

The philosopher who foresaw AI

& inspired the Unabomber & Neil Postman

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His name was Jacques Ellul, and he predicted the future. Or to be more precise, the present.

In 1954, Ellul, a French philosopher, theologian, sociologist and law professor, published his magnum opus, a book called “The Technological Society.” In it, he argued that **technology had broken free from human control and would one day enslave us.**

Ellul did not blame technology itself. Technological advancement had existed since cavemen fashioned the first tools without usurping mankind’s humanity or agency. Why? For most of human history, **societies recognized technology’s potential for disruption** and restricted its advancement and adoption, he wrote.

That changed in the 18th century when the West began pairing technology with efficiency to better people’s lives and ease their burdens, Ellul wrote. Instead of a potentially dangerous disrupter needing constant oversight, **technology was set free to improve humanity’s material and physical well-being.** This new dynamic allowed technology to slip the bonds of human control and become a self-sustaining force unto itself, Ellul wrote. He dubbed this combine of technology and efficiency “technique.”

“The term technique, as I use it, does not mean machines, technology, or this or that procedure for attaining an end,” Ellul wrote in the 1964 introduction to the English translation of “The Technological Society.” “Technique is the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity.”

Technique, as Ellul defined it, gradually and then ever faster became humanity’s central organizing principle, **pushing aside religion, tradition, morality, aesthetics, beauty and the search for enlightenment.** The quest for maximum efficiency through technological innovation conquered nearly every culture and came to rule nearly every human endeavor. While it has delivered unparalleled wealth, well-being and comfort for many, **it had also led to mass death, dislocation and environmental destruction, dehumanization, alienation and erosion of society’s cultural, spiritual and moral underpinnings.** And those downsides would only get worse.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Me4vmkzKv84>

Prophet of AI

It is impossible to read Ellul’s “The Technological Society” without being struck by how accurately he predicted, if not the specific rise of artificial intelligence, the thinking — replacement of man with machine in the name of efficiency— behind it and its consequences. With a prescience both remarkable and unsettling, **he describes the no-win box into which technology in the form of AI is forcing humanity.** In spite of mounting evidence of its deleterious effects — potentially catastrophic

job losses, alienation and loneliness, dehumanization and social breakdown, a mental illness crisis and the undermining of education and abandonment of critical thinking, especially among the young — there is no question of slowing, let alone stopping AI’s development and adoption. As Ellul predicted, technology has seized control and is hurtling us into a future over which we have no control or say.

Sam Altman and the other avatars of AI not only have no counter to Ellul’s critique — I doubt any of them have even heard of him — they unwittingly echo it. **AI, they tell us, is unstoppable and humanity must adapt to it, not the other way around.**

In other words, as Ellul predicted, **technique, having reached its ultimate expression in AI, “has penetrated the deepest recesses of the human being.** The machine tends not only to create a new human environment, but also to modify man’s very essence. The milieu in which he lives is no longer his. He must adapt himself, as though the world were new, to a universe for which he was not created.”

So why should we, per Altman and his ilk, surrender ourselves to this fate? They again unknowingly channel perhaps their greatest and most effective critic: The resulting exponential growth in productivity — contingent on the ruthless quest for maximum efficiency in all things that Ellul warns about — will lead to a golden age of wealth, wellness and leisure.

Or as Ellul put it more than 70 years ago: “Modern technology has become a total phenomenon for civilization, the defining force of a new social order in which efficiency is no longer an option but a necessity imposed on all human activity.”

Ellul didn’t just get the big picture right. **He also envisioned the broader fallout, the intrusion of AI into every aspect of life,** the resulting collapse of spirituality and morality, abandonment of cultural heritage, undermining of democracy and human freedom and atomization of society into a mass of disconnected, alienated and easily manipulated individuals. He even foresaw how efficiency and technology unbound would snuff out spontaneity and alter how we spend our leisure time.

“(Life) has room for activities that are not rationally or systemically ordered,” Ellul wrote. “But the collision between spontaneous activities and technique is catastrophic for the spontaneous activities.”

And to the au courant argument, fashionable to the point of cliché among American progressives, that “late stage capitalism” is to blame for all these ills, Ellul responds with an emphatic “*Non!*” **Communism, socialism and capitalism all embrace technique,** wrote Ellul, who was a scholar but not an adherent of Marxism. They differ only in how to channel it.

“It is useless to rail against capitalism,” Ellul wrote. “**Capitalism did not create our world; the machine did.**”

Kaczynski & Postman

I'm far from the first to recognize Ellul as the Nostradamus of the Digital Age. His most famous adherent is among the most infamous people of the late 20th century: the Unabomber. Alone in his tiny Montana cabin, **Ted Kaczynski devoured and internalized Ellul's works**, especially "The Technological Society." Kaczynski's brother called the book his "Bible"; In a 1980s fan letter to Ellul, Kaczynski wrote that he had read it six times. His 1995 manifesto, a screed against technology that is finding ever more fans disillusioned by our increasingly digitized society, is shot through with Ellul's ideas.

