



The Technological Society

Jacques Ellul, Robert K. Merton (Introduction)

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."..He goes through one human activity after another and shows how it has been technicized, rendered efficient, and diminished in the process."- Harper's Magazine

The Technological Society Details

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From Reader Review The Technological Society for online ebook

jeremy says

Orwell said it in the 1940s- Ellul elaborated on it in the 1960s- but no one listened. Now we are all enslaved and think we are free. Time to take the red pill.

Chris Laskey says

Well this is such an interesting book but not necessarily for the issues Ellul brings up. Obviously much has changed of the world from 1954 and in this American translation, which appeared in 1964, (considered by the Knopf publisher as their "Folly") to where one has to wonder if his ideas even have validity anymore. In addition one has to constantly keep track of his vernacular and adjust it to a more modern word sense or at least find an adaptive set of terminology that fits and still makes sense of his themes. Ultimately his idea is of the "machine" be it a State, Corporate/Industrial, Military or Political Engine eventually envelops and determines our human state. No longer is the technology for our use but instead we are controlled by the systems (his idea of the police state is chilling for one). This theme certainly was a prominent and concerning issue during the 1950's and the 1960's - and found its strength in the developing corporate structure. People had very real fears of being lost to technology (Toffler's Future Shock). We still see this element with the popularity of the Terminator and Matrix movies. Ellul's theme furthers a Global technology and world market something that he is very clearly against for fear of losing human, cultural and spiritual identities. Again this is partly a reaction historically to the French decline of political power. It is humorous at times reading between lines to see that sense of French culture ready to fall to this monster like America and Russia had. His analogy to Bread making is a crucial element to understanding his point and certainly we can understand his issue. Who doesn't prefer the homemade or artisanal bread to the manufactured? But we now have a resurgence of interest in things crafted. Certainly a large group of people reacting to Technique - but again to Ellul this is just another means of Technique, just adjusted to please people and lull them into a false sense.

Additionally, and somewhat more difficult to work with, is his belief that our whole being has been so subversive that we are no longer aware (he does offer interesting observations about entertainment) and worse even if so that any resistance to systems is futile (yet another modern technological reference: the Borg). When one has reached such a conclusion it doesn't really allow any room for discussion about anyone or any society being able to change course. It is a major flaw in the work. Another weakness in the vast book is ignoring the idea of Entrepreneurship, Capitalism and Technique. Specifically the Corporate Engines start out from a person's idea and eventually expand. Business and Technology drive each other and for many profit and wealth are the primary factors in building the global network not necessarily Efficiencies or Systems management. Those elements can be and are manipulated by individuals with nothing more than greed as their motive. There is no real accounting for such aspects and as such it is glaringly absent in his work. Also he notes that large Efficiencies can ultimately only be handled by Government agencies since they are too expensive but as we know Government (or State as he typically refers to) involvement leads to huge amounts of inefficiency and collapse.

Regardless of these issues the book does present some interesting ideas and lays the historical groundwork for understanding the tumultuous changes that came in the late 1960's when the whole world literally rioted against "the System". Did it make any difference in the end - to Ellul of course it was a futile exercise I'm sure. The Machine moves on.

Jay Pope says

One of the 20th century's most important works of sociopolitical commentary and, as it is only becoming clearer with each passing year how sagacious and astute were Ellul's observations 50 plus years ago, one of the most important works of the 21st century as well. Ellul is a prophet and like a prophet, he never really "fit in" in a conventional sense in his time and place. Part anarchist, part politician, part academic, part theologian, and certainly not a part of the religious establishment, despite his obviously deep commitment to the Christian faith and belief in the presence of the kingdom of heaven in Jesus Christ. And like the best prophets, he is often better at diagnosing than treating. This is a horror story, an exceedingly unnerving glimpse into the dystopian future (present) that we are creating almost unconsciously, told by our friendly but world-weary guide who knows he is not going to enter the promised land in this lifetime. Ellul's job is to rouse us, remind us of our identity as the church, reveal the evils and dehumanizing effects of pure technology, and show us how to save us from ourselves. He is the old man at the gate, telling us that he is too old to come with us, but we'd better damn well listen to him. His gift is in his ability to go on astounding rants, riffing on several themes at once in a chaotic energetic attempt to make a point. This is also his weakness, as the book is laboriously long. Still, there is no book in my mind that I would have my students read before this one in order to better understand what is happening to them without their permission. A must read for anyone who wants to know how the world of today operates and fancies themselves as even minimally well informed.

