

Tolkien, Ellul and the Unabomber

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Tolkien, the One Ring and the Machine

In this article, I will demonstrate that:

1. The core of Tolkien's political message lies in the idea of something dangerous, which cannot be used for good purposes and therefore must be destroyed. For Tolkien, this is the One Ring in his secondary world, and the Machine in our primary world.¹ The idea of the Machine is linked to Tolkien's theory of Powers: here Tolkien distinguishes between the main kinds of Powers, according to their purpose (whether they are used for domination or not) and their means (exercised with or without the use of an external apparatus. The power of the Machine, like the One Ring, is one of domination, requiring an external apparatus. However, Tolkien clearly distinguishes between the Machine and machines in general.
2. Tolkien's ideas about the One Ring and the Machine can be better understood thanks to Ellul's theory about the Technological System². For the French scholar, this was a system whose key elements are Production, Consumption, and Culture, and whose process is one of exponential self-growth. Man cannot use this system for good purposes, and is a slave to the system, which differs from technical objects and machines. These similarities to the One Ring and the Machine make Ellul's Technological System the best candidate for the role of the Machine in our primary world.
3. Ted Kaczynski, better known as the Unabomber,³ shared Ellul's ideas regarding the Technological System; however, he took it a step further, similar in ways to the decision taken at the Council of Elrond concerning the destruction of the Ring: for him, this system, which was acting against Man, needed to be destroyed as soon as possible;
4. Tolkien's political message, though, is in complete opposition to Kaczynski.⁴ This is because Tolkien never went so far as dynamiting factories or trying to organise a movement for this purpose, or for killing people: nothing in his *Legendarium* or his letters can be construed as approving of similar violent activities. The "weapons" proposed by Tolkien for fighting the Machine are in fact Fantasy, Escape, Recovery and "chance", as one would say in Middle-earth.

Starting from the Ruling Ring, it is important to remember that one of the deeper, most fascinating and misunderstood qualities of the One Ring is that it cannot be used for good purposes. This is because everyone who uses it becomes a servant of its power and it is for this reason that it has to be destroyed:

¹ [Missing footnote]

² [Missing footnote] The Technological System by Jacques Ellul (1980)

³ [Missing footnote] Ted Kaczynski | Wikipedia

⁴ [Missing footnote]

‘Alas, no,’ said Elrond. ‘*We cannot use the Ruling Ring.* That we now know too well. It belongs to Sauron and was made by him alone, and is altogether evil. Its strength, Boromir, is too great for anyone to wield at will, save only those who have already a great power of their own. But for them it holds an even deadlier peril. The very desire of it corrupts the heart. Consider Saruman. If any of the Wise should with this Ring overthrow the Lord of Mordor, using his own arts, he would then set himself on Sauron’s throne, and yet another Dark Lord would appear. And that is another reason why the Ring *should be destroyed*: as long as it is in the world it will be a danger even to the Wise. (LotR I, *The Council of Elrond*, italics added)

To better understand the magical power of the Ring, this quote from letter 131 is fundamental:

Anyway, all this stuff is mainly concerned with Fall, Mortality, and *the Machine*. With Fall inevitably, and that motive occurs in several modes. With Mortality, especially as it affects art and the creative (or as I should say, sub-creative) desire which seems to have no biological function [...]. This desire [...] may become possessive, clinging to the things made as ‘its own’, the sub-creator wishes to be the Lord and God of his private creation. He will rebel against the laws of the Creator – especially against mortality. Both of these (alone or together) will lead to the desire for Power, for making the will more quickly effective, – and so to *the Machine* (or *Magic*). By the last I intend all use of external plans or devices (apparatus) instead of development of the inherent inner powers or talents — or even the use of these talents with the corrupted motive of dominating: bulldozing the real world, or coercing other wills. *The Machine is our more obvious modern form though more closely related to Magic* than is usually recognised. (L 131, italics added)

In this text, Tolkien affirms the following sequence:

- I- art produces a sub-created world,
- II- this action can also produce love for the primary world,
- III- after the Fall, love of the primary world may become possessive, and cause the sub-creator to become a Creator,
- IV- this leads to the desire to change the Creator’s world and laws (especially concerning mortality),
- V- this causes the desire for Power and to make the will more quickly effective,
- VI- and, finally, this leads to Magic (in the secondary world) and to the Machine in our primary world.

