
CONTESTED

TERRAIN

Jacques Ellul: Between Babylon and the New Jerusalem

JOHN H. SCHAAR

Jacques Ellul is of the tribe of the hedgehog. From 1954, when *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* appeared, until the present, he has tirelessly announced and endlessly elaborated "one big thing."

No social, human, or spiritual fact is so important as the fact of technique.¹

The technological phenomenon is tending more and more to encompass *all* our activities.²

Now, our "technology" is narrower than Ellul's "*la technique*." Within technique Ellul of course includes machinery, tools, physical apparatus—our technology. But technique is generally "the *totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency* (for a given stage of development) in *every* field of human activity."³ Technique thus includes those activities that can be accomplished by purposive, rational, transmissible, repetitive means. It also in-

¹ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Knopf, 1964), p. 3.

² Jacques Ellul, *Perspectives On Our Age*, ed. William H. Vandenburg, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), p. 38.

³ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, p. xxv.

cludes those social formations and processes that are deliberately designed as means to specified ends: bureaucracies, mass production systems, corporations, propaganda and mass communications, police, vocational education, and so forth. All societies, of course, use tools and deliberate methods. The technological societies are those in which the technical element predominates, determining or conditioning all other aspects of life. In pretechnological societies the technical element was limited and woven into the entire social fabric. It was truly "appropriate technology," framed within customary, religious, moral, and esthetic standards and practices. The purely technical, instrumental element might remain almost unchanged for generations, even centuries. In the technological societies, the technical element is disembedded, set free from social constraints and allowed to proliferate by its own dynamic. In the pretechnological era, society and nature were milieu; in the technological era, technique is milieu.

Technique is our environment, the sea we swim in. We, of course, are its creators but we are also its creatures. For most of us in the "developed" societies the technical system sets the rhythms and provides the substance of our lives at work and home, as producers and consumers. It filters our communications and shapes most of our symbolic activities. It constitutes most of our sense of what is possible, necessary, and even real. It provides the stuff of our hopes and fears, even as it provides our daily bread. As we move farther away from tradition and religion, from the bonds of locale and ethnic group, and from the treasury of humane values, our standards of judgment and moral appraisal themselves come to be drawn from within the technical system: nothing ranks higher on our actual scale of values than productivity, precision, power, method, prediction, control. Far from assessing the technological order from a standpoint outside it, we reproduce its own values in ourselves. Genuine alternatives diminish.

In all these ways, technique is our idol and our destiny. It defines us and it is what we do best. This is not to say that the system is somehow self-creating and self-maintaining. Of course it is people who build and run the system, but people who are themselves *within* it. The point is made nicely by a formula Justice Holmes liked to pronounce: "the mode in which the inevitable comes to pass is through effort"—effort, of course, that sees itself as the only kind of effort possible.

Ordinarily the technical system runs along on its own tracks seemingly powered by its own dynamic and governed by its own laws. We are hardly conscious of it. It is all just process, logical and orderly advance through time from one moment to the next, with no end point at all, or with a goal that vanishes as the process continues, for technique dissolves all ends into means.

No one has shown more clearly than Ellul how mindlessly we bear the weight of the technological system and conform ourselves to its imperatives. Of course we know there are also losers and victims, but we are getting better and

better at managing the victims of the technological order by increasingly sophisticated techniques drawn from within the logic of the technical system itself: propaganda, narcotics, behavioral therapies, consumer goods, scientific management, control of information, police. We become aware of the system only at those moments when a trap springs, a calamity falls, when the logical, orderly, ordinary advance suddenly produces a grotesque and frightening caricature of process. The trap was there all the time, set by ourselves of course, but impossible to avoid.

Reflect on that night a few years ago when the lights went out in New York City, bringing paralysis and violence. What keeps order among us—civic attitudes, or the police? Or reflect on the helplessness of the ordinary people whose lives were hostage to the potential disaster at Three Mile Island, and on the mixture of mendacity and incompetence displayed by the experts and officials who were in charge of affairs there. Or consider what modernization, that bland word for a bitter reality, has meant for millions upon millions of people in traditional societies—subsistence economics destroyed; customs and religions wrecked, forced mass migration from the countryside into the city. Or this grotesque caricature of process: last July, in Tokyo, Kenji Urada, a worker in the Kawasaki factories, inadvertently stepped across an electronic safety barrier and triggered a robot into motion. The robot pinned the man against another machine and stabbed him in the back, killing him.

