in case of a disaster. We need it in case there's a riot."

Means and ends. The day it arrived, the first thing that came into my mind was, "Means and ends." What did Ellul say about means and ends? Now let's think about this vehicle, the MRAP. It has an end. It was developed for a reason. It was developed for one very specific reason. It can carry large numbers of soldiers down a flat Iraqi road, have an explosive device go off underneath it, and preserve the lives of the people inside. It was created because of a lie. If you disagree with me that the Iraq war was a lie we can discuss it later. The end to which it was set was based on a lie. It achieved the end of keeping people alive, but when the war was over, the U.S. Government needed to do something with it, and so it committed to sending these MRAP's to every community that wanted one in the United States, no strings attached. A vehicle worth \$750,000 each.

And our police are saying to me, "We need it. We need it." So I challenged them, and I said, "What's the concern? Security, right? We need it for our security." And we did Town Hall meetings, and people came and said, "We need it for our security." That's the end that we're trying to achieve, security.

So I asked the police in public meetings, "What's the security threat?" They said two things, which are very telling in this world. And think of this through the lens of Ellul. Everything is becoming means. We've forgotten the ends. So we have a machine that's created for certain ends, which are based on a lie, now this machine, this means, is coming to a community and

what we're trying to do is find an end that justifies this means so that we can keep it. We "create" ends to justify its continued use. But it's an instrument of power and control.

And so, the police said, "Well, we have drug deals going down in our town, and the drug dealers are stealing each other's stashes, and they get into gun battles with each other, and we need it in case we're going in to arrest the drug dealers because they're heavily armed."

Okay, now think about that in terms of ends. The first question was, "Who's buying the drugs?" And the police turned to me and said, "Our largest problem is drug sales--a heroin problem among our young people and a methamphetamine problem among our middle-aged population." This is a real problem in our community. The demand for drugs is not dropping out of the sky; again, these guys are not cultivating drugs and selling them just to make our lives hell, they're doing it because there is a demand. So how do we respond to this problem? We're going to address addiction with an MRAP. We are trying to achieve certain ends (reduction in drug sales) by focusing on the wrong means. We should be looking at the causes of addiction, not stopping drug sales caused by it with an MRAP

The second one is even more telling. It gave me chills and I hope it gives you chills too. The assistant chief of police came to me separately, and said, "Robb, we have legitimate concerns. There are people in this community who are tactically trained. They're trained in police tactics, and they know how to counter us, and by the way Robb—some of these folks have PTSD. If they get guns in their hands, it's very difficult for us to deal with them." And I said, "We have people in our community who are tactically trained, who have PTSD, and access to weapons?" He said, "Yeah. Former military."

Means and ends, right? We go off to Iraq. We wage war. Men come back with PTSD, tactically trained. And the way we deal with them is an MRAP so that we can take them out? And the government is not paying anything to deal with the PTSD? This is the way we're dealing with the problems in our community? With an MRAP? So we voted to get rid of it. It felt significant, but the Department of Defense sent it 10 miles north to the city of Woodland. We were the laughingstock of the neighborhood. The big blowback came a few weeks later though and relates to another insight from Ellul. In the film, "The Betrayal of Technology" he said, "Technique will not tolerate (or accept) any judgment passed on it. In other words, technicians do not easily tolerate people expressing an ethical or moral judgment on what they do."

"Technique does not accept judgment." Moral Judgment. And then Ellul wrote, "in other words, the technician." I find it very interesting that he started by saying, "*la technique*," which shows me that technique is a spiritual power. In addition to the technicians, there is *la technique*, there is technique, which is the Power. The blowback we got, which was severe, and I almost thought I was going to be recalled, was that we were accused of compromising the security of our city. We were accused. I sat with the police and the police said, "We are the experts. We understand security. *You* are a politician, you do not know about security, you've taken a tool of security out

of our hands.” I said to them in a public meeting, “The problem I have with the MRAP is that it is a symbol.” It is a symbol of the most destructive military force that the world has ever known, and we’re bringing that into our community.”

Most politicians don’t want to talk about ends, because a lot of times the ends that they’re working towards are hidden. They’re not the ends that they say publically. Push them on ends. Push them. Push them. The other thing is that we do have, in every bureaucracy, we have people who are enamored with means who will look for ends to which the means can be applied. It is means in search of ends.

**Mark:** In what ways have you personally felt challenged in relation to these themes we have been talking about, and what have you done in response?

**Robb:** People don’t corrupt you overtly. They do it this way: “Man, you’re amazing. You know if you—I know we have a weak mayor form of government Robb but, if you push this, it’ll pass, because people respect you. And so, could you push it?” So it’s subtle. It’s people projecting their hopes on you and convincing you, or trying to convince you that you are the solution to the problem, and if you take the lead—and that’s every single day. Every single day there is the temptation to use power in a way that looks good, but here’s what happens. For instance, I want to work on restorative justice with youth. So one day I pick up the newspaper and it says, “Robb Davis led the initiative on restorative justice.” I read it and think, “Actually, no I didn’t. There were like 10 of us in the room.” So I have a choice at that point. Am I going to go correct the paper and say, “Actually there were 10 of us in the room, and I didn’t lead anything.” Or am I going to let that go.

