

# The Ellul Forum

For the Critique of Technological Civilization

Issue 43                      Spring 2009

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## *Ellul in Scandinavia*



*“Our hope lies in starting from the individual---from total subjectivity. . . This radical subjectivity will inform . . . the three human passions . . . to create, to love, to play. But these mighty drives of the human heart must find a particular expression in each person . . . in the building of a new daily life. . . Kierkegaard, it seems to me, alone can show us how to start.”*

**-Jacques Ellul**

**“Between Chaos and Paralysis,”**  
*Christian Century* 85 (3 June 1968), p. 749

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# The Ellul Forum

For the Critique of Technological Civilization

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*The Ellul Forum* is published twice per year, in the Spring and Fall. Its purpose is to analyze and apply Jacques Ellul's thought to our technological civilization and carry forward both his sociological and theological analyses in new directions.

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# From the Editor

Our front cover quotation reminds us of how important the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard was to Jacques Ellul. This issue introduces recent work on Ellul in Scandinavia. Two active Ellul scholars are featured—Erik Persson of Lund University (Sweden) and Monica Papazu of the Loegum Kloster Theological Institute (Denmark). They give an account of Ellul's books translated into Swedish and Danish. Christian Braw is a well-known Swedish author with an interest in Ellul and one of his essays is included. Ellul is an active presence in Scandinavia as the Nordic countries deal with technological innovation, globalization and political change. As additional scholarship on Ellul in Scandinavia becomes available, the *Forum* will introduce that information to our readers.

Previous issues of the *Forum* have been geography-specific. Ellul scholarship in Latin America was featured in Issue #40. Ivan Illich called Ellul "a master who decisively affected my pilgrimage" and we went with Illich from Mexico to Germany in Issue #31. Issue #30 featured Myung Su Yang's book-length work on Ellul published in Korean.

Ellul's influence in England, the United States and Canada is well-documented. The *Forum* has included articles from the Netherlands and New Zealand. Joyce Hanks' *Reception of Jacques Ellul's Critique of Technology* shows the global reach of Ellul studies. But *Forum* issues such as this one featuring Scandinavia, enable those of us interested in Ellul to learn from each other, both in theory and application.

Virginia Landgraf, Board of Directors, International Jacques Ellul Society, is editing an issue of the *Forum* on economics/economic ideologies. She welcomes your ideas and contributions [kaencat@sbcglobal.net]. Manuscripts you wish to have considered on any Ellul-related topics are invited by the editor. Material for "News and Notes," "Ellul Resources" and queries about book reviews should be sent to David Gill.

*The Ellul Forum* and the International Jacques Ellul Society are all-volunteer activities, funded entirely by membership dues and small donations. We appreciate your solidarity and support.

*Clifford G. Christians, Editor*  
editor@ellul.org

# Cybergnosticism Triumphant?

## Towards an Ellulian Analysis of Cyberspace and Cybergaming

by Erik Persson

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**Abstract.** *In order to penetrate behind the commonplace views of the current attempts to bring to fruition the vision of cyberspace, i.e. a shared, computer-generated, internet-based 3-D “virtual world,” and to arrive at a proper understanding of the driving forces behind the ongoing cyberspace revolution, its historical, ideohistorical, and mythistorical roots as well as the motive backgrounds of the key personages involved in bringing it about must be explored. In particular, the question as to how “worldviews” and various extra-scientific motivations and pursuits, such as gnostic-utopian ideas and schemes – possibly disseminated through, for example, science fiction literature and films – impinge on and direct research and development in and about these topics and how they relate to the neglected ethical issues of the field needs to be attended to. In order to put the ongoing cyberspace revolution into some kind of macrohistorical context, we may take our cue from, inter alia, Marshall McLuhan’s media theory, Jacques Ellul’s notions of “la Technique” and “le bluff technologique,” Paul Virilio’s observations on “extreme science,” Eric Voegelin’s insights about the gnostic character of modernism, and various theories and approaches formed within the field of the philosophy of technology as well as from an ideohistorical scrutiny of the seminal notions and thought structures involved.*

### The Brave New World of Virtual Entertainment

Recently, there has been a great uproar around the phenomenon of computer gaming in the daily press and other media. Brash headlines call attention to a quickly growing addiction problem amongst the

young, and reports proliferate about youngsters who have lost their youth to the machine, sacrificing friends, family, their education, and most ingredients of a normal youth to a life-style of persistent gaming.

Interviewed parents bitterly regret the day they provided their child with a computer, telling distressing stories about children who stay up all night playing games, neglecting or even dropping out of school because of their all-consuming interest in videogame playing, and react violently to any attempt to mitigate or stop their addictive gaming habits. For instance, one Swedish teenager deprived of his computer by his parents is reported to have smashed the furnishings of his and the parents’ home and a 16-year-old Maryland videogame enthusiast tried to hire a hit-man to have his mother and stepfather killed, when his mother confiscated his PlayStation.

Just like alcoholics and drug addicts, game-addicted children are now regularly treated by psychologists and psychiatrists in order to get rid of their addictive behaviour, and there are even specialized clinics and treatment programmes available for the more serious cases. A steady stream of new books, such as [GD99], [Winn02], [Stey03], and [Brun05], offers advice to the troubled parents of the victims of the new videogame obsession, while “videogame addiction” and “Internet addiction disorder” are currently being considered for inclusion amongst the officially recognized medical diagnoses of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). A poll made in 2004 in Sweden by Fair Play, an organisation formed by concerned parents and researchers, indicated that as many as 40.000 (about 6%) of all Swedish children between 11 and 16 years of age exhibit addictive gaming behaviour, spending more than 35 hours per week on video gaming (see [Fair04]; cf. also [Fair05]), and the results of these and similar polls from all over the world have been the subject of much debate and altercation. In at least

three highly-publicized cases, inveterate gamers have died from exhaustion due to excessively extended spells of computer gaming. The lure of virtual reality (VR) environments has been discussed in terms of “electronic LSD” and “virtual delirium” since the early 90s, and some researchers have taken advantage of concepts from research on altered states of consciousness, such as notably Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow, in order to describe the mesmerizing effects of computer gaming and their shrewdly thought-out reward systems (see [Csik90]; cf. also [Bart07]).

The phenomenon of massive multiplayer online games (MMOGs or MMOs), the iconic examples of which will be the immensely popular World of Warcraft and Second Life, has added an economic dimension to the problem picture, since on-line gamers usually pay for access to the game worlds as well as for various related services and virtual paraphernalia, such as virtual weapons or territory, sometimes spending huge amounts on virtual “investments” (cf. [Cast05]). MMOGs have grown big business, becoming extremely popular during the last few years with millions, or in some cases even tens of millions, of players all over the world; in South Korea there are even two television channels devoted to broadcasting events in the MMOG “worlds”. A growing number of people spend most of their waking hours in these gaming worlds, occasionally even trying to make a living out of on-line gaming, and skilled third-world gamers offer the service of increasing the valuable properties of rich Westerners’ avatars by persistent gaming.

That the younger generations’ fascination with the thrill-laden world of electronic media – TV, video, computer games – in lieu of the staid world of books, studies, and erudition is a major culprit in the decline in educational skills widely observed amongst university students, seems to be the common opinion in academe. Amongst the effects of video game playing vindicated by researchers into the field are, besides addiction tendencies and reduced cognitive brain function and educational performance, an increase in aggressive and violent thoughts, emotions, and behaviour, a corresponding decrease in social behaviours, and various health problems, such as obesity and depression (see [Gent03], [Ande03], [GA05] and [Spit06]). In particular, there has been a heated discussion going on as to the relationship between various forms of violent criminality, such as the school shootings in Columbine, Heath High School, Dawson College and elsewhere, and violent

computer games and other forms of media violence. Sadistic or hyperviolent games, such as Doom, Mortal Kombat, Manhunt, Postal<sup>2</sup>, Duke Nukem 3D, or Grand Theft Auto, have been part of the picture in several brutal murder cases and school shootings, although their precise significance in these cases is the subject of dispute. According to [GD99] and others, many videogames take advantage of techniques similar to those used by the military to harden people emotionally against their natural repugnance against killing or violently attacking other people, in effect being nothing but “murder simulators”. In fact, in military training such “first-person shooter” videogames are used to teach soldiers how to shoot and kill. Notably, the user interfaces of modern remote-controlled weapon systems tend to be indistinguishable from typical videogame or virtual reality user interfaces, subtly blurring the border between killing in fantasy and in real life.

