Liberalism and the State in French and Canadian Technocritical Discourses: Intersections and Contrasts between George Grant and the Bordeaux School[1]

By Christian Roy

Christian Roy is an independent scholar of intellectual and cultural history (PhD McGill 1993), an art and cinema critic, and a translator from several European languages. A specialist of the French Personalist tradition (having for instance identified its Bordeaux "school" around Bernard Charbonneau and Jacques Ellul as fount of the critique of technology), he has published his thesis and many articles on the subject, as well as on George Grant (e.g. www.revueargument.ca/article/2002-03-01/207-george-grant-lidentite-canadienne-face-a-lempire-de-la-technique.html), and is on the editorial committee of the Ellul Forum (ellul.org). He is also the author of Traditional Festivals: A Multicultural Encyclopedia (ABC-Clio, 2005).

ABSTRACT

In English translation (1964), Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society* framed the definition of its topic in North America and elsewhere, expressing a key insight that remained marginal in France, where it first arose in the 1930s in a Southwestern faction of the Personalist movement led by Ellul's lesser-known mentor Bernard Charbonneau, pioneer of the Green movement. Ellul's analysis was taken up by political philosopher George Parkin Grant, buttressing his defense of Canadian nationhood against US hegemony as the vortex of technology's drive toward a "universal homogeneous State"(Kojève/Strauss). Grant was first noticed in France in a review of his *Technology and Empire* (1969) by Daniel Cérézuelle, founder of the Société pour la Philosophie de la Technique as a second-generation member of the Bordeaux School. Beyond such cross-fertilization, some differences with Grant remain about the role of the State, despite related understandings of liberalism as the matrix and chief vector of technology.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *   *   *</p>

In its 1964 English translation, Jacques Ellul's book on *The Technological Society* framed the definition of its topic in North America and beyond, even though its impact remained marginal in France, where it was first published in 1954. It was a belated fruit of over twenty years of critical reflection and activism in a Southwestern faction of the French Personalist movement, driven by Ellul's lesser-known mentor Bernard Charbonneau, who invented political ecology in that pre-war context.[2] Charbonneau (1910-1996) and Ellul (1912-1994) formed a tandem of thinkers who were so close that it almost did not matter which one of them discussed what topic; so much so that each devoted his first major book to the other's main concern. Having first originated the concept of Technique as the distinctive, overarching organizing principle of modern society, Charbonneau entrusted it to Ellul, so that he, rather than this Christian anarchist, could dwell on the State in his own book *L'État*, which would only find a publisher forty years later, in 1987. It

was around that time that the Société pour la Philosophie de la Technique was launched at the initiative of disciples of Charbonneau and Ellul, the second generation of what may be seen as the Bordeaux School, by analogy with the Frankfurt School of critical theory.[3]

Not coincidentally, Daniel Cérézuelle, a pillar of the Société pour la Philosophie de la Technique, coming back from studying with Hans Jonas at New York's New School for Social Research, was the first scholar in France to discuss, alongside the latter, the Canadian philosopher George Parkin Grant (1918-1988) in a 1976 article for an early issue on Technique of the journal *Les Études philosophiques* published by the Presses universitaires de France. Cérézuelle highlighted among the philosophical investigations of "the meaning and implications of technological progress" that had appeared in North America over the previous decade those that "tend to undermine the prevalent notion of the universality and axiological neutrality of the technological phenomenon"[4], as the Bordeaux School had been doing since the early 1930s. The parallel was left unmentioned in that text, but I want to explore it by following the thread of a line of argument Cérézuelle highlighted in Grant that can be traced back to Ellul, beyond the direct influence his book on *The Technological Society* admittedly had on the Canadian philosopher.

In his own *Technology and Empire*, George Grant had maintained in 1968 that progressive narratives of emancipation were not really in a position to sustain a coherent challenge to the enfolding of all aspects of life within technology, which he defined as something more than technique, understood by Ellul as the whole complex of rational methods for absolute efficiency, since it entailed a "belief in the mastering knowledge of human and non-human beings." As both a practice and an ideology, Grant wrote in passages quoted by Cérézuelle, technology "arose together with the very way we conceive our humanity as an Archimedean freedom outside nature, so that we can creatively will to shape the world to our values." The problem is then that "the moral discourse of 'values' and 'freedom' is not independent of the will to technology, but a language fashioned in the same forge together with the will to technology."[5] As a result, "our liberal horizons fade in the winter of nihilism" before "the pure will to technology (whether personal or public);" for if, "within the practical liberalism of our past, techniques could be set within some context other than themselves —even if that context was shallow," "we now move towards the position where technological progress becomes itself the sole context within which all that is other to it must attempt to be present."[6]