And most people would say, “Let it go. Let it go.” Because if you let it go, you can move that initiative forward so much more quickly. People will follow you. And you’ll be able to move much more quickly.”

Here’s what happens: The goal is restorative justice. That is the end that you want to achieve. What happens when you start listening to those voices, or when you don’t correct those errors, or when you accept you know that praise? You actually start going doing that path. And you start saying, “You know what’s most important is that I am able to bring change.” And so what I need to do is I need to accumulate a little more of that status and power so that I can be better at bringing change.

Two things can occur. First, I can use the positive end, restorative justice, to justify means inconsistent with restorative justice itself and, for me, importantly, inconsistent with the way of Jesus. Second, with increased emphasis on the means to achieve power, eventually the original end of implementing the practice of restorative justice can get lost. Achieving power becomes the true end—even if not the acknowledged one.

Therefore, I must re-orient regularly. I so easily get pulled off track. As part of that re-orientation I have had to do things like go before people and say, “You know what, I should’ve spoken up earlier, I had nothing to do with that. I didn’t do anything about that. I can’t take any credit for that.”

**Mark:** As you point out, to make effectiveness the supreme goal can become problematic, yet you do seek to be effective, correct? As you state, you desire to see an increased practice of restorative justice. You want to be effective in that.

**Robb:** Yes, we can’t live without some commitment to effectiveness. The problem is making effectiveness or efficiency the supreme goal that drives and determines everything. I have found it is of utmost importance to have made premediated commitments. For instance, like Ellul I am committed to not use violence. Without that commitment, if violence appeared to be required to achieve a goal I might too easily succumb to the ends justifying that means—the means of violence. Ellul has certainly been a key influence in helping me, as a follower of Jesus, determine what my pre-commitments are—things I will not do in spite of what efficiency may demand or promise. This is not to say I am always faithful. As I just said, re-orientation is a constant necessity.

**David Lovekin:** If I were an average citizen in Davis I would probably have the idea that you are a thoughtful politician, more thoughtful than most, but would I know you are a Christian?

**Robb:** I made a decision to bring some explicit Christian theological language into my day-to-day political work. One explicit way I bring in faith language, and I think an authentic way, is to say what I’m actually doing as a leader in the community is I’m looking out for giftedness. I’m looking for gifts that can be brought to bear on dealing with the challenges of our community. So I use concepts like that, that we are given gifts. I don’t say God gives us gifts, I say we are given gifts, and they’re for the good of the community. That’s Paul. I also say, to my colleagues, “What we need to be modeling as a council is grace and forgiveness.” I talk explicitly about needing to reconcile the broken relationships in our community. And I do that by encouraging factions, whether it’s in the business community or whatever, to go through mediated processes. And these are things that have never happened before in Davis, but we’re starting them, and we’re having some success. And I talk about reconciliation and forgiveness. Grace, reconciliation, forgiveness, giftedness. Confession. I encourage people to confess when they hurt someone else. So I bring those terms in because they’re meaningful to me. I think they’re meaningful to the discourse. People definitely pursue me afterwards on certain things and say, “Where did you get that from? Like giftedness. What do you mean by that, Robb?” I haven’t had any pushback, and part of it is I’m not saying, “Paul said,” “Jesus taught.”

**David Gill:** As an ethics professor I always say to my students something like this: “Ethics is a team sport, not a solo sport. So you’re not going to do well living or discerning what’s right all by yourself. So you need some people around you.” So my question is, do you have some people

around you who will help keep you sane, keep you in check so you don't get arrogant about good things that happen?

**Robb:** In the spirit of confession, I think I'm doing that rather poorly. Leadership of this kind is isolating. And there are real trust issues. So the people who I trust are not engaged in city politics. And people engaged in city politics have some trust issues. Can I just acknowledge that? So I'm not doing a very good job at that. And it's lonely and it's not healthy.

**Mark:** But you do have people that you get together with who pray for you?

**Robb:** Yes, every two months we have a small group of people who come together on a Saturday afternoon and they put their hands on me and they pray for grace and patience and wisdom. You know, that's important. But it's not easy to get a group of people around who can simultaneously entertain deep conversation on policy and really be trustworthy--that they don't have an interest that they're trying to push. And I haven't found that group yet. And I'm despairing that I will. And so, maybe I'll just leave it at that.

## **The Empire of Non-Sense: Art in the Technological Society**

*By Jacques Ellul; translated by David Lovekin and Michael Johnson, edited by Samir Younés. Papadakis, 2014. 168pp.*

### **Reviewed by Zachary Lloyd**

Zachary Lloyd studied with David Lovekin at Hastings College before going on to complete an MA in philosophy at the New School for Social Research. Currently he is a PhD student in comparative literature at the City University of New York.

