

The Ellul Forum

For the Critique of Technological Civilization

Jacques Ellul on Sport

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Jacques Ellul in the 1960s

“The mechanization of actions is accompanied by the mechanization of sporting goods---stop watches, starting machines, and so on. . . . The individual, by means of the discipline imposed on him by sport, not only plays and finds relaxation from the various compulsions to which he is subjected, but without knowing it trains himself for new compulsions. . . . [R]eal play and enjoyment . . . improvisation and spontaneity all disappear.”

Jacques Ellul

The Technological Society (1954; ET 1964), p. 383

The Ellul Forum

For the Critique of Technological Civilization

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From the Editor

From 1935 until his death in 1994, Jacques Ellul argued for *la technique* as the twentieth century's most distinctive phenomenon and its most powerful, defining force. Technique, he wrote, is "the totality of methods rationally arrived at and have absolute efficiency in every field of human knowledge" (*Technological Society*, (1954) ET 1964, p. xxv.).

Developed most conspicuously in his classic trilogy (*Technological Society*, *Political Illusion*, and *Propaganda*), rearticulated and extended in *Technological System* and *Technological Bluff*, *la technique* is the organizing idea for all of Ellul's work. He exhaustively portrays one thesis---that industrialized nations are beguiled enough by machine productivity to reconstruct all their social institutions on this model. The technical mystique so captivates our thinking that we cast aside all other imperatives "as in ancient days men put out the eyes of nightingales in order to make them sing better" (p. 75).

In coming to grips with Technique, Ellul addressed a wide-ranging audience of practitioners as well as theorists, thoughtful people both inside and outside the academy. In this issue Michel Hourcade and Boyan Koutevski continue that tradition, both academically-trained but serving also as a government official (Hourcade) and media professional (Koutevski). Hourcade wants to understand sports decisively and chooses Technique as his critical lens, rather than professionalization, money, and media spectacle. Koutevski explores the Internet in terms of Technique.

Little needs to be said about the importance of assessing the explosive growth and challenge of the Internet in the decade since Ellul's death. With the record-setting attendance and skyrocketing economics of sport in our era, with the Tour de France, Wimbledon, Olympic Games, U.S. baseball World Series, the popular film "Bend it Like Beckham," the influential book *How Soccer Explains the World*, and many other evidences, it is also timely to focus some Ellulian attention on sport.

We are also honored to have Professor Rustum Roy's "re-view" of *The Technological Society* in this fiftieth year after its initial publication (p. 19). Associate Editor David Gill is provoked both by the contentious and superficial political contest this fall in the U.S. and by the fortieth anniversary of the Free Speech Movement at his alma mater, UC Berkeley, to reflect on Ellul's contribution to a better politics (p. 23). Gill also provides a review of *Ellul Forum* Contributing Editor Bill Vanderburg's newly reissued *Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on His Life and Work*, a fine little introduction to Ellul's thought that Vanderburg edited from his interviews twenty-five years ago (p. 21).

Next up (Spring 2005, Issue 35) we will be thinking about the relationship of René Girard's ideas to those of Ellul. In Fall 2005 (Issue 36) we are planning an issue on Ellul's biblical studies. We gratefully welcome your ideas, news, manuscripts, feedback, support, and ongoing participation in the IJES.

Clifford G. Christians, Editor

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Sport, Technique, & Society: Ellul on Sports

by Michel Hourcade

Michel Hourcade is a comptroller for the French government, having served 20 years previously at the French ministry of Youth and Sport. He is a graduate of the Institute of Political Studies at the University of Bordeaux, co-editor of Jacques Ellul's course lectures on Marxist Thought (Paris: La Table Ronde, 2003), and author of articles on sports.

"I find sports boring." This admission by Jacques Ellul, expressed in the course of his correspondence with Didier Nordon¹, seems like a sufficient reason for ruling out any effort to study his opinions and ideas on the subject of sports. Also, of course, sufficient to discourage the reader from venturing beyond the first few lines of this article. However, the context of Ellul's words deserves attention, because it reveals a thought process that is both critical and self-critical.

Here is the context of Ellul's statement: "I do not go to the trouble of making a critical analysis of social phenomena that bore me, that I have nothing to do with. I find sports boring, but I can conceive of someone taking pleasure in going in for a sport. I do not understand how someone can feel passionate as a spectator, however. But since I am not involved with them, I take care not to write about sports as sports (I did so once, and made huge mistakes!)." So (to quote the title of a recent book on Ellul²), "the one who foresaw (almost) everything," once took the liberty of writing about sports, and later recognized that he had gone far afield.

Should such a modest effort (just one text on sports, and mistaken at that!) cause us to consider closed the subject of Ellul on sports? Or, on the contrary, should we keep the issue on the table, and try to locate Ellul's comments on sports, and, secondarily, his "huge mistakes"? The second option naturally appeals more to me, considering that in 2004 Ellul is still an important author, and sports remain a major facet of our civilization.

My reading in Ellul so far (probably incomplete) has uncovered five separate references that would constitute his "sports bibliography":

1. Brief references in two of his very early writings, in the mid-1930's;
2. A section in one chapter of a major book, *The Technological Society*³;
3. A section in one chapter of *The Technological Bluff*⁴;
4. An aside in one of his last books (see above);
5. An article requested by a critical sports journal in French.

The publication in 2003 of the first issue of the *Cahiers Jacques Ellul*⁵ gives us access to some of Ellul's earliest writings, written as he was finishing his studies. It seems worthwhile to place ourselves at least briefly in the center of his thinking at that time in his life.

Ellul's seventeen-page essay "Fatality in the modern world"⁶ shows the weight of new forces that press heavily on man and leave him with only one possible response: passivity. Centralization; gigantic size; Technique (already a concern of Ellul's!) which makes centralization and hugeness possible; and the powerlessness of politics—all of these serve as examples of this fatality that turns all men into proletarians.

What strikes Ellul about this society is the importance of the masses, a concept he takes care to define, and then goes on to illustrate, in particular by means of references to the phenomenon of sport. Ellul states that "man becomes part of the crowd. He will become an element within a mass, that is, within a grouping of men, which has come together under some external pressure, for a given purpose they share. Such a grouping lasts only a short time, but such masses occur again and again, almost without interruption, in our society. They are constantly re-formed: the individual becomes part of a mass in the workplace, whether office or factory, he belongs to the mass of readers of the same evening paper, the mass of moviegoers, the mass of *sports enthusiasts*" (p. 110; emphasis added). These words, in a text to which we can assign a date of 1936 or 1937 (p. 95, n. 1), probably constitute one of the first references to sports in Ellul's work. As we saw above, sports are not Ellul's favorite

topic, but that does not keep them from surfacing spontaneously in his mind when he is describing society.

Ellul's second reference to sports comes in an essay written around the same time as the above text, in 1937: "Le fascisme, fils du libéralisme" ("Fascism, Offspring of Liberalism").⁷ The very subject of fascism offers a hint as to Ellul's probable inspiration in making a reference to sports: the Berlin Olympic Games of 1936 and their context, the Nazi regime and its propaganda display. In this essay also, Ellul points out the role of the masses in human submission. But in this case he offers a more expanded study (some 25 pages in the *Cahiers Jacques Ellul*), intentionally based on Émile Durkheim's sociology, with some references to Georges Gurvitch. The essay concludes with a quotation from Alexis de Tocqueville.

Ellul approaches Fascism and liberalism by means of Durkheim's classical distinction between the two forms of solidarity: mechanical and organic. In mechanical solidarity, an individual is subject to society, whose collective consciousness overlays individual consciousness, and penal law is the juridical expression of society. In organic solidarity, society breaks down into many subgroups, and the will of the individual plays an important role. The individual is not directly connected to society as a whole, but rather to its parts. The juridical expression of this society is civil, contractual law.

Another distinction, based on duration, is added to this distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity: the masses, distinguished by their temporary character, are seen as distinct from more permanent arrangements, such as groups, the abstract collective, etc. Ellul identifies still another group: the abstract masses, which passively receive external influences, and can transform themselves into concrete masses, thus giving birth to Fascism. As for sports, "liberalism has brought about a social passivity unprecedented in history. It has permitted the creation of abstract masses [. . .] in which the life of a man is covered over by a series of overlapping circles that completely engulf the individual: the café group, the club group, the sports group, and the trade or professional group" (pp. 135-136; emphasis added).

In *The Technological Society*, first published in French in 1954, Ellul devotes a separate section to "Sport" in his fifth chapter, in which he deals with human techniques. Between sections entitled "Amusement" and "Medicine," he devotes two pages to the many aspects of sport, using a distinctly critical tone.⁸ Two main themes are taken up, illustrated by examples that initially seem disconcerting. First of all, Ellul notes that sports are connected with big cities (perhaps an allusion to English "rural sports" in the 17th century, such as hunting), and with industrialization: first English, then American, and finally Soviet. We should note that this correlation between

industrialization and the appearance and development of modern sports is quite commonly laid out in modern studies on sports. Most authors limit themselves to mentioning the historical co-existence of these two developments, with only a few writers daring to answer the question: is the appearance of sports inevitable in a society in the process of industrialization? The boldest writers emphasize the relationship between the gymnasium and the factory. Some more careful ones enumerate the inventions (in transportation and telecommunications) that have enabled different disciplines or sports events to reach the level of fame, passion, or myth (for example, football, baseball, the Olympic Games, and the Tour de France). Still other authors search out possible cultural or national factors. Richard D. Mandell does this: "The same forces that made the young nation a populous industrial power made American sport."⁹ Although Ellul did not originate the idea of a connection between industrialization and sports, we should recognize that he pointed it out, half a century ago. Perhaps he discovered it in reading the history or sociology of sport, or, just as likely, he may have come up with this linkage on the basis of his own reflection on the history of Technique.

Ellul continues in *The Technological Society* by saying that sport is also connected with the world of Technique, and is itself a Technique. Here we enter Ellul's preferred domain, in which he proceeds pretty much on his own, since his keen understanding of the technical phenomenon constitutes an original approach to sport. For instance, the distinction he makes between swimming and the competitive sport of swimming is quite clear and appropriate. The degree to which sports involve technical skill is only rarely noticed and commented on by others,¹⁰ implicitly confirming Ellul's understanding of Technique as omnipresent in society, to such a degree that it becomes invisible.

We could extend Ellul's principles by noting that physical exercise initially constitutes the least technical human activity. For this reason, it is the most susceptible to Technique. The nude Greek athlete apparently shocked the Romans and then the Church; according to etymology, the gymnast was similarly nude. Modern athletes wear scarcely more clothes, but their scanty attire has been carefully designed to offer the least possible aerodynamic resistance. Such clothing is made of the most efficient new fiber blends. This modern athlete's movements and stride have been filmed, dissected, compared, and improved. His food intake obeys the dictates of dieticians, he is medically monitored, and his real or perceived deficiencies are offset by inventions straight from the laboratory. A psychologist completes this medical engineering of sport.

Swimming vs. natation: the athlete is Technique in human form. Should we soften this statement by thinking about diversity in the practice of sports? For example, the difference between high-level sports and recreational sports, or between professional and amateur sports? I am not inclined to think so. The most anonymous athlete, even the beginner, will choose equipment that imitates the champion's. He buys performance enhancing agents at the drugstore or online, and wears tiny electronic devices that measure his pulse and keep track of how far he has run. A study in November 2003 revealed that ten percent of French teenagers who take part in sports use stimulants. According to this same study, young French athletes begin to use such substances at the age of fourteen; Americans apparently begin at eight years of age.