To better understand Tolkien’s theory on Magic, it is important to underline that here he distinguishes four different powers with regards to:

- their purposes: A) powers for domination or B) not for dominating.
- their means: 1) powers exercised through an external apparatus or 2) without an external apparatus. Let’s look at some examples from The Lord of the Rings:
- The power of the Ring is obviously one of domination exercised through an external apparatus, while the Elvish rings (whose aim is the “prevention or slowing of *decay*”: L 131) are not for domination.
- Considering powers that do not require an external apparatus, the voice of Saruman is for domination while human Fantasy, or Elvish Enchantment, are not.

The following scheme summarises these four powers:

POWERS	A) FOR DOMINATION	B) NOT FOR DOMINATION
1) WITH APPARATUS	A.1 <i>The One Ring</i> ,	B.1 <i>Elvish rings</i>
2) WITHOUT APPARATUS	A.2 <i>Voice of Saruman</i>	B.2 Fantasy, Enchantment

It is important to underline that this division *is not* between good powers (on the right: B.1-B.2) and evil powers (on the left: A1-A2), in fact:

- Fantasy (B.2) can be used for evil purposes;

“Fantasy can, of course, be carried to excess. It can be put to evil uses.”
(FS par.80 p. 65)

- In his secondary world, it was the Elvish desire to know and embalm which caused the forging of the Elvish Rings (B.1) and, therefore, of the One Ring to rule them all:

many eyes were turned to Elrond in fear and wonder as he told of the Elvensmiths of Eregion and their friendship with Moria, and their *eagerness for knowledge, by which Sauron ensnared them*. For in that time he was not yet evil to behold, and they received his aid and grew mighty in craft, whereas he learned all their secrets, and betrayed them, and forged secretly in the Mountain of Fire the One Ring to be their master. (Tolkien. LotR I, *Council of Elrond*, italics added)

the Elves are not wholly good or in the right. Not so much because *they had flirted with Sauron; as because with or without his assistance they were ‘embalmers’*. They wanted to have their cake and eat it. (L 154, italics added)

These texts show that at the core of both Magic⁵ and the Machine lies a desire for Domination and for making the will more quickly effective. Therefore, it is possible to affirm, following Tolkien’s application⁶ of his *Legendarium* to our world, that the Machine in the primary world is the closest thing to the most powerful Magic, which is the One Ring (see L 131 quoted above, last paragraph). Christopher Tolkien also underlines this important link between the One Ring and the Machine:

The supreme Machine in the mythological world is the Ring⁷

Now, what did Tolkien really mean by “the Machine”? First of all, in his letters, and in his *Legendarium* too, he clearly distinguishes between the Machine (that we cannot use) and machines in general. For example, in Hobbiton, there were machines (like watermills) and also Lotho’s industrial mills, which were not considered evil objects:

It would no doubt be possible to defend poor Lotho’s introduction of more efficient mills; but not of Sharkey and Sandyman’s use of them. (L 155)

Therefore, for Tolkien, it is possible to use machines, technology and science⁸ for good purposes: and this distinguishes machines in general from the One Ring and from the Machine. In fact, it is possible to use a gun as a bookend, or to use a giant bomber plane (see L 75) to transport people: these are good purposes using bad means. However, these means (the gun, the giant bomber) are not the Machine.

In short, every concrete object from our primary world can be used for a good purpose and therefore cannot play the role of the Machine: even an atomic bomb (see L 102) could be used to deflect a hypothetical meteorite heading for Earth.

To mark this difference, I can say that machines are products of the Machine, in Sauron fashion:

⁵ Tolkien considers Magic only the powers A.1+B.1+A.2 (written in Italic in the previous table) as the last paragraph of the previous text (L. 131) shows: “By the last I intend all use of external plans or devices (apparatus) (A.1+B.1) instead of development of the inherent inner powers or talents [B.2] — or even the use of these talents with the corrupted motive of dominating (A.2)”

⁶ For the distinction between application, interpretation and allegory, see Testi C.A.: Pagan Saints in Middle-earth, WTP, Zurich-Jena 2018 pp. 15–20.

