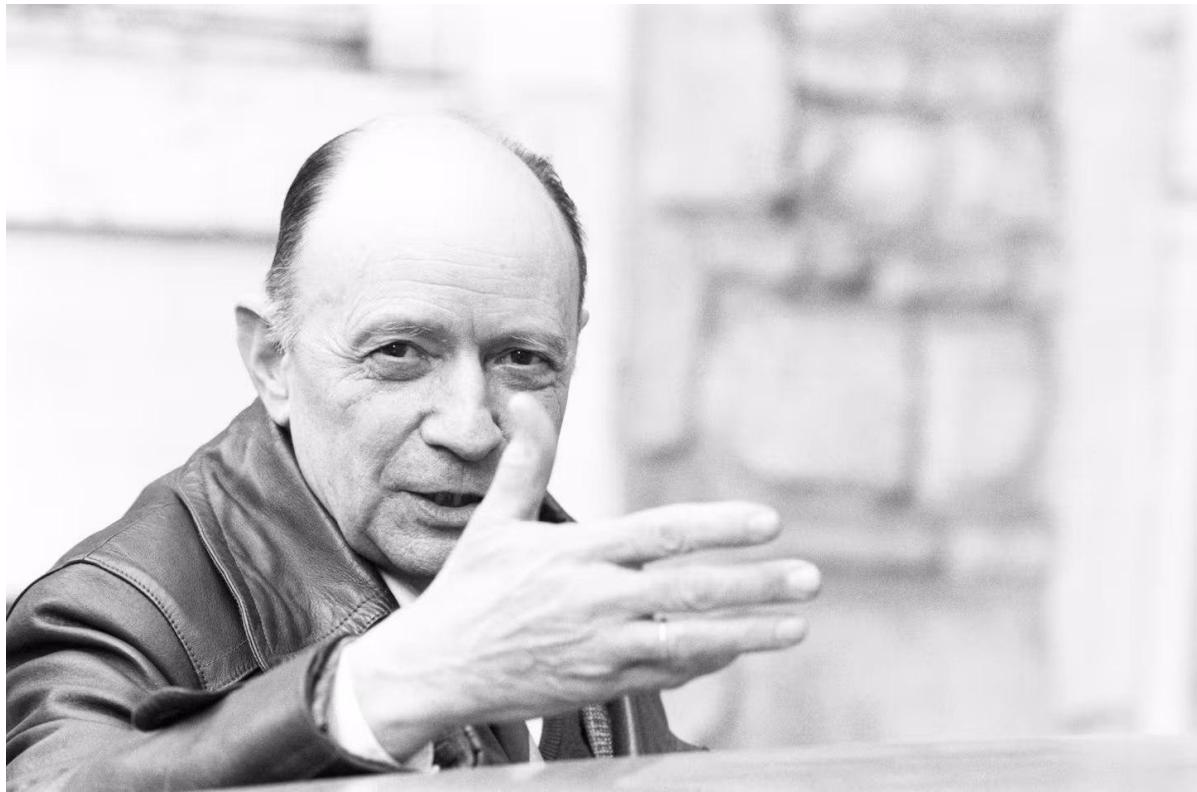


Jacques Ellul, technology doomsday before his time

Doug Hill

July 8, 2012



Jacques Ellul in 1982. He spent his career at the University of Bordeaux as a professor of law and economics.

Sophie Bassouls/Sygma/Corbis/Sygma/Corbis

Imagine for a moment that pretty much everything you think about technology is wrong. That the devices you believed are your friends are in fact your enemies. That they are involved in a vast conspiracy to colonize your mind and steal your soul. That their ultimate aim is to turn you into one of them: a machine.

It's a staple of science fiction plots, and perhaps the fever dream of anyone who's struggled too long with a crashing computer.

But that nightmare vision is also a serious intellectual proposition, the legacy of a French social theorist who argued that the takeover by machines is actually happening, and that it's much further along than we think. His name was Jacques Ellul, and a small but devoted group of followers consider him a genius.

To celebrate the centenary of his birth, a group of Ellul scholars will be gathering today at a conference to be held at Wheaton College near Chicago. The conference title: "Prophet in the Technological Wilderness."

Ellul, who died in 1994, was the author of a series of books on the philosophy of technology, beginning with "The Technological Society," published in France in 1954 and in English a decade later. His central argument is that we're mistaken in think-

ing of technology as simply a bunch of different machines. In truth, Ellul contended, technology should be seen as a unified entity, an overwhelming force that has already escaped our control. That force is turning the world around us into something cold and mechanical, and—whether we realize it or not—transforming human beings along with it.

In an era of rampant technological enthusiasm, this is not a popular message, which is one reason Ellul isn't well known. It doesn't help that he refused to offer ready-made solutions for the problems he identified. His followers will tell you that neither of these things mean he wasn't right; if nothing else, they say, Ellul provides one of the clearest existing analyses of what we're up against. It's not his fault it isn't a pretty picture.

"He was a very stern thinker, and a very chilling thinker," says Langdon Winner, a professor of the humanities and social sciences at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. "He wasn't one of those people who say that everything will be OK if only the right side wins the next election."