Aa says

The first few times I picked this one up it didn't seem to be much more than a rather plodding diagram of generic claims about the dehumanization of society due to the appetites and inherent structures of science, government and business - the indulgent kind of paranoia that's bread and butter for the entertainment industry (think The Matrix etc.) It doesn't leave you with a whole lot to chew on. The print quality in mine is pretty bad to boot. For much of the book Ellul treats his observations with unnerving lack of concern, like a doctor describing the gradual death of his own body. The distance is both comforting and horrifying. His evolving and elusive definition of "technology" is what eventually hooked me. The whole book is massive effort to transpose a single idea from comprehension to concept. The meat in the writing is more impressionistic than the academic discourse it feigns toward. Ellul's "technolgy" emerges as a golem carved out of fog - undeniably present and then gone, absorbed again into it's own substance. Laziness and slight of hand are often the roots of ambiguity. With Ellul (in this book as well as in "Propaganda") it is different. The ambiguous heart of his books stands somehow as proof of intensity and intention of his investigations.

Brian says

This book is another truly remarkable exposition of the relation between technology and society, along with Mumford's, Pentagon of Power. This book, as with the latter, goes far beyond a mere criticism of technologies. It examines the nature of Technique, which is the collective organization of a society mediated and, in the end, increasingly driven by technology. The ideology of efficiency which drives technologies becomes incorporated into every aspect of the social structure.

This book is much more pessimistic than *Pentagon of Power*. It is also quite a heavy read. Ellul, perhaps even more than Mumford, thoroughly destroys the deluded notion that technology is somehow neutral. He painstakingly lays out the ways in which technology underwent crucial and fundamental qualitative shifts during the industrial revolution. This means that technologies before and after cannot be meaningfully compared, except in very general ways. This explodes the usual arguments that hammers and computers are both tools and are therefore essentially the same. These simple-minded arguments ignore the rest of Technique - the social and economic machinery that goes into their creation and production. Needless to say, the technologizing of our culture may not be so healthy.

This book really changed the way I think and caused me to question my environment in a serious way. I think it should be read by everyone who can understand it! I formed a discussion group based partially around it back in the early 90's, though I must admit the response was somewhat disappointing. It is not an easy book to wrap your mind around and it challenges such basic assumptions that it can be hard to come to grips with. It is also a bit dark and scary. Nonetheless, I think it is essential reading for our times.

John Jr. says

This book isn't about technology per se. It explicates a broader concept for which the French term is "la technique," which Ellul uses to mean an entire system of rational methods for advancing order and efficiency. As the Wikipedia summary of his view puts it, "his sociological analysis focuses not on the society of machines as such, but on the society of 'efficient techniques.'" So his examples range from the ordering of information—that is, propaganda—in the Nazi regime to the mass production of bread. The latter was particularly striking to me at the time I read this, somewhere during the 90s. In Ellul's account, baking bread on a large scale by using traditional methods proved to be impossible, so the methods were "improved," and the basic result, relatively homogenized and bland, still makes up most of what we find on grocery shelves, despite the proliferation of varieties beyond plain Wonder Bread-style white bread.

A short but striking summary of the book can be found [here](#).