Nearly forty years after its publication in French, Jacques Ellul's seminal work *The Empire of Non-Sense* has been made available to the English speaking world. This beautiful, hardbound edition also contains two introductory essays by David Lovekin and Samir Younés, both of which constructively engage with the text and with Ellul's broader philosophical perspective. As the subtitle of the work ("Art in the Technological Society") indicates, Ellul's subject is art and those who create it—and indeed, a dizzying array of contemporary artists, architects, critics, and cultural movements are given due consideration. However, the pivot of these analyses lie in their relation to a complex set of phenomena that Ellul calls *la technique*: basically, the totality of methods of and for achieving absolute efficiency in every field of human knowledge. We moderns, as Ellul has it, are so beguiled by machine productivity that we reconstruct, almost unconsciously, all of our cultural and social institutions on this paradigm—namely, on the pursuit of unrelenting efficiency. In effect, technique surreptitiously predisposes a certain manner of operating not merely for our interaction with machines, but also with each other; it becomes as if our very substance, a mentality and an environment fully in and of itself. It is no coincidence, for example, that cognitive science draws heavily from computational models; today the line between brains and processors is nothing if not muddled. In the technical society as Ellul perceives it, human action is re-envisioned as function, something that may be tweaked and fine-tuned; the individual—the site of eccentricity and spontaneity—is increasingly unneeded, and, indeed, is nothing now but a potential source of error. Subsequently, this mentality subtends not only our desiccated assemblages of bureaucracy and economic productivity, but even the vaunted, ironically detached freedom of the artist. In a society where creativity has been co-opted by hyper-rational methods, the official art of the age is inevitably artificial.

The modern artist, consuming and consumed by the technical society, is placed in a position the likes of which human history offers no counterpart. Ellul, in his rich, slightly polemical, and overtly sarcastic style of writing (very faithfully captured by the translators), spends the bulk of *Empire* problematizing the theories and practices of the artist's position by dialectically revealing the contradictions that underlie it. Beginning with the notion that the Modernist art movement had purportedly freed itself from the shackles of tradition and authorial control, Ellul goes on to show that this supposed liberation has only amounted to a deepening technical captivity. In other words, artistic practices have become increasingly infatuated with their technical procedures or methods rather than with whatever it is they actually create. For example: An empty canvas hangs on a gallery wall. I am standing before it; sensuously, symbolically, there is nothing there but this blank object. Slightly confused, I glance down to the little placard next to it which

enables me fill in the void with some appropriately elaborate theory (e.g., “This is a painting that is not yet a painting”). What is emphasized here is not the painting, but the technical procedure of painting; theory and the generative procedure of the artwork have become the work’s very claim to art. The work, subsequently, no longer speaks for itself—the placard, or the art critic (which amount to the same), speaks for it and guarantees its place in the newly minted technical discourse of value. In other words, we are confronted with a situation wherein the meaning of the work is, like a sticky note, “tacked on” from the outside. But this need for the “tacking on” of meaning does, in fact, accomplish the very opposite of what it intends: it only reveals the vacuity and actual meaninglessness of the (non)painting itself. This veneration and overvaluation of artworks that are inherently devoid of sense or meaning is precisely what Ellul considers to be the sense of nonsense.

Once again: modern art professes to have been freed—free from tradition, free from material constraints, free from the godhead. Yet once art has refused the communication of meaning, it has refused itself; in keeping with its nihilistic trope art becomes anti-art. Ellul contends that in such a situation—when art obliterates meaning—all that is left is the bare process by which the artwork is created, along with an absurdly opaque technical discourse that attempts to veil the work’s own vacuity. What was once believed to be a revolution or a freeing has only become an emptying and a stripping of sense. Now the only value of art is in its ability to “question,” precisely because technological rationality and the homogenizing principles of technique throw into question the very value of the individual. In short, this is where Ellul locates the fundamental contradiction: art, as it attempts to revolt against the oppression and subjugation of the individual to technical ideology, profitably uses and proliferates this ideology even as it appears to denounce its value. Accordingly, modern artistic freedom has amounted only to one more capitulation: an enslavement to the technical mentality; an endorsement to a world in which technique is the absolute benefactor of value; a genuflection before the pervasive Empire of Non-Sense.

In the final analysis, *Empire* is a proleptic work, a kind of promise. It is reasonable to ask, after nearly forty years of sweeping technological advancement that would have surely surprised even Ellul, whether the situation looks more hopeful now; whether art has remained on the level of technique and ignored fundamental human issues or whether its particular capacity for immanent critique (i.e., for using oppressive methods in order to lend awareness to their very oppressiveness) can be successful in bringing to light the reality we are facing. In any case, the issues Ellul has presented are, no doubt, all the more pressing today—the meaninglessness of art he has described only mirroring the meaninglessness permeating our everywhere and everything—and to ignore these issues is as if to give in; to declare as a bitter necessity that which we have only chosen.