Ellul continues with a reference to the use of equipment such as stopwatches: "This mechanization of actions is accompanied by the mechanization of sporting goods [. . .] In this exact measurement of time, in this precision training of muscular actions, and in the principle of the 'record,' we find repeated in sport one of the essential elements of industrial life" (p. 383). So when science and budding industrial technique met in England, sport very quickly became infused with a modern mentality that would lead to amazing consequences. After all, expressions we commonly use today, such as: "running the hundred meter dash in ten seconds," presuppose that we have previously defined the length of the meter, and that we can measure in seconds. None of this was scientifically and technologically possible before the end of the eighteenth century, which saw the measurement of the earth's meridian and the invention of the Swiss watch. Unexpectedly, but significantly, we can observe these same aspects of modern mentality, and therefore of sport mentality, in the early days of mountain climbing, at about the same time.¹¹

After considering the relationship of sports, industry, and Technique, Ellul comes to the question of the subjection of man to totalitarian society through sports. At this point Ellul's analysis converges with that of an active minority among sociologists who are critical of sport, represented in France by Jean-Marie Brohm, of whom we will speak later. Ellul states that sports enable a man to relax from the pressures he experiences, but at the same time, surreptitiously, they adapt him to new constraints. This "insidious Technique" extends to the masses. In the guise of team spirit, sports prepare people for the totalitarian spirit, so that sports are essential for Fascist, Nazi, and Communist dictatorships. In "developing" countries, we can see the concurrent penetration of techniques and sports.

Ellul is scarcely gentler in speaking of the United States as the country that first developed sport as Technique, and in calling it "the most conformist of all

countries" (p. 383; here Ellul apparently takes up an observation usually attributed to Tocqueville). What can we say to this indictment? As noted above, the analysis of sports by means of Technique is rather uncommon, and radical critique of sports comes only from a minority of voices. Clearly, it is dangerous to pontificate on the degree of conformity among Americans. We can point out simply that there are arguments both for and against. A significant amount of sports sociology, especially in America, follows a functional approach that tends to recognize the role, implicitly positive, of sports in adapting people to social values and in socializing them. As Aesop might have said, sports are the best thing and the worst thing.

Leaving this debate behind momentarily, I suggest to the reader that we examine the sometimes disconcerting examples cited by Ellul to support his argument. He offers three, all related to the relationship between sports, industry, and Technique. Here is the first: "The only country in central Europe which had organized sport, Czechoslovakia, was the only one which was industrialized" (p. 382). Since we have no additional precise references from Ellul here, we can speculate that Ellul had in mind the "sokol" movement, founded in 1862 in what would become Czechoslovakia. It was an organization that aimed at developing "a healthy mind in a healthy body." This movement took root in the United States beginning in 1865, and apparently continues to flourish. Ellul's rather abrupt statement thus seems to refer to an established episode in the history of sport. In this example we can see something of the extent and the diversity of his knowledge, which casts some doubt on his claim to have no interest in sports.

The second example, from ancient history, seems less surprising coming from the pen of Ellul the historian: "The enormous contrast between the athletes of Greece and those of Rome is well known. For the Greeks, physical exercise was an ethic for developing freely and harmoniously the form and strength of the human body. For the Romans, it was a technique for increasing the legionnaire's efficiency" (pp. 382-383). Evidently, Ellul knew at least some of the many studies on physical exercise in antiquity, which conclude that the Romans had a concept of physical activity different from the Greeks, a concept directly oriented toward its military application. On the other hand, historians of ancient Greece emphasize the very strong religious connotation of physical activity, especially the Olympic Games. In descriptions of modern sports, and not only of the Olympics, the parallel between sports and religion recurs often. We might consider it paradoxical that Ellul, who devoted much of his writing to religious issues, did not note this comparison, which has become almost a cliché.

The third and final example Ellul offers is the most disconcerting: "The best athletes come from working-

class environments. Peasants, woodsmen, and the like, may be more vigorous than the proletariat, but they are not as good athletes. In part, the reason for this is that machine work develops the musculature necessary for sport, which is very different from peasant musculature. Machine work also develops the speed and precision of actions and reflexes" (p. 382). We probably cannot uncover the sources that enabled Ellul to arrive at this clear distinction between worker and peasant performance. We can credit him with considerable knowledge of lumberjacks' capacities, since he is known to have occasionally borrowed an ax to chop down a tree, for relaxation and exercise. But "the one who foresaw (almost) everything" may still have surprises in store for us. French statistics dating for the most part after Ellul's writing of *The Technological Society* indeed demonstrate, on the one hand, that workers go in much more for sports than peasants, and, on the other hand, that physical aptitudes are correlated with height. Also, according to statistics, peasants tend to be smaller than workers.

In Ellul's trilogy on Technique, *The Technological System*¹² and *The Technological Bluff*¹³ follow *The Technological Society*. Although absent from *The Technological System*, sports surface again in the "Bluff," as a six-page section inserted between those on games and the automobile, in a chapter on diversions. By way of introduction, Ellul refers briefly to *The Technological Society* and outlines his dual approach involving spectacle and technological discourse, which "has transformed sport into an enormous spectacle" (p. 366).

Clearly, by "spectacle" Ellul means television, and the overwhelming presence of sport in this medium, as illustrated by many statistics. We can also suggest that Ellul may have borrowed at this point from *The Society of the Spectacle*,¹⁴ the best seller of Situationist literature, published in 1967, and well known to Ellul (who was cited in the sacred texts of the *Internationale Situationniste*). Technological discourse is the key term underlying this third part of Ellul's trilogy, following his earlier volumes on the technological society and the technological system.

As in his earlier book, Ellul amazes us in the "Bluff" with the multiplicity of his examples, which prove that he did pay attention to sports, in clear contradiction to the lack of interest in them that he claims elsewhere. We also note some naive touches or throwbacks ("Originally a city team used to be made up of people from that city," p. 368; "But where is the tennis of yesteryear . . .?," p. 368), and this unassailable title quoted from the discerning anarchist Cavanna: "Dying as a Fool for Paris-Dakar" (p. 370). Ellul mentions the place of sports in the media, professionalism, money, and violence, offering an abundance of examples and figures, in keeping with the overall tendency of this book, which overflows with

statistics and references. But Ellul does not draw only on current events. Comparisons with antiquity mushroom as he writes. The sale of professional soccer players "reminds us of the auctioning of gladiators, pugilists, and chariot drivers at Rome" (p. 368, n.11). The Olympic Games of antiquity (another backward-looking touch?) "were something quite different . . . there was a truce, fighting stopped, Greek unity was restored" (p. 369), in precise contrast with modern-day Olympic boycotts applied to the United States, the Soviet Union, and South Africa. Ellul suggests that the Games have become an expression of conflict "due to the technicizing of society (not its politicizing, for no world was more political than the Greek)"! (p. 370).

I find three of his observations especially striking because of their relevance or their originality. First, Ellul (who knew sailing well from time spent at the Arcachon Basin, a favorite spot for the sport not far from Bordeaux) describes the racing of yachts, which have become a medium of advertising and "monstrous gadgets" (p. 367, n.9). They are outfitted with satellite navigation systems, weather decoders, on-board computers, and television cameras for retransmission by the media—all presented by the press without irony as "Technology in the Service of Fantasy" (p. 371). A fine example of technological discourse that masks the technical reality and leads us to confuse the real with the virtual, the cause with the effect.

Next, the creation of events: no empty slots may be left in the feeding of the spectacle-hungry public. Does such creation stem, as Ellul suggests (for example, an event "has to be staged," p. 370) from the will of mysterious forces, from the constraints of implacable Technique, or simply from the logic of media programming, which abhors a vacuum and loves publicity revenue? The observation of a so-called journalist shouting out his lungs, with heavy use of hyperbole, in his commentary on the retransmission of a dull but expensive sporting event, can serve as evidence in this debate. Note that this staging of events mentioned in Ellul's section on sports could take its place just as well in other parts of the book: Games, Diversions, Information, etc.

Finally, in counterpoint to this downward spiral in sports and the media, Ellul surprises us with a rather unexpected reference to bullfighting: "the barbarous game has been ritualized," and its "collective behavior set within a kind of communal ethic" (p. 369).

We will conclude this consideration of sports in *The Technological Bluff* with a passage that shows Ellul's originality in reflection and action. In connection with the inordinately high cost of signing professional soccer players, he mentions the financial difficulties of soccer clubs (a problem that was just beginning when Ellul's book came out, but which has continued in its importance since then), the generous subsidies offered to them by municipalities, and the use

for this purpose of taxes levied on many taxpayers who have no passionate interest in sports at all. In 1988, Ellul was certainly one of the first to have identified and raised this problem of subsidies to professional clubs. Beginning in 1994, it would become the object of sharp debates and decisions aimed at limiting such generosity by local governments. But in particular, as he mentions in a footnote, Ellul had proposed a tax reduction for those who did not care about sports clubs (p. 367, n.10). As a pioneer of "think globally, act locally," whether or not he invented the slogan, Ellul singled out sports for his participation in local affairs, along with the environment in Aquitaine and its coastline, and action to prevent young people from becoming delinquents.

In April 1991, the journal *Quel Corps?* published its 41st issue, entitled "The Cannibalism of Sports." In this number of more than two hundred pages, Ellul had an article that ran to seven pages: "Sport et technique" (Sports and Technique).¹⁵ The journal's director, Jean-Marie Brohm, wrote two articles for the same journal issue: "La guerre olympique" (The Olympic War) and "Le sport est un assassin" (Sport is an Assassin), whose very titles give evidence of the existence in France of the critical school of sports sociologists mentioned above. Can we find in this article by Ellul the "huge mistakes" he admitted to in his 1992 correspondence with Nordon? In any case, we probably owe this article in *Quel Corps?* to Nordon, a friend of both Ellul and Brohm.

After explaining his understanding of Technique, in the introduction to this article, Ellul sets out the image of sports prevalent in 1930, and then describes the impact of the technological society: on sports, on the bodies of those who practice sports, and on sports equipment. He concludes with the role of money. According to Ellul, around 1930, when the era of Technique really began, the image of sports was that of a game played locally, to act on the imperative of "a healthy mind in a healthy body." There were sports for the rich, and other sports for everybody else. For all, sports meant fair play, according to rules that prepared one for life in society (note here the function of sports in socialization, mentioned above).

In this passage, Ellul is careful to look at sport objectively. He limits himself to describing the image of sport at the time, since it quickly became an ideological, idealized concept. As in the material from *The Technological Society* and *The Technological Bluff* we have examined, Ellul here illustrates his ideas with many specific examples. He calls boxing "one of the first sports to be regulated" (p. 78), and indeed, although it was not the first sport to be organized and to have rules, boxing was organized as a sports association in England in 1884, on the basis of the Marquis of Queensberry rules. Ellul cites another example, from soccer, which he says already existed professionally in Great Britain in 1900-1930. Here also, Ellul is right,

since soccer became a professional sport in Great Britain in 1885. We cannot fault him in this first part of the article. In his enthusiasm, he cannot resist the pleasure of adding a few historical details, which curious readers would surely try to verify: "of course, fair play was not always observed: cyclists in the second Tour de France were knocked senseless by regional fans of another team" (p. 78 n.1). Here is another one: "in auto races, people sometimes put nails on the track" (p. 78 n.1).

What happened to sport as it was practiced at the beginning of the twentieth century? Ellul indicates that in the technological society, winning, and thus competition, became decisive values. In sports, a competitor must choose the winning method at all costs, because Technique teaches us we must always win. Images broadcast around the world by means of new techniques, coupled with our hunger for entertainment, have encouraged aggressiveness, replacing the earlier value accorded to beauty and elegance of movement. Perhaps idealizing the past a bit, Ellul offers the boxer Georges Carpentier as an example. He makes a perceptive observation, however, when he applies this aspect of Technique to tennis: "muscles that pack a powerful punch" (p. 79). What would Ellul have said about tennis in the new millennium, and especially women's tennis?

Next, Ellul examines techniques of the athletic body as a development of Taylorism. He refers to the use of film, physical and psychological preparation, dietetics, and chemical agents and drugs. His thoughts on the banning of illegal drugs need to be quoted in full: "This prohibition can be perfectly understood in the case of two men (or two teams) opposing each other, who would have been like all the others, for whom sports were a hobby, much as other people might take part in amateur theater. But is this prohibition really so understandable in the case of two opposing machines, whose only purpose is to show their power and win?" (p. 80).