I don't know enough to evaluate Ellul's current status, but it seems to me his standpoint is reflected in some of the work of present-day writers such as Evgeny Morozov, Sherry Turkle, and Zeynep Tufekci. In addition, Ellul's thinking may be part of the foundation of the anarcho-primitivist movement, of which John Zerzan is a leading exponent. (Only yesterday I discovered, thanks to Zoltan Istvan, a 2011 interview with Zerzan on the subject of Steve Jobs and the social effects of technology.)

Kevin A. says

Similar in tone to Mumford's pessimistic "Pentagon of Power" phase. Very dated in my opinion, relevant mainly to the centralizing and totalizing effects of mid-20th century mass-production technology. I recommend reading this with an off-setting dose of Antonio Negri and Yochai Benkler.

Mark Sequeira says

Excellent! A 'Must Read' esp. by Christians in our day but all would benefit and find themselves put out but

agreeing with a lot of what he has to say. It's been many years since I've read much Ellul but I love his writing.

Ryan says

Ellul has one point: Civilization is ruled by technique, and the only response to technique is further technique. Please read the first half, and the conclusion of this book (that's all I could take, but I could take no less). You will see this pattern play out everywhere, everyday. But can you fight this power? Should you?

By the way, his (translated) term "technological" has nothing, *per se*, to do with technology. I would have translated it as "methodological".

An example: Various modern methods have created a sterile world for children, from their toys to their food. Still, we are developing more methods (from bleach sprays to "we aren't letting people touch her yet"). One result appears to be immune-system problems. The reaction to this will not be a reversion to a more "natural" lifestyle, but the addition of various new techniques. For instance, we will develop a pill with the chemical essence of various germs that we used to uptake naturally. The real catch is that even a so-called reversion to a natural lifestyle, would be made in the form of a technique. Somehow, this inevitable description of reality is disturbing. The only deviations from technique I might imagine are spontaneity, creativity and randomness.

Reading this book helped me to recognize some of the absurdly urgent reactions we have to the ongoing barrage of "scientific" studies. One day we learn that we have to buy our kids "Baby Einstein" for them to have an advantage in life. Then, a couple years later, we are told that "Baby Einstein" actually retards our kids development. What's a dad to do?

Jacob Russell says

Ellul is one of those thinkers, like Simone Weil or Hannah Arendt, who are in a class to themselves. He defines technology, not by tools and techniques, but by a set of assumptions governing the choices we make, where utility and the possibility of doing something overrides all other considerations, becomes, in fact, the determinative value of society.

loafingcactus says

This book blew my mind- I'll never see the world the same way again. I'll never appeal to "efficiency" as if it were a moral end (and error I was absolutely making). Absolutely one of the most important things I have read in my life.

David says

Ellul wrote this book over half a century ago, talking about how technique is taking over our society.

Technique is not technology, though that is part of it. Instead, as Ellul defines it right at the beginning, it is the "totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency." Maybe I'm a bit thick, but I found it a difficult concept to get my mind around, but as I read I just kept thinking of "methods" and "efficiency". This truly is what our culture is all about. Whether I am thick or not, the book certainly is. If you just read the first two chapters you get the basic idea. I found chapters three and four, where he goes into depth on technique and the economy and technique and the state, a drag. Chapter five, human technique, was more interesting as was his look at the future. I would love to hear Ellul's take if he was living now, in that future, to get what he would say about smart phones and social media and binge-watching and so on. That said, I am sure he would say much the same thing he said here and that these are just further instances of technique taking over our lives.

At the same time, at least where I am from, there has been a movement back to the natural and dare I say, inefficient. Farmers markets and CSA (community supported agriculture) keep popping up. People want things more natural, they want to send their kids to Waldorf schools. Maybe this is still technique, it is technique's way of coopting even what appears natural for the kids still go to the "art" school and the farmers market may appear natural but how natural is it, let alone accessible to most people?

Overall this was a good book, but a bit too long. Read the first two chapters and the last one and you'll get it. Maybe you'll get it better then me!

