

The Betrayal by Technology: A Portrait of Jacques Ellul

By Jan van Boeckel

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Ellul: Technology with a capital letter, with big "T", is...

(Electricity in the room is suddenly out)

Director: Wait a minute. It'll soon be back.

Ellul: Ah...

THE BETRAYAL BY TECHNOLOGY

Ellul: One of my best friends is a very competent... was a very competent surgeon. During a discussion in which he participated, about the problems of technology and progress, someone said to him: "You, as a surgeon, surely know everything about the progress in surgery?"

He gave a humorous reply, as always: "I am certainly aware of the progress in the medical field. But just ask yourself the following question: currently, we carry out heart transplants, liver transplant and kidney transplants. But where do those kidneys, that heart and those lungs come from, in fact? They must be healthy organs. Not affected by an illness or the like. Moreover, they must be fresh. In fact, there is just one source: traffic accidents. So, to carry out more operations, we need more traffic accidents. If we make traffic safer, fewer of those wonderful operations will be carried out."

Of course, everyone was rather astonished and also somewhat shocked. It was very humorous, but it was also a real question.

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"Technology with a 'T' is not concrete like a machine or electricity. The technology phenomenon has become detached from the machine." — Jacques Ellul

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One of the illusions which some try to put across to people today is to get them to believe that technology makes them more free. If you just use enough technical aids you will be freer.

Free to do what?

Free to eat nice things. That's true, if you have money, that is. Free to buy a car so that you can travel. You can go all the way to the other side of the world. To Tahiti. So you see: technology brings freedom. We can acquire knowledge in the whole world. That's fantastic. So a world of freedom is open to us.

Just to give a small example in connection of the use of cars:

As soon as the holidays begin, three million Parisians decide independently to one another to head for the Mediterranean in their cars. Three million people all decide to do the same thing. So then I ask myself if the car really brings us much freedom. Those people haven't given it a moment's thought that they are, in fact, completely determined by technology and the life they lead. That, in fact, they form a mass. A coherent whole.

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In a society such as ours, it is almost impossible for a person to be responsible. A simple example: a dam has been built somewhere, and it bursts. Who is responsible for that? Geologists worked out. They examined the terrain. Engineers drew up the construction plans. Workmen constructed it. And the politicians decided that the dam had to be in that spot. Who is responsible? No one. There is never anyone responsible. Anywhere. In the whole of our technological society the work is so fragmented and broken up into small pieces that no one is responsible. But no one is free either. Everyone has his own, specific task. And that's all he has to do.

Just consider, for example, that atrocious excuse... It was one of the most horrible things I have ever heard. The person in charge of the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen was asked, during the Auschwitz trial... the Nuremburg trials regarding Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen: "But didn't find you it horrible? All those corpses?" He replied: "What could I do? The capacity of the ovens was too small. I couldn't process all those corpses. It caused me many problems. I had no time to think about those people. I was too busy with that technical problem of my ovens." That was the classic example of an irresponsible person. He carries out his technical task he's not interested in anything else.

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In a so-called traditional society such as, for example, Western society in the Middle Ages, technology is controlled by certain rules. Religious rules, for example. In certain civilizations it was, for example, forbidden to work the ground with iron tools. For the earth was considered as mother and you weren't allowed to hurt her in any way with hard tools. That was a rule. For similar reasons the Egyptians didn't use no wheels. The Hyksos had long known about the wheel. So had the Egyptians. But they didn't use it, because it looked like a zodiac. And mortals were not allowed to use zodiac for material purposes.

To be honest, I don't think that the technology of the past is comparable with the technology of the present. In the past technology was a means of achieving a certain aim. Whether that aim was a sculpture or agriculture or hunting, was not important. The technologies used were relatively stabile. They remained more or less the same, and were sometimes very ingenious. The hunting techniques of the Bushmen, for example, were very ingenious. They were incredibly skilled in killing elephants. So their techniques were very clever. But without that element of excessiveness which is a characteristic of technology today.