Ellul's point of view calls for two comments. First of all, the article was published in 1991, well before 1998. In that fateful year, the Tour de France, the bicycle race that had been exalted to mythical status, and that enjoyed international renown, was the object of devastating revelations concerning the massive use of illegal drugs in both professional and amateur cycling. Since 1998, drug use in sports has become a matter of widespread public interest. Its existence is divulged from time to time in detailed revelations which prove embarrassing for the sports world, whereas earlier, the mere suggestion of such a thing was often considered obscene or sacrilegious ("sportingly incorrect" as well as "politically incorrect"). Now drug use is no longer such a taboo subject. The year 1998 enables us, then, to make a ruthless distinction between those who had enough perception and intellectual honesty to deal with

the drug problem, and those who merely got on the train after it had already begun to roll, or who even discovered the existence and the importance of the sports phenomenon by means of attention paid by the media to the drug scandal. And we must note that Ellul belongs to the first group.

Secondly, the use of chemical substances, as part of the mobilization of all possible technical resources for the purpose of improving performance and achieving victory, may indeed seem perfectly consistent. Drug use is just one more demonstration of the impact of Technique on our society. Its tacit acceptance in sports circles and the relative indifference of public opinion show rather clearly the moral standards that prevail in a technological society. Sports in general, and drug use in particular, fit in perfectly with Ellul's analysis.

His article continues with a denunciation of the ridiculous precision involved in the calculation of records and the use of sophisticated devices to distinguish between competitors when the human eye cannot detect any difference between them; he calls this "the irony of a human spectacle utterly outclassed by human technical inventions" (p. 81). Ellul mentions another gadget: the racing car, "a strange instrument that resembles a car only in that it has four wheels" (p. 81). Then he assesses automobile research, carried out by people who are "more and more specialized, in typical technical fashion" (p. 81). In reality, Ellul's commentary sheds little light on the subject of auto racing and does not really enrich his analysis of Technique.

On the other hand, he spends considerable time on the bicycle, which he believes has undergone the most spectacular transformation. And it is true that the bicycle used in racing or in the time trials of the Tour de France has undergone very visible changes. But Vigarello¹⁶ would no doubt remind us that the bicycle underwent a series of important changes right after it was invented: the free wheel, pressurized tires, and the gear shift. This last invention was long banned for reasons of "sportsmanship." So perhaps the distinction between the early period and the advent of the technological society should be sought in the change from concern with the perfecting of machines to concern with obtaining the maximum performance from the human machine. After examining these concrete examples, Ellul alludes briefly to developments in pole vaulting and skiing. Then he questions the meaning of such "progress" in performance, the supposed reality of the superiority of contemporary athletes over earlier ones, or over ordinary people in previous historical periods. He concludes that sports records become values in themselves, and that they demonstrate the triumph of techniques over bodies and equipment.

Ellul closes his article by considering how money has become the ultimate justification for sport. He spells out the reciprocal relationships, the "self-

augmentation" (alluding to one of the characteristics of Technique that he has outlined in his books) resulting from the media, advertising, rebroadcasting rights, sponsorship, sports organizations, spectators and TV viewers. Ellul also mentions the role of government authorities in the construction of sports venues. The end result of the interaction of these different players parallels the conclusions of current economic and sociological analyses of trends in sport. In his conclusion, Ellul defines sports as "entertainment that allows us to absorb unused passions (in a society that no longer has any values), in the midst of millions of men who no longer believe in anything" (p. 83). In this way sports fall into "this empty space with no meaning that characterizes our time, and that stems from the replacement of personal action with the spectacle of collective expression" (p. 83).

What main impressions can we gain from Ellul's views on sports, spread out over more than fifty years, from his first to his last writings? Clearly, his alleged lack of interest and the mistakes he claims to have made are largely contradicted by his remarks, which go to the heart of the subject, with accurate aim. Except for some examples we cannot confirm and an occasional hasty word, Ellul makes use of established arguments based on current events and important books. It is perhaps surprising that he fails to refer to Norbert Elias, a historian and sociologist like Ellul, but fifteen years older. There are other parallels between them: both treat the subject of sports in summary fashion in a major work (*The Technological Society* in French in 1954 in Ellul's case; *The Civilizing Process* for Elias¹⁷). But of the two, only Elias would return at length to the subject of sports, which he considered a key for understanding the evolution of modern societies. He wrote a number of articles since gathered into a single volume in translation.¹⁸

Another item we note as missing, already referred to, is the importance of religion in sports, and the role of sport as a possible substitute for religion: Pierre de Coubertin proclaimed this, and many have suspected it. Paradoxically, Ellul barely touches on the matter, merely mentioning the "millions of men who no longer believe in anything." In reality, for Ellul sport is only a technical epiphenomenon in a world in which man "transfers his sense of the sacred to the very thing that has destroyed its former object: to technique itself."¹⁹

Notes

¹Jacques Ellul and Didier Nordon, *L'homme à lui-même: Correspondance* (Paris: Félin, 1992), p. 173.

²Jean-Luc Porquet, *Jacques Ellul: L'homme qui avait (presque) tout prévu* (Paris: Le Cherche-Midi, 2003).

³Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Knopf, 1964; Fr. eds. 1954 and 1990).

⁴Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990; Fr. ed. 1988).

⁵*Cahiers Jacques Ellul: Pour une Critique de la Société Technicienne*, no. 1, "Les années personalistes," ed. Patrick Troude-Chastenet (2003).

⁶Jacques Ellul, "Fatalité du monde moderne," *Cahiers Jacques Ellul*, ed. Patrick Troude-Chastenet, no. 1 (2003), pp. 95-111.

⁷Jacques Ellul, "Le fascisme, fils du libéralisme," *Esprit*, vol. 5, no. 53 (1 Feb. 1937), pp. 761-797; reprinted in *Cahiers Jacques Ellul*, ed. Patrick Troude-Chastenet, no. 1 (2003), pp. 113-137.

⁸*The Technological Society*, pp. 382-384.

⁹Richard D. Mandell, *Sport, a Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 184.

¹⁰See, however, "Présence de la technique," in Georges Vigarello, *Du jeu ancien au show sportif : La naissance d'un mythe* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2002).

¹¹Nicolas Giudici, *La philosophie du Mont Blanc: De l'alpinisme à l'économie immatérielle* (Paris: Grasset, 2000).

¹²Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Continuum, 1980; Fr. eds. 1977 and 2004).

¹³See note 4.

¹⁴Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1994; Fr. ed. 1967).

¹⁵Jacques Ellul, "Sport et Technique," *Quel Corps?*, no. 41 (April 1991), pp. 77-83.

¹⁶See note 10.

¹⁷Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (New York: Urizen, 1978); *La civilisation des mœurs* ([Paris]: Calmann-Lévy, 1973; original German ed. 1939).

¹⁸Norbert Elias, *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process* (New York: B. Blackwell, 1986); *Sport, violence et société: La violence maîtrisée* (Paris: Fayard, 1994). The title of one of the articles in this volume, "The Quest for Excitement in Unexciting Society," seems to parallel Ellul's words.

¹⁹*The Technological Society*, p. 143.

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Sport, technique et société Le sport vu par Jacques Ellul

Michel Hourcade

« Le sport m'ennuie »...

Exprimé au détour d'une de ses correspondances, cet aveu suffirait à disqualifier toute tentative d'étude des opinions et réflexions de Jacques Ellul sur le phénomène sportif et, accessoirement, à dissuader tout lecteur d'aller au-delà des premières lignes du présent texte. Le contexte de la citation mérite toutefois d'être mentionné car révélateur d'une démarche à la fois critique et autocritique.

« Je ne me donne pas la peine », nous dit Ellul, « de procéder à une analyse critique de phénomènes sociaux qui m'ennuient, où je me sens étranger. Le sport m'ennuie, je conçois qu'on prenne plaisir à pratiquer un sport – moins à le regarder et à se passionner. Là, je ne comprends pas. Mais dans la mesure où il m'est étranger, je me garde d'écrire sur le sport en tant que tel (je l'ai fait une fois et j'avais commis de belles erreurs!) ».

« Celui qui avait (presque) tout prévu », pour reprendre le titre d'un ouvrage récent qui lui est consacré,¹ se serait donc laissé aller à écrire sur le sport (une fois) et reconnaîtrait s'être fourvoyé.

Tant de modestie (un seul texte, et erroné de surcroît!) doit-il nous inciter à refermer le chapitre du sport vu par Ellul ou au contraire à le garder ouvert en recherchant les écrits elluliens sur le sport et, subsidiairement, ses belles erreurs ? La seconde option m'a naturellement paru plus stimulante si l'on veut bien considérer qu'en 2004 Jacques Ellul est toujours un auteur important et que le phénomène sportif reste une manifestation majeure de notre civilisation.

La « bibliographie sportive » attribuable à Jacques Ellul recouvre, en l'état actuel (probablement incomplet) de mes lectures, cinq références bien distinctes :

- Une brève référence dans deux écrits "de jeunesse" (vers 1936)
- Un sous-chapitre dans son ouvrage majeur *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* (1954)³
- Un sous-chapitre dans *Le bluff technologique* (1988)⁴
- Une contribution sollicitée par une revue critique du sport française (1991)
- Une mention dans un de ses derniers écrits (1992; voir ci-dessus)

La publication en 2003 du premier numéro des *Cahiers Jacques Ellul*⁵ permet d'accéder à des textes qui comptent parmi les plus anciens sous la plume d'Ellul, qui achevait alors ses études. Il n'est pas sans intérêt de se replacer, au moins succinctement, au cœur de la réflexion qui l'anime alors.

Le texte *Fatalité du monde moderne*⁶ énonce en dix-sept pages le poids des forces nouvelles qui pèsent sur l'homme et ne lui laissent qu'une possibilité : la passivité. La centralisation, le gigantisme, la technique (déjà!) qui permet leur réalisation, l'impuissance de la politique, illustrent cette fatalité qui fait de tous les hommes des prolétaires. Ce qui frappe Ellul dans cette société, c'est l'importance des masses, concept qu'il s'attache à définir et qu'il va illustrer, notamment, par référence au phénomène sportif. L'homme, nous dit Ellul, « rentre désormais dans la foule. Il sera l'élément d'une masse, c'est-à-dire d'une réunion d'hommes, faite sous une pression extérieure dans un but déterminé pour chacun d'eux, et qui ne dure que peu de temps – mais ces masses se renouvellent presque sans interruption dans notre société – elles sont incessamment refaites – l'individu fait partie de la masse de son travail – au bureau ou dans l'usine – de la masse des lecteurs de Paris-Soir, de la masse des spectateurs de cinéma, de la masse de la *société sportive* » (p. 110; c'est nous qui soulignons).

Voilà pour ce qui est probablement une des premières mentions du sport dans l'œuvre ellulienne à travers ce texte que l'on peut dater de 1936 ou de 1937 (p. 95, n. 1). On l'a vu plus haut, le sport n'est pas le sujet de prédilection de Jacques Ellul, ce qui n'empêche pas qu'il lui vienne assez spontanément à l'esprit dans sa description de la société.

Le second texte à mentionner le sport, intitulé *Le fascisme, fils du libéralisme*,⁷ a été écrit à la même époque (1937) que le précédent. Le sujet même du fascisme nous fournit un indice assez vraisemblable des origines de l'inspiration d'Ellul faisant référence au sport : l'organisation des Jeux Olympiques de Berlin en 1936, dans le cadre du régime nazi et de son déferlement de propagande. La masse est ici encore le groupe humain désigné pour son rôle de soumission de l'homme, mais à travers un développement plus étoffé (vingt-cinq pages dans les *Cahiers Jacques Ellul*) d'inspiration délibérément sociologique, empruntant pour l'essentiel à Durkheim, ponctuellement à Gurvitch et concluant sur une citation de Tocqueville.

Fascisme et libéralisme sont abordés à travers la distinction classique formulée par Durkheim entre les deux formes de solidarité, mécanique et organique. Dans la solidarité mécanique, l'individu est soumis à la société, la conscience collective recouvre les consciences individuelles. Le droit pénal est l'expression juridique de la société. Dans la solidarité organique, la société se fractionne en sous-groupes nombreux et la volonté individuelle y joue un rôle

important. L'individu n'est pas rattaché directement à la société globale mais à ses parties. L'expression juridique de cette société est le droit civil, contractuel.