Even when the trap springs, showing us clearly for one moment what it is that we are doing, there seems nothing more to do than to forget as soon as possible and return to sleep, more anxious but also more determined than before. If our technological methods of agriculture cause the topsoil to lose vitality, the plants to lose their natural resistance to pests and disease, the groundwater to diminish and become more saline, there is nothing to do but pour on more chemical fertilizer, apply stronger pesticides, and dig deeper wells. If the food loses its own natural flavor and nutritional value, add artificial flavor and make the package more attractive, for when content is nil, package is all.

As one expert has said, “man in fact has no choice but to push forward with his technology. The world is already irrevocably committed to a technological culture.”⁴ Or Max Weber: the technological and bureaucratic order “determines the lives of all individuals . . . with irresistible force,” and it will continue to “determine man’s fate until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt out.”⁵ The

⁴ Harvey Brooks, *Technology Assessment Hearings before the Subcommittee on Science, Research and Development of the U.S. House of Representatives* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1970), p. 331.

⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner’s, 1930), pp. 181, 183.

system is set; we can only hook on and be carried along. *That* is the voice of technological determinism.

Ellul understands as well as anybody the ways in which the technical system determines our fate, but he also believes, unlike so many moderns, that ordinary men and women can come to understand that fate and struggle to alter it. We may live in the iron cage, but we need not adopt the views of the keepers. The future is ours to make, even though the hour is late. "I have no mechanical, fatalist, or organicist view at all. I only say that most of the time, in our days, things are that way. Genuine independent political decisions are more and more limited and rare."⁶ But we are helpless either to "preserve personal freedom or to change the course of events" *only* if each of us "abdicates his responsibilities" and "limits himself to leading a trivial existence in a technological civilization." Only then will the determinants be "transformed into inevitabilities."⁷ Ellul calls to the sleepers to awake.

If Henry Adams were alive today he would, I think, welcome Ellul as a fellow member of the party of Conservative Christian Anarchism—though with some reservations about Ellul's Protestant disdain for colored glass and Provençal verse. And Nietzsche, while no ally in other respects, would recognize in Ellul a fellow enemy of that "coldest of cold monsters," the state. Ellul is intransigently antistatist and anticentralist. He recommends the restoration of the person, the formation of autonomous centers of action small in scope and neighborly in tone, and a resolute and cheerful recognition of the human inability to build the New Jerusalem of comfort and control.

For Ellul, the task is not to "take over" technique and shape it toward "good" ends—technique both consumes other ends and contains its own ends, which are always ambiguous—but to build genuine alternatives to the technical system and the technical mentality. Not control but reduction of technique must be the beginning and end of a politics of freedom. That orientation reveals Ellul's conservatism, which is of course radical, for it is a simple fact that among us change itself is the great destroyer of people's ability to control their daily lives. To be sure, change often gives the illusion of choice, but the change is usually determined by the technical system and is rarely the result of conscious resistance offering a genuine alternative to the logic of that system. Again, the change often benefits one group or special interest more than others, and is often imposed on those others, frequently with the support of the public power. But the result is always to strengthen established institutions, including the state.

⁶ Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, trans. Konrad Kellen (New York: Knopf, 1967), p. 34.

⁷ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, p. xxix.

Thus, the Reagan propagandists set up a word barrage of "localism" and "decentralization" to conceal—even from themselves—the realities of "reindustrialization," which means more technicization of work, more superfluous human beings, more wealth and power to the corporations, and more opportunities to pillage natural resources. Which "local agencies" control the multinational corporations and the nuclear arsenal?

So, Ellul insists that the real question is whether we can develop the capacity to act by choice on the lines of force that attract us in the technical system, or whether we must continue to react automatically as we do now. Given that formulation of the question, the first task is to dispel what he calls "the political illusion," which is the ideological veil of the technical reality.

The political illusion has three aspects. First is the belief that politics and politicians, and the whole state apparatus, have escaped the process of technologization and can direct its basic movements by conscious choice shaped by moral and practical standards external to the technical regime. Of course politicians choose, but most of their choices are at the margins of the order and are taken by reference to criteria drawn from within it. The state itself is largely "an enormous machinery of bureaus,"⁸ and most of the work of those bureaus is simply "a concrete exercise in administration or management," guided by technical criteria, and "without spiritual, ideological, or doctrinal content."⁹ Genuine commitment to theory and principle is rarely found, and the chief differences among the modern states are rhetorical. The United States of 1982 is a lot more like the Japan or Germany or Soviet Union of 1982 than it is like the United States of 1789 or 1890 or 1930. Despite the ideological differences among parties and states, everywhere the same tendencies appear: increase of centralized power; expansion and elaboration of the bureaucracy; growth of the apparatus of control; manipulation of opinion; commitment to the goals of productivity and power; suppression of local initiative and autonomy. The generous hopes once held for socialist revolution have proved vain, and almost all actual socialist states are as centralized and technicized—and often more dreary and repressive—than the regimes they replaced. The hope was vain from the start, so Ellul thinks, in the false Marxist belief that technology is an imprisoning force only when the wrong class owns and controls it. Indeed, Ellul thinks that the Marxist and socialist parties have done more damage to human liberation than the capitalist and liberal parties, for it was they who persuaded the workers to give up their resistance to the technological order and seek instead to gain

⁸ Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, p. 141.