They were technologies passed on from generation to generation, changing very little. We know, on the basis of the development of technology in Roman times and the Middle Ages that it took a century before technology was changed. Of course, the technology had certain efficiency. But that was fully compensated for by stability.

In the Middle Ages there were religious rules, partly Christian, partly derived from popular belief which related to works and similar matters. And those rules were more important than equipment or tools. But sometime during the fourteenth or fifteenth century people in the Western world began questioning everything. All the existing certainties and convictions were cast overboard. The concept of tradition was under review. That's very important. In the past, everything was based on tradition. And suddenly, for example in France in the fifteenth century all traditions were thrown overboard. They were suddenly no longer important. The old values and customs were obsolete. Suddenly, everyone feels free to do what he wants. And at the same time, in the field of science a number of "truths", let's say, were discovered, which undermined the existing convictions. Also dating from that time was the discussion about whether the earth was the centre of the universe. All very typical.

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I think that's indeed our greatest tragedy and our greatest sin. We entered those societies with the idea that those people were savages. That they almost weren't human. We didn't realize that there could be well some truth concealed in their concepts. Two examples:

To start with, we gave the impression that we used all the riches of those countries. But then only from our own industrial point of view. So we destroyed the traditional agriculture and replaced it with what we called "industrial" agriculture. That is, peanuts for making oil, coca beans, sugar cane, and so on. And at the same time we forced the members of those societies to obey their conquerors. For contacts were only possible after you had first conquered them. And we always won, because we were much more advanced technologically.

Many fundamental things were destroyed at that time. Things which are necessary in order to be able to live. Where do we come from? What is the point of living? Those people had found an answer to those questions. And we didn't have the right to destroy that answer. We destroyed their social structures and also the whole system of their philosophy of life. Their conceptions of the world and the universe.

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What is sacred in one society is not always sacred in another. But people have always respected sacred matters. And if there was a force which destroyed those sacred matters, those elements regarded as sacred in certain society, then this new force was revered and respected by the people. For it was clearly stronger. So there was a new thing that was more sacred than the old one.

What is now so awful in our society is that technology has destroyed everything which people ever considered sacred. For example, nature. People have voluntarily moved to an acceptance of technology as something sacred. That is really awful. In the past, the sacred things always derived from nature. Currently, nature has been completely desecrated and we consider technology as something sacred. Think, for example, on the fuss whenever a demonstration is held. Everyone is then always very shocked if a car is set on fire. For then a sacred object is destroyed.

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That is one the basic rules of technology. Without a doubt. Every technological step forward has its price. Human happiness has its price. We must always ask ourselves what price we have to pay for something. We only have to consider the following example. When Hitler came to power everyone considered the Germans mad. Nearly all the Germans supported him. Of course. He brought an end to unemployment. He improved the position of the mark. He created a surge in economic growth. How can a badly informed population, seeing all these economic miracles, be against him? They only had to ask the question: What will it cost us? What price do we have to pay for this economic progress, for the strong position of the mark and for employment? What will that cost us? Then they would have realized that the cost would be very high. But this is typical for modern society. Yet this question will always be asked in traditional societies. In such societies people ask: If by doing this I disturb the order of things what will be the cost for me?

Wisdom does not come from intellectual reflection. It is achieved in a long process of transfer from generation to generation. (It is) An accumulation of experiences in direct relationship with the natural social climate. Nature served as an example for us. We must divest ourselves of all that. For in a technological society traditional human wisdom is not taken seriously.

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Technology also obliges us to live more and more quickly. Inner reflection is replaced by reflex. Reflection means that, after I have undergone an experience, I think about that experience. In the case of a reflex you know immediately what you must do in a certain situation. Without thinking. Technology requires us no longer to think about the things. If you are driving a car at 150 kilometers an hour and you think you'll have an accident. Everything depends on reflexes. The only thing technology requires us is: Don't think about it. Use your reflexes.