Some researchers (notably [Gunt98], [Free02], [EH03], and [LB05]) have criticised the trend to paint computer gaming in black only, questioning the above results on methodological and other grounds and citing positive effects in, for example, spatial capabilities and reaction time. However, their rather off-handed dismissal of a very large body of research certainly is not beyond criticism (see, for example, [Ande03a-b], [HT03], [Spit06], and [AGB07]), and the positive effects cited seem vague and of questionable significance when compared to the negative ones claimed by their opponents and confirmed by common sense. In addition, it has been noted that the entertainment and media industry is apt to guard its vested interests by funding and promoting such critical researchers, bringing to the fore the sore issue of these researchers’ impartiality (see, for example, [Ande03a-b] and [Spit06] p. 255). In any case, researchers and others developing and making a business of the new technology generally take little interest in the dangers inherent in it, but rather tend to entertain a discourse of fantastic expectations and grandiose predictions, typical of what I have called “cybernetic joachimism” (see [Pers02] p. 484 et seqq.). Arguably, their and their scholarly defenders’ neglect of or facile rebuff of the, to common sense at least, rather obvious negative consequences and conspicuous dangers of these technologies. This seems to confirm Jacques Ellul’s famous thesis of the fundamental deceitfulness of technological discourse, “le bluff technologique” (see [Ellu90]), whereby all negative aspects of technological “progress” are swept under the rug or made light of in the interest of

the “wager” (“l’enjeu du siècle”) that we shall be able to control technology to our own advantage, the unspoken premise of which being “after us the deluge”.

For, indeed, these developments will raise many disturbing questions: Will a gradual “exodus” of mankind into cyberspace, as [Cast07] proclaims, take place by our giving up our allegedly dull natural life-world for a more “fun” virtual dream world, where various cunningly calculated thrills and kicks, the refined scientific technologies of an ever-growing “experience industry”, will make us captive to a permanent state of virtual coma or psychosis? What will the development towards increasingly realistic 3-D graphics environments entail, in particular when enhanced by the widespread use of immersive virtual reality equipment such as head-mounted displays, data gloves, or 3-D audio and force feedback devices? If today’s fairly primitive electronic media are capable of spellbinding people and propagating, undermining, and homogenising beliefs, morals, and attitudes in ways that many will find disquieting or unpalatable, their immersive VR counterparts have the potential of becoming immensely more impressive, powerful, and addictive; hence also the talk about virtual reality as “electronic LSD” (see [Rhei91] p. 353 et seqq. and [Zett96] p. 91 et seqq.). If people start spending large portions of their spare time (and perhaps working time as well) in “synthetic worlds” (so [Cast05]), thereby taking part in, as it were, an exodus from reality as well as the much less intrusive alternative realities provided by literature, theatre, art, and the like, this will indubitably have consequences for mankind and society that give at least some of us pause.

Certainly, tomorrow’s VR entertainment will offer all the brutality, decadence, obscenity, and vulgarity of today’s video games, telecasts, docusoaps, and video films, but writ large, potentially at least, being capable of producing so much more of obtrusiveness and realism than ever will be possible on today’s coarse CRT and TFT displays. By offering a highly lifelike, but imaginary “room of one’s own”, where no normal moral responsibilities and restrictions any longer obtain and where “telepathological” influences from all the world will be directly accessible at everyone’s fingertips, will not cyberspace present insuperable evil temptations to many people, not a few of whom will be children or adolescents, nay the intrusion of the deepest recesses of Hell into everyone’s sitting room and nurseries? If it is true that today’s electronic media, such as television and video games

in particular, are highly addictive, what are we to expect from a virtual reality already dubbed “electronic LSD”? If today’s electronic media have been highly conducive to the escalation of violence in society and the dissolution of family and community life, as hardly can be denied, what can we expect from those growing up with a daily dose of hyperrealistic virtual carnage and carnality? What will the person be like who will appear from long-time immersion in all kinds of “ultraviolent” (see [Ande03]), more or less corrupt and perverted, virtual realities and repeatedly exposed to the ego-dissolving allures of “identity tourism” (so [Naka00])? Can we hope that man will be able to cope with such an assault on his own essence in any reasonable way? These and many similar questions are closely connected to the wider question as to how media in general and electronic media in particular affect man and society.

### **From the Global Village to Discarnate Man**

Marshall McLuhan is best known as the founding father of modern media theory and the cheerful prophet of the Internet era, but he was in fact a stunningly erudite scholar and a metahistorian of some standing as well. In McLuhan’s construal of the past, the main caesurae of history are marked by the shifts in media, as epitomised by the famous quip “the medium is the message” (see [McLu64] p. 7 et seqq.; cf. also [Chan94]). By this catch phrase, so typical of McLuhan, were spotlighted “the structuring powers of media to impose their assumptions subliminally” ([McLu62] p. 216), amputating and extending man’s being and senses in subtle ways and, thus, changing “the ratio of the senses”. McLuhan also made a distinction between two types of media, “cold” and “hot”, which can be illustrated by the difference between a photograph and a cartoon (see [McLu64] p. 22 et seqq.). Cold media, such as the cartoon, speech, the telephone, and television are “low definition”, insofar as they, containing little data and detail, provide but an outline that makes it necessary for the recipient to fill in and “participate” in order to understand, whereas hot media, such as a photograph, a page of print, a lecture, movie pictures, or the radio, being rich in data and detail, extend a single sense in “high definition” and demand little mental participation.

According to McLuhan, the introduction of phonetic literacy made for a major shift of emphasis between the human senses, “the ratio of the senses”, from the original predominance of “acoustic space” in pre-literate, tribal life to that of the “visual space” of

literate society, as reflected in the change from primitive, non-representative art to the representative plasticity of, for instance, classical Greek art. Thus, the art of writing changed man's very *modus essendi* in various subtle ways, from tribal man's impulsive, emotional, weakly defined ego to the controlled, goal-oriented, rationalistic individuality of literate man (see [McLu62] p. 51 et seqq.). Likewise, the Reformation, the centralised national state, the formation of "the public", the modern self-conscious, alienated individuals and groups of individuals, ideologies, mass man, the desacralisation of the cosmos, and modern science together with its worldview, specialism, incessant technological change, industrialism, mass production, and market economy would hardly be conceivable without the printing press, which, thus, strongly amplifies the rationalist bias inherent already in manuscript literacy.

More recently introduced electric-electronic media, such as the telegraph, the telephone, radio, film, television, and, of course, the networked computer, have changed or are about to change man's being once again. But what will the outcome of this shift be? According to McLuhan, electronic media inaugurate the third age of "the global village", an epoch of a "post-literate" second orality, which will give us back the participatory collectivity, a kind of holistic, integral, right brain-hemisphere awareness, and the "buzzing" and chattering audile-tactile space that used to surround the tribal village, but amplified to a global scale, supplanting the predominance of the visual space characteristic of the age of phonetic literacy with its proclivity for linearity, logic, causal reasoning, sequentiality, fragmentation, homogenisation, and left hemisphere mentality. Sometimes he referred to this resurgent mode of being as "robotism", in contrast to the "angelism" of Western literary man, enslaved by the domination of the left hemisphere of his brain (see [MP89]). To bring mankind together into "the global village" united by electronics will thus be the most significant implication of the computerised information networks. In the end, McLuhan thus arrives at a tripartite interpretation of history, where the "cool" pre-literate, participatory culture of primitive happiness is followed by the "hot", rationalist literate culture – the temperature being considerably raised by the introduction of the printing press –, which he prophetically pronounces to be about to be ensued by the "cool", once again participatory "post-literate" age of electric and electronic media, when man will finally be restored to his primordial acoustic happiness.

McLuhan, however, also recognised that every new technology not only provides benefits to man, but also implies a loss, as the balance between the human senses is implicitly changed by the new technology. In a letter to the Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain from May 6, 1969, he famously wrote ([McLu87] p. 370, [McLu99] p. 72; cf. also [Angl05] p. 15 for some similar reflections):

Electric information environments being utterly ethereal fosters the illusion of the world as a spiritual substance. It is now a reasonable facsimile of the mystical body, a blatant manifestation of the Anti-Christ. After all, the Prince of this World is a very great electrical engineer.

During the 70s, McLuhan in fact changed his mind fundamentally on the electronic media revolution, forming a much more gloomy view of its consequences (see [McLu78]; cf. also [Marc98] p. 248 et seqq., [Tayl96], and [McDo97]). Step by step, he developed the idea of "discarnate man", who, liberated from the physical limitations of corporeality through various kinds of electronic equipment, no longer identifies his self with his body, but with a shadowy, gnostic pattern of information and, swamped by the deluge of incoming information and images, tends to live in a hypnotic state between fantasy and reality, where he will suffer a breakdown between the conscious and unconscious parts of his psyche and, having lost identity, civility, literacy, discipline, purpose in life, and the sense of natural law, will become a brute prone to acts of violence and crude amorality. The relevance of this conception of "discarnate man" when trying to make sense of the effects of the developments in cyberspace and cyber-gaming technologies as described above will be obvious.

### **Discarnate Man, La Technique, and Extreme Science—Technocalypse Now!**

McLuhan's insights about "discarnate man" can be compared and combined with Jacques Ellul's conclusions in his great trilogy on modern technology, the three volumes of which were published 1954-1987 as *La Technique*, *Le système technicien*, and *Le bluff technologique* (see [Ellu64], [Ellu80], and [Ellu90]). According to Ellul, "the

technical phenomenon” (la Technique), being the most decisive power of our time, can by no means be controlled or supervised (the famous “autonomy thesis”) and is continually and relentlessly expanding into every nook and cranny of our life-world. At the same time, it eliminates everything else, gradually replacing nature and society with a more and more technical-artificial environment. Apparently, cyberspace will be the ultimate upshot of this unstoppable self-augmentation of la Technique, substituting an electronically generated virtual world for physical space and our entire natural life-world (cf. [Eber07]).