⁹ Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Erdmans, 1976), p. 382.

ownership and control of the machinery and resources of state and economy—under the direction of the party, of course. Ellul, on the contrary, thinks that the technological system itself is and always will be an order of domination, regardless of who “owns” and “controls” it. There is no gain for personhood and liberty in the conquest of state power by any social group, for the state is “an organization of increasing complexity which puts to work the sum of the techniques of the modern world.”¹⁰ Not to understand that technique is in command in the state as elsewhere is the first aspect of the political illusion.

The second is the belief that the “democratic” and “representative” state belongs to the people, who control it through the electoral machinery. The people can of course periodically vote one party in and another out, thus giving the illusion of control, but Ellul argues that the main tendencies are set, and that those tendencies are always toward the augmentation of the technological regime. Underneath the frothy surface of party and electoral politics, behind the smokescreen of party rhetoric, the deeper currents move steadily in the same direction.

I think Ellul is largely correct on that point, though he probably overestimates the power of the illusions of “popular sovereignty” and “representative democracy” in the public mind. Most evidence suggests that the people do not regard the government as theirs, under their control and at their service.

In any case, Ellul is surely right that state and parties derive much benefit from the illusion of citizen control and that they nourish it with every possible propaganda resource. Governments today do not rest on popular consent, at least not in any honorable and serious meaning of that abused expression, but they do need support in public opinion. However, what passes for public opinion is so mercurial, so heterogeneous, and so often ignorant that no government could in any real sense base its decisions on it. Hence, the task is to convince subjects “that the government’s decisions are legitimate and good and that its foreign policy is correct. . . . The point is to make the masses demand of the government what the government has already decided to do.”¹¹

Ellul’s analysis of the myth of popular control leads him into the third aspect of the political illusion, the politicization—his word, “governmentalization” would be better—of more and more areas of life. Overwhelmed by the scale and complexity, dazzled by the superior knowledge of experts and technicians, convinced anew each day of our own inability to take care of ourselves and to join with each other to take care of the common life, we turn our affairs over to the officials—reserving the right to complain, of course, when the service

¹⁰ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, p. 254.

¹¹ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Knopf, 1965), pp. 126, 132.

is unsatisfactory. We have now reached the point where almost all aspects of life, from the intimate to the global, from mental health to the exploration of space, must be accomplished and guaranteed by government. The price is high: diminished personal competence and responsibility; loss of communal autonomy and homogenization of cultures and individuals; huge expansion of the control apparatus; diversity, flexibility, and initiative increasingly stifled by networks of bureaucratic regulation.

If we stopped there it might seem that all we need do to revitalize politics is to detach technique from it—supposing that possible. But for Ellul that is only half the story; the other half is found in his version of Biblical political history. In that version of the story, politics is seen as inherently illusory, inherently a realm of corruption and the lust for power. The political illusion is, at bottom, a form of idolatry, a wish to set up a form of power independent of God, to rely on one's own or another's powers instead of on the love and promise of God. Ellul tells this story in *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, a commentary on the Second Book of Kings, and in *The Meaning of the City*, an analysis of the Biblical treatment of the city running from Enoch and Babylon to the New Jerusalem.

It is a story of unrelieved darkness. When Israel chooses a king, chooses the worldly path of politics, she necessarily chooses everything on that path: heavy taxation, centralization, violence, gaudy display and illusion, deafness to the prophetic voice. When men choose to build great cities, they necessarily choose all that goes with cities: the pillaging of the countryside, confusion of meaning, the building of elaborate temples housing idols of their own deluded pride and fear. The harder we strive to assert our independence, the farther we fall from grace and into determinisms of our own making. The Biblical texts consistently teach, Ellul claims, that politics, the state, and the city have at best only relative value, and that efforts to build the Kingdom of God on earth through such instrumentalities will always produce violence and enslavement.