# Liberalism and the State in French and Canadian Technocritical Discourses: Intersections and Contrasts between George Grant and the Bordeaux School<sup>1</sup>

By Christian Roy

Christian Roy is an independent scholar of intellectual and cultural history (PhD McGill 1993), an art and cinema critic, and a translator from several European languages. A specialist of the French Personalist tradition (having for instance identified its Bordeaux “school” around Bernard Charbonneau and Jacques Ellul as fount of the critique of technology), he has published his thesis and many articles on the subject, as well as on George Grant (e.g. [www.revueargument.ca/article/2002-03-01/207-george-grant-lidentite-canadienne-face-a-lempire-de-la-technique.html](http://www.revueargument.ca/article/2002-03-01/207-george-grant-lidentite-canadienne-face-a-lempire-de-la-technique.html)), and is on the editorial committee of the Ellul Forum ([ellul.org](http://ellul.org)). He is also the author of *Traditional Festivals: A Multicultural Encyclopedia* (ABC-Clio, 2005).

## ABSTRACT

In English translation (1964), Jacques Ellul’s *The Technological Society* framed the definition of its topic in North America and elsewhere, expressing a key insight that remained marginal in France, where it first arose in the 1930s in a Southwestern faction of the Personalist movement led by Ellul’s lesser-known mentor Bernard Charbonneau, pioneer of the Green movement. Ellul’s analysis was taken up by political philosopher George Parkin Grant, buttressing his defense of Canadian nationhood against US hegemony as the vortex of technology’s drive toward a “universal homogeneous State”(Kojève/Strauss). Grant was first noticed in France in a review of his *Technology and Empire* (1969) by Daniel Cérézuelle, founder of the Société pour la Philosophie de la Technique as a second-generation member of the Bordeaux School. Beyond such cross-fertilization, some differences with Grant remain about the role of the State, despite related understandings of liberalism as the matrix and chief vector of technology.

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In its 1964 English translation, Jacques Ellul’s book on *The Technological Society* framed the definition of its topic in North America and beyond, even though its impact remained marginal in France, where it was first published in 1954. It was a belated fruit of over twenty years of critical reflection and activism in a Southwestern faction of the French Personalist movement, driven by Ellul’s lesser-known mentor Bernard Charbonneau, who invented political ecology in that pre-war context.<sup>2</sup> Charbonneau (1910-1996) and Ellul (1912-1994) formed a tandem of thinkers who were so close that it almost did not matter which one of them discussed what topic; so much so that each devoted his first major book to the other’s main concern. Having first originated the concept of Technique as the distinctive, overarching organizing principle of modern society, Charbonneau entrusted it to Ellul, so that he, rather than this Christian anarchist, could dwell on the State in his own book *L’État*, which would only find a publisher forty years later, in 1987. It

was around that time that the Société pour la Philosophie de la Technique was launched at the initiative of disciples of Charbonneau and Ellul, the second generation of what may be seen as the Bordeaux School, by analogy with the Frankfurt School of critical theory.<sup>3</sup>

Not coincidentally, Daniel Cérézuelle, a pillar of the Société pour la Philosophie de la Technique, coming back from studying with Hans Jonas at New York's New School for Social Research, was the first scholar in France to discuss, alongside the latter, the Canadian philosopher George Parkin Grant (1918-1988) in a 1976 article for an early issue on Technique of the journal *Les Études philosophiques* published by the Presses universitaires de France. Cérézuelle highlighted among the philosophical investigations of “the meaning and implications of technological progress” that had appeared in North America over the previous decade those that “tend to undermine the prevalent notion of the universality and axiological neutrality of the technological phenomenon”<sup>4</sup>, as the Bordeaux School had been doing since the early 1930s. The parallel was left unmentioned in that text, but I want to explore it by following the thread of a line of argument Cérézuelle highlighted in Grant that can be traced back to Ellul, beyond the direct influence his book on *The Technological Society* admittedly had on the Canadian philosopher.

In his own *Technology and Empire*, George Grant had maintained in 1968 that progressive narratives of emancipation were not really in a position to sustain a coherent challenge to the enfolding of all aspects of life within technology, which he defined as something more than technique, understood by Ellul as the whole complex of rational methods for absolute efficiency, since it entailed a “belief in the mastering knowledge of human and non-human beings.” As both a practice and an ideology, Grant wrote in passages quoted by Cérézuelle, technology “arose together with the very way we conceive our humanity as an Archimedean freedom outside nature, so that we can creatively will to shape the world to our values.” The problem is then that “the moral discourse of ‘values’ and ‘freedom’ is not independent of the will to technology, but a language fashioned in the same forge together with the will to technology.”<sup>5</sup> As a result, “our liberal horizons fade in the winter of nihilism” before “the pure will to technology (whether personal or public);” for if, “within the practical liberalism of our past, techniques could be set within some context other than themselves—even if that context was shallow,” “we now move towards the position where technological progress becomes itself the sole context within which all that is other to it must attempt to be present.”<sup>6</sup>

Before Grant, the Bordeaux School viewed liberalism as the ideological seedbed of technology's threat to the values of freedom and equality claimed by that ideology. Ellul could describe “Fascism as Liberalism's Child” (1937) in the Personalist review *Esprit*, for as Charbonneau had maintained earlier in the newsletter of its Bordeaux group of followers, both, like communism, have quantifiable production as their final argument. Fascism and communism, being but “spectacular reformisms,” share in this the assumptions of the liberalism they aim to replace, and thus cannot change an increasingly alienated daily life.<sup>7</sup> Grant also saw these three rival ideologies as the modern political systems consonant with the dominance of technology, which had replaced Christianity in Western man's assumptions about reality.<sup>8</sup> Asked about Ellul in a 1978 interview, Grant voiced his distaste “of the liberal and Marxist ideologists and their accounts of technology as a means at the disposal of human freedom. When they speak that way they forget that both capitalism and communism are but predicates of the subject, technology.