⁷ (<https://middle-earth.xenite.org/christopher-tolkien-the-silmarillion-and-the-machine/> video 2)

⁸ On Tolkien and science, see: Gee, Henry. *The Science of Middle-earth*. New York: Cold Spring Press, 2004; Larsen, Kristine. ‘Sauron, Mont Doom, and Elvish Moths: The Influence of Tolkien on Modern Science.’ *Tolkien Studies* 4 (2007): 223–234; Lehoucq Ronald – Mangin Loic – Steyer Jean-Sébastien, *Tolkien et les Sciences*, Belin, Paris, 2019

The world is not a machine that makes other machines after the fashion of Sauron. (LR, p. 48)

To conclude this section, I hope to have shown that:

- The One Ring is something dangerous which cannot be used for good purposes; therefore, it must be destroyed;
- the Machine in our primary world has the same qualities of the One Ring, so it should be placed in position A.1 in the previous scheme;
- The Machine is different from other machines.

However, the question “What did Tolkien really mean by ‘The Machine’?” is still unanswered.

Ellul and the Technological System

The answer to this question, in my humble opinion, is that in our primary world the “thing” most similar to the Machine is The Technological System. This idea was elaborated on in 1954 by the French scholar Jacques Ellul (1912–1994) in his book “The Technological Society”, and in other works⁹.

Ellul’s complex and articulate theory could be summarised here through these two schematic definitions:

- A System in general is a set of elements connected in such a way that a change in one element causes a change in the others
- The Technological System is a system whose elements are Production, Consumption, Culture (mainly technical) and whose process is exponential self-growth.

As for Tolkien’s distinction between the Machine and machines, Ellul distinguishes between the Technological System and technological machines and objects, which are products of the system:

the very same people declare that the *technological system* does not exist as such and that there are only *technological objects*. In point of fact, however, those objects are not scattered and unrelated, they are *included in a system*. (Ellul, *System*, p. 87, italics added)

⁹ See also Ellul, Jacques, *The Technological System*, The Continuum Publishing Corporation, New York, 1980 (English translation of *Le Système technique*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 1977); *The Technological Bluff*. Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990 (English translation of *Le bluff technologique*. Hachette, Paris, 1988).

As for the One Ring, in this system, the human being is only an element who serves the system's process of self-growth as a worker, a consumer and a technician:

The human being who uses technology today is by that very fact the human being who serves it. And conversely, only the human being who serves technology is truly able to use it. (Ellul, *System*, p. 325, italics added)

For this reason, from Ellul's perspective, it is possible to use every technological object for good or bad purposes, and it is impossible to use the Technological System because it uses us for its selfgrowth, which cannot be stopped, changed or guided:

We have completed our examination of the monolithic technical world that is coming to be. *It is vanity* to pretend it can be checked or guided. (Ellul, *Society*, p. 428)

Let's create an example to clarify these concepts. Thirty years ago, if one wished to read a book, they would need a few days in order to make a number of car trips to the closest bookshop, order, pay, and finally start reading the desired item. Now, thanks to e-book readers, this time has reduced to a few seconds, without any kind of car travel. In this example, it is important to note that, in order to gain this result, it is necessary to have:

- Machines for production (e.g. advanced computers) and consumption (e.g. an e-book reader);
- Engineers with a technical culture who are able to project ever faster computers and e-readers.

The Technological System is the whole set of these linked elements, and the process that improves them to make the will increasingly effective. Because of technological progress, we become more and more addicted to technology, to the point that today almost no one wants to (or even can) stop this "magical" movement.

In summary, for Jaques Ellul, the Technological System, like Tolkien's Ring and the Machine, possesses these qualities:

- Its movement is one of self-growth empowerment, which is always quicker;
- Man cannot use this system;
- Man is a servant of the system.

For these reasons, in my opinion, the best candidate for the role of Tolkien's Machine (which is the closest thing to the One Ring in our primary world) is Ellul's Technological System.