Before Grant, the Bordeaux School viewed liberalism as the ideological seedbed of technology's threat to the values of freedom and equality claimed by that ideology. Ellul could describe "Fascism as Liberalism's Child" (1937) in the Personalist review *Esprit*, for as Charbonneau had maintained earlier in the newsletter of its Bordeaux group of followers, both, like communism, have quantifiable production as their final argument. Fascism and communism, being but "spectacular reformisms," share in this the assumptions of the liberalism they aim to replace, and thus cannot change an increasingly alienated daily life.[7] Grant also saw these three rival ideologies as the modern political systems consonant with the dominance of technology, which had replaced Christianity in Western man's assumptions about reality.[8] Asked about Ellul in a 1978 interview, Grant voiced his distaste "of the liberal and Marxist ideologists and their accounts of technology as a means at the disposal of human freedom. When they speak that way they forget that both capitalism and communism are but predicates of the subject, technology.

Ellul's description of technology was quite outside such a shallow account, and he faced what was actually happening with his lucid French and Christian common sense."[9]

Ellul thus ascribed the emergence of a "pre-fascist mentality" to the fact that, "*by proclaiming freedom of thought, liberal society had freed itself from thought,*" since "*any thought is equivalent to any other,*" and need not be matched by corresponding action to be validated. Subjective opinion and arbitrary imagination go unchecked, but remain powerless, while "*the material world tends to organize itself on bases that are absolutely independent of any effort of thought*"[10]; until, that is, they are imposed as public dogma through advertising and propaganda, forming "abstract masses" of individuals whose psychological reactions are gauged and manipulated by the statistical methods of the social sciences. By its ability to go a step further and concretely mobilize these abstract masses, "fascism appears, from a social standpoint, as a better designed, more willful amorphism than the other, liberal state, but of the same nature, belonging to the same type of society."[11] Even "*fascism's lack of theory is a liberal characteristic.*"[12] Fascism is thus the worthy heir of liberalism: "it keeps all of its father's features —only with the addition of those of its mother, technique,"[13] just as for Grant modernity itself, as "the dream of liberalism and its scientific mistress —'neutral' technology"[14], seems destined to gut freedom and equality of substantive content. Ellul concludes with the description of fascism he claims to find in Alexis de Tocqueville, when this nineteenth-century liberal thinker, who remained a touchstone for Charbonneau and him, writes of "democratic societies that are not free though they may be rich, refined, ornate, magnificent even, powerful by the weight of their homogeneous mass," where private virtues may still flourish even in the absence of civic spirit, once this mass quietly embraces absolute rule.[15]

In a 1968 collection of "candid Canadian opinions" of the United States, Grant used their example to likewise "assert the ancient and forgotten doctrine that evil is, not the opposite, but the absence of good,"[16] fostered by liberalism's "value-freedom" as theorized by John Rawls, of whose *Theory of Justice* he was thus an early critic, long before the communitarians.[17] "The emptiness of a moral tradition that puts its trust in affluence and technology results in using any means necessary to force others to conform to its banal will," "when deemed necessary to comfortable self-preservation," in a "use of power" "which perpetrates evil from its very banality."[18] For "'the 'good life' to which it is proper to aspire in technological society is not a life constrained by moral judgments; […]. This quest for freedom divorced from virtue entails the desire to dominate necessity, hence leads to tyranny."[19] Charbonneau already saw the banality of evil as an issue going far beyond the specific "Responsibilities of the German People" he discussed in a November 1945 article for one of the Protestant publications his friend Ellul gave him access to, agnostic though he was: for "if we can only imagine a mechanical civilization where personal responsibility is lost," then "we will have to manufacture good Germans the same way Hitler manufactured bad Germans. But let us remember that it is when we start from those neutral techniques that can be used for anything indifferently, when we start especially from this neutral being that gets formed and deformed, that everything is possible,"[20] even when it is a liberal regime that proposes to "win hearts and minds" —or else.Thus, in 1967, Grant is not surprised that "what is being done in Vietnam is being done by the English-speaking empire and in the name of liberal democracy," and not by what "could be seen as the perverse products of western ideology —National Socialism or communism."[21]