As the driving force of la Technique is, according to Ellul, the crave for absolute efficiency in all human endeavours, we are led towards an interpretation of cyberspace as primarily a mediator of efficiency, whereby, for one thing, the inefficient obstacles of geographical distance are overcome, and of cybergaming as a hyperefficient form of amusement, where Pavlovian physiology, modern psychology, and cybernetics are cross-bred and brought to bear on man’s mind with an efficiency that makes the anxieties about “electronic LSD”, VR-based brainwashing, and “amusing ourselves to death” seem almost like understatements or platitudes (cf. [Post86]). That virtual reality and cyberspace would become the ideal medium for brainwashing and propaganda has been foreseen at least since the publication of Huxley’s *Brave New World*, confirming C.S. Lewis’ observation that man’s much-praised dominion over nature is a kind of magician’s bargain, which repeatedly has turned out to end up in the dominion of a few over the many through nature, thus in effect bringing about the paradoxical “abolition of man” rather than the desired “empowerment of man” (see [Lewi96]). To take advantage of Ellul’s brilliant analysis of propaganda [Ellu65] as a prime, defining force of the modern world parallel to la Technique also in the study of the brave new cyberworld, however, remains a task to be carried out.

Nor should cyberspace and virtual reality be treated in isolation from other recent technological and scientific developments. On the contrary they will be part of the much wider postmodern phenomenon of “extreme science” described by another Christian French thinker, Paul Virilio, in [Viri00]. According to Virilio, science is currently going through a process of violent escalation, through which a new kind, or phase, of science, “extreme science”, has appeared. Firstly, science currently tends to become more and more cybernetic, which is to say that

science and technology now are quickly amalgamating into “techno-science” (so [Lato93]), the overriding obsession of which is control and management of all aspects of reality. Secondly, there is a strong tendency in today’s science towards the transcendence of all limits and the rejection of all ethical restraints, making science into a most dangerous game for mankind, where what is now at stake is nothing less than the very principle of life. Nay, behind this “post-scientific extremism” Virilio discerns a kind of almost demonic “Lust am Untergang”. This Faustian extremism comes to the fore in all kinds of “limit performances” through which the scientists vie for fame just like artists who try to gain publicity by overtrumping each other in the breaking of taboos or athletes who set out to transcend the physical limits of man’s body by preparing themselves with steroids that they know will ruin their health and mental stability. This is of course the very opposite of Ellul’s proposal of an “ethics of non-power”, according to which we should not do everything we can do (“the technological imperative”) and limits must be set for technological development.

At the same time, much of what is going on and is claimed in contemporary science seems to be unrealistic, unverifiable, strange or simply untrue, thus creating a kind of “science of the implausible” (cf. also [Horg96] where similar observations are made about the coming of “ironic science”). The pathologies of “extreme science” and “the science of the implausible” show up almost everywhere in today’s scientific world, most spectacularly, perhaps, in fields such as genetic engineering, embryonic stem cell research, cloning, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence (AI), and robotics with their outlandish discourses on such topics as the transformation of all living matter into “gray goo” through an out-of-control self-replicating nanoproces (“the accident to end all accidents”), the selective killing of enemy populations through genetically engineered “nanoviruses”, the cure of all illnesses through nanomedicaments or stem cell broths made on aborted foetuses, the cloning of human beings and the “uploading” of their minds into a computer’s memory, or the future overshadowing and replacement of man by artificially hyperintelligent robots, just to mention a few popular themes of this kind. Evidently, also virtual reality and cyberspace must be included amongst the manifestations of “extreme science”, exuding the typical odour of unrestrained technolatriy and pneumopathology. In the end, the technological assault on reality leads, according to Virilio, into a kind of “generalized

virtualization”, through which the real is overshadowed by the virtual and everything becomes artificial, the brave new world of “globalitarian” technutopianism. Virilio concludes apocalyptically ([Viri00] p. 139):

Ultimately, this so-called post-modern period is not so much the age in which industrial modernity has been surpassed, as the era of the sudden industrialization of the end, the all-out globalization of the havoc wreaked by progress.

### Cyberspace—A Gnostic Project?

McLuhan’s shrewd observations about the quasi-spiritual character of the electronic media environment and the new kind of gnostic personality, “discarnate man”, who will appear from long-time exposure to this environment, lead us to the thought of Eric Voegelin, the great investigator and critic of the ‘gnostic’ character of modernism. It was Eric Voegelin’s intriguing and much-debated thesis, that there is a deep-seated disorder in our civilisation rooted in a ‘gnostic’ sentiment of alienation and discontent with reality perceived as evil, in the consequential ‘gnostic’ turn away from this reality and its Ground (the “Demiurge”), and in the crowning and pre-eminently ‘gnostic’ claim to self-salvation and liberation from the prison of reality through absolute knowledge (gnosis), coming clearly into sight for the first time in the gnostic heresies, which emerged as a gloomy shadow of Christianity during its earliest years, and which from that time have reasserted themselves ever and anon during the course of history (see [Voeg87]). Having gone through a process of what Voegelin calls ‘immanentization’, by which the original hopes for a transcendental escape from this world, were, as it were, brought down to earth and turned into utopian projects, the gnostic thought structures gave birth to the virulent impulse of a flight not from, but to this world, or rather to a reconstructed, transfigured, utopian version of it – in short the “revolt against reality” so typical of modern Western culture. Cyberspace can be construed as the ultimate consequence of this “revolt against reality” and the concomitant desire for man’s dominion over being, providing an electronic, quasi-spiritual otherworld totally under man’s control as the replacement, in the gnostic’s view, of the imperfect, unjust, and evil order of the present world (see

[Davi98] and [Pers02] p. 492 et seq.; cf. also [Wert99] p 276 et seqq., although her description of the nature of gnosticism is somewhat misleading). The last century’s research into the history of science and ideas has provided an entirely new picture of the emergence of modern science. One of the more intriguing aspects of this picture is the crucial rôle of theology, mysticism, and esotericism for early science, which seems to be connected not primarily with a rationalistic-scientific tradition with its roots in Greek rationalism as is often more or less implicitly taken for granted, but rather with a gnostic-esoteric cultural undertow that had its roots in the religious-philosophical reactions against Christianity during late antiquity (see, for example, [Eamo94], [Funk86], and [Thor23]).

Unfortunately, the bearings of mystical-esoteric and, more generally, religious-philosophical ideas on contemporary science and the interest in such issues taken by many latter-day scientists have as yet only been spottily and unsatisfactorily explored, being in conspicuous need of more systematic study (see, however, [Nobl99] and [Duse99] for promising bird’s-eye views). Nevertheless, as far as cyberspace and virtual reality are concerned a few more or less relevant studies exist, such as [Heim93], [Heim98], [Davi98], [Wert99], and [Cohe66]. Arguably, we cannot get at the real motives and ideas behind the computer phenomenon in general, and the cyberspace and virtual reality sub-phenomena in particular, nor arrive at a proper understanding of their roots and future direction of growth, unless we take into account these mighty metaphysical driving forces and motivations, as I also attempted to show in [Pers02], notably by charting and analysing:

- (1) the rôle of various esoteric-mystic themes in computing, including i) the Golem myth and similar stories about artificially created life, such as the alchemists’ homunculus, ii) the quest for the primordial, perfect language as in the tradition of Lullism, Leibnizian-Fregian logicism, and logical positivism, iii) traces of number mysticism, as in Leibniz’ binary calculus, which originally was devised in a (mistaken) attempt to comprehend the Chinese divinatory system I Ching, iv) the notion of the World Soul seemingly reflected in the connectionist mystique rampant in the discourse about the Internet, ubiquitous computing, “the noosphere”, and similar topics, v) astral

worlds and travel as prototypical for virtual reality, cyberspace, etc.

- (2) different varieties of “cybernetic Joachimism”, i.e. the widespread idea that electronic media, the computer, cyberspace, or some future breakthrough, development, or ‘singularity’ in computing will in due time inaugurate a new era of cybernetic delights
- (3) the rôle of computing in more pessimistic or apocalyptic scenarios of science and technology and the future that they supposedly will bring about, such as Virilio’s “extreme science”, McLuhan’s “discarnate man”, Heidegger’s “Ge-stell”, Gibson’s dystopian “cyberspace”, Ellul’s “la Technique” and “le bluff technologique”, etc.
- (4) the debate about the metaphysical implications and lessons learnt by the computing experience, which, I contended, in many ways call into question the naturalist presuppositions of the computer pioneers and most present-day AI and VR researchers, cognitive scientists, and philosophers of computing and the mind
- (5) the different attitudes toward the ethics of computing and, in particular, of such potentially momentous developments in computing as “virtual reality” and “cyberspace”, which I ventured to discuss in the more general context of the ethical assessment of technological-scientific innovation at large, the historical development of the attitudes to new technology, some major types of worldviews and ethical theories, and the debates pursued in the field of “the philosophy of technology”

Extensive references to the literature on the discussed topics can be found in my thesis [Pers02].