Ted Kaczynski: The Technological System Should Be Destroyed

Ted Kaczynski (1942-), better known as the Unabomber, was a mathematics prodigy, but abandoned his academic career and moved to a remote cabin without electricity in Montana, where he lived as a recluse while learning survival skills in order to become self-sufficient. He witnessed the destruction of the wilderness surrounding his cabin and concluded that living in nature was becoming impossible. So he decided to fight industrialisation through an ingenuous and diabolical postal bombing campaign which, between 1978 and 1995, led to the deaths of three people and injured 23 others. There were no breakthroughs in the FBI's attempts to unmask him until, in 1995, he sent a letter to *The New York Times* promising to “desist from terrorism” if the *Times* or *The Washington Post* published his essay entitled *Industrial Society and Its Future*. Kaczynski explicitly considered Ellul a soulmate because they both made the same analysis of Technological Society¹⁰. However, Kaczynski went a step further in deducing some practical consequences: if the Technological System (named in his essay as “Industrial-Technological Society”) could not be used for good purposes and its self-growth acted against nature and humanity, it should be destroyed:

2. *There is no way of reforming or modifying the system* to prevent it from depriving people of dignity and autonomy.
3. If the system breaks down the consequences will still be very painful. But the bigger the system grows the more disastrous the results of its breakdown will be, so if it is to break down *it had best* break down sooner rather than later. (Kaczynski, *Industrial*, nn. 2–3, pp. 7–8, italics added)

Kaczynski never quoted Tolkien in his works¹¹, and I do not know if he has read *The Lord of the Rings*. I asked his brother David if he had, but he couldn't recall any mention of it. David provided me with Ted's address in jail, so I tried to contact him by post to ask him about this possible link to Tolkien, but the letter never arrived. Regardless, we can see that his idea of the Technological System and his decision to destroy it is very close to the one made by the Council of Elrond about the One Ring, as Haag has also noted:

¹⁰ Ted Kaczynski said, “I had already developed *at least* 50% of the ideas of that book on my own, and ... when I read the book for the first time, I was delighted, because I thought, ‘Here is someone who is saying what I have already been thinking’” (quoted in Alstom, Chase, “Harvard and the making of Unabomber”, *The Atlantic* June 2000, www.theatlantic.com. Also David Kaczynski testified that Ted “had absorbed Jacques Ellul’s Technological Society, a wide-ranging critique of technology” (Kaczynski, David. *Every Last Tie*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2016. p.14).

¹¹ See also: Theodore John Kaczynski, *Anti-Tech Revolution: Why and How*, Fitch & Madison Publishers, Scottsdale, USA, 2016; id., *Technological Slavery*, Fitch & Madison Publishers, Scottsdale, USA, 2019.

Kaczynski warned that if the [...] collective movement ever did manage to achieve the ultimate political conquest and take control of the whole system, trusting [—] to *destroy technology at that moment would be as irresponsible as expecting Smeagol to destroy the ring after finally taking possession of it. Gandalf's warning to Boromir against playing games with repurposing the ring* to “strictly ethical purposes” is worth quoting in full: ‘We cannot use the Ruling Ring. It is altogether evil. Its strength is too great for anyone to wield at will, save those who have already a great power of their own. But for them it holds an even deadlier peril. The very desire of it corrupts the heart.’ (Haag, *Philosophy*, p.32, italics added)

Tolkien and Politics: vs. Kaczynski and vs. the Technological System

Now, the final question is: what kind of political message does Tolkien propose for solving the technological problem?

If one considers letter n. 52, one could wrongly think that Tolkien was not far separated from Kaczynski's ideas.

There is only one bright spot and that is the growing habit of disgruntled men of dynamiting factories and power-stations; I hope that, encouraged now as ‘patriotism’, may remain a habit! But it won't do any good, if it is not universal. (L 52)

Obviously, we have to consider this text to only be a provocation and we must reject any interpretation of Tolkien as being in any way like the violent activist Kaczynski, who explicitly affirmed that:

4. We therefore advocate a revolution against the industrial system. This revolution *may* or may not make use of violence. (Kaczynski, *Industrial*, n.4, italics added)¹²

In fact, Tolkien's ideas are in complete opposition to Kaczynski, because he never actually dynamited factories or tried to organise a movement for doing this, or killing people: also, nothing in his *Legendarium* or his letters can be construed as being approving of similar violent activities. In this regard, he explicitly stated that:

My political opinions lean more and more to Anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control *not whiskered men with bombs*). (L 52, italics added)

¹² In the interests of fairness, it should be noted that, in later works (see above: Kaczynski 2016 and 2019), Kaczynski seems to rectify this position on the possible uses of violence.

