Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society* Re-Visited

John A. Coleman

I was asked by the editor of *Reflective Practice* to pen an essay commenting on Jacques Ellul's classic book, *The Technological Society,* originally published as *La Technique* in 1954.[1] The concern of the editor was with how Ellul's argument holds up nearly 57 years later. There is one slight misnomer in the "re-visited" title that I give to this essay. In point of fact—and in retrospect, a little surprising to me—I did not read *The Technological Society when* I was doing my doctoral studies in sociology in the late 1960's and early 1970's—despite the fact that the English edition carried an introduction by the distinguished sociologist, Robert K. Merton. Various of Ellul's ideas rattled around some of my sociological classes at that time but, for some reason, I never picked up on his work. I was more taken at that time by two other, somewhat cognate and more hopeful books about technology and modern life: Lewis Mumford's *Techniques and Civilization*[2] and Ivan Illich's *Tools for Conviviality*.[3]

John A. Coleman, SJ, Casassa Professor of Social Values Emeritus, Loyola Marymount University, One LMU Dr., Los Angeles, CA 90045–4400 (Email: jacoleman@usfca.edu).

After finishing my doctorate in sociology, I did a post-doctoral year in theological ethics at the University of Chicago. Gibson Winter, who taught there at the time, was a great fan of Ellul (and, behind Ellul, the influence of Heidegger). Ellul is a bit hard to type, academically. He was profoundly influenced by Karl Barth and was self-consciously a Christian, albeit an ecumenical one. Many of his books are best-termed theological. Technically, his position at the University of Bordeaux, where he served as a professor, was in philosophy. Yet in *The Technological Society*, Ellul eschews any explicit theological stance. He describes himself in that book as engaging primarily in sociological reflection. Perhaps, one apt way to describe the book is to say it is a dazzling phenomenology of the technical state of mind. Yet, in truth, I only just got around to reading *The Technological Society*.

To the question of how does Ellul's argument stand up, I have one short answer—despite many changes in the last fifty years (surprisingly, Ellul *did* foresee the information explosion and something like an Internet, as well as biotechnology), Ellul is not particularly dated because of new developments. Again as a summary judgment, any flaws in Ellul's argument (I will suggest one glaring one) as we read him now were there equally sixty years ago. As it turns out, reading Ellul today fits closely with a current intellectual project of mine: How to relate moral thinking with sociological structures and the new forms of a networked society?

For those who have not read *The Technological Society*, it is an enormously learned and, in places, densely written book and it has a clear and, on the face of it, compelling argument. By technique, Ellul did not mean just machines. Rather, as his translator put it: "Technique is the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency." Another way of looking at technique is to see it as the ensemble of practices by which one uses available resources to achieve values. Ellul seems to refer to technique as the entire pre-determined complex of standardization of means. For Ellul, technique applies not just to the economy or the state, but to leisure activities, bodily regimes, regulations, psychoanalysis, management and organization, human technique, information, and etc. "Nothing at all escapes technique today."[4]

The Technological Society is, in no way, an optimistic book. It is an almost harrowing inspection of the rise of modern technological society since the industrial revolution, which allows little lee-way for effective agency to control its excesses. It is a book that is almost deterministic and, even, fatalistic. In part, Ellul states that he "deliberately refrained from providing solu-

tions," even though lurking throughout the book is the question of how to resist and transcend technological determinisms. To be sure, in his introduction,[5] Ellul does admit that he believes in human agency, but "the individual's acts or ideas do not here and now exert any influence on social, political, economic mechanisms." There has been an "application of technique to all spheres of life." So, "at present, there is no counterbalance to technique."[6]

In earlier societies, before the industrial revolution, there were built-in limitations to techniques. Techniques remained local and were constrained by what may now be called "the inefficiencies," which are caused by deep-rooted loyalties to family, religion, culture, public opinion, and a prevailing morality. But once capitalism arose in its industrial forms, technique came to spread from economy to society to all spheres of modern life. The technical mind, Ellul argues, has a built-in totalitarian tendency toward centralizing varying sub-sections of technique. The precise role of the centralized, planning state is to integrate technique. Technique also shows an anti-democratic tendency, in that it "always gives rise to an aristocracy of technicians who guard secrets to which no outsider has access."[7]

The rise of "economic man" devalued all activities and tendencies other than the economic. The technical mind tends to think of technique as neutral and it eschews moral judgments. The technical mind "tends to create a completely technical morality."[8] A technological take-over of society inverts means to ends. The most important questions become merely "how-to" technical questions—for example, the creation of the atom bomb and biological experiments that exalt artificial forms of procreation. Ellul laments that "technological man" tends to move, inexorably and without much deep thought, from what is technically possible to its actuation. Those who resist the technological mind become isolated or rejected.

The brilliance of the book lies in the way Ellul systematically treats technique and the economy, the state, and the law (where order and security get substituted for justice as the end and foundation of law—such that "law becomes merely a complex of technical norms."[9] Technique de-natures natural society and various techniques converge. Human techniques, such as propaganda, advertising, and other psychological means, attempt to get humans to do what they do not spontaneously want to do. Education is reduced to an attempt to produce technicians. Ellul ends up calling this technical world "a universal concentration camp."[10]

Some commentators have mused about what Ellul would do with the elements of a full-blown information revolution. At least some of them sug-

gest that he could include them in his analysis. Media applications that use the Internet, such as Facebook, Twitter, and iPods, and the way they are electronically inter-twined would not surprise him. He would also note that—as entertainment—it is simply not the case that "the individual, left on his own, will devote himself to the education of his personality or to a spiritual and cultural life."[11] Moreover, he would likely lift up the 'unintended consequences' of information technology: for example, its tendency to make silence or quiet meditation more difficult.