Although the personae of the leading figures behind the cyberspace and cybergaming revolutions have been interestingly portrayed in such works as [Rhei91] and [CR05], the portraits given tend to be somewhat shallow, focusing rather heavily on careers, technical and scientific ideas, and suchlike, rather than on the drivers and motives behind these

careers and ideas. It is my thesis that the roots of cyberspace and cybergaming must be investigated in a much wider context than is done in these and other similar works so as to clarify and make comprehensible the motive background and worldviews of the key personages of the field. For the kind of investigations I have in mind the scrutiny of the written, published and unpublished, output of the leading figures and interviews with them, their relatives and collaborators may indeed be necessary preparations. But during this undertaking much more attention to their philosophical, metaphysical-ethical, ideological-political, religious-theological (or anti-religious-secular), and mystical-esoteric leanings and interests and their bearings on their scientific-technical accomplishments and ideas should be paid as well as to the possible sources and the actual development of these ideas and attitudes. Needless to say, such an analysis will have to be much concerned with the backdrop provided by ideohistorical derivation and contextualization and by a study of any pertinent thought currents, issues, and debates in the discourse of the field of study as well as in society and modern culture at large. For example, it can be gathered from such en passant observations as those made by [Bran87] p. 224 et seqq. or [Davi98] p. 279 et seqq. that one major source of inspiration for these pursuits as well as a mediator of gnostic attitudes and thought structures will be science fiction literature and film – indeed, the very concept of “cyberspace” derives from the writings of William Gibson, the father of the pre-eminently neo-gnostic literature of the cyberpunk.

The true significance of such an attempt lies in its goal of a deepened appreciation of the phenomena of cyberspace and cybergaming and their relations to and background in various extrascientific agendas and pursuits. Considering the highly problematic spiritual, social, ethical, educational, and other consequences of the current fascination with cyberspace and cybergaming as outlined above and implied by such concepts as “electronic LSD” and “discarnate man”, the need for a comprehensive understanding of these phenomena and their historical roots should be obvious.

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# The Survival of Culture: “The Kindred Points of Heaven and Home”

by Monica Papazu

Dr. Monica Papazu is a Professor in the Loegum Kloster Theological Institute in Denmark. This paper was presented to the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, conference on “Language, Literature, Culture, Identity,” September 11-12, 2008, and is used by permission of the author. In her book, *Det hvileløse hjerte: Essays (Restless Heart: Essays)*, Professor Papazu includes a major section on Ellul [“Jacques Ellul: The Word of Freedom in the History of Unfreedom”/“Jacques Ellul: Frihedens Ord I ufrihedens historie”, pp. 245-291]. It was published in 2004 in Skanderborg (Denmark): Re-formatio’s Forlag.

In her correspondence with the editor, she notes these items of interest to *Forum* readers: “Ellul means very much to me. Ever since I left Romania (in 1980) and got the possibility to read him, Ellul has been a permanent source of inspiration, a fountain of wisdom to me.” “One of my best friends in France is Xavier Martin. He is a professor of history and of law history. Ellul was one of his teachers, and each time I visit him he tells me how wonderful it was to attend Ellul’s lectures and to study under his guidance.” “The only book of Ellul which has been translated into Danish is *La subversion du christianisme/Kristendommens Forvanskning*. The translation was made by one of my friends who was very impressed by a conference I gave on Ellul and began reading his works, and I wrote the Preface, “Forord” (pp. 5-9). Translated by Chr. Truelsen, Skaerbaek (Denmark): Tidehvervs Forlag, 2005. This was a posthumous publication. Chr. Truelsen used the last years of his life to translate Ellul (he was in his nineties, yet he continued to work). Ellul was a spiritual nourishment to him. He has also translated *L’espérance oubliée* into Danish. I gave it to him as a Christmas gift and he loved it enormously. His widow has the manuscript and we hope that it will be published one day.”

## Abstract

In his Nobel speech, Solzhenitsyn rejected the idea of “the disappearance of peoples in the melting-pot of modern civilisation,” and expressed his belief that “Nations are the wealth of mankind...the smallest of them...embodies a particular facet of God’s design.” Solzhenitsyn’s words suggest the connection between time and eternity (or, to quote G. K. Chesterton, “heaven and home”), and point to the cultural role that national communities play. What we call “world civilization” does not consist in a unique culture, but on the contrary in a multitude of very different cultures (Lévi-Strauss, Kilakowski). The only way in which something becomes universal is by being at first local, limited, an expression of a nation’s historical experience and particular *Weltanschauung*. (The inspiration that *The Lay of Kosovo* brought to Western culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries proves this reality.) At the present moment nations face two challenges. One is ideological, and stems from the abstract and utopian ideas of the Enlightenment, which assimilated “boundaries,” and national differences with “prejudice.” The other is connected with “the technical system.” The technical system, whose *raison d’être* is its own uninterrupted development, runs counter to spiritual culture, which is based on individual reflection, the slow passage of time which is necessary for thought and cultural creation, and continuity with the past (Ellul). The present forms of conditioning raise urgent questions about the survival of spiritual culture, which constitutes the essence of man.

In his Nobel Speech of 1970 Solzhenitsyn wrote: “Nations are the wealth of mankind, they are its generalised personalities: the smallest of them has its own particular colours, and embodies a particular facet of God’s design” (15-16).

As he addressed the Western world that honoured him for his works, Solzhenitsyn viewed himself as the representative of millions of people who shared

the experience of Gulag (he felt himself “accompanied ... by the shadows of the fallen”), and as the representative of his national culture: he was the voice of “[a] whole national literature [that] has been left there, buried without a coffin,” and an heir to the great tradition of Russian literature (8). He embodied indeed what for him stood as “the quintessence of the writer’s position: ... to give expression to the national language, which is the main clamp that binds a nation; to give expression to the very land occupied by his people ... [and] to the national soul,” and to create works that are the nation’s “living memory” (25, 15).

Confronted with the terrible assault on memory, tradition, and the national soul, which Communism stood for, Solzhenitsyn rose in defence of the reality of life, in defence of his own people’s life and spirit. At the same time, his words were meant as a protest against the Western idea, akin to the communist ideology, of “the levelling of nations and of the disappearance of peoples in the melting-pot of modern civilisation” (15).

Solzhenitsyn’s protest was the protest of a Christian conscience. In the eyes of the Christian faith, nations are referred to as God’s creation. Nations are “not made by human hands” (“acheiropoetos” in Greek); they are not “reducible” to the will and actions of man, says Solzhenitsyn (“Du repentir” 114-5). Their existence is a mystery as unfathomable as the existence of the human person, and their destination lies beyond the temporal horizon.

That is why Solzhenitsyn applies the moral and spiritual imperatives that hold for the individual to nations in general, and to his own nation in particular. A community that is “mystically bound together by sin,” as all communities are, is called to “repent,” to ask God’s and the other nations’ forgiveness (“Du repentir” 118). Repentance is the miracle through which a people can begin a new life within the community itself as well as a new life together with other nations, for nations are bound together by historical fate.

### **Heaven and Home**

A nation is by definition a limited community – limited by geography, by a particular *Weltanschauung*, and usually by language. How can this limited reality with its characteristic borders then be related to the eternal “unity from above,” to the

“ultimate end,” when “God will be all in all” (1 Co 15:28) (Schmemmann 151)?

The English writer G.K. Chesterton, who (I only mention it in passing) wrote about Serbia, close to the First World War, and drew inspiration in his poetry from *The Lay of Kosovo*, and who was one of the first to address the question of “cosmopolitan civilisation,” answered this question in his novel *Manalive* (1912): “... God has given us the love of special places, of a hearth and of a native land, for a good reason. ... Because otherwise ... we might worship ... [e]ternity ... the largest of the idols – the mightiest of the rivals of God. ... God bade me love one spot and serve it, and do all things however wild in praise of it, so that this one spot might be a witness against all the infinities and the sophistries, that Paradise is somewhere and not anywhere, is something and not anything” (190-1).

Chesterton explains here that the love for what is entirely local, unique, and unrepeatable is a prerequisite for understanding God’s eternal kingdom. Community is woven in the very texture of existence. The earthly community is a metaphor of the heavenly community. Loving and sharing, one is brought to understand the reality of the personal, triune God’s all-encompassing love, and the intensity of life in the Kingdom of God, true community as opposed to the abstract idea of eternity. Human life is thus, in Chesterton’s words, a bridge between two “kindred points” which mirror each other: “the kindred points of heaven and home” (*New Jerusalem* 21).

