

## BOOK REVIEW

# Jacques Ellul and the Technological Society in the 21st Century

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*Jacques Ellul and the Technological Society in the 21st Century*

*Helena Jerónimo, Jose L. Garcia and Carl Mitcham*

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Jacques Ellul does not need presentation. He has a vast trajectory as philosopher, economist and writer. The themes approached by Ellul ranged from technology, economy and sociology towards philosophy. This book, edited by three senior lecturers as Jeronimo, Garcia and Mitcham, explores the connection of capitalism with technology and human agency. Is technology functional to the interests of humankind?, or it is a new fresh instrument of control?. To catalog and give full description of 17 chapters is almost impossible in a book review, but what is important to discuss is the legacy of Ellul, who was a critique of technological world in XXth century, as well as his contradictions. The

preliminary chapters are oriented to explain the reception and evolution of Ellul in United States as well as his view on the actual problems of ecology we are experiencing. The second section signals to the cultural glitches in communication process. The last one is reserved to a theological journey into the cosmology of modern world.

The main thesis of Ellul was formulated as follows. Technology oppresses human beings by eroding their tradition and nature ability to imagine. That way, the ongoing advance of technology not only reduces the scope of symbols and symbolism but changes radically the capacity of culture to produce meaning. Managerial logic undermined the authentic democracy at the time the needs for efficacy rises. But the question is efficacy for what?. The life becomes in a great business which are controlled by the monopoly of patent and health services. It is vital not to lose the sight that the net of specialists attempts to discipline the social order to impose a limited body of knowledge that supposedly will mitigate the consequences of decision-making process. As

a pretext of intervention, the risk allows the adoption of policies which otherwise would not be accepted. However, the paradox is that any human intervention on nature generates new unanticipated threats.

This book reminds that the good reception of Ellul's theory in US depended on the many contextual factors. One of them was theological, the other psychological. At a first look, the negative view of technology was based on the belief that consumerism defies the God's will. Many Christian sociologists devoted considerable effort in criticizing the role of technology leading lay people to an unmoral consumerism. Secondly, the fear to atomic powers (post Chernobyl accident) paved the ways for some sentiment of distrust in the technological society

If George Ritzer (chapter II) exerts a considerable criticism on Ellul's argument because of his radicalism respecting to the concept of efficiency and technology, Mitcham and Alonso will go in another direction. Both highlight that Ellul was a fore-runner in alerting on the negative effects of capitalism. Like Weber and Baudrillard, Ellul not only developed a negative view on efficiency, but also on the technology which daily reinforces the logic of alienation and work-force exploitation. But what is the relation between technology and efficiency?

Alerts posed by Ellul on the pervasive nature of technology in producing information as well as the decline of democracy, are two of the seminal point of entry this project presents. The tergiversation of new made by journalism to boost or sink some or another candidate to presidency alludes to recreate a pseudo-reality to

disarticulate the critique view of public opinion. Business corporations have designed their own project for this new world, and propaganda has penetrated in all industrial societies. This leads democracy to a paradox. Ellul realized that democracy rests on shaky foundation because its persistence depends upon the correct use of propaganda to protect the interests of status quo. If the technology is given to protect the exploitation of many in few hands, efficiency is bad. The goals of propaganda are not related to produce information but to paralyze the critical thought by the introduction of "mediocre" wishes. At the time, the rates of unemployment are higher than ever, employed workers spent more time at their work-desks than other generations. Alonso is not wrong when proclaim cyber-terrorism and hackers exhibit the spirit of freedom.

This book represents a fertile ground to discuss seriously what world we want. Though it rescues the contributions of Ellul from oblivion, some chapters exerts an interesting criticism on the view he had on technology or the potential applications it can be. The proof of time showed that the work of Ellul deserves recognition and admiration by many reasons, but one is of paramount importance in this review. If the technology served to produce further information, the society declined its rights for understanding. Precisely, in a current world where the censorship is given by over exposure, ignorance is not determined by the lack of knowledge, but by the exaggeration of information which leads to a deeper decline of the meaning.