

Illusions of Freedom: Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul on Technology and the Human Condition

By Jeffrey M. Shaw. Pickwick Publications, 2014. 193pp.

Reviewed by Jacob Van Vleet

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Many readers of Jacques Ellul and Thomas Merton have long recognized the similarities in thought between both prophetic thinkers. Jeffrey Shaw is the first to bring both into dialogue in book length form, in his *Illusions of Freedom: Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul on Technology and the Human Condition*. The work is divided into seven clearly written and engaging chapters. By presenting and working through the arguments and ideas found in Merton and Ellul, Shaw awakens readers to the profound limiting and restrictive effects modern technology has on individual freedom and agency, and also on the political, the ethical, the religious, and various other sectors of society.

The first chapter introduces the reader to both Merton's and Ellul's definitions of technology and freedom, pointing out their striking resemblances. Chapter two details the early influences on Merton's and Ellul's religious thought and how this would go on to influence their respective views on technology and their social criticism. The third chapter presents a fascinating and in-depth discussion of the influence of theologian Karl Barth on both Merton and Ellul. It also discusses how each thinker appropriated particular Barthian ideas in their work. Chapter four examines the philosophical and sociological influences on Merton and Ellul, with an emphasis on how the ideas of Soren Kierkegaard and Aldous Huxley guided the worldviews of both men. Chapter five delves into the influence of Karl Marx on Merton and Ellul, and how Marx's thought is developed, changed, and extended in their views on technological development and freedom. This insightful chapter also provides a discussion of how Merton and Ellul, in their own ways, criticized contemporary capitalist and communist societies from a theological vantage point, instead arguing for a "third way" which would escape the propaganda and the technological fetishism found in modern industrial societies. In chapter six, Shaw returns to another similarity between Merton and Ellul: their respective analyses of human language. For both thinkers, the Revealed Word is the ultimate source of freedom, and it provides a counterbalance to the enslavement of our present era (an entailment of the unfettered dominance of technology). The seventh and final chapter concludes and summarizes the previous chapters.

Of the many strengths of *Illusions of Freedom*, four stand out. First, Shaw is a clear and coherent writer. This makes the book a pleasure to read. Second, Shaw demonstrates an in-depth knowledge of the many writings of both Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul (in French and English), leaving the reader with a sense of confidence in Shaw's analysis and conclusions regarding their work. Third, Shaw thoughtfully appropriates insightful and illuminating key quotations from Merton's and Ellul's work which illustrate his arguments and explanations in a quite helpful way. Finally, Shaw is persuasively and doggedly convincing that the prophetic

sociological, philosophical, and theological insights of Merton and Ellul are more relevant today than ever before – and that we owe it to ourselves to listen.

Overall, *Illusions of Freedom* is an insightful work, and one which will hopefully stimulate readers of Ellul to read Merton, and readers of Merton to read Ellul. A deeply interesting book which is highly recommended.