Todd says

A very provocative book with continuing relevance today. Not an easy read, Ellul sometimes goes about describing things in complicated ways, when they could be reduced to simpler terms. No doubt the translation does not aid readability either, but one can follow it, though it is not a beach read. He comes across as overly fascinated with Hegelian dialectic, and he uncritically accepts Marxism in most cases. Ellul focuses on not just technology or machines, but "technique" itself and the impact the growing importance and use of technique has on mankind. Ellul claims that to give any kind of prescription would be fantasy, therefore he merely describes what he observes and forecasts its likely further course. While trying to remain objective, he is not above making remarks or observations such that the reader can guess Ellul's opinion on a given matter. While I found myself disagreeing with some of Ellul's premises and some of his analysis, in the main I think he has grasped a significant element of modern society that is still far from fully understood and vital to the well-being of humankind.

Ellul defines technique as "the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity." (p xxv) He further posits that mankind has reached a period markedly different from previous eras in which techniques were used, but they were not technical societies in the same sense as modern society. Herein lies my first disappointment with the book: while Ellul is essentially saying society from the Industrial Revolution onward is qualitatively different from preceding societies, he tries to do this in an empirical manner and fails. He leaves it up to his judgment call when and how that change really occurred, without adequately arguing why cavemen using techniques they developed over time to craft flint weapons and tools were not also included. All people in all times arrive at techniques to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of any task they regularly do, as well illustrated in Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations. So I understood what Ellul was after in this sense, but not convinced that he adequately defined and defended it.

Ellul acknowledges in his foreword that he might be accused of determinism; I would agree his arguments

are deterministic. He sees only one logical outcome to each trend he observes, and he insists on each one absolutely, often without much evidence or argument, except perhaps to cite someone else's work in the field. But given how many works he omits or dismisses with a wave of his hand, I find such style to be overbroad and not sufficiently well thought out. However, he makes some valid points in his defense, such as, "it is an illusion--unfortunately very widespread--to think that because we have broken through the prohibitions, taboos, and rites that bound primitive man, we have become free. We are conditioned by something new: technological civilization." (p xxix)

While he claims not to offer solutions, he does urge his readers, "each of us, in his own life, must seek ways of resisting and transcending technological determinants...freedom consists in overcoming and transcending these determinisms...it represents victory over necessity." (p xxxii)

As for determinism, Ellul insists that technique, for all practical purposes, refines and extends itself, as if without human intervention. Naturally, it does take a person to improve an existing technique or come up with a new one; but in a sense, Ellul is on to something, as so many people are applying widespread techniques, their improvement is almost a matter of when, not by whom.

Although Ellul emphasizes that industrialized society is different from previous ones, he does single out the Roman society as the technical society of the pre-industrial world (a frustrating distinction, since Ellul fails to fully establish objective criteria for the difference between one and the other). He draws many examples from their practice, to include showing how states that wish to run themselves economically do so by using the least possible force, as "force is never economical." (p 31) Therefore, the state arranges itself and the lives of its citizens in such a manner as to get the maximum amount of voluntary compliance with the least amount of violence.

As part of his groping toward a distinction between technical and non-technical society, Ellul focuses on the French Revolution as a process wherein technique "was applied to everything--it resulted not only in the establishment of budgetary rules and in fiscal organization, but in the systematization of weights and measures and the planning of roads." (p 43)

While many have examined the atomization of society as a result of the Industrial Revolution, Ellul sees it more as a precondition and as a consciously sought after objective: "a systematic campaign was waged against all natural groups, under the guise of a defense of the rights of the individual...There was likewise a struggle to undermine the family...laws governing divorce, inheritance, and paternal authority were disastrous for the family unit, to the benefit of the individual...The individual remained the sole sociological unit, but, far from assuring him freedom, this fact produced the worst kind of slavery." (p 51) "The proletariat is the creation of the industrial machine...It was conceivable only when he literally had no environment, no family, and was not part of a group able to resist economic pressure; when he had almost no way of life left." (p 51) And the specialization that comes with technique reinforces this trend, "The man of today is no longer able to understand his neighbor because his profession is his whole life, and the technical specialization of this life has forced him to live in a closed universe." (p 132) Any bonding that does occur between people occurs on a professional basis.