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Because of its efficiency technology leads to more power. But also to more risks. For efficiency is everything. All else is peripheral. Including risks, therefore. But in the case of more power and greater risks people themselves must change, too. They must be sufficiently independent to control that power and perhaps not to use it fully. And they must try to avoid risks. So it is necessary for people to change quickly so that they can apply the technology in the proper way, not simply efficiently. That is why something must change. As the French philosopher Bergson said long ago, in 1930's: The more power people have the greater strength of mind they need. There must be a kind of refinement. But if people think only of one thing, namely power, and they are given control over means of power they will use that power as quickly as possible without even thinking about it.

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Technology will not tolerate any judgment being passed on it. Or rather: technologists do not easily tolerate people expressing an ethical or moral judgment on what they do. But the expression of ethical, moral and spiritual judgments is actually the highest freedom of mankind. So I am robbed of my highest freedom. So whatever I say about technology and the technologists themselves is of no importance to them. It won't deter them from what they are doing. They are now set in their course. They are so conditioned. For a technologist is not free. He is conditioned. By his training, by his experiences and by the objective which he must reach. He is not free in the execution of his task. He does what technology demands of him. That's why I think freedom and technology contradict one another.

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Human technology is created from the moment that it is felt that people are unhappy. City dwellers, for example, live in a completely dead environment. Cities consist of brick, cement, concrete, and so on. People cannot be happy in such an environment. So they suffer psychological problems. Mainly as a result of their social climate but also as a result of the speed at which they are forced to live. Yet man is specifically suited for living amidst nature. So man becomes mentally ill. And for the relief of those psychological illnesses there is human technology, just as there is medical technology. But human technology must enable man to live in an unnatural environment. As in the case of deep sea diving. Divers have a deep sea diving suit and oxygen cylinders in order to survive in an abnormal environment. Human technology is just like that.

I know many people who like watching commercials because they're so funny. They provide relaxation and diversion. People come home after a day's work, from which they derive little satisfaction, and feel the need for diversion and amusement. The word diversion itself is already very significant. When Pascal uses the word diversion he means that people who follow the path of God deviate from the path which leads them to God as a result of diversion and amusement. Instead of thinking of God, they amuse themselves. So, instead of thinking about the problems which have been created by technology and our work we want to amuse ourselves. And that amusement is supplied to us by means of technology. But by means of technology which derives from human technology. For example, in a work situation people are offered the diversion which must serve as compensation.

The media era is also the era of loneliness. That's a very important fact. We can also see that in the young. In 1953 you had the so called "rebels without a cause". Students who revolted in Stockholm. That was the first revolt of the young rebels without a cause. They had everything. They were happy. They lived in a nice society. They lacked nothing. And suddenly, on New Year's Eve, they took to the streets and destroyed everything. No one could understand it. But they needed something different from consumption and technology.

If people lose their motive for living two things can happen. It only seldom happens that they can accept that fact. In that case, they develop suicidal tendencies. Usually, either they try to find refuge in diversion. We've already discussed this. Or they become depressed and begin swallowing medicines. So if people become aware of their situation they react to it as usually happens in Western society: they become depressed and discouraged. So they just don't

think about their situation and simply carry on. They drive faster and faster. Never mind where, as long as it's fast.

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Because of our technology, we now have a world in which the situation of mankind has totally changed. What I mean by that is: mankind in the technological world is prepared to give up his independence in exchange for all kinds of facilities and in exchange for consumer products and a certain security. In short, in exchange for a package of welfare provisions offered to him by society. As I was thinking about that I couldn't help recalling the story in the Bible about Esau and the lentil broth. Esau, who is hungry, is prepared to give up the blessings and promise of God in exchange for some lentil broth. In the same way, modern people are prepared to give up their independence in exchange for some technological lentils. The point is simply that Esau made an extremely unfavorable exchange and that the person who gives up his position of independence lets himself be badly duped too, by the technological society. It boils down to the fact that he gives up his independence in exchange for a number of lies. He doesn't realize that he is manipulated in his choice. That he is changed internally by advertisements, by the media and so on. And when you think that manipulator, the author of advertisements or propaganda is himself manipulated, then you cannot point to one culprit as being responsible. It is neither the advertiser nor his poor public. We are all responsible, to the same extent.