Sur la division solidarité mécanique-solidarité organique vient se greffer une autre division selon la durée, la masse qui se distingue par son caractère passager d'autres notions plus permanentes (le groupe, le collectif abstrait). Ellul distingue en outre les masses abstraites, qui reçoivent passivement des influences de l'extérieur, et peuvent se transformer en masses concrètes, donnant alors naissance au fascisme. Quant au sport : « le libéralisme a entraîné un amorphisme social probablement sans précédent dans l'histoire. Il a permis la création de ces masses abstraites [...] où la vie de l'homme se recouvre d'une série de cercles qui se recourent et qui absorbent totalement l'individu. Groupe du café et groupe du club, *groupe du sport* et groupe du métier » (p. 795, 1937; pp. 135-136, 2003; c'est nous qui soulignons).

Dans *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* publiée en 1954, le sport fait l'objet d'un traitement spécifique à l'intérieur du chapitre V consacré aux techniques de l'homme. Entre *divertissement* et *médecine*, deux pages sont consacrées au sport sous ses multiples facettes et dans une tonalité nettement critique.⁸

Deux thèmes principaux sont abordés, émaillés d'illustrations et d'exemples à première vue déconcertants.

Le sport, note d'abord Ellul, est lié à la grande ville (allusion possible aux *rural sports* anglais du 17^{ème} siècle, comme la chasse à courre) et à l'industrialisation, anglaise, américaine puis soviétique. On observera que cette corrélation entre industrialisation et apparition et développement du sport moderne est aujourd'hui très couramment exposée dans la littérature consacrée au sport. Si la plupart des auteurs se bornent à mentionner la concomitance historique des deux événements, peu se hasardent à répondre à la question : l'apparition du sport était-elle inévitable dans une société en cours d'industrialisation ? Les plus hardis souligneront la parenté entre gymnase et manufacture. Plus prudents, d'autres énumèrent les inventions (transports, télécommunications) qui ont permis à des disciplines ou des manifestations sportives (que l'on songe au football, au base-ball, aux Jeux Olympiques ou au Tour de France) d'accéder à la notoriété, à la passion ou au mythe. D'autres encore recherchent une traçabilité culturelle ou nationale. Ainsi R.D. Mandell : « the same forces that made the young nation a populous industrial power made American sport ». ⁹ A défaut d'originalité, il faut sans doute reconnaître à l'auteur de *La technique* le mérite d'avoir, il y a un demi-siècle, identifié ce lien, que ce soit à partir de lectures sur l'histoire ou la sociologie du sport ou, tout aussi vraisemblablement, sur la base de sa propre réflexion sur l'histoire de la technique.

Le sport, poursuit Ellul, est aussi lié au monde technique, il est lui-même une technique. Nous sommes évidemment ici dans son domaine de prédilection, où il évolue un peu seul il est vrai, tant sa perception aiguë du phénomène technique constitue une approche spécifique du sport. La distinction qu'il opère entre, par exemple, nage et natation, est tout à fait explicite et pertinente. La part de technicité incorporée au sport est rarement perçue et commentée,¹⁰ confirmation implicite de la perception ellulienne d'une technique omniprésente dans la société et qui finit par devenir invisible. Dans le prolongement du texte, on pourrait avancer que l'exercice physique est au départ l'activité humaine la moins technicisée et qu'elle recèle donc le plus fort potentiel de technicisation. L'athlète grec était nu, ce qui choqua paraît-il les Romains, puis l'Eglise. Le gymnaste, étymologiquement, arborait la même nudité. L'athlète moderne est à peine plus vêtu. Mais le peu de vêtement qu'il porte a été soigneusement étudié pour ne pas offrir de prise au vent. Son matériel utilise les matériaux nouveaux les plus performants. Son geste, sa foulée, ont été filmés, décortiqués, comparés et améliorés. Son alimentation observe les prescriptions du diététicien, son suivi médical est assuré, ses carences réelles ou supposées compensées par des produits conçus en laboratoire. Le psychologue vient parachever cette ingénierie médico-sportive.

La nage et la natation. Le sportif est la technique faite homme.

Convient-il de relativiser le propos en ayant présente à l'esprit la diversité des pratiques sportives, par exemple la séparation entre le haut niveau et le sport de masse, le professionnalisme et l'amateurisme ? Je ne suis pas enclin à le penser. Le sportif le plus anonyme, et même le débutant, copient leur équipement sur celui du champion, achètent en pharmacie ou sur l'internet les « aliments de l'effort », annexent à leur corps de minuscules capteurs électroniques qui mesurent leur pouls et calculent les distances parcourues. Une étude révélait en novembre 2003 que les adolescents français qui pratiquent un sport sont 10% à recourir à des substances dopantes. Selon la même étude, c'est à quatorze ans que les jeunes sportifs français commenceraient à recourir à ces produits ; pour les jeunes Américains, ce serait à huit ans...

La mécanisation des gestes poursuit Ellul, correspond à la mécanisation des appareils utilisés pour le sport (chronomètres...). La mesure de précision, la formation des gestes, le principe du record, qui sont des éléments importants de l'industrie, se retrouvent donc dans le sport (p. 347). Au confluent de la science et de la technique industrielle naissantes en Angleterre, le sport s'imprégnerait ainsi très tôt d'une mentalité moderne appelée à de fameux prolongements. Après tout, l'expression aujourd'hui banale « courir le 100 mètres en dix secondes » suppose bien que l'on ait préalablement défini la notion de mètre et que l'on soit

capable de chronométrer en secondes, ce qui ne fut scientifiquement et techniquement possible qu'à partir de la fin du 18^{ème} siècle avec la mesure du méridien terrestre et l'invention de la montre suisse. De façon inattendue mais assez significative, on retrouve ces ingrédients de la mentalité moderne, et donc sportive, dès les balbutiements de l'alpinisme, à la même époque.¹¹

Après avoir abordé le thème des rapports entre sport, industrie et technique, Ellul en vient au thème de l'assujettissement de l'homme à la société totalitaire par le sport. Nous sommes ici résolument dans une approche critique du sport, approche qui correspond à un courant minoritaire mais actif à l'intérieur de la sociologie du sport, représenté en France notamment par Jean-Marie Brohm dont nous reparlerons plus loin.

Le sport, indique Ellul, permet à l'homme de se délasser de ses contraintes mais l'adapte aussi à son insu à de nouvelles contraintes, et cette « technique insidieuse » s'étend à la grande masse. Sous couvert d'esprit d'équipe, le sport préparerait à l'esprit totalitaire. Il est indispensable aux dictatures fascistes, nazies et communistes. Dans les pays « nouveaux », on assiste à une pénétration conjointe des techniques et du sport. Guère plus tendre avec les Etats-Unis, Ellul constate que le sport technicisé s'y est développé d'abord en leur qualité de « pays le plus conformiste ».¹²

Que répondre à cette charge ? Comme indiqué plus haut, l'analyse du sport à travers la technique est assez peu répandue et la critique radicale du sport n'est le fait que de courants minoritaires. Il est évidemment périlleux de dissenter sur le caractère plus ou moins conformiste des Américains. Avançons simplement que les arguments peuvent être réversibles. Une bonne part de la sociologie du sport, et de la sociologie américaine en particulier, obéit à une approche fonctionnaliste qui se plaît à reconnaître le rôle -implicitement positif - du sport dans l'adaptation aux valeurs sociales et la socialisation. Le sport, aurait dit Esope, est la meilleure et la pire des choses.

Pour quitter provisoirement le débat d'idées, je propose au lecteur de revenir sur les exemples parfois déconcertants apportés par Ellul à l'appui de son raisonnement.

Ils sont au nombre de trois, tous liés à la relation entre sport, industrie et technique.

Premier exemple : « le seul pays d'Europe centrale ayant une organisation sportive était le seul industrialisé : la Tchécoslovaquie » (p. 346). En l'absence de toute référence ou indication plus précises dans le texte, on peut avancer l'hypothèse qu'Ellul avait à l'esprit le mouvement sokol, fondé en 1862 dans ce qui allait devenir la Tchécoslovaquie, mouvement visant à développer « un esprit sain dans un corps sain ». Ce mouvement s'est implanté aux Etats-Unis dès 1865 et il semble y être toujours vivace. L'affirmation un peu abrupte d'Ellul correspondrait ainsi à un épisode avéré

dans l'histoire du sport ce qui donne une idée de l'étendue et de la diversité de ses informations et relativise le prétendu désintérêt qu'il professait à l'égard du sport.

Le second exemple, emprunté à l'histoire de l'Antiquité, surprendra moins sous la plume de l'historien qu'était Ellul : « on sait la grande opposition qui a été faite entre les athlètes grecs et les athlètes romains. Pour les premiers, l'exercice corporel était un jeu qui tendait à développer harmonieusement et librement les formes et les puissances corporelles. Pour les seconds, il s'agissait d'une technique pour avoir plus d'efficacité et vaincre » (p. 346, 1954; p. 347, 1990). Visiblement, Ellul avait connaissance d'une partie au moins des abondantes études relatives aux exercices physiques de l'Antiquité dont il ressort, effectivement, que les Romains avaient une conception des activités corporelles différente de celle des Grecs, et directement tournée vers l'usage militaire. En revanche, les historiens de l'Antiquité grecque ne manquent pas de souligner la très forte connotation religieuse des activités physiques, et des Jeux Olympiques en particulier. Dans la description du sport moderne, et pas seulement des Jeux Olympiques, le parallèle entre sport et religion revient fréquemment. On pourra juger paradoxal qu'un auteur qui a consacré une partie considérable de son œuvre au problème religieux n'ait pas manifesté de sensibilité à ce rapprochement devenu presque un cliché.

Le troisième et dernier exemple proposé par Ellul est le plus déconcertant : « Les meilleurs sportifs sortent des milieux ouvriers : les paysans, les forestiers, qui peuvent être plus vigoureux, sont de moins bons athlètes. Cela tient au fait que le travail à la machine développe une certaine musculature, juste celle qu'il faut pour le sport, très différente de la musculature paysanne ; et d'autre part ce travail développe la rapidité, la précision des gestes, des réflexes » (p. 346, 1954; p. 347, 1990).

Les sources qui permirent à l'auteur de proposer cette distinction tranchée entre performances ouvrières et paysannes resteront probablement inconnues. Nous porterons à son crédit qu'il était sans doute bon connaisseur des aptitudes des forestiers puisque l'on sait qu'il ne dédaignait pas d'emprunter une hache pour abattre un arbre, à l'occasion, à titre de détente et d'exercice physique. Mais « celui qui avait (presque) tout prévu » pourrait encore nous réserver une surprise. Des données statistiques françaises largement postérieures à l'époque de rédaction de *La technique* montrent en effet d'une part que les ouvriers pratiquent beaucoup plus le sport que les paysans, d'autre part que les aptitudes physiques sont liées à une taille élevée. Or, toujours selon les statistiques, les paysans seraient plus petits que les ouvriers...

Dans la trilogie ellulienne consacrée à la technique, *Le système technicien*¹³ et *Le bluff*

*technologique*¹⁴ font suite à *La technique*.¹⁵ Absent du *Système technicien*, le sport est à nouveau à l'honneur dans *Le bluff technologique*, avec un sous-chapitre de sept pages intercalé entre le jeu et l'auto, à l'intérieur d'un chapitre consacré au divertissement.

En introduction, une brève référence à "mon premier livre" (*La technique*, donc) et une double approche à travers le spectacle et le discours technologique: "le discours technologique a transformé le sport en énorme spectacle" (p. 430). Le spectacle, c'est évidemment la télévision, et l'omniprésence du sport dans ce média illustrée par de nombreuses statistiques. Avançons aussi l'hypothèse d'un emprunt à *La société du spectacle*¹⁶ best-seller de la littérature situationniste publié en 1967, bien connu d'un Ellul lui-même cité dans les textes sacrés de l'Internationale Situationniste. Le discours technologique, c'est, après la société technicienne et le système technicien, le maître mot qui sous-tend le troisième volet de la trilogie.