Despite the conspiratorial terms of this description, Ellul insists that its development was not the conscious product of any one person or group of people--each technique is created and refined to serve its own purpose, without thought to how it impacts people or events outside of its own immediate scope, something Ellul brilliantly illuminates throughout the book. For example, "The individual, in order to make use of technical instruments, no longer needs to know about his civilization." (p 93) On the other hand, Ellul rises above arguments about whether particular techniques can be used for "good" or "evil" by emphasizing techniques

evolve, and therefore are evaluated on, the terms of their own efficiency and effectiveness--absolutely independent of moral judgments. (p 97) In fact, "The power and autonomy of technique are so well secured that it, in its turn, has become judge of what is moral, the creator of a new morality." (p 134)

An example of Ellul's overuse of determinism (tightly bound, in most cases, to his inability to understand anything about economics) is illustrated in his insistence that it was "obligatory to pass through the stage of the atomic bomb" in order to reach peaceful use of nuclear energy. (p 99) While that is the course of history, nuclear research had already been well underway during the interwar period, which is precisely what made it seem both plausible and desirable as a weapon during WWII. It certainly is possible, absent the second world war, that nuclear energy could have been discovered and employed prior to its being used as a weapon. Ellul will have none of this. He does have a point that its use as a weapon, if not preceding, most certainly would have soon followed: "everything which is technique is necessarily used as soon as it is available, without distinction of good or evil." (p 99)

While economics seems to be Ellul's weakest point, his understanding of human nature is penetrating, especially as regards influencing and controlling people. Take his analysis of police: "The techniques of the police, which are developing at an extremely rapid tempo, have as their necessary end the transformation of the entire nation into a concentration camp...To be sure of apprehending criminals, it is necessary that everyone be supervised...This does not imply a reign of terror or of arbitrary arrests. The best technique is one which makes itself felt the least." (p 100)

Ellul is convinced that the variety and complexity of problems stemming from the application of technique, and their respective technical solutions, can only be determined and applied by authoritarian government. Therefore, he makes the error so readily addressed by Friedrich Hayek: our variety and complexity of issues cannot possibly be understood, much less addressed, by any individual or committee; they can only be executed simultaneously by individuals acting on their own, but in concert through microeconomic factors. Ellul puts himself through quite some gymnastics trying to work out how planners figure out how to match production and needs, when microeconomics does so almost instantly through price. His criticism of democracy's inability to handle specialization (p 209) rebounds upon his own envisioned Statism for this very reason. Ellul, for his part, dismisses microeconomics altogether into the dustbin of history (prematurely, given the date of publication). For instance, "the good will of the public cannot be counted on. It then becomes indispensable to sanction normalization some other way. And only the state can apply this sanction." (p 156)

Ellul joins the consensus view that the introduction of technique into non-Western societies has transformed them in a way no less radical than the original transformation in the West. He sees this impact not through a national or cultural lens, but rather as the inexorable advance of technique and its inevitable consequences. He thereby excuses especially his fellow Marxists of their willful destruction of previous culture (i.e., Communist Chinese destruction of Buddhism), and at the same time, he is premature in his declaration of religion's death.

Where his critique of liberal society seems to gain more traction is in his perception of the methods of propaganda and censorship. People living in "free" countries seem to not notice the less obnoxious censorship they live under merely because it is either not inflicted by the state, or is applied indirectly through intermediaries. Ellul sees technique itself as the driving force behind this, rather than specific ideological agendas.