Charbonneau presciently picked up on a tell-tale early sign of that shift within liberalism in a 1952 article on this "Heart-Rending Revision" for the Protestant weekly *Réforme*. He argued that Western societies, "particularly Anglo-Saxon ones, were founded on the myth of Progress that confused material progress and spiritual progress, that of collective power: of science and technology, with that of individual freedoms. There wasn't a problem: it is understood that that the societies that are technically most advanced are also the freest, as shown by the case of America." "Having long confused Progress with Freedom and Democracy, America is now mulling over their contradiction, but I fear it won't be for long," for "today, it is becoming perfectly natural to sacrifice the latter to the former, since the facts have demonstrated that Freedom is an obstacle to Progress," in the guise of "totalitarian successes." Identifying their values with their national power, when forced to choose, "liberal democracies will brutally suppress their political freedoms, equality in education or salaries, leading to a regime where the dictatorship of the central power would underwrite a policy of massive investments," surviving freedoms having first been emptied of content by the cult of efficiency: "while Human Rights are on display on the first floor, torture is being practiced in the basement." —be it in Algeria at that time or in Guantanamo in ours. For whether it be H-bombs or drones, "what is the use of changing your weapons system without also updating your principles," as Charbonneau had first asked upon introducing the musings of "an American journalist" on which this text was a commentary, to the effect that "we have to wake up from our illusions of easy technical and material superiority;" Soviet life is based on force rather than consent, but "are we so sure that our social aims, derived from the individual's right to free will, are stable, constructive and based on lasting values?"[22]

The author of this quote, identified as Lester Pearson, was actually neither American, nor a journalist, but Charbonneau still could not have chosen a better specimen of the contradiction at the core of Anglo-Saxon liberalism than this Canadian minister of Foreign Affairs who would win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957 for his invention of UN peace-keeping troops during the Suez Crisis, and would go on to become leader of the Liberal Party in 1958 and Prime Minister from 1963 to 1968. The policy of military, even nuclear cooperation with the United States that brought Pearson to power was the pretext for the book that made Grant famous in his own country in 1965, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism*. As Grant explained in introducing its 1970 reissue, behind the specific political decisions arising from Canada's ambiguous status within the American empire was "the deeper question of the fate of any particularity in the technological age. What happens to nationalist strivings when the societies in question are given over, at the very level of faith, to the realisation of the technological dream? At the core of that faith is service to the process of universalization and homogenisation" in the name of technology's "one best means." Hence a Canadian sensitivity to this issue, exemplified by Grant among others,[23] since any "distinction will surely be minimal between two nations which share a continent and a language especially when the smaller of the two has welcomed with open arms the chief instrument of its stronger brother —the corporations." Viewing the United States as "the only society which has no history (truly its own) prior to the age of progress," and as a result, no horizon beyond the one defined by technology, Grant lamented the passing of a British North America that drew from its acknowledged roots in the older European cultures of France and the United Kingdom the "belief that on the northern half of this continent we could build a community which had a stronger sense of the common good and of public order than was possible under the individualism of the American capitalist dream"[24] unleashed by the Revolution his Loyalist ancestors had fled.

Grant sympathized with French Canadian nationalism for keeping a similar hope alive, despite its current modernizing wager to have it both ways, a typically Canadian position he thought "had been put most absurdly by the Liberal leader in Quebec, M. [Robert] Bourassa: 'American technology, French culture' —as if technology were something external (e.g. machines) and not itself a spirit which excludes all that is alien to itself. As Heidegger has said, technique is the metaphysic of the age."[25] Feeling that a strong national State was the only thing that might defend Canada's identity and communitarian ethos against the encroachments of American corporate liberalism, Grant admired Charles De Gaulle for taking such a stance for France, and giving his country a measure of independence from the dictates of the United States as the hegemonic center of the liberal version of the "universal homogeneous State" devoted to neutralizing "politically relevant natural differences among men" "by progressing scientific technology," "thanks to the conquest of nature and to the completely unabashed substitution of suspicion and terror for law," in the terms drawn from Leo Strauss's debate with Alexandre Kojève[26] that Grant applied to America.