All this is not very different from what a good many people, philosophers and ordinary folk, have said about politics. But saying it leads Ellul to neither of the two conclusions that usually follow. Ellul does not for a moment think that until Christians become kings or until kings become Christians politics and the state will remain hopelessly corrupt. He knows perfectly well that a lot of kings and princes have been Christians, and they have been no better and often worse than a lot who have not. Christians in politics are just as prone to cant and lies, to stupidity, nonsense, and violence as are non-Christians. Nor could it be otherwise, for politics and the state simply *are* and always will be that way. Every state manifests Satan's power. Every state "is founded on violence and cannot main-

tain itself save by and through violence."¹²

Ellul is scornful of those who think their religion gives them political wisdom and virtue superior to that of others. After all, Jesus refused the Satanic offer of power in the kingdoms of this world, so the Christian who acts otherwise adds sin to folly. Maybe God in his boundless love will forgive such ones, but Jacques Ellul cannot.¹³

Nor, on the other side, does Ellul advise those who are good and want to stay that way to wash their hands of politics. Withdrawal is also a political choice, and one which smoothes the way of the expansionist, centralizing state.

Neither Constantinism nor withdrawal, then, is the right path, whether for Christians or non-Christians. The task for both is to desacralize politics, to place obstacles in the path of the technical state, and to develop alternative modes of action that will augment personhood and develop the capacity for freedom. How to do that? Ellul divides his answer into two parts: one for Christians, the other for all who care for freedom. I shall give some attention to the former, and more attention to the latter.

First, the counsel to the Christians. What are their special duties and opportunities in politics? They will of course pray for the rulers as they pray for all others. (Ellul has written a book on prayer, and he profoundly believes in its power.) They will do most good for others by living Christian lives, witnessing to the truth of the Christian faith: don't scream for justice, live justly; don't fight for peace, be peaceful. If this witness requires them to become martyrs, they will accept that, though they need not welcome it or seek it out. Christians are also enjoined to give the most scrupulous attention to means: persuasion, example, prayer are the only ones thoroughly acceptable. Should Christians feel themselves compelled to use coercion or violence, they must not call it anything other than the sin it is: war may be necessary; no war is just. Nor should Christians pretend that there are uniquely "Christian" political doctrines and programs, and they must reject all orientations that glorify or absolutize politics and the state. On this ground, Ellul can recommend that Christians work for anarchy, not because it is an intrinsically Christian attitude but because it constitutes the most thoroughgoing rejection of the totalizing state. Christians will also try to cool out political conflict and action. Christians must seek no special status or

¹² Jacques Ellul, *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective*, trans. Cecelia Gaul Kings (New York: Seabury, 1969), p. 85.

¹³ On these themes, read anywhere in Ellul's *False Presence of the Kingdom*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1972); *The New Demons*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1975); *Betrayal of the West*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Seabury, 1978); and the earlier (French publication, 1948) *Presence of the Kingdom*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Seabury, 1967).

privileges within the state, whether for themselves as persons or for churches as institutions. Nor will Christians seek public office. And finally, Christians will always stand with the “truly poor” against the proud and mighty.¹⁴

But what can such a politics accomplish? Using such means, can one be effective in the world? Ellul’s answers are the best that can be given. The Christian’s vocation is not to conform to the world but to act as a leavening within it, a living alternative to it. Besides, the means that others call efficient reflect and reproduce the very practices they wish to alter. And finally, the question itself shows that the questioner lives in the world of utility and success and not in the world of freedom: “To be controlled by utility and the pursuit of efficacy is to be subject to the strictest determination of the actual world.”¹⁵

What about all the rest of us? Only at the urging of the strongest motive, and only from a standpoint outside the system, will persons be both ready to offer serious resistance to the enslavements of the technical order, and able to shape hopeful alternatives to that order. For Ellul, the motive and standpoint are found in Christian faith, and he writes first for those within the faith. Still, although the rest of us are poor material, we are not utterly hopeless, so Ellul has some counsel for us too.

We must first become vitally aware of the lateness of the hour. The whole intention of Ellul’s work is exactly to convince us that we are in deepest peril. He calls to the sleepers to awake—with indifferent success, of course, but with unflagging energy. And Ellul sees many hopeful stirrings: certain aspects of the rebellions of the sixties; the ecology movement; the antinuclear movement; parts of the women’s movement; the numerous local attempts to resist the incursions of distant power and the technical mentality and to restore local and personal control over the small (and all-important) affairs of daily life.