The chapter on Technique and Economy is the most difficult to get through, owing to Ellul's poor grasp of economics. He is disbelieving that private concerns can amass enough capital undertake large projects;

likewise that they are able to amortize the costs of upgrades to their capital equipment in a rational way, insisting centralization under authoritative government is determined. He disbelieves the ability for private credit to be offered or obtained for long-term loans without government guarantees. He cites the consolidation of small companies into fewer, larger companies as inevitable, without seeing why Statism and its resulting mass of legislation, regulation, and taxation tends to favor the formation of large companies, though these are actually interfering with the techniques of those sectors in precisely the way he declared impossible. Furthermore, David Friedman provides a clear illustration of how there is a natural limit to the size of a company, beyond which the company loses efficiency (and this would violate Ellul's own deterministic rules regarding technique). Even Ellul recognizes the inferiority of the state, "When the same problems are posed simultaneously to the state and to individuals, the individuals are usually the first to find the correct method and solution...The individual considers the problem as it really exists in its individuality and, as a consequence, seeks the method that represents the best solution." (p 240)

Ellul, among his economic mistakes, insists on full employment all the time, obviously never having read Frédéric Bastiat's Economic Sophisms (Bastiat, unlike Hayek, does not even make Ellul's bibliography). Ellul goes to the trouble of saying, "No one accepts Friedrich August von Hayek's proposition," while clearly indicating he did not read the work beyond the title owing to his ignorance of it. (p 178) At least Ellul agrees with Hayek in recognizing there can be no liberty under planning (p 181). He goes so far to predict liberal countries, "out of commercial necessity, are obliged to align themselves with the Soviet system." In light of 1990, Ellul's economic understanding is laughable.

Yet his insistence on planning, its inescapable determinism, and his steadfast belief in its superiority with regard to techniques (though demonstrably false), may explain the continued adherence to socialism in its several forms, and to Keynesianism in more liberal countries. Ellul is not the only one under the spell of Statism in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. At least he has no illusions about the romantic side of Marxism; anything established for the "benefit" of the proletariat only worked to further integrate him to the Corporatist system, "the [labor] union subordinates its members even more closely to the economic function in the process of satisfying their revolutionary will and exhausting their will with regard to purely economic objects." (p 221)

"An economy completely founded on technique cannot be a liberal economy." (p 200) This is the decisive point; since history has shown it evident that liberal economies thrive better in technical society, this can be the crux of resisting the complete mechanization of humankind, the preservation of human intelligence, initiative, creativity, feelings, etc. Per Ellul's exhortation in the forward, embracing liberalism to the maximum is not only practicable (it consistently outperforms the varieties of Statism), but as he points out here, forms a hedge against surrender to technique. The other part of this key argument is that no inorganic, inhuman thing like a "system" or technique can ever fully adapt to the human, hence the failure of Statism itself (take, for example, the "Best and Brightest" of Kennedy and Johnson's administrations, in their very flower when this was published, and their dismal failure to achieve any of their stated aims except putting a man on the moon).

Interestingly, Ellul predicted that increasingly technical society would snuff out political corruption, a brake on the advance of technique. (p 262) Does anyone thinks there is less political corruption today than in 1964? Ellul spells out the undoing of his own vision toward Statism, "In the area of justice, the state has been a barrier and a check against private technical abuses. But when technique became state technique...did the state adhere to its old wisdom? Experience must answer in the negative. The techniques, to which the state opposed checks when they were in the hands of private persons, become unchecked for the state itself." (p 266)

While Ellul appreciates the role of plurality in free countries, he insists the subjection of the citizen to competing streams of propaganda is even more damaging than authoritarianism to the citizen's psyche, "the intensive use of propaganda destroys the citizen's faculty of discernment." (p 276) Ellul may accept Marxist assumptions, but he remains cynical to ideology as such, "the sole criterion of action consists in knowing whether or not technique has been correctly used, and no political theory can tell us that...political doctrine intervenes to justify action and to show that it corresponds to ideals and to moral principles...efficiency is a fact and justice a slogan." (p 282)