Charbonneau, on the other hand, could never forgive General De Gaulle for making France into a nuclear power, and presiding over the planned modernization of the country justified by the bid to retain some status on the world stage. For in the name of "a certain idea of France," the reality of the country, and whatever was worth preserving about it, was being readily sacrificed, from the age-old nature-culture synthesis of the countryside down to its very existence and that of all mankind as a likely result of nuclear proliferation and the increasing risk of worldwide conflict. This for him exemplified the logic of the modern State as it has developed in the West since the eleventh century as the centralizing vortex of the converging control processes culminating in technology.[27] Ellul also underlined that "the increasing interrelationship of state and technique affects political life on a global level. The ultimate product is a total world civilization."[28] Grant would have agreed that "protecting romantic hopes of Canadian nationalism is a secondary responsibility" "in an age when the alternatives often seem to be between planetary destruction and planetary tyranny [...],"[29] feeding the dialectic of system and chaos that Charbonneau, in a book written between 1951 and 1967, described as the driving force of exponential development, in a vicious cycle calling on ever more technological control to counter the latter's increasingly disruptive environmental and social effects.[30]

For Charbonneau and Ellul, any nation-state, including such smaller-scale ones as might result from the breakup of larger units, was bound to be a vector in that worldwide process of technological homogenization, whatever claims of cultural particularity might be invoked to justify building a State apparatus so as to be politically and economically competitive. That is why, shunning the draw of Paris and faithful to their provincial roots, they took aim at the hold of the centralized State in France as the oldest modern nation, in a defence of local life against planned modernization and untrammeled development that happened to be rooted in the same Southwestern region as the Girondin party of federalists crushed by the Jacobins in the French Revolution.[31] Faced with a French centralism whose claim to embody the common good went unchallenged, Charbonneau appreciated what remained of individualism in Anglo-Saxon cultures, as it was this Protestant element that had allowed them to discover nature as an ally for individuals who resisted the encroachments of industrial society and the technocratic State.[32] Conversely, Grant liked to turn to France for a sense of the common good such as he was hoping to maintain through Canadian statehood, in the face of American corporate domination built on liberal assumptions about the innocence of technology and the possessive individualism it

enabled. Yet it seems no coincidence that the powerful critiques of technique's alleged neutrality mounted first by the Bordeaux School and later by George Grant arose on the marches of France and the United States respectively as the historic centers of progressivism in the Old and New Worlds, motivated by concern for the fate of both local particularity and genuine personal freedom in the Brave New World remade as one by technology. For they all saw in Technique the underlying dynamics shared with overtly State-worshipping ideological competitors by the liberal consensus, until the latter prevailed as both its matrix and its most potent vector.

---

[1] This article was originally a paper given at the Sorbonne in Paris on September 21 2013 at the 6th Tensions of Europe Plenary Conference "Democracy and Technology. Europe in Tension from the 19th to the 21st Century."

[2] Christian Roy, "Aux sources de l'écologie politique: Le personnalisme gascon de Bernard Charbonneau et Jacques Ellul," in *Canadian Journal of History/ Annales canadiennes d'histoire*, Vol. 27, No.1, April 1992, 67-100.

[3] Christian Roy, "Ecological Personalism: The Bordeaux School of Bernard Charbonneau and Jacques Ellul," in *Ethical Perspectives* (quarterly review of the European Ethics Network), Vol. VI, No. 1, April 1999, 33-44 (summarized as document no. 698481 in Vol. 36 of *The Philosopher's Index*, 2003), downloadable at http://www.ethical-perspectives.be/page.php?LAN=E&FILE=ep_detail&ID=21&TID=1363.

[4] English abstract of D. Cérézuelle, "La philosophie de la technique en Amérique," in *Les Études philosophiques*, No. 2, April-June 1976, 209.

[5] George Grant, "In Defence of North America" (1968), in *Technology and Empire. Perspectives on North America* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969), 32.

[6] *Ibid.*, 40.

[7] Bernard Charbonneau, "*Les actes nécessaires,*" in *Bulletin du groupe de Bordeaux des Amis d'*Esprit, No. 2, *s.d.*

[8] George Grant, "Religion and the State" (*Queen's Quarterly* 1963), in *Technology and Empire. Perspectives on North America* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969), 41-60.

[9] Larry Schmidt (ed.), *George Grant in Process: Essays and Conversations* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1978), 146.

[10] Jacques Ellul, "Le fascisme, fils du libéralisme," first published in *Bulletin du groupe de Bordeaux des Amis d'*Esprit, No. 4, *s.d.*, then in *Esprit*, No. 53, February 1 1937, 761-797, and cited here from the reissue in *Cahiers Jacques Ellul. Pour une critique de la société technicienne*, No. 1 ("Les années personnalistes"), 2003, 118-119.