So, to answer the question of Tolkien's political message, it is better to observe what he did during his life in connection with Magic and the Machine. On the one hand, Tolkien spent his life using Fantasy (position B.2- in the previous scheme) and, being a devout Catholic, praying to God. On the other hand, he was well aware, as a man and as a Christian, that it was necessary to fight the "long defeat" (L 195) in a world which, according to his vision, was increasingly moving away from truth and beauty.

This means it would be wrong to think that Tolkien's mythopoeic activity is something devoid of political implications: he was certainly not a snobbish aesthete and did not practice "art for art's sake", but in order "to express, in the only way I can, some of my (dim) apprehensions of the world" (L 211). The proof lies in Tolkien's *On Fairy Stories* which, in defining the effects of Fantasy, explicitly assigns two of these (Escape and Recovery) an extremely "practical" and "political" function.

The Escape is also a political condemnation of the worst, inexorable products of the Machine:

I do not think that the reader or the maker of fairy-stories need even be ashamed of the "escape" of archaism: of preferring not dragons but horses, castles, sailing-ships, bows and arrows; not only elves, but knights and kings and priests. For it is after all possible for a rational man, after reflection (quite unconnected with fairy-story or romance), to arrive at *the condemnation*, implicit at least in the mere silence of "escapist" literature, of *progressive things like factories, or the machine-guns and bombs* that appear to be their most natural and inevitable, dare we say "inexorable," products. (FS, Par. 93, italics added)

Moreover, Recovery is a practical activity that truly changes our mind and allows us to see the primary world without possession:

Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining—*regaining of a clear view*. I do not say "seeing things as they are" and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say "seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them"—as *things apart from ourselves*. We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be *freed* from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity—*from possessiveness*. (FS, Par. 83, p. 67, italics added)

The political role of these two effects can also be found in his fiction. Here, it is enough to remember that:

- Bilbo's *Escape* lies in the song of the dwarves, who speak of dragons and mountains, and which "activates" the Took side in him and pushes him to leave for Erebor (H chapter 1). Also, in *LotR*, it is during the story of Beren, Luthien and the Silmarilli that Frodo and Sam experience their own Escape, understanding

how they have been inserted into the same narrative, and this gives them the strength to continue on the march towards Mordor. (LotR II, IV chapter 8, *The Stairs of Cirith Ungol*)

- the experience of *Recovery* is clearly described when Frodo perceives colours in Cerin Amroth “as if he had at that moment first perceived them” (LotR I, II. *Lothlórien*). It is also “clear” that, in LotR, the hobbits (and all free peoples) have a “clear view” typical of *Recovery*, which leads to them perceiving how ugly the “new” scenarios desired by Sauron and Saruman are, in the same way Tolkien perceived a horse more real than “motor-cars” (FS, Par. 90). On the other hand, the evil that enters Frodo through the wound caused by the Morgul blade, and his use of the Ring, prevents him from perceiving the beauty of the Shire anymore, as noted in the words, “it has been saved, but not for me” (LotR III, IV, 9, *The Grey Havens*): in order to “recover” that vision of the world, he has to set off for a stay of “peace and healing” in Tol-Eressea (L 297 and 325).

Escape and *Recovery* are therefore fundamental “weapons” in the war against Mordor, Isengard and the Machine. In Tolkien, however, the awareness remains that success does not depend solely on their strength but also on something superior and mysterious, which will in fact somehow cause the Ring to be destroyed at Mount Doom.

In closing, I hope to have shown in this article that:

- for Tolkien, the Machine, like the Ring, acts against Man and Nature and cannot be used for good purposes. Therefore, it needed to be destroyed;
- the best candidate for the role of “the Machine” in our primary word is Ellul and Kaczynski’s Technological System;
- in opposition to Kaczynski’s ideas, Tolkien’s political message was not to oppose the Technological System through any form of violence, but to instead use Fantasy, Escape and *Recovery*, at the same time also hoping, by chance, “as we say in Middle-earth” (LotR, App. A, III, *Durin’s folk*), that the Technological System would fall into a figurative Crack of Doom.

Are Fantasy, Escape, *Recovery* and “chance” enough to solve the technological problem, ensuring that machines, which are of themselves largely positive, really at the service of man and not causing man to instead serve the Machine? I do not know but I really hope so.

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