### **The Fact of Natality**

Solzhenitsyn and Chesterton’s vision reflects their faith. Their perception is nonetheless rooted in an existential awareness that amounts to a universal truth. The German philosopher Hannah Arendt called this truth “the fact of natality” (61, 174, 196). It means that in order to think clearly about man one has to begin with “that which is given,” with the objective, unalterable facts of human existence. What is objective and therefore determines all the rest is the fact that man does not owe his existence to himself, nor is he born into a void but into “the world”: “a pre-existing world, constructed by the living and the dead” (174, 177). This world has an objective existence: a land; parents, ancestors; the vast expanse of history and historical experience; a common language; common assumptions and values. Growing up means making this world one’s own, because it is

one's own, not through choice but as "something given." The "denial of everything given," characteristic of modernity, is, in the words of Hannah Arendt, a token of "radical nihilism" (34). To be born is a bond. And this bond is what culture and the transmission of culture is about.

Culture is, by definition, the legacy of the past. Knowledge is simply knowledge of the past, for the world into which human beings are born and which they have to learn about is an "old" world, a world that is "always older than they themselves," writes Hannah Arendt (195).

Learning about the world in which the previous generations have lived, men gain "depth," which, says Hannah Arendt, is "the same" as "memory", and a bond with both mankind and the world (94). For what makes the world human is the *meaning* one learns to discover in it – in other words, *tradition* is what makes the world human: "without tradition – which selects and names, which hands down and preserves, which indicates where the treasures are and what their worth is – there seems to be no willed continuity in time and hence ... neither past nor future, only sempiternal change of the world and the biological cycle of living creatures in it" (Arendt 5). Man's world is fundamentally a cultural world that "comprehends, and gives testimony to, the entire recorded past of countries, nations, and ultimately mankind" (Arendt 202).

### **Particular cultures – world culture**

"[C]ountries, nations, and ultimately mankind": Hannah Arendt's words suggest a connection between the particular cultures of the world and a universal heritage. There is indeed a common human nature, a common human condition, and a common quest for meaning and beauty. Taking a bird's eye view, there appears to be a "world culture." The question is what "world culture" really means.

Speaking of the great literature nourished by a particular people's tradition and historical destiny, and permeated with truth, beauty, and goodness, Solzhenitsyn expressed his belief that art can convey "life experience from one whole nation to another," reveal "the timeless essence of human nature," and contribute to the "spiritual unity of mankind" ("One Word" 15, 19, 24). Solzhenitsyn does embrace a belief in universality, but his words indicate that it is what is most particular, unique, that acquires a universal dimension.

There is no way in which *limited* man – for man is not "universal" but limited, he belongs "to a place," he is marked by "a past," a specific tradition, and the weight of a particular historical experience (Ellul, *Bluff* 275) – can reach a certain degree of universality other than by being authentically what he is. This paradox is the condition of culture and the condition of mankind: what is universal can only hope to reveal itself through what is most particular.

Culture does express, as the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss puts it, "the generality of human aspirations," universal questions and experiences, but it does that in "peculiar," not universal, forms (*Race and History* 44). The richness of meaning stems from what is most particular in a certain culture: "there is not, and can never be," writes Lévi-Strauss, "a world civilization in the absolute sense in which that term is often used, since civilization implies, and indeed consists in, the coexistence of cultures exhibiting the maximum possible diversities" (*Race and History* 45).

In order to protect culture, underlines Lévi-Strauss, one has to understand the condition of culture, that is to say the existence of communities with their specific cultures, cultures that can only preserve their identity through a partial lack of "sensitivity" towards each other's "values" (*Regard* 15). Identity can only be maintained by refusing to be someone else: "one cannot at the same time merge into the spirit of another, identify with another and still maintain one's own identity" (*Regard* 47).

It is a fatal mistake to think of humanity in the abstract, to embrace the idea of "world culture" as "a harmonious whole," and to promote this illusion in the form of a political project that can only result in the atrophy of creativity and culture (*Regard* 47, *Race and History* 48-9). Because this ideological project is at work, the technical system contributing largely to it, Lévi-Strauss stresses the urgency of a clear understanding of the condition of culture, based on the reality of facts: "if mankind is not to resign itself to becoming a sterile consumer of the values it created in the past and of those values alone ... it will have to relearn the fact that all true creation implies a certain deafness to outside values, even to the extent of rejecting or, in given cases, denying them" (*Regard* 47).

## The Lures of Nowhere

The idea of a totally unified world, unified in values, norms, manners, that Lévi-Strauss opposed, belongs, as the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski insists, to the realm of utopia, which is a *denial of reality*. Utopias can be implemented, as the totalitarian experiences of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have shown. If the present trend continues, writes Kolakowski, “the world’s cultural variety” will be annihilated “in the name of a so-called world civilisation,” and “this will probably entail such a break in traditions that not only each and every particular civilisation but the human civilisation in its entirety will be put in mortal danger” (113).

Such a world will not be a unified world, but a world that is no longer human, indeed a relapse into “barbarism.” The project itself signals, in Kolakowski’s eyes, the growing barbarism of the West, that is to say the indifference towards one’s own culture. What characterizes the West today is a “suicidal mentality in which the indifference towards our own particular tradition ... or even the self-destructive frenzy disguise themselves as generous universalism” (Kolakowski 102).

The “multicultural” utopia is only a new expression of the chimera of a society “without evil, without sin, and without conflicts: such ideals,” writes Kolakowski, “are the aberrations of a spirit that believes in its own omnipotence, they are the fruits of pride” (121-2).

\* \* \* \* \*

Today’s “universalism” is without doubt an heir to the utopian thinking of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. The Enlightenment thought in general terms (concepts are, by nature, abstract and universal) and envisaged creating a new mankind and a new man (even in the biological sense). In the utopia of the reign of reason there was no room for the real human beings such as they are, anchored in the traditions and the values of their particular community. Suffice it to mention here the abolition of Christianity and the extermination of the population in the province of Vendée in 1793-1794.

In order to bring forth “the new man,” man had to be liberated from the shackles of “prejudice,” that is to say *the existing culture*. The principle that held for the individuals constituting one community also held for humankind as a whole. Prejudices were

considered “mental barriers separating human beings,” while state-borders were viewed as the “embodiment” of prejudices. The project of the Enlightenment was, as the French philosopher Pierre-André Taguieff writes, two-sided: it consisted in both “the abolition of prejudices” and of the concrete “borders” between states, which should result in “the inception of the reign of reason” and the advent of a “universal brotherhood society” (190-191).

Seen in this utopian light, differences seem outrageous, because they contradict the abstractness of the concepts. Pure reason discards the so-called prejudices (“the prejudice against prejudice,” as Hans-Georg Gadamer calls it) and thus the entire tradition, without realizing its significance – even the exercise of reason, logic and intellectual rules are “prejudices,” since they represent a legacy, the result of the intellectual work of previous generations in a given civilisation (Gadamer 255).

To discard prejudices in this fashion is to estrange oneself from mankind and to cut oneself off from indispensable knowledge. As Hannah Arendt puts it: “[t]he disappearance of prejudices simply means that we have lost the answers on which we ordinarily rely without even realising they were originally answers to questions” (174).

The modern concept of “multiculturalism” is a postscript to the Enlightenment, which ignored history, and failed to understand the meaning of culture. Its near roots are to be found, however, in the vestiges of Marxist and Communistic ideology in the West, in the utopia of a new mankind where classes as well as fatherlands will have disappeared. The present civilisational universalism appears as “the substitution of one utopia for another” (Yonnet 111-27).

The West’s diminishing understanding of its own culture (and therefore of the sense of culture altogether), the breakdown of tradition and “the crisis in education” represent undoubtedly a serious spiritual crisis (Arendt 173-96). This does not mean that European civilisation is doomed – the proximity of other cultures in Western Europe due to immigration seems even to contribute to a rediscovery of the foundations of European culture and thus to reversing the process. Up until now history has shown, as in the case of the Communist experiment, that utopian projects finally break against the rock of reality. What makes the present crisis

particularly threatening, though, is the fact that it is associated with the impact of the technical system.

## The Technological Society

When we look at “technology” from the limited point of view of subjective experience, its negative aspects can be hard to grasp. As scholars we use the possibilities created by the Internet. Many of the classical writers’ works are online, and research papers, magazines, and newspapers can be reached in the blink of an eye. An immense library is at our disposal. The essence and the discipline of our work appears to be unaltered by the advent of technology.

To grasp the critique of technique, as formulated for example in the pioneering work of the French thinker Jacques Ellul (1912-1994), technique must be put in a much broader, objective frame of reference. The core of the problem is the relationship between technique and culture.

Throughout most of the history of mankind, highlights Ellul, “*technique belonged to a civilization and was merely a single element among a host of nontechnical activities.*” Technical development was slow, and it was absorbed into the general texture of life. Culture remained the axis around which human activities rotated, in other words it remained the determinant factor (*Technological Society* 128, author’s italics).

The unprecedented technical development, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century especially, has broken this pattern. Not only did machines develop which have changed the natural perception of time and space, technique has evolved into an integrated system, totally emancipated from culture. Technique has become the decisive factor by “*tak[ing] over,*” as Ellul puts it, “*the whole of civilization*”: “*Technical civilization means that our civilization is constructed by technique (makes a part of civilization only what belongs to technique), for technique (in that everything in this civilization must serve a technical end), and is exclusively technique (in that it excludes whatever is not technique or reduces it to a technical form)*” (*Technological Society* 128, author’s italics).