Ellul's description of technology was quite outside such a shallow account, and he faced what was actually happening with his lucid French and Christian common sense."<sup>9</sup>

Ellul thus ascribed the emergence of a "pre-fascist mentality" to the fact that, "*by proclaiming freedom of thought, liberal society had freed itself from thought,*" since "*any thought is equivalent to any other,*" and need not be matched by corresponding action to be validated. Subjective opinion and arbitrary imagination go unchecked, but remain powerless, while "*the material world tends to organize itself on bases that are absolutely independent of any effort of thought*"<sup>10</sup>; until, that is, they are imposed as public dogma through advertising and propaganda, forming "abstract masses" of individuals whose psychological reactions are gauged and manipulated by the statistical methods of the social sciences. By its ability to go a step further and concretely mobilize these abstract masses, "fascism appears, from a social standpoint, as a better designed, more willful amorphism than the other, liberal state, but of the same nature, belonging to the same type of society."<sup>11</sup> Even "*fascism's lack of theory is a liberal characteristic.*"<sup>12</sup> Fascism is thus the worthy heir of liberalism: "it keeps all of its father's features —only with the addition of those of its mother, technique,"<sup>13</sup> just as for Grant modernity itself, as "the dream of liberalism and its scientific mistress —'neutral' technology"<sup>14</sup>, seems destined to gut freedom and equality of substantive content. Ellul concludes with the description of fascism he claims to find in Alexis de Tocqueville, when this nineteenth-century liberal thinker, who remained a touchstone for Charbonneau and him, writes of "democratic societies that are not free though they may be rich, refined, ornate, magnificent even, powerful by the weight of their homogeneous mass," where private virtues may still flourish even in the absence of civic spirit, once this mass quietly embraces absolute rule.<sup>15</sup>

In a 1968 collection of "candid Canadian opinions" of the United States, Grant used their example to likewise "assert the ancient and forgotten doctrine that evil is, not the opposite, but the absence of good,"<sup>16</sup> fostered by liberalism's "value-freedom" as theorized by John Rawls, of whose *Theory of Justice* he was thus an early critic, long before the communitarians.<sup>17</sup> "The emptiness of a moral tradition that puts its trust in affluence and technology results in using any means necessary to force others to conform to its banal will," "when deemed necessary to comfortable self-preservation," in a "use of power" "which perpetrates evil from its very banality."<sup>18</sup> For "the 'good life' to which it is proper to aspire in technological society is not a life constrained by moral judgments; [...]. This quest for freedom divorced from virtue entails the desire to dominate necessity, hence leads to tyranny."<sup>19</sup> Charbonneau already saw the banality of evil as an issue going far beyond the specific "Responsibilities of the German People" he discussed in a November 1945 article for one of the Protestant publications his friend Ellul gave him access to, agnostic though he was: for "if we can only imagine a mechanical civilization where personal responsibility is lost," then "we will have to manufacture good Germans the same way Hitler manufactured bad Germans. But let us remember that it is when we start from those neutral techniques that can be used for anything indifferently, when we start especially from this neutral being that gets formed and deformed, that everything is possible,"<sup>20</sup> even when it is a liberal regime that proposes to "win hearts and minds" —or else. Thus, in 1967, Grant is not surprised that "what is being done in Vietnam is being done by the English-speaking empire and in the name of liberal democracy," and not by what "could be seen as the perverse products of western ideology —National Socialism or communism."<sup>21</sup>

Charbonneau presciently picked up on a tell-tale early sign of that shift within liberalism in a 1952 article on this “Heart-Rending Revision” for the Protestant weekly *Réforme*. He argued that Western societies, “particularly Anglo-Saxon ones, were founded on the myth of Progress that confused material progress and spiritual progress, that of collective power: of science and technology, with that of individual freedoms. There wasn’t a problem: it is understood that that the societies that are technically most advanced are also the freest, as shown by the case of America.” “Having long confused Progress with Freedom and Democracy, America is now mulling over their contradiction, but I fear it won’t be for long,” for “today, it is becoming perfectly natural to sacrifice the latter to the former, since the facts have demonstrated that Freedom is an obstacle to Progress,” in the guise of “totalitarian successes.” Identifying their values with their national power, when forced to choose, “liberal democracies will brutally suppress their political freedoms, equality in education or salaries, leading to a regime where the dictatorship of the central power would underwrite a policy of massive investments,” surviving freedoms having first been emptied of content by the cult of efficiency: “while Human Rights are on display on the first floor, torture is being practiced in the basement.” —be it in Algeria at that time or in Guantanamo in ours. For whether it be H-bombs or drones, “what is the use of changing your weapons system without also updating your principles,” as Charbonneau had first asked upon introducing the musings of “an American journalist” on which this text was a commentary, to the effect that “we have to wake up from our illusions of easy technical and material superiority;” Soviet life is based on force rather than consent, but “are we so sure that our social aims, derived from the individual’s right to free will, are stable, constructive and based on lasting values?”<sup>22</sup>