Comme dans l'ouvrage précédent, Ellul étonne par la multiplicité des exemples choisis, preuve d'une attention portée au sport en parfaite contradiction avec le désintérêt et l'ennui professés ailleurs. On relèvera aussi quelques notations naïves ou passéistes ("autrefois, l'association bordelaise pour le football était composée de Bordelais," p. 432; "mais où est donc le tennis d'antan?," p. 432), et cette formule sans appel empruntée au subtil anarchiste Cavanna: "mourir comme un con pour le Paris-Dakar" (p. 434).

La place du sport dans les médias, le professionnalisme, l'argent, la violence, sont évoqués avec abondance d'exemples et de chiffres, à l'image de l'ensemble de l'ouvrage qui regorge de statistiques et de références. Mais Ellul ne puise pas seulement dans l'actualité. Les comparaisons avec l'Antiquité fleurissent sous sa plume. Les achats de footballeurs professionnels "rappellent exactement la vente à l'encan, à Rome, des gladiateurs, des pugilistes, des conducteurs de char" (p. 432, n. 8). Les Jeux Olympiques de l'Antiquité (autre notation passéiste?) "étaient tout autre chose" (p. 433): la guerre s'arrêtait et l'unité de la Grèce était reconstituée, à l'inverse des boycotts américains, soviétiques et sud-africains. Les Jeux, avance Ellul, sont devenus un moyen de combat du fait de la technicisation de la société, et non de sa politisation "car il n'y avait pas de monde plus politisé que le monde grec!" (pp. 433-434).

Trois observations d'Ellul me frappent par leur pertinence ou leur originalité. Il décrit d'abord les courses de ces voiliers (le bassin d'Arcachon, proche de Bordeaux et prisé par les adeptes de la voile, lui était familier), qui sont devenus des supports publicitaires et des "monstres de gadgets" (p. 430, n. 6) équipés d'appareils de navigation par satellite, de décodeurs météo, d'ordinateurs de bord, de caméras pour la retransmission médiatique et que la presse présente sans rire comme "la technologie au service de l'imaginaire"

(p. 435)! Bel exemple de ce discours technologique qui masque la réalité technique et nous amène à confondre le réel et le virtuel, la cause et l'effet.

La création d'événements ensuite: ne pas laisser de vide dans l'alimentation spectaculaire du public. Cette création résulte-t-elle, comme le suggère Ellul ("il faut" créer; "on" crée) de la volonté de forces mystérieuses, des contraintes d'une technique implacable, ou plus simplement de la logique d'une programmation médiatique qui a horreur du vide et adore les recettes publicitaires? L'observation du journaliste (sic) s'époumonant à commenter, à grand renfort d'hyperboles, la retransmission d'une rencontre sportive languissante mais chèrement payée peut servir à alimenter ce débat. Notons que cette création d'événements mise en évidence dans la partie de l'ouvrage consacrée au sport s'appliquerait avec autant de pertinence à bien d'autres chapitres de l'ouvrage (jeux, divertissement, information...).

En contrepoint des dérives sportives et médiatique, Ellul nous surprend enfin par une référence un peu inattendue: la corrida, "jeu barbare ... ritualisé" (p. 433), ou encore "comportements collectifs intégrés dans une sorte d'éthique commune" (p. 433).

Terminons cette présentation des pages du *Bluff technologique* consacrées au sport par un passage qui campe Ellul dans l'originalité de sa réflexion et de son action. A propos de l'achat à prix d'or des joueurs professionnels de football, il mentionne les difficultés financières des clubs (problème naissant à la sortie de l'ouvrage et qui n'a cessé d'être d'actualité depuis), les subventions généreuses que leur versent les municipalités et le prélèvement fiscal qui en résulte pour des contribuables qui ne sont pas tous des passionnés de sport. En 1988, Ellul était certainement l'un des premiers à avoir identifié et soulevé le problème des subventions aux clubs professionnels qui devait faire l'objet, à partir de 1994, de vifs débats politiques et de décisions visant à limiter la générosité des collectivités territoriales. Mais surtout, il avait, comme il le rappelle en note, proposé une réduction fiscale pour les contribuables qui ne s'intéressaient pas aux clubs sportifs (p. 431, n. 7). Pionnier, sinon créateur, du *think global, act local*, Ellul avait choisi le sport pour sa participation à la vie locale, au même titre que la protection de l'environnement aquitain et de son littoral ou l'action en direction des jeunes délinquants.

En avril 1991, la revue *Quel corps ?* publiait son numéro 41 intitulé « Anthropophagie du sport » (sic). Riche de plus de deux cents pages, ce numéro incluait un article de sept pages intitulé « Sport et technique » signé de Jacques Ellul.¹⁷ Le responsable de la publication, Jean-Marie Brohm, signait pour sa part deux articles (*La guerre olympique ; Le sport est un assassin*), dont l'intitulé même illustre assez bien l'existence en France du courant critique évoqué plus haut.

Trouvera-t-on dans cet article les « belles erreurs » qu'il reconnaissait dans sa correspondance de 1992 avec Didier Nordon ? C'est en tous cas à ce dernier, ami commun de Jacques Ellul et de Jean-Marie Brohm, que l'on doit probablement cette contribution à *Quel corps ?*.

Après avoir rappelé en introduction ce qu'il entend par technique, Ellul expose l'image que l'on donnait du sport vers 1930, décrit ensuite l'impact de la société technique sur le sport, le corps du sportif et son matériel, pour achever son exposé avec le rôle de l'argent.

L'image que l'on donnait du sport vers 1930, lorsque commence vraiment l'ère technique, nous dit Ellul, était d'abord celle d'un jeu pratiqué au niveau local, avec un impératif de « mens sana in corpore sano ». Le sport, qui se divisait en sports de riches et sports pour tous était alors synonyme de fair play, avec des règles à respecter qui favorisaient l'apprentissage de la vie en société (notons que l'on retrouve ici la fonction de socialisation évoquée plus haut).

Dans ce passage, Ellul prend soin de garder ses distances avec le sport. Il se borne à décrire l'image que l'on en faisait, tant il est vrai que le sport est rapidement devenu une représentation idéologique et idéalisée.

Comme dans les textes tirés de *La technique* et du *Bluff technologique*, l'exposé des idées s'appuie sur des exemples précis particulièrement nombreux. Ainsi de la boxe, « un des premiers sports à être réglé ». Effectivement, sans être la plus ancienne dans son organisation et ses règles, la boxe fut constituée en association sportive en Angleterre dès 1884, sur la base de la codification effectuée par le marquis de Queensberry. Autre exemple de l'auteur relatif au football, le professionnalisme en Grande Bretagne qui existait « déjà » en 1900-1930. Mention encore une fois exacte, le football y étant devenu sport professionnel en 1885. Incollable dans cette première partie de l'article, notre auteur, décidément très en verve, ne résiste pas au plaisir de l'anecdote, que les lecteurs les plus curieux ne manqueront pas d'aller vérifier : « bien entendu, le fair play n'était pas appliqué partout : des coureurs du second Tour de France furent assommés par des partisans régionaux d'une autre équipe ». Ou encore : « dans des courses automobiles, on plaçait des clous sur la piste... ! ».

Qu'est-il advenu du sport tel qu'on le représentait au début du 20^{ème} siècle ? Dans une société technique, indique Ellul, la réussite, donc la compétitivité sont devenues des valeurs décisives. En sport, il faut choisir à tout prix le moyen de gagner car la technique nous a appris à toujours gagner. La diffusion mondiale des images par les techniques nouvelles, le goût pour le divertissement, ont encouragé l'agressivité, reléguant le beau jeu et l'élégance. Et de citer (idéalisant peut-être un peu le passé) l'exemple du boxeur Georges Carpentier. Observation lucide en

revanche sur l'extension au tennis « des muscles qui tapent avec violence » (qu'aurait dit Ellul du tennis du troisième millénaire, et particulièrement du tennis féminin?).

Les techniques en rapport avec le corps sont ensuite examinées dans leur filiation avec le taylorisme. Ellul cite l'usage du film, la préparation physique et psychologique, la diététique, et aborde les produits chimiques et les dopants. Sur l'interdiction des produits dopants, sa pensée mérite d'être reprise dans son intégralité : « Cette interdiction se comprend parfaitement lorsqu'il s'agissait de l'affrontement de deux hommes, (ou d'équipes) comparables à tous les autres, et qui pratiquaient le sport comme une sorte de distraction, comme d'autres font du théâtre amateur. Mais est-ce encore tout à fait aussi compréhensible lorsqu'il s'agit de l'affrontement de deux machines uniquement destinées à montrer leur puissance et à gagner? ».

Une telle prise de position mérite un double commentaire. En premier lieu, l'article a été publié en 1990, soit bien avant 1998, année fatidique au cours de laquelle le Tour de France, épreuve cycliste érigée en mythe et de notoriété internationale fut l'objet de révélations accablantes sur l'usage massif du dopage dans le cyclisme professionnel et amateur. Depuis 1998, le dopage dans le sport est devenu un sujet "grand public". Son existence est divulguée périodiquement par des révélations circonstanciées, embarrassantes pour le milieu sportif, alors que sa seule évocation était auparavant souvent considérée comme indécente ou sacrilège (« sportivement incorrecte » aussi bien que « politiquement incorrecte »). Le dopage n'est plus tout à fait un sujet tabou. L'année 1998 permet dès lors d'opérer une distinction impitoyable entre ceux qui avaient eu assez de lucidité et d'honnêteté intellectuelle pour aborder le problème du dopage, et ceux qui se sont contentés de prendre le train en marche, voire qui ont découvert l'existence et l'importance du phénomène sportif à travers le scandale médiatisé du dopage. Et force est de constater qu'Ellul se range dans la première catégorie.

En second lieu, dans la mobilisation de toutes les ressources techniques au service de la performance et de la victoire, l'absorption de substances chimiques peut en effet paraître parfaitement cohérente. Le dopage est une démonstration supplémentaire de la technicisation de notre société. Son acceptation tacite par les milieux sportifs et la relative indifférence de l'opinion illustrent assez bien la morale qui prévaut dans une société technicienne. Le sport en général, le dopage en particulier, s'inscrivent parfaitement dans l'analyse ellulienne.

L'article se poursuit par la dénonciation du caractère dérisoire de la précision apportée au chiffrage des records et du recours à des engins sophistiqués pour départager des concurrents que l'œil humain est

incapable de différencier : « dérision du spectacle de l'homme parfaitement déclassé par ses engins techniques ».

Autre engin évoqué, l'automobile de compétition « instrument étrange qui n'a plus de l'auto que les quatre roues ». S'ensuit une appréciation sur la recherche en matière automobile par des chercheurs « de plus en plus spécialisés, ce qui est le processus typique de la technique ». A vrai dire, le commentaire d'Ellul apporte peu sur le sujet de la course automobile et n'enrichit pas véritablement son analyse de la technique. Il s'attarde en revanche sur la bicyclette qui aurait selon lui connu la mutation la plus spectaculaire. Et il est vrai que l'engin utilisé sur piste ou dans les étapes contre la montre du Tour de France a connu des modifications très visibles. Georges Vigarello¹⁸ ferait sans doute observer que, dès les premières années de son invention, la bicyclette connut également des modifications successives notables avec l'apport de la roue libre, du pneumatique et du dérailleur. Ce dernier mécanisme, on le sait, fut d'ailleurs longtemps prohibé pour des raisons propres à « l'esprit sportif ». Peut-être alors la distinction entre les deux époques (la première précédant l'avènement de la société technicienne, comme indiqué plus haut) serait-elle à rechercher dans le passage d'un souci de perfectionnement de la machine à un souci d'obtention de la performance maximum de l'homme-machine.

