

JACQUES ELLUL: A NOOLOGICAL SOCIOLOGY OF MODERNITY. SHORT OVERVIEW

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Abstract: *Man is a social and a personal being, but is also a spiritual one. He does not live concerning himself only with material or problems, but try to understands his own existences, and the existence of the world. One issue that affects his existence on all these levels is the problem of evil. The problem of evil is pervasive an is not easy to discern or to tackle it accordingly, thought one should not allow himself to think evil consists in the wrong structure of society. Evil lurks moreover in the soul of man, but his soul exists and moves in society. And it is associated with the problem of liberty. Evil and liberty belong together. The sociology of Jacques Ellul, his sociological work and his theological, offer some insights in the matter at hand. The evil can be named according to hum the technological system, or le système technicien. This paper offers some insight in Ellul's conceptions and adds some insights from other thinkers, so that it may become clearer what he means, and where the roots of this technological system or technological man lay. His views on technological society are true, and such things existence of explicit transhumanist theoretical positions, or the social changes that are imposed unto the societies today do attest his views.*

Key words: *Ellul; technological society; spirituality; sociology; modernity; evil.*

Aristotle defined man as a political being, meaning by that, what today is called a social being, that is not a specifically activity in the polis. But man cannot be seen strictly as a -product of the interaction of social, economic forces, or as his attempt to survive in a hostile world, for which he is not biological prepared to face. Man, as such is also a cultural and spiritual being, and a true understanding of man, be it philosophical or sociological, should take this into account. Man is defined by a noological dimension, and his activities do reflect this even without conscious intent. There is a noological outlook present in the modern attitude. This outlook has been detected and described by many people, but one of the most original and radical in his judgment about it is Jacques Ellul (1912-1994). The main thesis of this paper is that his views, along other insight that other thinks have to offer, such John Locke, or present-day German theologian Eugen Drewermann or the Dutch author Adrian Pabst, for example, offer a hermeneutical key to understand modernity and the meaning of humanity and freedom that lies behind it, and the completely negative import of those. The collective or social dimension of man's existence can not be ignored, but it is better to assume that the social relations are also the product of

the human psyche, be it personal or collective, and that these social relations can be social and historically conditioned but not grounded in these circumstances (Drewermann: 1988 II, p. XLIII).

Contemporary man is the result of a change, a true revolutionary change that happened in the 17th century, and that comes to fruition these days. These changes introduce a new understanding of human condition, change that expresses itself in a new understanding of human condition. Everything man does is supposed to come from its own self-interest. Human condition, after Jean Rohou (2002: 13), represents the state in which people come to enter after they are born, so the totality of relationships between the person as desiring, feeling, etc. subject to institutions, values, transcendent forces and themselves. The relationship to itself is also modeled through values, models, symbols etc. This totality can change and will change, sometimes very quickly and it is possible to beget a society where two opposed systems co-exist side by side. The official network of values, institutions, norms and behavior and an unofficial one of ways of thinking, behaving and so on. That happened in the 17th centuries, but continues also today. This revolution of thought and feeling amounts to a break in the history of man (Mairet 1997: 19). The contrast is between a social conception of man and an individualistic one, which entails different views not only about the human person, but about nature, world, what is permissible and what is not. These two systems go through each person. This revolution is the basis of the future technological system that engulfs man, as Jacques Ellul shows. It is the basis of the abstract system of thought that has modeled and still does the contemporary world. This revolution has replaced the past or classical way of understanding things, that is the vision of a world which entails an order that is superior to man, in which man has to integrate, and to which it belongs some other transcendent purpose. This order preceded man, and the whole of society aspired to wisdom or redemption in this divine order, and an order that was communitarian in its being. What was good, true or beautiful was defined by this order, and did not depend upon the will of man or mankind. The new order, the modern society replaced this order with the will of man, a will to dominate and to satisfy the wishes of mankind. Nature and world are things that have to be conquered and mastered, and also man has to free himself from tradition, dogmas, natural communities, and to build a society which is a society of free individuals, so people abstracted from their context and without any characteristics properly. The world of man has now only one law, a law that he gives it to himself without taking into account a law that has nonhuman origin, like the natural law in the Middle Ages, or the law of Dao, if one peeks at the Chinese culture. The new fundamental principle can be called the principle of sovereignty, be it the sovereignty of the group or the individual. The past comes to be seen as an inheritance that has to be disposed of, because it hinders progress, that is the reconstruction of man and society which aims at attaining happiness. This new moment in history of mankind can be named as the moment of instauration of liberalism (Rohou 2002: 15). But generically it can be