The author of this quote, identified as Lester Pearson, was actually neither American, nor a journalist, but Charbonneau still could not have chosen a better specimen of the contradiction at the core of Anglo-Saxon liberalism than this Canadian minister of Foreign Affairs who would win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957 for his invention of UN peace-keeping troops during the Suez Crisis, and would go on to become leader of the Liberal Party in 1958 and Prime Minister from 1963 to 1968. The policy of military, even nuclear cooperation with the United States that brought Pearson to power was the pretext for the book that made Grant famous in his own country in 1965, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism*. As Grant explained in introducing its 1970 reissue, behind the specific political decisions arising from Canada’s ambiguous status within the American empire was “the deeper question of the fate of any particularity in the technological age. What happens to nationalist strivings when the societies in question are given over, at the very level of faith, to the realisation of the technological dream? At the core of that faith is service to the process of universalization and homogenisation” in the name of technology’s “one best means.” Hence a Canadian sensitivity to this issue, exemplified by Grant among others,<sup>23</sup> since any “distinction will surely be minimal between two nations which share a continent and a language especially when the smaller of the two has welcomed with open arms the chief instrument of its stronger brother —the corporations.” Viewing the United States as “the only society which has no history (truly its own) prior to the age of progress,” and as a result, no horizon beyond the one defined by technology, Grant lamented the passing of a British North America that drew from its acknowledged roots in the older European cultures of France and the United Kingdom the “belief that on the northern half of this continent we could build a community which had a stronger sense of the common good and of public order than was possible under the individualism of the American capitalist dream”<sup>24</sup> unleashed by the Revolution his Loyalist ancestors had fled.

Grant sympathized with French Canadian nationalism for keeping a similar hope alive, despite its current modernizing wager to have it both ways, a typically Canadian position he thought “had been put most absurdly by the Liberal leader in Quebec, M. [Robert] Bourassa: ‘American technology, French culture’ —as if technology were something external (e.g. machines) and not itself a spirit which excludes all that is alien to itself. As Heidegger has said, technique is the metaphysic of the age.”<sup>25</sup> Feeling that a strong national State was the only thing that might defend Canada’s identity and communitarian ethos against the encroachments of American corporate liberalism, Grant admired Charles De Gaulle for taking such a stance for France, and giving his country a measure of independence from the dictates of the United States as the hegemonic center of the liberal version of the “universal homogeneous State” devoted to neutralizing “politically relevant natural differences among men” “by progressing scientific technology,” “thanks to the conquest of nature and to the completely unabashed substitution of suspicion and terror for law,” in the terms drawn from Leo Strauss’s debate with Alexandre Kojève<sup>26</sup> that Grant applied to America.

Charbonneau, on the other hand, could never forgive General De Gaulle for making France into a nuclear power, and presiding over the planned modernization of the country justified by the bid to retain some status on the world stage. For in the name of “a certain idea of France,” the reality of the country, and whatever was worth preserving about it, was being readily sacrificed, from the age-old nature-culture synthesis of the countryside down to its very existence and that of all mankind as a likely result of nuclear proliferation and the increasing risk of worldwide conflict. This for him exemplified the logic of the modern State as it has developed in the West since the eleventh century as the centralizing vortex of the converging control processes culminating in technology.<sup>27</sup> Ellul also underlined that “the increasing interrelationship of state and technique affects political life on a global level. The ultimate product is a total world civilization.”<sup>28</sup> Grant would have agreed that “protecting romantic hopes of Canadian nationalism is a secondary responsibility” “in an age when the alternatives often seem to be between planetary destruction and planetary tyranny [...],”<sup>29</sup> feeding the dialectic of system and chaos that Charbonneau, in a book written between 1951 and 1967, described as the driving force of exponential development, in a vicious cycle calling on ever more technological control to counter the latter’s increasingly disruptive environmental and social effects.<sup>30</sup>

For Charbonneau and Ellul, any nation-state, including such smaller-scale ones as might result from the breakup of larger units, was bound to be a vector in that worldwide process of technological homogenization, whatever claims of cultural particularity might be invoked to justify building a State apparatus so as to be politically and economically competitive. That is why, shunning the draw of Paris and faithful to their provincial roots, they took aim at the hold of the centralized State in France as the oldest modern nation, in a defence of local life against planned modernization and untrammelled development that happened to be rooted in the same Southwestern region as the Girondin party of federalists crushed by the Jacobins in the French Revolution.<sup>31</sup> Faced with a French centralism whose claim to embody the common good went unchallenged, Charbonneau appreciated what remained of individualism in Anglo-Saxon cultures, as it was this Protestant element that had allowed them to discover nature as an ally for individuals who resisted the encroachments of industrial society and the technocratic State.<sup>32</sup> Conversely, Grant liked to turn to France for a sense of the common good such as he was hoping to maintain through Canadian statehood, in the face of American corporate domination built on liberal assumptions about the innocence of technology and the possessive individualism it

enabled. Yet it seems no coincidence that the powerful critiques of technique's alleged neutrality mounted first by the Bordeaux School and later by George Grant arose on the marches of France and the United States respectively as the historic centers of progressivism in the Old and New Worlds, motivated by concern for the fate of both local particularity and genuine personal freedom in the Brave New World remade as one by technology. For they all saw in Technique the underlying dynamics shared with overtly State-worshipping ideological competitors by the liberal consensus, until the latter prevailed as both its matrix and its most potent vector.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally a paper given at the Sorbonne in Paris on September 21 2013 at the 6th Tensions of Europe Plenary Conference "Democracy and Technology. Europe in Tension from the 19th to the 21st Century."