Technique cannot stop, as Hannah Arendt also remarked, at the border where human life begins: after the conquest of nature, man is being conquered, and technique invades the “world of human relations and human affairs” (Arendt 89, 59). This does not mean that machines run the world, but that *technical*

*thinking* does, reducing man in all his aspects to a technical problem, in other words assimilating him “to the machine” (Ellul, *Technological Society* 12). The technical system has spilled over into all human activities, giving in the first place rise to “the technical state” which by “the accumulation of techniques” in all fields (from economy to propaganda), and not by intention or doctrine, has, as Ellul defines it, a “totalitarian” propensity. Technique has a tendency to evacuate political life and make the “differences from state to state ... fade progressively away.” The contemporary technical state rests upon universal techniques of administration, and does not depend on political thinking or on the nation as “a human, geographic, and historical entity” (*Technological Society* 268, 265, 284).

Technique, as opposed to culture, cannot be national. It can only be universal, due to its abstract nature. As an object of technique, man has no more reality than the quantities combined in an algebraic equation. There is no bridge between technical thinking, in which technique is “an end-in-itself,” and culture, for culture is, by its own nature, “humanistic.” That is to say, culture is “centered on man,” on the question of “the meaning of life” and of good and evil, in a word, on man’s moral and spiritual values (Ellul, *Bluff* 281-2). From the point of view of technique, guided solely by the principle of efficiency, what constitutes human life (man as a cultural being) appears as a hindrance or “grit in the machine.”

There is thus an obvious connection between the utopian ideas of the Enlightenment and technical thinking, which as a rule is not aware of its philosophical presuppositions. Technical thinking is an heir to utopian thinking in that it neither respects nor reflects upon “that which is given” but wills a new, ideal mankind. The connection between technique and the discourse of cultural universalism is just as obvious: multiculturalism can be considered as an ideology that serves the implementation of the technical system, since it endeavours to remove the hindrances represented by the vestiges of nation, community, and culture.

By taking over “the whole of civilisation,” technique creates a new environment. It gives rise to a new pattern of ideas that are an obedient adaptation to the technical system, and it imposes its own time. Technique (from machines to administrative techniques) pushes forward at high speed, while it effaces its own traces – today makes yesterday

obsolete, as tomorrow's models will cancel today's. The past has no value any more.

For culture, the reverse is true. Cultural time is slow. It is characterized, as Ellul rightly underlines, by "reflection" and not by efficiency. It takes time to reflect; human experience is slow in bearing the fruits of understanding; the generations succeed one another, as they hand down the meaning they have extracted from their experiences. Meaning arises from the past and through the continuity with the past (Ellul, *Bluff* 276-7).

To remember is what characterizes the human spirit. Without remembrance we are strangers to the world and to our life. Without remembrance we have no means to evaluate the present – we are prisoners of the present. That is why anti-totalitarian literature puts so much weight on memory, as we can see in Solzhenitsyn's works (his Nobel Speech, for example), in Orwell's *1984* (27, 29-33, 192-209), or in Kundera's axiom: "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (14). Spiritual culture is, in its essence, memory. By considering Mnemosyne (Memory) as the mother of the muses, the Greeks showed that memory is the foundation as well as the meaning of culture (Hesiod 915-7).

The opposition between cultural time and technical time is the struggle between Mnemosyne and Chronos, the "devouring time" (Ovid xv.234-6). For man, time only exists because he has the "remembrance of things past," but memory is also man's victory over time. Without memory, the sense of time disappears, but the power of time (and ultimately of death) becomes absolute. Human life is reduced to a biological process, not different from the mermaids' life in Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale, where a hedonistic existence is brought to a painless end, as the mermaids, whose memory is never preserved (there are no graves on the bottom of the sea), become "foam on the ocean" ("The Little Mermaid" 66).

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Globalisation is then not the spreading of culture, but the spreading of technique, which produces the collapse of traditional structures, modes of living and cultures, and, in the final analysis, threatens to destroy the conditions necessary for the existence of culture. What the technical civilisation gives rise to is a global mass-society, consisting of atomised

individuals, caught in the alternate rhythm of work and entertainment, and deprived of memory, tradition, and bonds.

Contrary to the assumption that globalisation brings people and peoples together, creating a "world community," the universal technical system tends to bring about, as both Arendt and Ellul write, "a radical world-alienation" (Arendt 89; Ellul, *Ethique* 256-7), for technique eradicates both nature and culture, the two milieus that hitherto have constituted man's universe and mankind's common world. What is left behind is "a society of men ... without a common world which would at once relate and separate them ... For a mass-society is," as Hannah Arendt expresses it, "nothing more than that kind of organized living which automatically establishes itself among human beings who ... have lost the world once common to all of them" (89-90).

(The misinformation carried out in the West with regards to the dismemberment of Yugoslavia can be partially understood as a consequence of the technical civilisation: the loss of the sense of community and tradition, and even of the mere interest in knowing history, associated with the propaganda apparatus and the power of the media.)

Alienation, as Arendt and Ellul understand it, means that man becomes a stranger to the reality of his life and to his very nature. A world reduced to the fleeting present moment, a world that can no longer be put into words and thus shared with others, and where one neither receives the legacy of the past nor hands down a story to be told (Hamlet's last words in Shakespeare's play are: "tell my story" [V.iii.354]), a world to which one is no longer bound by the bonds of birth, loyalty, and love; and *logos* is not a home for man anymore.

### **The Rebirth of Community**

And yet, it is possible that man will rebel once more against utopia, as he did against the totalitarian projects in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and that there will be a rebirth of community and culture. That was the belief of Chesterton, who in his novel *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* of 1904 prophetically described the technical civilisation and the return to what he calls "normality" and "sanity" (100).

All the characteristics of the technical civilisation evidenced above are, artistically expressed, present in his novel: it was a "well-ordered" universe, a

“terribly quiet” world, where one felt “the hell of blank existence” (78-9, 97). Political life had disappeared: “Democracy was dead; for no one minded the governing class governing” (12). The ideology in power was “cosmopolitanism”: “We moderns believe in a great cosmopolitan civilisation,” “we are rid of superstitions,” especially “the superstition of small nationalities,” and, as a consequence, all national symbols and customs have been “relegated ... to the Museums” (23, 24, 17). Freedom in all its forms was gone from the world: “Freedom of speech means practically in our modern civilisation that we must only talk of unimportant things” (79). World peace had finally become a reality through the monopolisation of power: “The big Powers of the world, having swallowed up all the small ones, came to ... [an] agreement, and there was no more war” (84). What was left was “this strange indifference ... this strange loneliness of millions in a crowd” (79).

All this lasts until the day when a child, symbolically called Adam, that is to say *man*, rediscovers the meaning of “that which is given”: the near universe consisting of nine streets in Notting Hill, where “men have built houses to live, in which they are born, fall in love, pray, marry, and die,” streets where they bring out their “dead.” In the centre of this small universe lies Pump Street, that is to say the human “heart” (62-3, 73). And the old truth that the earth is a home for man, and that “[f]or every tiny town and place / God made the stars especially” spreads throughout the world and eventually sets everybody free (3).

Chesterton gives no explanation here. This is exactly the point, for no explanation is needed for a statement of facts: the fact of the human nature, as we do know it from mankind’s history and culture. He states a fact and gives, at the same time, expression to his faith in both “heaven and home.”

Our duty today is to transmit the culture handed down to us, to transmit the enduring works that, as Solzhenitsyn puts it, bring a “word of truth” and clothe it in beauty, to maintain the continuity between generations and the bridge between peoples, for the great culture of the world with its very particularities reaches beyond borders, communicates itself from one people and to another, and makes the world a home for man.

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## Notes

1. G.K. Chesterton, “The Thing Called a Nation: The Spiritual Issue of the War” (*The Daily News*, June 18,

1916; *The Law of Kosovo: Serbia's Past and Present (1389-1917)*, London: The British Kosovo Day Committee, 1917, 32-5. In Chesterton's masterpiece *The Ballad of the White Horse* (1911) the Kosovo-motive of the letter of the Mother of God plays a crucial role.

2. This theme is to be found in the great Danish writers Hans Christian Andersen's and N.F.S. Grundtvig's poetry as well as in the last pages of C.S. Lewis' *The Last Battle*.

3. Unless otherwise mentioned, the translation of the French and the German quotations belongs to me.

4. Xavier Martin, *Régénérer l'espèce humaine: Utopie médicale et Lumières (1750-1850)* (France: DMM, 2008).

5. Reynald Secher, *Le génocide franco-français: Le Vendée-Vengé* (Paris: PUF, 1986).

6. As "technology" etymologically means "discourse on technique," the term "technical" is more accurate than "technological."

7. See also Lewis' critique of technique: C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1943), and *That Hideous Strength* (London: The Bodley Head, 1945).

8. Vladimir Volkoff, *Petite histoire de la disinformation: Du cheval de Troie à Internet* (Paris: Ed. du Rocher, 1999), especially the pages 217-43.