The two men could not have been less alike. Kaczynski was an atheist, a mentally ill loner and a misanthrope whose solution for technology's ills was violence and terror. Ellul was a deeply religious academic, thinker and family man, a happily married father of four. **Unlike Kaczynski, he had a foot planted firmly in the real world** through his work with youthful offenders and participation in the French resistance during World War Two. He explicitly rejected violence and grappled with technology's relationship with man in most of the more than 60 books he wrote.

I have no doubt that **Ellul would have been horrified by his influence on Kaczynski**, who was finally caught two years after Ellul's death in 1994.

The Unabomber aside, Ellul has inspired many important thinkers who are not murderous sociopaths. Among them was Neil Postman, often called the greatest American sociologist of the last 50 years. One of Postman's later books, 1992's "Technopoly," is heavily influenced by Ellul's ideas.

But it is Postman's greatest work, his 1985 bestseller "Amusing Ourselves to Death," that comes closest to Ellul's *weltanschauung* in an American context. Postman's premise was that **television was transforming America from a literate to a post-literate culture**, one that valued emotion, entertainment and distraction over facts, thought and reason. At the beginning of the book, he asks, is the future Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World" or George Orwell's "1984"? He comes down firmly on the side of "Brave New World."

"Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression," Postman wrote. "But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, **people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.**"

Sound familiar?

Time has proven Postman's vision, like Ellul's, correct. Social media, the smart phone and the rise of AI — all of which postdate Postman's 2003 death — are completing our transition to a post-literate society, unleashing the very demons he foresaw.

Ellul's legacy

While Ellul has long enjoyed popularity among a segment of American intellectuals, **he has never broken into the mainstream of American thought**, let alone the larger culture. A perusal of the online catalogues of the Yale and Harvard philosophy departments, for example, reveals no courses devoted to him or his ideas. Why? Is he too provincial? — he spent his entire life and career in the Bordeaux region. Does he lack the panache, provocation and gift for self promotion of the Paris-based Jean Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault?

Perhaps, but I would argue the reasons are more straightforward. **Ellul does not fit into either of the two tribes into which Americans have sorted themselves** over the last 50 years. For progressives, he is too religious — he wrote multiple books on theology and spoke openly of a mystical experience at 17 in which he felt in the presence of God — too disinterested in race, sex and gender and too skeptical of big government solutions. For conservatives and their MAGA successors, he's too critical of capitalism, too indifferent to culture war and too pro-environmental — he is often credited with coining the catchphrase, "Think globally, act locally."

Nor would either side in America's cold civil war think much of his wariness of technology. Until very recently, no people have more eagerly embraced efficiency and technological progress than Americans or been more willing to accept the inevitable disruptions. **Americans regardless of political stripe always believe there is a solution, and that solution is more often than not technological** — the AI boom being the latest example. You could even argue that our founding creed — life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness — is among the earliest expressions of Ellul's "technique."

Naysayers have criticized "The Technological Society" as too pessimistic and devoid of solutions. In the 1964 forward to the book's English translation, Ellul addresses both charges and pleads innocent. "I am neither by nature, nor doctrinally, a pessimist, nor have I pessimistic prejudices," he wrote. **His book offers no sweeping or specific remedies because he has none.** His purpose, he wrote, is to lay out the problem and sound the alarm. It's up to humanity to find solutions.

"(The Technological Society) is a call to the sleeper to awake," Ellul wrote. His best case scenario is a critical mass of people coming to grasp the threat "technique" poses to their humanity and freedom and "upsetting the course of this evolution."

"At stake is our very life, and we shall need all the energy, inventiveness, imagination, goodness, and strength we can muster to triumph in our predicament," he wrote. ". . . **each of us, in his own life, must seek ways of resisting and transcending technological determinants.** Each man must make this effort in every area of life, in his profession and in his social, religious, and family relationships."

That means, putting down the phone; restricting screen time; leaving social media or minimizing its use: eschewing AI, especially in writing, thinking and education; reading books; seeking out accurate sources of information; and talking to each other.

It sounds both deceptively easy and ridiculously hard in our increasingly AI-saturated world. **Can we do it?** Our future is likely to depend on it.

Posted on the **Cracks in Postmodernity** substack run by Stephen G. Adubato. Cultural commentary that gives precedence to aesthetics and ontology over ethics and politics.

A guest post by **Christopher Hoffman**

Christopher Hoffman is a veteran Connecticut journalist whose work has appeared in the Boston Globe, Columbia Journalism Review, the Irish Times and Yale Medicine Magazine.

Comments

John Milbank • 17 May

Thank you for this important article.