<sup>2</sup> Christian Roy, "Aux sources de l'écologie politique: Le personnalisme gascon de Bernard Charbonneau et Jacques Ellul," in *Canadian Journal of History/ Annales canadiennes d'histoire*, Vol. 27, No.1, April 1992, 67-100.

<sup>3</sup> Christian Roy, "Ecological Personalism: The Bordeaux School of Bernard Charbonneau and Jacques Ellul," in *Ethical Perspectives* (quarterly review of the European Ethics Network), Vol. VI, No. 1, April 1999, 33-44 (summarized as document no. 698481 in Vol. 36 of *The Philosopher's Index*, 2003), downloadable at [http://www.ethical-perspectives.be/page.php?LAN=E&FILE=ep\\_detail&ID=21&TID=1363](http://www.ethical-perspectives.be/page.php?LAN=E&FILE=ep_detail&ID=21&TID=1363).

<sup>4</sup> English abstract of D. Cérézuelle, "La philosophie de la technique en Amérique," in *Les Études philosophiques*, No. 2, April-June 1976, 209.

<sup>5</sup> George Grant, "In Defence of North America" (1968), in *Technology and Empire. Perspectives on North America* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969), 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Charbonneau, "Les actes nécessaires," in *Bulletin du groupe de Bordeaux des Amis d'Esprit*, No. 2, *s.d.*

<sup>8</sup> George Grant, "Religion and the State" (*Queen's Quarterly* 1963), in *Technology and Empire. Perspectives on North America* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969), 41-60.

<sup>9</sup> Larry Schmidt (ed.), *George Grant in Process: Essays and Conversations* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1978), 146.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Ellul, "Le fascisme, fils du libéralisme," first published in *Bulletin du groupe de Bordeaux des Amis d'Esprit*, No. 4, *s.d.*, then in *Esprit*, No. 53, February 1 1937, 761-797, and cited here from the reissue in *Cahiers Jacques Ellul. Pour une critique de la société technicienne*, No. 1 ("Les années personnalistes"), 2003, 118-119.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Ellul, "Le fascisme, fils du libéralisme," 136.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Ellul, "Le fascisme, fils du libéralisme," 118.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Ellul, "Le fascisme, fils du libéralisme," 136.

<sup>14</sup> Frank N. Flinn, "George Parkin Grant: a Bibliographical Introduction," in L. Schmidt (ed.), *George Grant in Process: Essays and Conversations* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1978), 199.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Ellul, "Le fascisme, fils du libéralisme," *Cahiers Jacques Ellul. Pour une critique de la société technicienne*, No. 1, 2003, 137.

<sup>16</sup> George Grant, "From Roosevelt to LBJ," in Al Purdy (ed.), *The New Romans. Candid Canadian Opinions of the U.S.* (Edmonton: M. G. Hurtig Ltd., 1968), 41.

<sup>17</sup> George Grant, *English-Speaking Justice* (first published by Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick, as the Josiah Woods Lectures, 1974), intr. Robin Lathangue, Toronto, House of Anansi, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> George Grant, "From Roosevelt to LBJ," in Al Purdy (ed.), *The New Romans. Candid Canadian Opinions of the U.S.* (Edmonton: M. G. Hurtig Ltd., 1968), 41.