Ellul (pronounced *a-lool*) was a native of Bordeaux, France. His family suffered during the Depression, and Ellul worked with the French Resistance to protect Jews during World War II.

An admirer of Karl Marx's sociological theories, Ellul came to believe that by the 20th century, the central issue facing industrialized societies had shifted from class struggle to technology—or, as he called it, "technique." Ellul used this term to underscore his conviction that technology must be seen as a way of thinking as well as an ensemble of machines and machine systems. Technique includes the methods and strategies that drive the mechanical system, as well as the quantitative mentality that drives those methods.

The character of technique is ruthless, Ellul believed. It relentlessly and aggressively expands its range of influence. Its single overriding value is efficiency. Because human beings are hopelessly inefficient by technique's exacting standards, they must be forced or seduced into conforming more precisely to its demands. This amounts to a fundamental degradation of the human spirit. "The combination of man and technique is a happy one only if man has no responsibility," Ellul wrote. "Otherwise, he is ceaselessly tempted to make unpredictable choices and is susceptible to emotional motivations which invalidate the mathematical precision of the machinery."

Ellul's theories on technology were not embraced by the French intellectual establishment, in part because of he was consistently out of step with academic fashions. He spent his career at the University of Bordeaux as a professor of law and economics, with a special interest in the history of institutions. Orthodox Marxists didn't buy idea that technology had superceded politics as the crucial issue of our time; according to Daniel Cérézuelle, who studied with Ellul and later worked as his teaching assistant, Ellul's theories were actively ridiculed. It was in America during the 1960s that Ellul achieved his widest recognition, thanks in part to Robert McNamara's technocratic prosecution of the Vietnam War.

Ellul was also unfashionable in intellectual circles because of his faith. A Protestant in the Reformed tradition, he was a prolific author of books on theology. For the most part, he kept his writings on religion separate from those on technology, though the forcefulness of Ellul's critique of technology often retains, as Langdon Winner put it, the tenor of an Old Testament jeremiad. Here, for example, is a typical passage from "The Technological Society":

"It is mere vanity to wish to distinguish a technique as good or bad according to its end. Whether technique acts to the advantage of a dictator or of a democracy, it makes use of the same weapons, acts on the individual and manipulates his subconscious in identical ways, and in the end leads to the formation of exactly the same type of human being...the well-kneaded citizen."

Ellul's defenders say the bluntness of his approach is one reason the profundity of his ideas has been overlooked. "He's so easily pigeon-holed and dismissed," says Albert Borgmann, a professor of philosophy at the University of Montana. "People see him as just a bringer of bad news, but the two most important things in his writing aren't taken into account. One is the comprehensiveness of his explanation of the technological phenomenon. The second is his powerful moral concern. Those two aspects of Ellul's thought are not as influential as I'd like them to be."

The gathering of the Ellul faithful at Wheaton College this week will be small: Only about 60 people have signed up. That's an indication both of Ellul's disfavor in the academy and of the aging of his original core of supporters. The conference organizers have gone out of their way to include papers by younger scholars, however, and there are plans to discuss how to best carry Ellul's message into the future.

The question can fairly be asked whether such an emphatic bringer of bad news believed there would be a future. Certainly he would never have endorsed the revolutionary solution proposed by Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, who counted Ellul as one of his most important influences. David Kaczynski, Ted's brother, has said that Ted considered "The Technological Society" his "bible." Several commentators, including the technophilic writer Kevin Kelly, author of "What Technology Wants," have expressed surprise that the analysis of technology in the Unabomber's manifesto is as insightful as it is, evidently not realizing the debt it owes to Ellul.

Ellul never advocated violence of any sort and rejected specific, programmatic solutions he felt would be fruitless. He did, however, endorse two more general antidotes to the technological dilemma. The first was faith. As pessimistic as his vision of technology often seemed, he asserted that there was always room for hope, even if it depended on the possibility of a miracle.

His second suggestion was to recognize as clearly as possible the character and temptations of technique and resist them. Technology moves forward because we let it, he believed, and we let it because we worship it. "Technology becomes our fate only when we treat it as sacred," says Darrell J. Fasching, a professor emeritus of religious studies at the University of South Florida. "And we tend to do that a lot."

An irony that hasn't escaped those who will be attending this week's conference is that the future of Ellul's legacy now depends largely on technology. According to David Gill, founding president of the International Jacques Ellul Society and a professor of ethics at the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Mass., the society's website now attracts hundreds of hits every day, far more than the number of people who subscribe to its journal.

"Ellul never opposed all participation in technology," Gill says. "He didn't live in the woods, he lived in a nice house with electric lights. He didn't drive, but his wife did, and he rode in a car. But he knew how to create limits—he was able to say 'no' to technology. So using the Internet isn't a contradiction. The point is that we have to say that there are limits."

Doug Hill is a journalist who recently completed a book on the history and philosophy of technology. He earned a master's degree in theological studies with a thesis on Jacques Ellul in 2004.

The Ted K Archive

Doug Hill
Jacques Ellul, technology doomsday before his time
July 8, 2012

<www.bostonglobe.com>

www.thetedkarchive.com