Après l'examen de ces exemples précis, complétés par une brève allusion à l'évolution du saut à la perche et du ski, Ellul se livre à une interrogation sur le sens de ce « progrès » des performances, sur la réalité de la supériorité des sportifs contemporains sur leur prédécesseurs ou sur l'homme quelconque à d'autres périodes de l'histoire. Le record, conclut-il, devient une valeur en soi et atteste du triomphe des techniques sur le corps et sur les instruments.

L'article se termine sur l'évocation de l'argent dans le sport, devenu sa « raison dernière ». Ellul développe les liens, « l'auto accroissement » (par référence aux caractéristiques de la technique qu'il a définies dans ses ouvrages) entre médias, publicité, droits de retransmission, sponsoring, organismes sportifs, spectateurs et téléspectateurs. Est en outre mentionné le rôle des pouvoirs publics dans la construction des équipements sportifs. Le cumul de ces différents intervenants correspond bien, en effet, aux analyses économiques et sociologiques actuelles sur le développement du sport.

Citons les phrases conclusives de l'article qui définissent le sport comme « un divertissement qui permet d'investir des passions inemployées (dans une société qui n'a plus de valeurs) face à des millions d'hommes qui ne croient plus à rien ». Le sport est ainsi tombé dans « ce vide de sens qui caractérise notre époque, provenant du remplacement de l'action

personnelle par le spectacle d'une manifestation collective ».

Quelles impressions dominantes retirer de ce discours sur le sport échelonné sur une période de plus d'un demi-siècle, des premiers aux derniers écrits ?

Il est assez clair que le désintéret affiché et les prétendues erreurs commises sont largement contredits par une réflexion qui porte sur l'essentiel du sujet, qui vise juste et qui apporte à la démonstration, à côté de quelques illustrations invérifiables et de formules parfois hâtives, des arguments avérés recueillis dans l'actualité aussi bien que dans des ouvrages. Parmi ces derniers, il est peut-être étonnant de ne trouver ni mention ni allusion à Norbert Elias, de quinze ans l'aîné d'Ellul et comme lui historien et sociologue. Le parallèle pourrait être poussé plus loin : chez les deux auteurs, le sport est abordé rapidement dans une œuvre maîtresse (*La technique* pour Ellul en 1954, *La civilisation des mœurs* en 1939 avec une traduction française en 1973 et anglaise en 1978 pour Elias¹⁹). Mais seul ce dernier reviendra longuement sur le sport, dont il fait une clé pour la compréhension de l'évolution de nos sociétés à travers différents articles repris en traduction française sous le titre *Sport, violence et société, la violence maîtrisée*.²⁰

Autre absence, déjà relevée, la part du religieux dans le phénomène sportif, son rôle possible de substitut de la religion; Coubertin le proclamait, beaucoup en ont l'intuition. Paradoxalement, Ellul effleure à peine le sujet, mentionnant simplement ces « millions d'hommes qui ne croient plus à rien ». C'est qu'en réalité, le sport n'est pour lui qu'un épiphénomène technicien dans un monde où l'homme « reporte son sens du sacré sur cela même qui a détruit tout ce qui en était l'objet: sur la technique ».²¹

Notes

¹Jacques Ellul et Didier Nordon, *L'homme à lui-même: Correspondance* (Paris: Félin, 1992), p. 173.

²Jean-Luc Porquet, *Jacques Ellul: L'homme qui avait (presque) tout prévu* (Paris: Le Cherche-Midi, 2003).

³Jacques Ellul, *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1954; 2^e éd. Paris: Economica, 1990).

⁴Jacques Ellul, *Le bluff technologique* (Paris: Hachette, 1988).

⁵*Cahiers Jacques Ellul: Pour une Critique de la Société Technicienne*, no. 1, "Les années personnalistes," éd. Patrick Troude-Chastenet (2003).

⁶Jacques Ellul, "Fatalité du monde moderne," *Cahiers Jacques Ellul*, éd. Patrick Troude-Chastenet, no. 1 (2003), pp. 95-111.

⁷Jacques Ellul, "Le fascisme, fils du libéralisme," *Esprit*, vol. 5, no. 53 (1 fév. 1937), pp. 761-797; réimprimé dans *Cahiers Jacques Ellul*, éd. Patrick Troude-Chastenet, no. 1 (2003), pp. 113-137.

⁸*La technique*, pp. 346-348 (1954, 1990).

⁹Richard D. Mandell, *Sport, a Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 184.

¹⁰Voir cependant "Présence de la technique," in Georges Vigarello, *Du jeu ancien au show sportif: La naissance d'un mythe* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2002).

¹¹Nicolas Giudici, *La philosophie du Mont Blanc: De l'alpinisme à l'économie immatérielle* (Paris: Grasset, 2000).

¹²P. 347, 1954; p. 348, 1990. Ellul reprendrait ici un constat que l'on prête habituellement à Tocqueville.

¹³Jacques Ellul, *Le système technicien* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1977; 2^e éd. Paris: Le Cherche-Midi, 2004, avec une préface de Jean-Luc Porquet).

¹⁴V. la note 4.

¹⁵V. la note 3.

¹⁶Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1967; 3^e éd. Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

¹⁷Jacques Ellul, "Sport et Technique," *Quel corps?*, no. 41 (avril 1991), pp. 77-83.

¹⁸V. la note 10.

¹⁹Norbert Elias, *La civilisation des mœurs* ([Paris]: Calmann-Lévy, 1973; ISBN 2702101291).

²⁰Norbert Elias, *Sport, violence et société: La violence maîtrisée* (Paris: Fayard, 1994). On mentionnera le titre de l'un de ces articles, "The Quest for Excitement in Unexciting Society," qui semble faire écho aux propos d'Ellul.

²¹*La technique*, p. 131 (1954); p. 132 (1990).

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Ellul & the Internet

by Boyan Koutevski

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Forecasts of the future usually reflect the fortune teller's mysticism, and we tend to doubt them. The main reason for our distrust is the claim of their authors that these are prophecies; that they, but no one else, has "the gift" to see far into the coming future. In describing and defending themselves, they actually identify with the mage of James Frazer's "social magician."

Jacques Ellul didn't make for himself this common claim for prophecy—he didn't need to. His prophecy emanated from his very personality. His ideas were clearly enough explained and argued. There are no absolute formulas. The skilled scientist cannot afford to have a passion different from the passion toward knowledge. Ellul didn't make glamorous statements. He didn't produce neologisms. So much social phenomena needed clear and simple, but at the same time, precise explanations. Ellul never hesitated to express his point of view; he never made critics by simply mentioning different theories or others' viewpoints. Explanation and persuasion are for me the two keywords that describe his scientific approach.

Ellul foresaw the estrangement among people caused by emerging technologies and by the bewildering consumption of goods and symbols. He warned us against the depersonalization of the individual; against the scarce knowledge resulting from image-based culture; against the opportunities, which overinformation have provided the propagandists for disabling one's critical judgments; against the equalization of truth and reality in a society ruled by fake images. The French philosopher examined in depth the transition from industrialism to the technological age—an age, which today has become a vast evolution of information technologies. Though the Internet form of those technologies emerged after Ellul's death, it is relevant to ask how his thinking comprehends it.

Let's not forget that the Internet started its existence simultaneously in the university and in military research centers in the USA, hence its "parents" are totally different. Meanwhile, we shall note that for Ellul technologies go beyond the control of their physical creators and owners. Therefore, we need a broader perspective than to see the Internet in terms of its parentage, which have become synonyms for the freedom of the mind and oppression respectively.

In *The Technological Society* (1954) and its "up-grade" *The Technological Bluff* (1990) Ellul argued one of the main ideas in his works—technologies push people into compliance and the chase for perpetual effectiveness, transforming individual personalities into an obedient mass. The inevitable consequence of this malfunction of civilization is the emergence of the mass-man. Ellul gave the example of advertising's technique, whose main goal has always been the creation of artificial needs as emotional desires among the biggest possible target group, without paying any attention to the negative results of this influence. Ellul implied that the notion "technological society" is an evolution of Raymond Aron's "industrial society." We can define the Internet society along the same logical lines.

After this brief survey of information in the past, we must now assess the complete change in our own day. Confronted with what now passes for information, we note at once the intellectual and conceptual gulf that separates us from the computer. What is information for the computer? Information is defined as data. Facts and ideas are formalized in such a way that they can be communicated or manipulated by different procedures. But that data have first to be represented. This representation is used throughout. The process consists of handling the data, which may or may not be memorized. It is interesting to note that in analyses of the information handled by the computer, we find again the ideas of knowledge-information and service-information, but the words have now changed their meaning. The knowledge at issue here is comparable merely to the predigested knowledge of an encyclopedia, which gives a certain picture of the world but bears no reference to reality (1, Ellul).

Ellul spoke against the transformation of technologies from being an instrument for human progress in society and the final objective of this progress. The Internet has been mutating menacingly from the means of communication among people into communication for the sake of the process itself—alienating people and making them an easy prey for attempts to bring compliance. As knowledge media become over-informative media, they exhaust the mind in their attempt to convert this information into a subjective judgment. Ellul summarized the common principles, which drive the technologies, especially media technologies and explained their impact on culture. Technologies themselves have been emerging on a cultural base, making them adaptive to the culture system and allowing them to change it. The scientist doesn't resist technological progress, he only warns that technologies have been developing beyond human control and progress becomes a goal in itself. Internet as practically unlimited emerging media fits this definition and that's the reason it has been chosen as the research object of this retrospective study. The easy mass access to the Internet, which doesn't require some scarcely spread technical equipment, draws the problem out of the technique of physical actuality. The analysis of the Internet must get more and more philosophical rather than be only technological in nature.

A similar evolution in understanding technological innovations has been observed with any new revolutionary means of communication: steam printing press, telegraph, phone, radio, TV, and lately, with the emergence of the global electronic network. However, in contrast to its predecessors, the Internet relies more on the already existing infrastructure and industrial capacities. Therefore, its technological destiny and development dynamics, including virtual "social processing," have been foreseen.

As noted earlier, the Internet went through several stages of development to build the infrastructure that would support networking innovations. The Department of Defense, the military, the National Science Foundation, and many more, financed and helped develop the infrastructure that would eventually become today's Internet. The Internet was not immediately successful. But, as time passed, its users and builders found ways to implement the technology, slowly changing its character (2, 2).

Ellul developed a way of thinking and acting that is necessary when thinking of technology, but is not necessarily connected with machinery. *Technique*, as described by Ellul, refers to governments as well as to artifacts. In fact, it is, *the ensemble of practices by which one uses available resources to achieve certain valued ends*. The printing press is technique. Slavery is technique. The alphabet is technique. Government

is technique. Steam power is technique. Ellul claims the key characteristics of technique are rationality, artificiality, the automatism of technical choice, self-augmentation, monism, universalism, and autonomy (3, Rheingold, 1).

These are the Internet's basic features which are unique for this medium: it's the answer to the rational needs of the globalizing world; it creates artificial reality; consumption becomes a stereotype; it grows from the human desire not to stay apart from the technological advantages of computer networks; it's an autonomic medium; it covers every aspect of life; the development limitations are minimal. Ellul's view of technology is that once it is let out of the laboratory, technology cannot be turned off. Technology begets more technology. The modern world, therefore, is one in which more technology is inevitable. "Fixing" or remediating the impact of a technology like water pollution requires—you guessed it—more technology (4, Arnold, 1-2).

To the science of persuasion, Ellul's biggest contribution was the analysis of technology's social development and being. In contrast to American researchers, he didn't stick with proving the "technologies-propaganda" interaction, using examples from social practice and strict definitions of the persuasion approaches. What he did was search for the deeper psychological and social prime movers leading to propaganda's success. As a sociologist, Ellul didn't limit his effort to the standard process: the subject uses persuasion technique with X results. He researched the process as complex interaction in its systematic specificity; in so doing, he opposed the theory that only via influence and attitude change is propaganda effective. Ellul's point of view was that a person or social group could be pushed toward certain desires by the propagandist's action without being preliminarily convinced of its correctness. This decision-making pattern appeared to Ellul to be caused very much by the influence of technique.