Once we are at least partly awakened, the hard job begins. That is the task not just of *reacting* to danger, but of acting intelligently and out of the only motive that can suffice, the love of freedom. Ellul does not think that a need or desire for freedom is inborn in human beings. Rather, he thinks, as Tocqueville thought, that most of us, when put to the test, will prefer other things: security,

¹⁴ See Ellul’s discussion of the truly poor in *The Betrayal of the West*, pp. 82–125. His chief criticism of the left is that it has time after time betrayed the truly poor, “who were the sole justification for the left’s existence,” and has adopted the causes of the “interesting poor” and the “useful poor”—those could be put to use in the struggle for party goals. The left has ignored or brutalized the bad and useless poor, those who either will not serve or who actively oppose its doctrines, tactics, and goals. In doing so, the left has put itself “up to its neck in lies.” It “displays the same characteristics and deserves the same contempt” as the “bourgeois church.” Like capitalism, it easily “identifies freedom with its own dictatorship” (p. 128).

¹⁵ Jacques Ellul, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Erdmans, 1972), p. 198.

comfort, entertainment, dogmatic belief, power over others, social approval. The taste for freedom must be cultivated, and not all persons are equally fit material, though Ellul does think that some conditions and processes can enhance the capacity for freedom in almost all human beings. Similarly, knowledge of what aids and hinders freedom is not easily come by. As often as not, our efforts to enlarge freedom only result in new enslavements, as the history of revolutions and liberation movements (and personal choices, too) grimly attests. Ellul, who has learned as much from Kierkegaard as from Marx, knows there are no quick cures and offers none. He does offer some orientations, both negative and positive, and he has put forward a good many specific suggestions, though never a "program." Basically, if the end is fuller freedom and personhood, reduction of the inhuman determinisms that increasingly rule our fate, then: first, the end must be present, immanent, in every means employed, every action taken; and second, we must proceed exceedingly carefully, being as sure as we can that what we are doing does not show disrespect for persons and does not reflect the mentality and employ the same practices as the technical system itself.

These counsels of caution rest partly on a keen awareness of the capacity of the technical system to assimilate and shape in its own image measures and policies designed as reforms of or alternatives to the system. One sees that happening today with "appropriate technology" and "worker participation" proposals, and with affirmative action procedures. It has happened with the device of "Environment Impact Reports," the preparation of which has become a professional speciality, providing much nourishment for lawyers, technicians, and bureaucrats, but little protection for the environment. More importantly, the counsels of caution rest on a deep conviction that *we*, not some external force, are the problem, that the technical mentality is our mentality, and that we naturally express it in conduct. The task is to reconstitute ourselves, to reconstruct and not just replicate the present dominant meanings of personhood. That task requires the greatest caution and vigilance—toward the self. Ellul's analysis is global; his suggestions for action are local.

To start with, revolution is out.¹⁶ Revolution as understood today, as theory-guided action designed to change the basic organizing principle and institutions of a social order and to effect that change quickly and compre-

¹⁶ The following draws on Ellul's *Autopsy of Revolution and Betrayal of the West*. Some specific formulations are also drawn from my "Decadence and Regeneration: Reflections on the Present Condition," in *Legitimacy in the Modern State* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1981), esp. pp. 339-345.

hensively, is a Western invention. As such, it has on some past occasions served well as a method for advancing the values of reason, freedom, and the individual. But today, in our situation, revolution is no longer capable of achieving even a fair measure of good results, let alone anything like a renewed world. We shall probably see more and more rebellions, but genuine revolution can no longer spring from rebellion as it could in earlier and simpler times.

This point has been reached by stages. The great revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, English and French, were directed against political ideas and institutions that had become so ossified that they thwarted the purposes of whole social classes and millions of people. Central power had grown enormously while local freedoms shrank. Economic enterprise labored under burdensome regulations. The aristocratic classes continued to guard their privileges while shirking their ancient duties. Political power was, and was felt to be, arbitrary and crippling. In that situation, revolution made sense; that is, specific changes in political institutions really could reach to the root causes of felt distress.

Still, even those revolutions gained only a mixed victory and left an ambiguous legacy. They struck down kings and swept away the gaudy paraphernalia and humiliating residues of aristocratic power, but they cleared the path for the emerging modern state, with its enormous potential for oppression. The ideology of popular sovereignty and representation dissolved moral, customary, and institutional impediments to the growth of bureaucratic institutions and central power. No need to fear power so long as it was based in "the people," rather than in kings, nobles, and priests. The revolutionaries were blind to the bitter possibilities hidden within the benign formula of a "government of laws, not of men."

Moving into the nineteenth century, the sources of oppression and alienation became increasing economic. Here Marx is the master teacher, and he understood that capitalism was different from earlier and simpler forms of economic oppression. It was a whole new system, in which the exploitative impulse was freed from its embedment in the whole structure of society to turn everything into commodities, melting all once solid bonds into air, replacing moral and customary limits and practices with the naked "cash nexus."