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(In Ellul's library)

These are all books on Karl Marx. Marx, socialism, and so on.

Those are books which I use continually.

Those are mainly poetry books.

And those are my dictionaries and so on.

I always have my poetry books within arm's reach. I read a lot of poetry while I work.

Those are books on the sociology of technology.

And those are books on theology.

When I write a book, I always have a tape recorder handy and a record player which is always on. For virtually every book I select a certain record which I listen to all the time. That's very... A book is associated with certain music, and inspired by it.

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Right from the start I have often been sharply criticized in the United States, for example, for allegedly being a Calvinist. And a Calvinist is pessimistic, and so on. But I'm not a Calvinist at all. They haven't understood anything of my theology, but it doesn't matter.

But what does matter is that pessimism in a society such as ours can only lead to suicide. That's why you must be optimistic. You must spend your holiday in Disneyland. Then you are a real optimist. With all that you see there you no longer have to think about anything else. In other words, those who accuse me of pessimism are in fact saying to me: You prevent people from being able to sleep peacefully. So if you let everything to take its course, never interfere, and you just go to sleep peacefully, all will end well.

I would certainly not want my words to be too pessimistic and too inaccessible. And I would like to explain that people are still people a bit – notice I say a bit – and they still have human needs; and they can still feel love and pity, and feelings of friendship.

The question now is whether people are prepared or not to realize that they are dominated by technology. And to realize that technology oppresses them, forces them to undertake certain obligations and conditions them. Their freedom begins when they become conscious of these things. For when we become conscious of that which determines our life we attain the highest degree of freedom. I must make sure that I can analyze it just as I can analyze a stone or any other object, that I can analyze it and fathom it from all angles. As soon as I can break down this whole technological system into its smallest components my freedom begins. But I also know that, at the same time, I'm dominated by technology. So I don't say, "I'm so strong that technology has no hold on me". Of course technology has hold on me. I know that very well. Just take... a telephone, for example, which I use all the time. I'm continually benefiting from technology.

So we can ask ourselves whether there is really any sense in all this to be investigated. But the search for it cannot be a strictly intellectual activity. The search for sense implies that we must have a radical discussion of modern life. In order to rediscover a sense, we must discuss everything which has no sense. We are surrounded by objects which are, it is true, efficient but are absolutely pointless. A work of art, on the other hand, has sense in various ways or it calls up in me a feeling or an emotion whereby my life acquires sense. That is not the case with a technological product.

And on the other hand we have the obligation to rediscover certain fundamental truths which have disappeared because of technology. We can also call these truths values – important, actual values which ensure that people experience their lives as having sense. In other words, as soon as the moment arrives, when I think that the situation is really dangerous, I can't do anymore with purely technological means. Then I must employ all my human and intellectual capacities and all my relationships with others to create a counterbalance. That means that when I think that a disaster threatens and that developments threaten to lead to a destiny for mankind, as I wrote concerning the development of technology, I, as a member of mankind, must resist and must refuse to accept that destiny. And at that moment we end up doing what mankind has always done at a moment when destiny threatens. Just think of all those Greek tragedies in which mankind stands up against the destiny and says: No, I want mankind to survive; and I want freedom to survive.

At such a moment, you must continue to cherish hope, but not the hope that you will achieve a quick victory and even less the hope that we face an easy struggle. We must be convinced that we will carry on fulfilling our role as people. In fact, it is not an insuperable situation. There is no destiny that we cannot overcome. You must simply have valid reasons for joining in the struggle. You need a strong conviction. You must really want people to remain, ultimately, people.

This struggle against the destiny of technology has been undertaken by us by means of small scale actions. We must continue with small groups of people who know one another. It will not be any big mass of people or any big unions or big political parties who will manage to stop this development.

What I have just said doesn't sound very efficient, of course. When we oppose things which are too efficient we mustn't try to be even more efficient. For that will not turn out to be the most efficient way.

But we must continue to hope that mankind will not die out and will go on passing on truths from generation to generation.

(the end)

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