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- <sup>19</sup> John Badertscher, summarizing Grant's essay "Tyranny and Wisdom" (*Social Research* 1964) from *Technology and Empire*, 79-109, in "George P. Grant and Jacques Ellul on Freedom in Technological Society," in Larry Schmidt (ed.), *George Grant in Process: Essays and Conversations* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1978), 84.
- <sup>20</sup> Bernard Charbonneau, "Responsabilités du peuple allemand," in *Le Semeur* (organ of the French Federation of Christian Student Associations), Second (post-war) Year, No. 1, November 1945, 85-86.
- <sup>21</sup> George Grant, "Canadian Fate and Imperialism" (*Canadian Dimension* 1967), in *Technology and Empire. Perspectives on North America*, 65.
- <sup>22</sup> Bernard Charbonneau, "Révision déchirante," in *Réforme*, from a clipping dated December 1952 without further identifying data that was shown to this writer by the author's widow around the turn of the century. Charbonneau would go on to publish numerous essays in this periodical over the following decade.
- <sup>23</sup> Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind. Innis/McLuhan/Grant* (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1985).
- <sup>24</sup> George Grant, "In Defence of North America," in *Technology and Empire. Perspectives on North America*, 17. On this much-debated "Red Tory" paradigm of Canadian identity, often associated with George Grant, see Gad Horowitz, "Conservatism, Liberalism, and Socialism in Canada: An Interpretation," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, Vol. XXXII, No. 2, May 1966, 143-171.
- <sup>25</sup> George Grant, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, "The Carleton Library," 1970), ix.
- <sup>26</sup> Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1959), 132-133, cited in G. Grant, "Tyranny and Wisdom," in *Technology and Empire. Perspectives on North America*, 96.
- <sup>27</sup> Christian Roy, "Charbonneau et Ellul, dissidents du 'Progrès'. Critiquer la technique face à un milieu chrétien gagné à la modernité," in Christophe Bonneuil, Céline Pessis & Sezin Topçu (eds.), *Une autre histoire des "Trente Glorieuses." Modernisation, contestations et pollutions dans la France d'après-guerre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013), 291.
- <sup>28</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, tr. John Wilkinson, intr. Robert K. Merton (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 318.
- <sup>29</sup> George Grant, *Lament for a Nation*, ix-x.
- <sup>30</sup> Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Système et le chaos: où va notre société?* intr. D. Cérézuelle (Paris: Le Sang de la Terre, "La pensée écologique," 2012; originally published as *Le Système et le chaos: Critique du développement exponentiel*, Paris: Anthropos, Paris, 1973 ; 2nd edition : Paris: Economica, 1990).
- <sup>31</sup> Bernard Charbonneau, *Sauver nos régions. Écologie, régionalisme et sociétés locales*, intr. Pierre Samuel (Paris: Le Sang de la Terre, "Les Dossiers de l'écologie," 1991).
- <sup>32</sup> Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Feu vert. Autocritique du mouvement écologique*, intr. D. Cérézuelle (Parangon/Vs, « L'Après-développement », 2009; original edition: Paris: Karthala, 1980; English translation by C. Roy as *The Green Light* in progress for Bloomsbury, due to appear in 2017).

***Illusions of Freedom: Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul on Technology and the Human Condition***

By Jeffrey M. Shaw. Pickwick Publications, 2014. 193pp.

**Reviewed by Jacob Van Vleet**

Jacob Van Vleet is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Diablo Valley College. He is the author of *Dialectical Theology and Jacques Ellul* (Fortress Press) and editor of *Jacques Ellul: Essential Spiritual Writings* (Orbis Books).

Many readers of Jacques Ellul and Thomas Merton have long recognized the similarities in thought between both prophetic thinkers. Jeffrey Shaw is the first to bring both into dialogue in book length form, in his *Illusions of Freedom: Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul on Technology and the Human Condition*. The work is divided into seven clearly written and engaging chapters. By presenting and working through the arguments and ideas found in Merton and Ellul, Shaw awakens readers to the profound limiting and restrictive effects modern technology has on individual freedom and agency, and also on the political, the ethical, the religious, and various other sectors of society.

The first chapter introduces the reader to both Merton's and Ellul's definitions of technology and freedom, pointing out their striking resemblances. Chapter two details the early influences on Merton's and Ellul's religious thought and how this would go on to influence their respective views on technology and their social criticism. The third chapter presents a fascinating and in-depth discussion of the influence of theologian Karl Barth on both Merton and Ellul. It also discusses how each thinker appropriated particular Barthian ideas in their work. Chapter four examines the philosophical and sociological influences on Merton and Ellul, with an emphasis on how the ideas of Soren Kierkegaard and Aldous Huxley guided the worldviews of both men. Chapter five delves into the influence of Karl Marx on Merton and Ellul, and how Marx's thought is developed, changed, and extended in their views on technological development and freedom. This insightful chapter also provides a discussion of how Merton and Ellul, in their own ways, criticized contemporary capitalist and communist societies from a theological vantage point, instead arguing for a "third way" which would escape the propaganda and the technological fetishism found in modern industrial societies. In chapter six, Shaw returns to another similarity between Merton and Ellul: their respective analyses of human language. For both thinkers, the Revealed Word is the ultimate source of freedom, and it provides a counterbalance to the enslavement of our present era (an entailment of the unfettered dominance of technology). The seventh and final chapter concludes and summarizes the previous chapters.

Of the many strengths of *Illusions of Freedom*, four stand out. First, Shaw is a clear and coherent writer. This makes the book a pleasure to read. Second, Shaw demonstrates an in-depth knowledge of the many writings of both Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul (in French and English), leaving the reader with a sense of confidence in Shaw's analysis and conclusions regarding their work. Third, Shaw thoughtfully appropriates insightful and illuminating key quotations from Merton's and Ellul's work which illustrate his arguments and explanations in a quite helpful way. Finally, Shaw is persuasively and doggedly convincing that the prophetic

sociological, philosophical, and theological insights of Merton and Ellul are more relevant today than ever before – and that we owe it to ourselves to listen.

Overall, *Illusions of Freedom* is an insightful work, and one which will hopefully stimulate readers of Ellul to read Merton, and readers of Merton to read Ellul. A deeply interesting book which is highly recommended.