Marx gave us illuminating accounts of how abstract this new kind of oppression could be, and of how bewildered people became when they tried to understand their own experiences in this alienated world. And when it came to changing this oppressive order by way of revolution, the perplexities multiplied. For one thing, the revolutionaries of 1848 attempted to reenact the drama of 1789, with the result that they staged a farce. The proletarians, Marx said, must draw their poetry from the future, not the past—but how is *that* to be done? Also, the revolutionaries were unable to develop a long-range strategy and program for changing the fundamental character of the economic order. Such a

program would need to be as abstract and complex as the forces and processes that were producing the distress. In the face of that need, all party platforms and demands seemed simplistic. Thus, the Communist demand of 1871 for National Workshops would have given the urban poor work, certainly, but work more regimented than any they had suffered before. To get a sense of what matters here, reflect on the fact that most of the demands presented in the *Manifesto* of 1848 have been substantially realized in the industrial countries, yet who would say we are closer now than we were then to a society "in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all"? Or consider Bahro's account of "actually existing socialism" in the East European states. Nor has the official left in the West European countries been able to envision a genuine alternative to the established order of technology *cum* corporate capitalism *cum* bureaucratic socialism, even though that order is felt to provide few of the goods of a rich human life except material comfort and consumer rewards. Will Mitterand demolish the foundations of French technocracy and centralism while he sits on the top floor of the edifice?

A third perplexity emerged in the nineteenth century, and has become a fixed feature of our own. Given the scope and complexity of the advanced technological societies, the means necessary to gain power and effect radical change easily reproduce in themselves the very evils they are meant to abolish: propaganda and coercion, hierarchy, centralization. Basically, the revolution cannot be made save by a party built on Leninist lines, and once such a party is formed it follows its own path of degradation: the people become the "soviets"; the soviets are replaced by the party; the party becomes the central committee; the central committee becomes a cabal; the cabal is mastered by a bully and his underlings; and the people are victims as they were before.

In our own day, estrangement and dispossession are as broad and as deep as they ever have been, but the experience has new sources and takes new forms. With us, it is not so much a matter of people being excluded by law from the places where decisions are made, but a matter of the very ways those decisions are made, and of what kinds of questions are decided. It is no longer a matter of workers being brutally exploited, but a matter of the very ways we have organized work (huge workplaces, technical tempo, micro-specialization of labor), a matter of the goods we produce (paperwork, weapons, shoddy and superfluous consumer goods), and of the goals for which we work (money and power). It is no longer a matter of arrogant lords having their way with underlings, but a matter of little personal authority at all: millions of anonymous technicians, managers, and bureaucrats stifling life in webs of regulation.

Alienation today is sweeping and systemic, rooted in our very values and embodied in our characteristic ways of doing things. The political and economic alienations described by Marx still persist, but they are now assimilated to an en-

compassing system of technical alienation. Process is in command. State, economy, and society are huge, remote, and thoroughly technicized. Hence, the sources and mechanisms of alienation are abstract, atmospheric. We have little immediate apprehension of them, and can "experience" them only at several removes of reflection.

Dispossession today is dispossession of the self. This means a number of things. One is a thinning out of the content of personhood. Family, place, religion, tradition, vocation—are losing substance and vitality. Accompanying this is a dispersal of goals, a narrowing of human capacities, and the drying up of sources of autonomous decision, both in individuals and in local associations. For millions of people, family, work, politics, religion, and even "free time" are wastelands and shadowlands: unsubstantial and ungratifying; yet irritating and confining. In addition, we are in the midst of a noisy and confused retreat from the adult ideals of dignity and self-restraint, vocation and responsibility. These are being replaced by ideals that are either infantile or adolescent—feeding-on-demand; absorption in private fantasies of pain and power.

Alienation and dispossession now reach to the roots of personhood, and if remedial action is to be effective it must be directed there. But it is hard to know what such action might look like. When Marx wrote, the industrial and agricultural producers still had integral cultures, and thus could pose genuine alternatives to the culture of capitalism. Under those conditions, it made sense to talk about replacing one class with another. But today the classes and strata have been homogenized to a degree inconceivable to the early socialists. The technician-consumerist mentality has no strong rival. The populations of the industrial countries have accepted the state as the legitimate Grand Inquisitor. Its duty is to feed them, and assure their security and comfort. What is called politics today is largely the administration of the feeding system, a system now so swollen and expensive (the feeders must eat, too) that no general program for changing it decisively on a broad front and by direct political means has much chance of producing good results. All such programs are simplistic, and result in greater governmentalization. The simple fact is that what goes for socialism today really amounts to giving the state—not the associated producers—direct access to the social product. And those who propose rapid and thoroughgoing dismantling of the technological order must first decide which millions of people should be condemned to death, for it is a fact that we are as dependent on that order as an infant is on adults. And finally, any collective formation designed to implement basic change at the level of the whole system necessarily mirrors the very characteristics of the system it is designed to change.