# The Islamization of the West

by Christian Braw

*Christian Braw is a prolific Swedish author on culture, literature, theology, and the history of ideas. Published in Swedish as "Västerlandets islamisering" Used by permission. Translated by Frederick Schwink.*

In today's world the West is acutely dependent on the Muslim world for its energy supply. A large number of Muslim immigrants confronts Europe with complicated questions. Capital investments from the Muslim world dominate significant sectors of the western economy. Muslim fundamentalists hold the West in terror.

Given this situation, it is easy to forget that the West's rationalism has a Muslim background. In simple terms, this rationalism contains within itself the belief that mankind has reason, a *ratio*, with whose help one can comprehend, control, and exploit existence. The central instrument is the *concept*, through which one encaptures the essence of being. A Westerner becomes a "Begriffenfeldt"—to use Ibsen's apt label [Transl: this is a German character in Ibsen's Peer Gynt play, the name means "conceptual field"]—with this there also went lost a considerable portion of symbolic thinking, i.e. the ability to translate existence into powerful signs which bring about what they express. Man steps out of the universe to observe it from the outside, as Tage Lindblom used to say.

Where does this manner of comprehending existence come from? It is a manner of thinking, as it was first developed in ancient Greek, above all by Plato and his disciple Aristotle. It survived the cultural catastrophe of the migration period only in fragments. That's what the situation was in the West. In the Orient the development was different. There the Greek philosophers were translated and annotated by Syrian speaking scholars. The Orient never experienced a migration period. The Arab storm was for the most part a taking over of power by an elite military force in country after country. In the track of military units followed administrative and intellectual elites that quickly took over for themselves the higher culture of the conquered lands. There thus arose a synthesis between Islam and the Greek-Syrian philosophical tradition. In the West by way of contrast there was to be found only a fragment left of the spread of Greek philosophy.

The Arab storm brought Islam to Spain and southern Italy, and once the Arab military, administrative, and intellectual elite had established itself there, cultural contact with the West was introduced. In this manner western researchers uncovered an extremely rich world of Greek thought, integrated into a Muslim religiosity. Its intellectual rigor and breadth caused most of what was thought and written about this in the West seem primitive. From the Arabic translations of Greek philosophers Latin translations were now made. In some cases thus the Greek ideas had undergone three metamorphoses in the process of

becoming accessible to western thinkers: from Greek to Syrian, from Syrian to Arabic, from Arabic to Latin. What happened to the Greek idea during this long detour is an interesting and partially unresearched history.

The West that took on this intellectual invasion was consciously and expressly Christian. How did people react? Some were enthusiastic, for example, Siger of Brabant (1240-1284) and his Nordic disciple Boethius de Dacia. Others were strongly critical, among them the Archbishop Estienne Tempier, who in a writing of 1271 condemned 219 of the new thinking's theses. Others, on the other hand, tried to come to terms and mediate between traditional Christian ideas and the newly received Greek philosophy, filtered through Islam. The foremost among the last group was Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). It was to be Thomas—and thus synthesis—that would win out.

Which were the Muslim philosophers who aroused such a varied reaction? There are three names that stand out especially. The first came to be called Averroës in the West. His Arabic name is Ibn Rushd (1126-1198). His commentary of Aristotle's writings was pathbreaking in western debates. He emphasized—like Aristotle—that the individual soul dies with the body. Only mankind's collective soul, i.e. Idea, survives. Avicenna Ibn Sina (980-1037) developed the conceptualization of being's essence and existence. Being is what something is, existence is what exists. With God being and existence converge. This is His essence to exist. Everything else can in contrast both exist and not exist. Therefore it is not necessary for something to exist. Mankind, for example, is a thinking being. That is its essence. But it is not necessary for it to exist. It can also not exist. This idea about that which exists necessarily or unnecessarily comes to acquire a major significance for Thomas and his followers. The third Muslim philosopher who came to influence the West is Algazel—Abu Hamid Mohammed Ghazali (1038-1111), a strong critic of Avicenna.

What is it that happened in the West when the dominant intellectual streams became a synthesis between Biblical faith and Greek thinking, transmitted by Muslims? One person who considered this is Jacques Ellul (1912-1994), French sociologist, legal historian, and theologian. Monica Papazu discusses him in her book *Det hvileløse hjerte [The Restless Heart]* (2004). One of his most important works, *La subversion du christianisme* (1984) has been available since 2005 in a Danish translation

with the title *Kristendommens forvanskning* (Tidehvervs Publishing House). Jacques Ellul's initial thesis is that there is a fundamental difference between Islam and Christianity: "I believe that the spirit of Islam in all respects is in conflict with the spirit of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. This juxtaposition suffices to explain: God cannot be incarnate, God cannot be anything but a sovereign judge, who determines everything according to his will. From this follows the complete integration of religion, politics, and law. God's will assumes inescapably the form of law." This is the conflict between the person Jesus Christ and the religiously motivated collection of laws. What happens then when one creates a synthesis between these conflicts? Ellul answers, "all things religious become legality...legality becomes theology."

There is found in Islam a close connection between religion, politics, and power, and Ellul believes that the Constantine state church of the 1200s received a new impetus from Islam. It is a fact that the greatest ideological battle of the Middle Ages, that between the church and the state, is about this very thing—the state or the political power that wants to protect the church, and against which the church defends itself with the battle-cry *Libertas ecclesiae! Freedom of the Church!* A further point where Ellul sees how conflicting tendencies receive a new impetus from Islam concerning the reason for war. The Germanic people's warrior ideal gradually receded from prominence in the West under the influence of Christianity. In Byzantium the soldier was a necessary evil more than an ideal. By contrast, in Islam military force is a part of the religious ideal. This was the Arab military elite, which spread Islam over the Orient and North Africa. Ellul writes concerning Muslim war that it is always justified and a holy duty. This implies the conclusion that war isn't only necessary in some situations. War is good. When George W. Bush described the American military deployment to the Middle East as a "crusade", this was taken very negatively in Muslim circles. In Ellul's interpretation this stands out, in contrast, as an example of Christendom's Islamization.

The most important point in the meantime has to do with the heart of theology, the appearance of God. Ellul writes, "...God's omnipotence is allowed to rule over love, his transcendence over the incarnation..." With this comes also history's pattern of appearing as predestined and irrevocable. God is destroyed—or Providence, as the rationalists of the 1700s would say. In their belief in *ratio*, Greek rationality as

transmitted by Muslim philosophers come to full expression.

In his treatise, *Shadows of Cavernous Shades* (2002) Erik Persson deals with, among many other things, the question of the Islamization of the West. This is one of the most unusual treatises to see the light of day for a long time in Scandinavia. The topic is data science and for 285 pages the author investigates *realistic computing*. Suddenly, it's as if he is befallen by an afterthought, and then he fills 240 pages with a reckoning with the Western rationality that is the basis of the development of computers. In other words, it is fundamentally a presentation on the history of ideas. For the most part, it is an analysis of the roots of Modernism in Arabic philosophy. Erik Persson expands our perspective. It is not just a question of an Islamicized Aristotle. In the intellectual baggage that was transported to the West were also mysticism, hermeneutics, astrology, and magic. In the case of hermeneutics one may exclude the esotericism that appeals to Hermes Trismegistos. It can be interpreted as if these influences pull in different directions, but there is to be found a common basic essential. This is the ambition to dominate being with knowledge. This knowledge can then become rational, esoteric, or magical. Goethe created the Faust figure as a symbolic figure. Erik Persson likewise pinpoints the Muslim impact. He points out namely that Averroës as well as Avicenna had associations with Ismaelite groups within Islam, a direction that combined the Platonic-Aristotelian idea with esotericism, i.e. a secret knowledge, reserved for a select few and transmitted in strict secrecy.

In the "Festschrift for Staffan Fogelmark," Erik Persson offers a creative investigation of the possible roots in Islam of western utopianism. That both the Bible's prophets and Jesus Christ looked forward to a perfect kingdom of God is obvious. What happens in utopianism is that this perfect condition is placed into time and space. Eschatology—the study of the final judgment—becomes immanent, becomes present in the world. The important figure here is Joachim of Fiore, born 1130. His greatest significance lies in his philosophy of history. From him come the concepts "the third Reich" and "the leader" [transl. presumably Führer]. The Third Reich is a secularized state; the leader is the *novus dux de Babylone*—Babylon's new leader. Erik Persson can show in point after point that Joachim's philosophy of history has parallels in contemporary Islam, especially in Ismaelism, and he

was active in southern Italy, one of the Middle Ages' meeting points between Christian belief and Islam.

The parallels do not of necessity imply that there was an influence. Similarity is not the same as relatedness. Erik Persson's contribution can be seen as an attempt, a proposal for later researchers to prove. It is a pressing task to prove, since utopianism is such a mighty force in the West: the idea of the perfect society. In this concept can also be found the dream of being able to "create" a new society, which is something completely different from advancing an existing society's renewal and growth. If one is successful with this, one can also proceed forwards, with both continuity and change. Western utopianism has had catastrophic results, above all in the 1900s: Gulag, Katyn, Auschwitz, Pol Pot, The Great Leap Forward. How could such things happen? Following Erik Persson's idea, the West's Islamization is an important contributing factor.