Technique impacts legal justice by substituting order for justice (as the former is needed for efficiency, not the latter). (p 295) Ellul sees individuals becoming absorbed into mass society, and that mob only receives joy from the facts and statistics of technological advances. (p 303)

Ellul laments that even state-run scientific concerns are not science for science's sake (as if there ever was any such thing), but has instead a "preoccupation with results." (p 312) Clearly Ellul needs to read Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* to see the ends of state-run "science." Ellul admits British scientific achievements like radar that resulted from freedom, over and as opposed to the Nazi approach (p 318).

Ellul calls out materialists masquerading as humanists, "the argument that moral development will follow material development can only be characterized as hypocrisy." (p 338) He likewise describes concern for nature or man motivated by a desire for production as "hocus-pocus" and asserts, "it seems impossible to speak of a technical humanism." (p 340) Ellul notes the importance of state-run education in molding children to become productive cogs on the technical wheel (p 346). He notes, "the technique cannot be effected unless all children are obliged to participate." (p 347) This education will "habituate him [the child] to a joyful serfdom." (p 347) "It is not the child in and for himself who is being educated, but the child in and for society." (p 348)

Ellul's analysis of mass society is brilliant and apt, "human relations must be restricted to the technical demands of their vocational role. They must not become deep relations involving profound ideas, tendencies, and preoccupations...human relations must be universal." (p 354) Likewise his understanding of propaganda goes to the heart of modern day divisive politics, propaganda creates the scapegoat, the mob takes its own initiative to slay it. "The critical faculty has been suppressed by the creation of collective passions...A good social conscience appears with the suppression of the critical faculty...This conviction is the stronger because it is collectively shared." (p 369) Ellul shows the importance of entertaining/distracting man in mass society during his leisure time to make up for his frustration in accomplishing nothing real in his work time. (p 399) Even politics is nothing but an escape and pressure relief valve. (p 403) Likewise, explicit entertainments or thirst for nature (funneled into structured exercises) make for control mechanisms on the masses. (p 417) Yet Ellul's criticism of publishing reflects his own elitism (how is it he got his own book published, if no one will publish anything meaningful?). (p 418) This seems like *Essays on Political Economy* all over again. Yet he appropriately excoriated other self-anointed elites, "Particularly disquieting is the gap between the enormous power they wield and their critical ability, which must be estimated as null." (p 435) Ellul's view of life in the year 2000 is quaint and entertaining. (p 432)

Andrew says

OK, first of all, I have to agree with quite a few of Ellul's specific observations about how technology molds the human spirit. That being said, he commits a few intellectual sins I am loathe to forgive. Firstly, to write about something as concrete as technology in terms as inductive as Ellul's is nothing short of offensive. And,

like so many writers on technology-- both critics and enthusiasts-- he falls into the fatal trap of believing that technology has its own logic independent of the human endeavor. I have a sympathy for why thinkers believe this-- after all, computers can be scary-- but ultimately it reduces human responsibility and acts as a premise for phony solutionism.

Furthermore, Ellul's writing is symptomatic of the Marxist-influenced literature of a time when the social-democratic state seemed sound, when those intellectuals comfortably ensconced in the apparatus of a technocratic, postwar society (Adorno, I'm keeping my eye on you too) could criticize it without thinking that their critiques could be used as ammunition by an army of egotistical libertarians and the wealthy conservatives who quietly bankrolled their efforts. Obviously, I can't blame them in retrospect, but still, for those of us tossed about by the whims of finance capital, there are times when I have to say *come on*.

Dan says

Ellul is neither a Luddite nor a Jeremiah, and he is reserved in his claims. Neither shrill nor militant in his position, he limits himself to clear-headed comments on the possible ramifications of the proliferation of technology in Western society.