We do indeed need, as Tocqueville said, a new political science for this new age. Ellul's political science starts with the person.

Ellul recommends an attitude made up of approximately equal parts of patience and restraint, anarchy and play. Don't take the pompous and false-heroic claims of politicians too seriously. Cheerful humor and gentle irony will do more to deflate the pretensions of parties and officials than any amount of angry opposition. And say "no," resolutely but not violently. This, I think, is what Ellul has in mind when he suggests anarchy as a political orientation. He means not throwing bombs or indulging in histrionic display, but adopting a negative attitude toward the sovereign: don't believe the tinsel promises of the state; don't call on the state to solve your problems and serve your needs, for the cure will always be worse than the disease. Still, while playful, this opposition to the state must be deadly serious, intransigent. Thus, Ellul can speak favorably of some of the syndicalist doctrines and practices of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially their emphases on spontaneity, decentralization, and direct encounter. He also refers favorably to the cooperativist and federationist principles of Proudhon and Kropotkin.

Ellul also insists that if political communication is to serve good ends it must be direct and personal. It is when we move out of the world of personal experience—how the peach tastes, what the kids do at school and with their free time, what it's really like for you at your workplace—that we ourselves fall victim to the shadow-world of the mass media and come to mistake its images for reality. Intellectuals are simultaneously the main victims and the worst offenders here. Convinced of the superiority of their mental constructions over the everyday experiences of ordinary people, they are the most propagandized of all members of society. Given their access to large amounts of information and their taste for abstract ideas, they feel required to have an opinion on every subject, and they regard others who lack their information and who do not feel so required as ignorant and inferior. The next step is easy: the intellectual joins hands with power and works through propaganda to *give* people the right opinions. Thus, Ellul argues that mass literacy and mass education, far from immunizing a citizenry against propaganda, make them vulnerable to it. Nor does he think that propaganda is good if the ends are good—mobilizing people for the construction of socialism, say. He insists that the use of propagandistic means for human improvement is self-contradictory: the means negate the end. Only direct and personal talk about things immediately known among the speakers will provide the basis of a genuinely democratic politics. The politics of propaganda inevitably means dishonesty and illusion, a relationship in which the politician "cannot escape the mass; but he can draw between himself and that mass an invisible curtain, a screen, on which the mass will see projected the mirage of some politics, while the real politics are being made behind it." When the process has gone far enough, its victims "are no longer capable of making the sim-

plest moral or intellectual distinctions or of engaging in the most elementary reasoning.”¹⁷

Consistent with this emphasis on the personal and the local, Ellul asks that “we become neighbor to someone” and “recover him socially.”¹⁸ For many of us this simplest of all recommendations may be the hardest to follow. We don’t know our neighbors, and the neighbor is likely to be intractably different from ourselves. It is much easier, much less risky, to characterize and make recommendations for an abstract collective entity than it is to deal with that irreducibly unique individual next door. That requires touching and being touched, and there is risk in that. At the same time, it is plain that this suggestion, taken seriously, has truly radical and transformative implications. Restoring the bonds of association at this grassroots level would eventually change the cellular structure of the body politic, bringing isolated atoms into connection, and thus rendering individuals less vulnerable to external powers and pressures.

What would this recommendation look like in practice? Some episodes from Ellul’s own life provide illustrations.¹⁹ In the middle 1930s, Ellul was among the founders of the Personalist Movement under the leadership of Emmanuel Mounier. Rejecting both individualism and collectivism, the Personalists based everything on “the importance and decisive character of the interhuman relationship.” During his involvement with the French Resistance, the *maquis*, Ellul made contact with a number of Protestant farmers who, while individually keeping the faith, no longer met as a congregation. Ellul found an abandoned church and encouraged the farmers to reunite in a community of worship. Because “one cannot be Christian all alone,” Ellul has been active for many years within the small Reformed Church, even though “the established Church is not the equivalent of the body of Christ.” Returning to teaching after World War II, Ellul worked to build a parallel university alongside the official one. Meeting in small study groups, teachers and students tried “to think critically about things and not just toe the traditional line.” The members of this parallel university also lived differently. In addition to their regular university work, groups would go to the country for two- or three-month sessions of study and practical work. Ellul did this as long as he was “not too old to camp out with my students.” From 1958 until about 1976 he worked with juvenile delinquents, both through personal engagement with troubled young people, and through trying to educate officials and the public on the social causes of delinquency and drug abuse. Finally, Ellul has been active in the ecology movement, and is espe-

¹⁷ Ellul, *Propaganda*, pp. 122, 174.