Jacques Ellul and Erik Persson present bold interpretive models. How far the implications reach can only be determined by someone who has very fundamentally detailed knowledge and a comprehensive overview. One thing is incontrovertible, it can be shown that Islam is not only a challenge today. It has been one already since the 1100s. Its intellectual rigor and breadth, its visionary imagination and strict logic make it in no way easy to confront or respond to. At that time the West's greatest talents joined Thomas Aquinas in taking up the challenge. Jacques Ellul questions this intellectual achievement—in order to converse with Rolf Lindborg. But even if Ellul has judged the matter rightly, there remains a second and more heated question: What will the West's greatest talents adopt today?

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# Book Notes & Reviews

## ***Green Politics is Eutopian***

by Paul Gilk

Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008

**Reviewed by Jacob VanVleet**

Diablo Valley College, Concord CA

In *Green Politics is Eutopian*, independent scholar Paul Gilk presents twenty-eight insightful essays exploring various facets of Green politics and culture. Among a wide array of topics, Gilk discusses modern industrial-technological society, the distinction between utopia and eutopia, and the necessity of small-scale agriculture.

A central theme throughout Gilk's writings is the recognition that mainstream Green politics/culture is utopian. According to Gilk, utopian thought strives for permanence, however, permanence is precisely the erroneous assumption of the industrial-technological system (i.e., "civilization"). Drawing from the work of Lewis Mumford and others, Gilk persuasively argues that "civilization in its essence is a utopian undertaking." The industrial-technological realm, as well as utopian thought, both imagine that there is some sort of permanent solution to various political and ecological problems. However, as Gilk points out, a permanent answer contradicts the dynamic nature of reality. The earth, humans, and political systems are always in a state of flux; there can be no single, overarching solution.

In contrast to mainstream utopian thought, Gilk advocates an alternative Green political vision: one that is eutopian. Eutopian thinkers seek a solution of stability and wholeness, embracing *impermanence* in its many complex forms. Eutopian thought also aims to sustain an authentic dialogue with the changing processes of the organic world, recognizing the need for a variety of solutions to the array of ecological problems we face.

In addition, Gilk maintains that in order to restore the earth we need to embrace two "tools" or guiding principles. First, we should look to the "ethical core of all true spiritual traditions: compassion, forgiveness, sharing, moderation, simplicity, modesty, selflessness, and love." By practicing these culture-transcending virtues, we will not only limit our ecological footprint,

but we can also begin to dialogue with other traditions which acknowledge the merit of these virtues. Second, we need to adopt the "slow, somewhat bumbling, but steady congealing of the Green political vision." Here, Gilk acknowledges the shortcomings of Green politics while recognizing the absolute necessity of keeping the well-being of the earth at the heart of politics. (This need has been made frighteningly clear by global warming/climate change, depletion of fossil fuels, and massive waste disposal at sea, to name a few.) Clearly, Gilk's two guiding principles -- the ethical core of true spiritual traditions and the Green political vision -- can lead us toward healing, wholeness, and stability.

Among its many good qualities, two primary strengths of *Green Politics is Eutopian* stand out. First, Gilk does not dogmatically assert quick fixes to complex problems. With sincerity, Gilk acknowledges that he does not have all of the answers, and he makes it clear that, "These essays, written in the excitement of discovery and the anxiety of distress, are a small nudge in the direction of eutopia." This humility adds to the persuasiveness already found throughout Gilk's work. The second strength is Gilk's recognition of the need for spiritual transformation. It is not enough to simply embrace the Green political vision; we also need to commit ourselves to an authentic and continual spiritual renewal. Indeed, only by committing ourselves politically *and* spiritually will we make any concrete changes in the world.

Overall, Gilk's book insightfully calls us to question our notions of "civilization"; it reminds us that the healing of the earth is our obligation in *many* ways; and it offers a refreshing corrective to today's mainstream, narrow, utopian solutions. Timely and thoughtful, *Green Politics is Eutopian* is a passionate, convicting, and much needed work.

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# News & Notes

## ✍ **RUSSELL HEDDENDORF (1930 – 2008)**

On December 24, 2008, Russell Heddendorf died suddenly at age 78 in Philadelphia. Heddendorf had a long and distinguished career as professor of sociology, with appointments at Dickinson College, Geneva College, and Covenant College. He was a long time student of Ellul's sociology and of the interface between Christianity and sociology. He was the author of eight articles and reviews of Ellul.

Heddendorf's latest book, *From Faith to Fun: The Secularization of Humor* (Wipf & Stock, 2008) "takes its lead from Ellul's *Subversion of Christianity*" he wrote in personal correspondence last year. *The Ellul Forum* will review this book in the Fall 2009 issue. A great man and a friend to the Ellul fraternity, Russell Heddendorf will be missed.

## ✍ **WIPF & STOCK: PROGRESS ON ELLUL BOOKS**

Despite some special challenges to surmount, editor Ted Lewis and Wipf & Stock Publishers are making progress on securing rights to reprint Ellul's out-of-print works in English. *Money & Power* will reappear very soon, *Living Faith* and *Hope in Time of Abandonment* will come next. Others to follow.

## ✍ **JOYCE HANKS TO PEACE CORP**

Our IJES co-founder and certainly the leading bibliographer of Jacques Ellul in the world, Joyce Hanks, has retired from her faculty post at the University of Scranton and also taken leave from the IJES to serve in the peace corp in a rather remote southeast Asia location. We wish our amazing colleague well and will eagerly welcome her back.

## ✍ **ANDY ALEXIS-BAKER AND DAVID LOVEKIN JOIN IJES BOARD**

At its annual meeting, the IJES Board welcomed two new members. Andy Alexis-Baker recently graduated from the Mennonite Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. He is a long time leader of the Jesus Radicals, an anarchist group largely inspired by Ellul. Andy has been an indefatigable, generous, and courageous promoter of Jacques Ellul's ideas and writings. David Lovekin is professor of philosophy at Hastings College in Nebraska. David was author of one of the first published monographs on Ellul's thought: *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (Lehigh Univ, 1991).

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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.

### **Membership**

Anyone who supports the objectives of the IJES is invited to join the society for an annual dues payment of US\$20.00. Membership includes a subscription to the Ellul Forum.

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# Resources for Ellul Studies

## **www.ellul.org & www.jacques-ellul.org**

The IJES web site at [www.ellul.org](http://www.ellul.org) contains (1) news about IJES activities and plans, (2) a brief and accurate biography of Jacques Ellul, (3) a complete bibliography of Ellul's books in French and English, (4) a complete index of the contents of all *Ellul Forum* back issues; and (5) links and information on other resources for students of Jacques Ellul. The French AIJE web site at [www.jacques-ellul.org](http://www.jacques-ellul.org) is also a superb resource.

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## ***The Ellul Forum CD: 1988-2002***

The first thirty issues of *The Ellul Forum*, some 500 published pages total, are now available (only) on a single compact disc which can be purchased for US \$15 (postage included). Send payment with your order to "IJES," P.O. Box 5365, Berkeley CA 94705 USA.

Back issues #31 - #42 of *The Ellul Forum* are available for \$5 each (postage and shipping included).

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## **Cahiers Jacques Ellul**

### ***Pour Une Critique de la Societe Technicienne***

An essential annual journal for students of Ellul is *Cahiers Jacques Ellul*, edited by Patrick Chastenet, published by Editions L'Esprit du Temps, and distributed by Presses Universitaires de France. Send orders to Editions L'Esprit du Temps, BP 107, 33491 Le Bouscat Cedex, France. Postage and shipping is 5 euros for the first volume ordered; add 2 euros for each additional volume ordered.

Volume 1: "L'Années personnalistes" (15 euros)  
Volume 2: "La Technique" (15 euros)  
Volume 3: "L'Economie" (21 euros).  
Volume 4: "La Propagande" (21 euros).  
Volume 5: "La Politique" (21 euros)

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## **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. 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. Visit [www.elsevier.com](http://www.elsevier.com) for ordering information.

## **The Reception of Jacques Ellul's Critique of Technology: An Annotated Bibliography of Writings on His Life and Thought**

by Joyce Main Hanks (Edwin Mellen Press, 2007). 546 pp. This volume is an amazing, indispensable resource for studying Jacques Ellul. All the books, articles, reviews, and published symposia on Ellul's ideas and writings are here.

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## **Living the Word, Resisting the World: The Life and Thought of Jacques Ellul**

by Andrew Goddard. (Paternoster Press, 2002). 378 pp. Seven years after being published, Professor Goddard's study remains the best English language introduction to Ellul's life and thought.

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## **Librairie Mollat---new books in French**

Librairie Mollat in the center of old Bordeaux ([www.mollat.com](http://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.

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## **Alibris---used books in English**

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

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## **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](http://www.chapitre.com) and [www.livre-rare-book.com](http://www.livre-rare-book.com).

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## **Ellul on DVD/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](http://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 Produkties (mail to: Postbox 93021, 1090 BA Amsterdam).

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