One citation captures well the basic thrust of the book:

> The character of technique renders it independent of man himself. Man, practically speaking, no longer possesses any means of bringing action to bear upon technique. He is unable to limit or orient it. The reality is that man no longer has any means with which to subjugate technique, which is not an intellectual, or even, as some would have it, a spiritual phenomenon. It is above all a sociological phenomenon, and in order to cure or change it, one would have to oppose to it checks and barriers of a sociological character. By such means alone man might possibly bring action to bear on it. But everything of a sociological character has had its character changed by technique. There is, therefore, nothing of a sociological character available to restrain technique, because everything in society is its servant. Technique is essentially independent of the human being who finds himself naked and disarmed before it.[12]

No one, then, so brilliantly unmasks the technological mind and its ability to lure us into a kind of blind acceptance and complacency in its ascendancy as Ellul does. No one so well details the idea that technology is not neutral or that, while made to serve humans, it actually subverts that hierarchy, so that humans serve it—no one so well helps us see that technology is rarely neutral in its effects. Ellul is effective in showing the folly of trying to address technological spheres as totally separate (they are inter-twined, as state is with economy, and labor is with leisure time). He does us a service ethically by showing how the technological mind inverts the values of the moral order.

My main complaint against Ellul's analysis is a fundamentally sociological one. As so many sociologists do, Ellul juxtaposes structure with agency. Correctly, he and other sociologists tend to unmask delusions of individual agency untouched by, un-hemmed in, unconstrained by culture and agency. We are less free, agile agents than we delude ourselves into imagining. If there are deep structural constraints—theologians might speak here of 'structural sin'—then, the address to them must be equally structural.

Yet, sociological structures (even quite constraining ones) are never totally divorced from human agency and there is a kind of "social construction" of reality. Humans who acquiesce in structures—perhaps, because they feel they are constrained by them and not free—can withdraw (as happens in revolutionary moments) their consent from them and, again, basically, unmask their de-humanizing character. Nor is all agency merely individual—there exists a collective agency, a more mass reaction and horror toward the de-humanizing character of the modern technological mind. In a recent, very brilliant, book, *What is a Person?*, sociologist Christian Smith uncovers some of the mistakes of an overly robust "structuralist" sociological model, such as found in Ellul.[13]

Perhaps, following Lewis Mumford, we will need to distinguish between authoritarian versus democratic techniques. Yet, even there, we may want to maintain a methodical suspicion about the purported claims for democratic techniques. The technological mind exalts freedom as an individual sense of choice. It masks how often the range of choices (if, indeed, there are any) is pre-determined by the regime of technology. So, I take Ellul's analysis quite seriously about the kind of dilemmas inherent in our technological society and within our minds. Although, I assume his work would read differently if his sociology were more informed by those who juxtapose structure and agency and know that there are elements of human agency (e.g., acceptance, acquiescence, willful cooperation) in every social structure. Had I read *The Technological Society* in the late 1960's, I might have missed this point. However, once I read Anthony Giddens' book, *The Constitution of Society: Outline for the Theory of Structuration*, I could no longer accept Ellul's crass view of sociological structures.[14] Having said that, however, I still think anyone who reads *The Technological Society* will be much more prone to engage in a truly "reflective" (carefully, suspiciously, and cautiously reflective!) practice.

NOTES

1.   Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society,* John Wilkinson, trans. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), originally published in 1954 as *La Technique ou L'enjeu du Siècle.*

2.   Lewis Mumford, *Techniques and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969).

3.   Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

4.   Ellul, *The Technological Society,* 22.

5.   Ibid., xxvii.

6.   Ibid., 301.

7.   Ibid., 162.

8.   Ibid., 97.

9.   Ibid., 298.

10. Ibid., 307.

11. Ibid., 401.

12. Ibid., 306.

13. Christian Smith, *What is a Person?* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

14. Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline for the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986).

Close to Home and All Together Very Different

People often ask whether you can begin to have the intimacy in the online class when you are not together in person. The format we use allows everyone to see and hear each other simultaneously. Offering the field education reflection seminar online has allowed students to sign on from a convenient location and enter into dialogue with each other. We bring rich diversity of experience and socio-geographic location to the process. We are in cities connected by high-speed fiber-optic cable, and in remote rural locations connected by satellite; we are in fancy offices, and small closets at the homeless shelter. Even more, the seminar members are connecting from various sites—their offices, their homes, a hotel on the road. We see their lives as they are unfolding. We meet their children, partners, dogs, and, finally, this semester, we even met an elusive cat. We become close in a way that lets us enter more deeply into the narrative of the cases presented and that lets us understand the seminar members more fully in context.

Mary C. Froehle
"Field Education and Online Interactive Peer-Reflection Seminars," Loyola University of Chicago and St. Thomas University