Marshall McLuhan's review of *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes for Book Week* summarized Ellul's general finding: "...when a new technology encompasses any culture or society, the result is propaganda" (5, McLuhan). Blocking critical thinking, together with the belief that the machinery (including computers) is totally reliable, are ideal premises for successful persuasion. Professor Robert B. Cialdini also demonstrates this interconnection and defined it as "primitive automaticity" similar to animals' instinct. We are likely to use those lone cues when we don't have the inclination, time, energy or cognitive resources to undertake a complete analysis of the situation. When we are rushed, stressed, uncertain, indifferent, distracted, or fatigued, we tend to focus on less of the information available to us. When making decisions under these circumstances,

we often revert to the rather primitive but necessary single-piece-of-good-evidence approach (7, Cialdini, 236).

The total technological foundation of contemporary society has also made the propaganda total—totally pervasive, presented in every form of public communication. Ellul rejected all attempts to research propaganda in small experimental groups. To him propaganda was a unique phenomenon, springing out of almighty powers, pushing the persons in the technological society in a way that could not be reproduced in an experimental environment. The most powerful form of propaganda—sociological propaganda—has found in the Internet an excellent medium. Sociological propaganda is a phenomenon much more difficult to grasp than political propaganda, and is rarely discussed. *Basically it is the penetration of an ideology into its sociological context* (7, Ellul, 63).

In his conversations with the French journalist Patrick Troude-Chastenet, featured in the book *Jacques Ellul on Religion, Technology and Politics*, the social philosopher made a precarious balance which was unknown to the book's readers and to researchers. Ellul summarized his analysis of technological developments during his lifetime, and in the process gave his forecast for the Internet's unseen future:

I would say that I have tried to show how technology is developing completely independently of any human control. Carried away in some Promethean dream, modernman has always thought he could harness Nature, whereas what is happening is that he is building an artificial universe for himself where he is increasingly being constrained. He thought he would achieve this goal by using technology but he has ended up its slave. The means have become the goals and necessity is a virtue (8, Troude-Chastenet).

I merely have tried to start analyzing the determinist characteristics of technology with this essay. The main problem of the vast majority of texts critically examining the men-and-technology interconnection is that they are limited to human labor activity and the concrete negative ends for people in their relations with technology. I have tried to analyze it in the way Ellul did—developing the problem in more general terms, while researching also the changes in real time. In this way, he destroyed the utopia of balanced control in society, executed via some kind of technology in the way Aldous Huxley had done with his *Brave New World*. But keep in mind that Huxley's work is conditioned by and is clearly anti-utopian, in contrast to Ellul's describing real processes in contemporary society.

Jacques Ellul left this world before the Internet had shown its true social power. Mentioning here its drawbacks to social development, mainly caused by its nature as a technologically based medium, it is fair to praise its ability to change technology's role in the social process. The combination of image, sound, text and the hyperlink have brought back the opportunity to choose the messages received. Internet isn't simply one of the electronic media—it limits information access only minimally. The development of search machines containing artificial intellectual elements could not only improve the quality of the information found but also lead to its critical interpretation. The critical analysis of the global network shouldn't be done in a retrograde mode. The lack of technological progress or its violent delay or stop has always led to a distortion of the principles of democracy, not just technically but also in their very core. This analysis is necessary for society, to protect it from becoming a mass of consumer spectacles in real time, and to leave the anti-utopia nightmares of George Orwell, Aldous Huxley and Robert Sheckley in the sci-fi thriller genre. The critical point of view plays its role of “socially-tolerated pessimism.” It always tries to find problems (real or imagined) as if obsessed by paranoia, but it guarantees the transparency of the processes and the development of human-oriented technologies. Maybe the critical perspective is on its way to transform the technologically determined society into a society determining its technologies.

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Re-Viewing Ellul

*Fifty years ago, in 1954, Jacques Ellul published what would become his most famous and influential book, **La Technique**, which in 1964 was published in an English translation as **The Technological Society**. To mark this half-century milestone, the Ellul Forum asked the distinguished Penn State University professor of materials science, Rustum Roy, to re-view Ellul's great book and its contribution to our thinking.*

The Technological Society

by Jacques Ellul

Translated by John Wilkinson. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1964. Revised American edition, New York: Knopf/Vintage Books, 1967.

Original edition *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1954. Second ed. Paris: Economic, 1990.

Re-viewed by Rustum Roy

Founding Director STS Program, Penn State University;
Founding Director, Materials Research Laboratory, Penn State University

Master Jacques Ellul: A Tribute*

In the euphoric time surrounding the release of Pope John XXIIIrd's "Pacem in Terris" at a symposium in New York, John Wilkinson mentioned a book creating a stir in Europe called *La Technique* by a Professor of Law named Jacques Ellul. These comments made no connection for me until the conversation turned to the content of the book and the summary of its thesis. Put crudely: Ellul, it was said, claimed that "Technology" was not controllable by human society. That in a sense technology was ultimately an enemy of human development.

As the only working high tech scientist usually present in such theological groups, I had become accustomed to the next question, "And how would Rustum Roy respond?" In this case my interlocutors were surprised by both my reply, and the tone of delivery. My response then, as it remains today was: Ellul not only was right, but he had *underestimated* the size of the problem, and how great a danger to the future of the human race the scientific/technological enterprise *as practiced today*, posed.

I had been introduced to the thoughts of Jacques Ellul through his slim volume *The Presence of the Kingdom* (1948; ET 1953). In the radical new Christianity emerging after WWII, Dietrich Bonhoeffer had emerged as

its prophet – with his "religionless Christianity." And here was Ellul expressing very similar ideas. So when his *Technological Society* painted similar ideas on a broader canvas, it was clearly destined to be a masterpiece. Notice I do not identify "science" or "technology" *per se* as dangers to humanity, only the *present* "system," Ellul's clearly identified "technological society" which has emerged in our time.

All great societies have had science and "technology" – much of it very sophisticated. From the Egyptian pyramids to Brunelleschi's Florentine cathedral there were dramatic technological achievements. The great insight Ellul brought into play was that in the contemporary technological society, technology had surreptitiously usurped the function of mythopoesis. Why? Because it had become something quite new: a *system*; thence: the "Technological-Society"---technology completely integrated into the warp and woof of culture. That remains Ellul's and this book's greatest insight, still hardly appreciated, even in academia.

The technological society was a conspiracy without conspirators. As Ellul clearly understood, our collective universal conspiracy is to allow our baser personal desires to be manipulated to undercut the collective good. Why? Because we had abandoned the transcendent values: we had dethroned all gods and God. Over the years I have phrased it thus: Technology is America's religion— with rigid practices, rituals, and liturgies—and Science has become its rather one-dimensional theology. It is surely necessary for academics never to discuss together incommensurable units such as "science and religion": one can not measure volume (the three dimensions of religion) in the units of length, linear science (cm). Our arguments should pit technology against religion as they interface in Ellul's *Technological Society*.

The other great insight of Ellul was that modern technology had mastered the art of using appropriate feedback loops to take over larger and larger spheres of human activity. Technology gives humans what their hearts desire, and for which humans will gladly sacrifice all their cherished values.

As we at Penn State helped seed and shape what was to become the national (and later international) Science, Technology & Society movement, it became clear that Ellul was in some ways the philosophical rock on which our call rested. I therefore approached him to join our fledgling movement to bridge the divide in C. P. Snow's "Two Cultures" world. He joined me as a Co-Editor in Chief for the *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*. At an early national Conference of the National

Association for STS, Ellul sent over a 45 minute speech in French for the opening plenary lecture. We played it, as I remember, with an English translation in voice-over. It appeared in the *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*. That surely was appropriate, for in “STS” as an emerging academic field no one could be more relevant than Jacques Ellul and now as his various updates of the Technological Society have emerged, I would hope that no one can get any degree in STS without a real familiarity with Ellul’s Technological Society concept. It is particularly fitting that Ellul’s Canadian protege, Prof. W. Vanderburg has succeeded both of us as Editor in Chief of that Journal.

But there is another way in which Ellul underestimates the danger we stand in – that is the danger, not only from technology, but from “science” of various degrees of “basicity.” Unlike Ellul, I have lived 100% immersed in that world of academic basic science *and* its applications in the real world for, six decades, while being, like Ellul, simultaneously a committed socially-and-politically *active* liberal, inclusivist Christian and, also like Ellul, an active but “outsider” participant in established church circles. I have very little patience for the esoteric *academic* science – religion dialogues about the Big Bang, evolution, etc. distracting citizens and even believers from the full bodied nature of religion and the Gospel imperatives of feeding the poor or loving enemies. Ellul, to the best of my knowledge, never discussed the fine points of evolution or string theory, and its relevance to the nature of God!! Nothing would be more irrelevant to the existential relation of “S/T” to religion as practiced. My experience is that modern science *as practiced today* has become, in fact, “scientism”. It has created in the West an oxymoronic “culture of disbelief”; since all other cultures cohere around a set of beliefs (*resultant practices and rituals*). “Scientism”, by actual acknowledgement or default, seduces most regular scientists into a frame of reference that has *all* reality subjected to evaluation by scientific measurements however narrow or irrelevant they may be. With the incredible degree of reductionist fragmentation, (disciplinary specialization in the common parlance) which creates a hitherto unknown condition: where no one “specializes” in the whole, i.e. in the biggest overarching issues of life in Society—in a word— religion. This is what Ellul did. He put together *in his life* his academic and theological insights with his actions – his praxis.

The part (science) is claiming, putting on airs, indeed positioning itself as the whole (Religious behavior), while entering into so-called conversations on “Science & Religion.” Among the world’s theologians, only Huston Smith (see his book *Religion Matters*) has clearly spotted this trend and attacked it vigorously. Among distinguished scientists, only C.F. von Weisäcker has identified the danger. In the closing paragraphs of “The History of Nature” Weisäcker writes:

But when knowledge without love becomes the hireling of the resistance against love, then it assumes the role which in the Christian mythical imagery is the role of the devil. The serpent in paradise urges on man knowledge without love.

Anti-Christ is the power in history that leads loveless knowledge into the battle of destruction against love. But it is at the same time also the power that destroys itself in its triumph. The battle is still raging. We are in the midst of it, at a post not of our choosing where we must prove ourselves.

Ellul was at his post proving himself!!

Yet a final topic which must be addressed is the Janus-like character of Ellul’s work: his deep, voluminous theological works on the one hand, and his “STS” writings including his cornerstone, *The Technological Society* on the other. There was little cross-referencing between the two realms in Ellul’s own writing. I have not seen this commented on widely by others. Perhaps only Willem Vanderburg, with his five year apprenticeship under Ellul, could fill out this story for the community. And in fact in a short second Appendix to his recent book “Perspectives on our Age” Vanderburg has given his very sound hypothesis on why Ellul did not link his two foci explicitly. I found the case very well argued. Contemporary culture simply cannot be mapped on to a Christian mythos. These worlds remain separated, with the rare working participants in both shuttling between them, fitting in, incognito, in both camps – rarely betraying their other allegiances. Like Kierkegaard’s Knight of Faith, the sensitized believer appears no different from other knights in the ordinary world (of technology.) Like Petru Dumitriu’s believers living in the even more constrained communist bloc, described in his great classic work, “Incognito,” they learn to use a special, largely unspoken, language when communicating among themselves.

In summary: Ellul is with little doubt the most significant author for the STS field; the unchallenged philosopher of technology, and the theologian providing a “Guide for the Perplexed” for believers living in a “Technological Society.”

*This appellation, “Master Jacques” used by my friend and colleague, Ivan Illich, at a celebrating event shortly before Ellul’s death, has a great ring to it.

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In Review

Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age

by **Bill McKibben.**

New York: Henry Holt, Times Books, 2003. xiii., 272 pp.

Reviewed by **David W. Gill**

Bill McKibben writes regularly for the *New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and many other publications. Among his previous books are *The End of Nature* and *The Age of Missing Information*. McKibben's *Enough* is an impassioned call for debate on whether we should set limits on developments in human genetic engineering and advanced forms of robotics and nanotechnology. His belief is that these technologies "may alter our relationship not just with the rest of nature but with ourselves" and "call into question, often quite explicitly, our understanding of what it means to be a human being." (xii).