Characters & Shadows • 17 May

What I appreciated most here is that Ellul's critique does not reduce to "technology is bad." The deeper problem is technique: efficiency becoming the hidden grammar of human life. That makes the AI question more than a debate about jobs, schools, or productivity. If the human person is constantly asked to adapt to a world built for the machine, then the real loss is not only attention or autonomy, but the older rhythms by which judgment, friendship, contemplation, and freedom become possible.

Blackmun • 6d

I had no previous knowledge of the work of Jacques Ellul, and found your post to be fascinating. What was most interesting was the great similarity of some of his ideas to those of Oswald Spengler, as presented in his book of 1931, "Man and Technics".

Spengler's view of "technics" seems to be very much like that of Ellul's view of "technique"; as Spengler put it, "If we are to understand the essence of Technics, we must not start from the technics of the machine age, and still less from the misleading notion that the fashioning of machines and tools is the aim of technics."

Spengler was also, like Ellul, skeptical of the ultimate result of technological development; he commented that "Finally, with the coming of rationalism, the belief in technics almost becomes a materialistic religion. Technics is eternal and immortal like God the Father, it delivers mankind like God the Son, and it illumines us like God the Holy Ghost."

At any rate, if you have any further interest in Spengler's ideas, you might want to take a look at my post on Substack, <https://blackboxsite.substack.com/p/8-the-prophecies-of-oswald-spengler>

Personalist Papers • 18 May

This article prompted me to act without further ado upon a move I had long been contemplating to do: launching my own substack to lift the curtain on Ellul's backstory and the unsuspected prewar context of a critique of technological society that he has even admitted his friend (and mine) Bernard Charbonneau (1910-1994) introduced him to over twenty years before the latter fatefully delegated to him the task of writing the book on it, as a last resort after their efforts to get a revolutionary movement against it off the ground since the early 1930s seemed to go nowhere, even as they ostensibly parted ways with the broader Personalist movement under whose umbrella it was initially conceived, because it had by then allowed itself to be mostly reducible to a Christian case for Progress. But it was Charbonneau who had launched their own Bordeaux School of critical thought embodied in new (local yet globally-minded, Nature-grounded) ways of life with a public lecture on 'Progress against Man' in 1935, even as he published an article on Publicity that reads as the first Adbuster manifesto. For him, 'seeking out accurate sources of information; and talking to each other' (in Christopher's parting words) were the pillars of the Personalist revolution as he conceived it, having as its chief method grassroots media detox, along lines he would remain faithful to till the end of his life, e.g., in his 1986 book *La Société médiatisée*, whose translation I have just about completed on a dedicated Patreon page. Before I have to withdraw access to it as I send it to publishers, you may still claim it as a perk when you join my Personalist Papers substack, where I recycle my tongue-in-cheek byline: 'If you liked Ellul's Technological Society, you're gonna love Charbonneau's Mediatized Society!'. Check my introductory post and a note of teasers of coming attractions at <https://christianroy181311.substack.com/p/personalist-papers>, if you want to discover how what you know of Ellul as a 'philosopher' (he always rejected the label as anything but an armchair speculator!) is but the tip of an iceberg of astonishingly radical critical thought and action, fully defined in the 1930s as a revolutionary alternative beyond Right and Left as well as liberal/capitalist compromise, i.e., close to a hundred years ago in an even more polarized and paralyzed landscape than our own. But they were not in advance of their time, it is the intervening generations that have fitfully been reinventing or rediscovering a set of insights and ways around Technological society that were available from the start to people with eyes to see what was not even hiding in plain sight (from automobiles to the mass mobilization of world wars), so that they still have much to tell us about what we are facing and we can perhaps do about it.

Gabriel Jorge • 17 May

This one made my day! For two years I have been studying Jacques Ellul's work and he opened my eyes to so many things happening now, and he died decades ago! My project is a Substack on him and the theory of technological determinism. Glad to read this in Cracks in PoMo

Randall Morris • 20 May

The notion that this philosopher was some isolated savant predicting the rise of AI and its consequences is nonsense. There was a host of sci-fi writers entertaining the same notion, including Asimov, and most were technically more astute than Ellul. Well before the turn of the century the notion of the singularity was in place and a popular topic. Much of that sci-fi addressed not just sociological themes, but the deeper notion of what it means to be a conscious entity.

MVN • 18 May

Amusing Ourselves to Death was used as a textbook in a college course I took. I loved that book so much I reread after I graduated. Only time in my life I reread a textbook as a treasured gift.

Thank you for reintroducing me to Ellul. French is a language I know (it's as official as English in my country) so I'd like to take a stab at Ellul in his native tongue (that will probably be over my head but I managed Camus so I hope I'm underestimating myself).

I find Christian Anarchism intriguing, and would like to know more about it, but can't see myself adopting it because I very much believe things need to be organized to prevent chaos & lawlessness.

The Ted K Archive

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<www.cracksinpomo.substack.com/p/the-philosopher-who-foresaw-ai>

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