[11] Jacques Ellul, "Le fascisme, fils du libéralisme," 136.

[12] Jacques Ellul, "Le fascisme, fils du libéralisme," 118.

[13] Jacques Ellul, "Le fascisme, fils du libéralisme," 136.

[14] Frank N. Flinn, "George Parkin Grant: a Bibliographical Introduction," in L. Schmidt (ed.), *George Grant in Process: Essays and Conversations* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1978), 199.

[15] Jacques Ellul, "Le fascisme, fils du libéralisme," *Cahiers Jacques Ellul. Pour une critique de la société technicienne*, No. 1, 2003, 137.

[16] George Grant, "From Roosevelt to LBJ," in Al Purdy (ed.), *The New Romans. Candid Canadian Opinions of the U.S.* (Edmonton: M. G. Hurtig Ltd., 1968), 41.

[17] George Grant, *English-Speaking Justice* (first published by Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick, as the Josiah Woods Lectures, 1974), intr. Robin Lathangue, Toronto, House of Anansi, 1998.

[18] George Grant, "From Roosevelt to LBJ," in Al Purdy (ed.), *The New Romans. Candid Canadian Opinions of the U.S.* (Edmonton: M. G. Hurtig Ltd., 1968), 41.

[19] John Badertscher, summarizing Grant's essay "Tyranny and Wisdom" (*Social Research* 1964) from *Technology and Empire*, 79-109, in "George P. Grant and Jacques Ellul on Freedom in Technological Society," in Larry Schmidt (ed.), *George Grant in Process: Essays and Conversations* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1978), 84.

[20] Bernard Charbonneau, "Responsabilités du peuple allemand," in *Le Semeur* (organ of the French Federation of Christian Student Associations), Second (post-war) Year, No. 1, November 1945, 85-86.

[21] George Grant, "Canadian Fate and Imperialism" (*Canadian Dimension* 1967), in *Technology and Empire. Perspectives on North America*, 65.

[22] Bernard Charbonneau, "Révision déchirante," in *Réforme*, from a clipping dated December 1952 without further identifying data that was shown to this writer by the author's widow around the turn of the century. Charbonneau would go on to publish numerous essays in this periodical over the following decade.

[23] Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind. Innis/McLuhan/Grant* (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1985).

[24] George Grant, "In Defence of North America," in *Technology and Empire. Perspectives on North America*, 17. On this much-debated "Red Tory" paradigm of Canadian identity, often associated with George Grant, see Gad Horowitz, "Conservatism, Liberalism, and Socialism in Canada: An Interpretation," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, Vol. XXXII, No. 2, May 1966, 143-171.

[25] George Grant, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, "The Carleton Library," 1970), ix.

[26] Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1959), 132-133, cited in G. Grant, "Tyranny and Wisdom," in *Technology and Empire. Perspectives on North America*, 96.

[27] Christian Roy, "Charbonneau et Ellul, dissidents du 'Progrès'. Critiquer la technique face à un milieu chrétien gagné à la modernité," in Christophe Bonneuil, Céline Pessis & Sezin Topçu (eds.), *Une autre histoire des "Trente Glorieuses." Modernisation, contestations et pollutions dans la France d'après-guerre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013), 291.

[28] Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, tr. John Wilkinson, intr. Robert K. Merton (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 318.

[29] George Grant, *Lament for a Nation*, ix-x.

[30] Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Système et le chaos: où va notre société?* intr. D. Cérézuelle (Paris: Le Sang de la Terre, "La pensée écologique," 2012; originally published as *Le Système et le chaos: Critique du développement exponentiel*, Paris: Anthropos, Paris, 1973 ; 2nd edition : Paris: Economica, 1990).

[31] Bernard Charbonneau, *Sauver nos régions. Écologie, régionalisme et sociétés locales*, intr. Pierre Samuel (Paris: Le Sang de la Terre, "Les Dossiers de l'écologie," 1991).

[32] Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Feu vert. Autocritique du mouvement écologique*, intr. D. Cérézuelle (Parangon/Vs, « L'Après-développement », 2009; original edition: Paris: Karthala, 1980; English translation by C. Roy as *The Green Light* in progress for Bloomsbury, due to appear in 2017).