McKibben fends off the possible charge of impeding progress and playing the Luddite by saying such charges are "as silly as accusing someone of being a prohibitionist because he'd rather leave a barroom with a warm glow than a spinning head" (xii). Is it possible that our technological reach is now far enough? Can we limit ourselves? Should we do so?

McKibben is especially concerned about germline genetic engineering and cloning. So far this has not been successfully done on humans but recent progress on both plants and animals and the lack of public discussion is an ominous portent. Part of McKibben's concern is with the potential for unintended, dangerous, even macabre consequences. But the center of his argument is with the erosion of our humanity as we turn ourselves into technical objects, devices, engineered phenomena. Part of what it means to be human is to struggle against our limits; to transgress all limits by technological decisions would be to erase one of the essential features of our humanity.

Echoing Bill Joy's famous article, McKibben also argues that nanotechnology, miniaturization, self-replicating assemblers, and robotics are to inanimate matter what biotechnology is to animate matter. The two realms are threatening---and converging.

McKibben's answer is that we say "enough" and pronounce the world we live in "good." He quotes technophile futurist Lee Silver as saying we are on a "journey into a rapidly evolving future that no man, or woman, could stop" (p. 163). It is this arrogance and assumption of inevitability that McKibben challenges. McKibben gives examples of how various societies and groups have said "no" at various points. The Amish lifestyle, the European rejection of genetically modified food, the rejection of DDT, the resistance to nuclear power plants, some progress in controlling population growth . . .

there are examples of a human capacity to resist what looks like inevitable scientific-technological prescriptions for our lives.

The scientists and their business investors are unlikely to be willing to stop on their own; a broader social debate is necessary. The answer is most certainly not to stop all scientific and technological advance; rather, it is to set some boundaries at critical points where our humanity is clearly at stake. McKibben's argument is well-written, provocative, and deserving of careful consideration.

Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on His Life and Work

Edited by **Willem H. Vanderburg**

Revised edition. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2004. xvii, 131 pp.. Original edition, 1981.

Reviewed by **David W. Gill**

Bill Vanderburg is the founding director of the Centre for Technology and Social Development at the University of Toronto and the author of *The Growth of Minds and Cultures* and *The Labyrinth of Technology*. Vanderburg is one of a long procession of students, researchers, and activists from North America and around the world to travel to Bordeaux for shorter or longer periods of study with Jacques Ellul. Vanderburg carried out "four-and-a-half years of postdoctoral work" with Ellul during the 1970s (p. x) and has continued to ponder and extend the ideas of Ellul during a quarter century as a professor working with engineering students and others.

Perspectives on Our Age is a superb introduction to Jacques Ellul's core ideas and perspectives and we can be grateful that it has now been republished. Vanderburg first worked with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to create a series of radio programs on Ellul with interviews of Ellul himself and commentary by others. (It would be great if these programs could be reissued on a compact disc). Following the radio broadcasts in 1979 and 1980, Vanderburg developed the material into the present manuscript. Vanderburg mapped out the organization and questions; Ellul provided the answers and narrative.

Perspectives has four main sections: (1) The Questions of My Life, (2) Understanding our Age, (3) The Present and the Future, and (4) Faith or Religion? Ellul's basic perspectives on technique/technology, Marx and Marxism, politics and the state, and Christianity and religion are all sketched out in an understandable way, with a lot of helpful personal and historical context.

The original preface to the first edition was not included in the Seabury Press publication of 1981 for some reason. It is now included along with a new preface and two additional appendices from Bill Vanderburg. Appendix 1 gives Vanderburg's understanding of Ellul's concept of technique; appendix 2 gives his understanding of the relation of Ellul's sociology to his Christian faith and theology. Some readers will, no doubt, find the Vanderburg additions helpful.

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The IJES (with its francophone sister-society, L'Association Internationale Jacques Ellul) links together scholars and friends of various specializations, vocations, backgrounds, and nations, who share a common interest in the legacy of Jacques Ellul (1912-94), long time professor at the University of Bordeaux. Our objectives are (1) to preserve and disseminate his literary and intellectual heritage, (2) to extend his social critique, especially concerning technology, and (3) to extend his theological and ethical research with its special emphases on hope and freedom.

The IJES and AIJE have been founded by a group of long-time students, scholars, and friends of Jacques Ellul, with the counsel and support of Jean, Yves, and Dominique Ellul, and as a French-American collaboration.

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Political Illusions & Realities

by David W. Gill

President, International Jacques Ellul Society

In this year of great anniversaries, a local one that has special meaning for me has been the 40th anniversary of the Free Speech Movement at the University of California. This past month in Berkeley we have had various reunions, reminiscences, panel discussions, speeches, rallies, and even a reenactment of Mario Savio's speech standing on top of a police car surrounded by thousands of seated demonstrators on Sproul Plaza.

I was an 18-year-old freshman student just starting at Berkeley when the student movement started in October 1964. I often joke that it is hard for me to study without the smell of tear gas in the air because the two are so closely associated in my experience! I loved the Free Speech Movement (and, for that matter, I was an enthusiastic participant in most of the movements that followed: demanding multicultural studies options, more diversity in the student body and on the faculty, a more thoughtful university development approach ("People's Park!"), and a rejection of the catastrophic Vietnam war).

The university was dramatically improved by these movements and the forty-year celebration is fully warranted. But there were two aspects to these movements that began to trouble me within a year of the launch of the Free Speech Movement.

Two Weaknesses in the Student Movement

The first problem was the *inconsistency*, even hypocrisy, of some of the movement and leadership. "Free speech for me, but not for thee"---was one way this played out. No, I didn't like Dow Chemical or R.O.T.C., either, but authentic free speech means having debates, not shouting down those we don't agree with. I was then, and am now, an advocate of radically free speech, not a selectively permitted speech (one reason why the IJES is a "big tent," inclusivist group rather than a sectarian elite as some would have it).

Same with violence: the Free Speech Movement, like much of the Civil Rights Movement, was nonviolent, using tactics like administrative office sit-ins, class disruptions, campus work stoppages, and the like. But when these non-violent tactics were replaced by some violence against people (including some innocent bystanders)---and truly idiotic destruction of property---I had to protest against the protesters.

The second problem was *naïveté*. We needed social challenge and change and there was some great thinking that went on in those days. But there was also some truly awesome naïveté regarding human nature, communities, tradition, and social and political change.

Enter Ellul

This is where Jacques Ellul stepped into my picture. I had heard about him in the mid-1960s but it was only in 1971 that I finally read *The Meaning of the City* for an article on urbanization I was writing. Then in 1972 I read four of his books in quick succession: *The Political Illusion*, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, *Presence of the Kingdom*, and *False Presence of the Kingdom*. I had seen these titles listed on the fly-leaf to *The Meaning of the City* and now read them to help me prepare to cover the Democratic Convention in Miami Beach in summer 1972 (with a press pass from *Radix Magazine* in Berkeley).

To say that I was "blown away" by the stunning political insight of Ellul is an understatement. With Ellul's help I was able to see much more clearly the political illusion and reality of the McGovern/Nixon contest and the larger society which hosted it. (Almost on a whim I sent some of my book reviews and articles to Ellul in the fall of 1972; his encouraging letter back to me was the beginning of a 22-year correspondence and what I recently added up as about 24 months of residence in Bordeaux over the years).

Deeper Forces Driving Political Reality

Jacques Ellul's political insight struck me first of all with its *depth*. Most political discussion and thought today is conducted in the world of images, he explained. Ephemeral current events, news sound bites, slogans, and image management---this is where the political passions of the citizens are engaged. Since Ellul's analyses of forty to fifty years ago, all of this has become more blatant than ever, embraced by journalists, politicians, and voters alike.

Meanwhile, underneath this surface froth the actual directions of our society and world are set by the deeper forces of technique, bureaucratization, the globalizing-technological-corporate economic order, the desperate search for survival, social order, and meaning by Islamic societies, and so on. Failing to insist that we explore, understand, and engage these deeper forces---rather than just adding rhetorical fuel to the fires passing for today's political debate---is a betrayal of our calling as thoughtful, reflective people in our world.

Self-criticism and the Search for a Third Way

The second contribution Ellul made to my political thinking was his continual call for self-criticism and an end to hypocrisy. We must help our "side" to understand the other side and to recognize and address our own failures and inconsistencies, not just those of our opponents. Christians, especially, should search for a "third way" beyond the standard options of Left and Right.

Radical, deep, courageous, self-critical, liberating, innovative, humane . . . these are some of the central characteristics of Ellul's political orientation. In the era of Bush, Kerry, Nader & Co. (to speak only of the American context) . . . it is of the highest urgency that some voices be raised for a different political path with these characteristics.

Resources for Ellul Studies

www.ellul.org & www.jacques-ellul.org

Two indispensable web sites

The IJES/AIJE web site at www.ellul.org contains (1) news about IJES and AIJE activities and plans, (2) a brief and accurate biography of Jacques Ellul, (3) a complete bibliography of Ellul's books in French and English, and (4) links and information on other resources for students of Jacques Ellul. The new AIJE web site at www.jacques-ellul.org offers a French language supplement.

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Cahiers Jacques Ellul

Pour Une Critique de la Societe Technicienne

The second issue of *Cahiers Jacques Ellul*, an annual journal edited by Patrick Chastenot and published by our sister society, L'Association Internationale Jacques Ellul, is now available for 20 euros (postage included) to individuals outside France, and for 25 euros to libraries. The theme of the second issue is "La Technique."

Cahiers Jacques Ellul is an essential new reference for those interested in Ellul's ideas.

Jacques Ellul: An Annotated Bibliography of Primary Works

by Joyce Main Hanks. Research in Philosophy and Technology. Supplement 5. Stamford, CT: JAI Press, 2000. xiii., 206 pages. \$87. ISBN: 076230619X.

This is the essential guide for anyone doing research in Jacques Ellul's writings. An excellent brief biography is followed by a 140-page annotated bibliography of Ellul's fifty books and thousand-plus articles and a thirty-page subject index. Hank's work is comprehensive, accurate, and invariably helpful. This may be one of the more expensive books you buy for your library; it will surely be one of the most valuable. Visit www.elsevier.com for ordering information.

Alibris---used books in English

The Alibris web site (www.alibris.com) lists thirty titles of used and out-of-print Jacques Ellul books in English translation available to order at reasonable prices.

Librairie Mollat---new books in French

Librairie Mollat in the center of old Bordeaux (www.mollat.com) is an excellent resource for French language books, including those by and about Ellul. Mollat accepts credit cards over the web and will mail books anywhere in the world.

Used books in French: two web resources

Two web sites that will be of help in finding used books in French by Jacques Ellul (and others) are www.chapitre.com and www.livre-rare-book.com.

Reprints of Nine Ellul Books

By arrangement with Ingram and Spring Arbor, individual reprint copies of several Ellul books originally published by William B. Eerdmans can now be purchased. The books and prices listed at the Eerdmans web site are as follows: *The Ethics of Freedom* (\$40), *The Humiliation of the Word* (\$26), *The Judgment of Jonah* (\$13), *The Meaning of the City* (\$20), *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (\$19), *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (\$28), *The Subversion of Christianity* (\$20), and *The Technological Bluff* (\$35). *Sources and Trajectories: Eight Early Articles by Jacques Ellul* translated by Marva Dawn is also available (price unknown).

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Ellul on Video

French film maker Serge Steyer's film "Jacques Ellul: L'homme entier" (52 minutes) is available for 25 euros at the web site www.meromedia.com. Ellul is himself interviewed as are several commentators on Ellul's ideas.

Another hour-length film/video that is focused entirely on Ellul's commentary on technique in our society, "The Treachery of Technology," was produced by Dutch film maker Jan van Boekel for ReRun Producties (mail to: Postbus 43021, 1009 ZA Amsterdam).

If you try to purchase either of these excellent films, be sure to check on compatibility with your video system and on whether English subtitles are provided, if that is desired.