¹⁸ Ellul, *Presence of the Kingdom*, p. 126.

¹⁹ What follows is drawn from Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age*, pp. 18–27. He of course refuses to detail a whole program. Who can tell another how to be free?

cially devoted to the defense of his own Aquitaine against efforts to develop nuclear power, to "rationalize" land use under central planning, and promote tourism. Ellul says he has relished the ecological struggle because through it "I attacked the three things I despise the most: technology, bureaucracy, and capitalism."

These examples show well enough what might be meant by the politics of the locale and the neighbor. It is a politics akin to those suggested by, say, Kirkpatrick Sale, Ivan Illich, E.F. Schumacher, and Wendell Berry, and by Mary Parker Follett before them. It is politics of the kind described by Harry Boyte in his *Backyard Revolution*. It is the politics of the early SDS and the Mississippi Freedom Democracy Party, the Clamshell Alliance, the Teamsters for a Democratic Union, and the European Nuclear Disarmament movement. Do not dismiss such politics as petty, insignificant. Can anyone doubt that a hundred thousand persons, thinking and acting in such ways as those Ellul suggests, contribute more to the joy and health of French life than the entire party establishment, left, right, and center? Can anyone doubt that the same is true in our own country?

And finally, Ellul calls for a revitalized pluralism, for the formation of groups independent of the state and capable of setting obstacles in its path. Only such associations can curb the monolithic tendencies of the technological mentality and its institutions. These groups must be "truly democratic," for only groups so constituted can provide the conditions needed for the formation of a new citizenry cultivating new social ground. I quote his summary of the proposal at some length:

We are therefore in the presence of the following dilemma: either we must continue to believe that the road to solving our problems is the traditional road of politics, with all sorts of constitutional reforms and "revolutions" . . . or we turn away from the illusory debate, and admit . . . that for man "to exist is to resist," and that . . . it is important above all never to . . . ask the state to help us. This means that we must try to create positions in which we reject and struggle with the state, *not* in order to modify some element of the regime or force it to make some decision, but, much more fundamentally, in order to permit the emergence of social, political, intellectual, or artistic bodies, associations, interest groups, or economic or Christian groups totally independent of the state, yet capable of opposing it, able to reject its pressures as well as its controls, and even its gifts. These organizations must be completely independent, not only materially but also intellectually and morally, i.e., able to deny that the nation is the supreme value and that the state is the incarnation of the nation. The idea

should be opposed that because a group is *inside* a nation . . . the state, representing the nation, can therefore control it and dictate to it. . . . What is needed is groups capable of extreme diversification of the entire society's fundamental tendencies, capable of escaping our unitary structure and of presenting themselves not as negations of the state . . . but as *something else*, not under the state's tutelage but equally important, as solid and valuable as the state.²⁰

This, then, is what Ellul means by the desacralization of politics and the state. He is recommending not that we abandon the public realm, but that we come to it by another route. Nor is he recommending that we turn our backs on technology—which is impossible anyway—but that we reconstruct society so that there are genuine alternatives to life lived under the determination of technique and in servitude to the state. He is urging us to repudiate the mentality of the passive and the colonized, the mentality that says, “someone else is in charge and I just live here, doing what I must, getting what I can.” He is proposing social action and social institutions that can nurture integral persons and encourage them on the path of public liberty.

In less than two short centuries we have brought ourselves to the edge of ruin. In the brief span of our national story we have managed to poison ourselves and much of the rest of the world as well. The poisons were idols of progress, efficiency, comfort, and power, and the institutions and policies built in their service. The result is a nation that does not know what it lives for, and that may be preparing for death.

But as the end of an old way comes into sight, new beginnings also become possible. Is a new way possible for us? Only we can answer:

I have never said that it *is* possible. I have only indicated what I consider to be the basic condition for social and political life and the *only* way to escape the political illusion. If one does not want to follow it, so be it. The future is clear enough under such conditions. More or less quickly, the political illusion . . . will dissolve into ashes, and what will be left will be an organization of objects run by objects.²¹

We can either open or close on that ending.

²⁰ Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, pp. 221–222.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 223.