dubbed modernity, though liberalism is only one way of attaining or expressing modernity, at least from a political and social point of view (Spitz 1997). The family and the bloodlines were seen as the basic unit of society, a thing that has changed. Now the individual with his wishes and desires is the basic unit, it is *der Mittelpunkt, der neue Maßstab aller Dinge*. He, and his wishes are king that command absolute. Nothing is allowed to resist his or her desires: country, family, etc. And the state has to act accordingly, punishing the people that do not agree with the wishes and desires of a minority, and criminalizing the discourse that doesn't agree. The right and the vision of justice have become subjective. And freedom has been defined as power to do something without being hindered by someone else. This conception has found an expression in John Locke's works, especially in *An Essay on human Understanding* (1995), where freedom is defined in terms of power. Even the notion of power derives from the exercise of human will (1995:163-164), from observing the changes happening to these inner objects that are the ideas. The experience of our will gives us an access to the idea of active power, of power that generates change.

Therefore, will appears as the faculty that generate change, a change that can be produced by human agents. Power sits henceforth at the center of Locke's philosophy, be it metaphysics, epistemology or political philosophy. Will is the power to do whatever someone wants to do, and as such it pertains not to knowledge but to action (Locke 1995: 166). This action can refer to an object or to a thought, and its proper aim would be the achievement of dominion. Lifting an arm is such an action that achieves dominion on a part of the body. So willing implies dominion and accomplishing a change in something. The faculty of will is put in motion by uneasiness, that is by a situation or a state that has to be removed. Something has to move the will in order that it start working, but this varies according to each individual. The will is no longer moved by the transcendent Good of theology or classical philosophy. The will determines what counts as good and what not (Schindler 2017: 28). For the English philosopher good and bad, wrong and right depend in the last instance on the will of man, though he asserts that they depend on the judgment of God, in a truly voluntaristic manner. Good and bad become powers, and they depend upon the perception of man regarding what may produce pleasure and pain (Schindler 2017: 29). Both good and evil are reduced to their empirical effects, and also to their significance for the direct and unmediated perception. Nothing can be said on their content which from now on will vary. Here the basis of relativism is set, though it can be argued that the basis had been set by William Ockham or by the western Church, when it accepted the philosophical dogma of absolute divine simplicity, which conflates divine nature/essence with activities and divine persons. This dogma has never been accepted by the Eastern Church, but it could be argued in another paper that the reduction of human person or essence to the power of choosing has its root in this absolute divine simplicity dogma. This is what the western political philosophy has done, it has reduced man to the power to choose

(Locke, Kant, etc.). For Locke, and for man henceforth there is no *summum bonum* as telos of its life. Whatever pleasures is happiness (Locke 1995: 189), and man through action and technology has the means to acquire or produce it. No more objective Good or Goods in the world, and no more hierarchy thereof. For Locke existence is not motivated by the Good, but by running away from the unpleasant, so by searching pleasure. But the will possesses also the veto power.

Man doesn't have to accept whatever comes to his senses and must not jump to action. This seems to be the source of all liberty (Locke 1995: 184-185). It means the autonomy of the will, its power not to be determined from outside, a kind of spontaneity. Even inborn preferences or things that normally are not thought to be under our control, will become targets of the will (Locke 1995: 190). Every determination seems now to get the status of an external determination, of heteronomy, so its effect on the human will could be suspended. Every determination becomes a kind of self-determination (Schindler 2017: 38). If I feel uneasy living in one place or under a certain political regime, that is my responsibility. That happens because I haven't used this power to suspend the uneasiness or not suspending it by leaving the place/emigrating. Nothing can determine someone without that person's consent. So, one becomes responsible for things he didn't or were not in his power. Every external determination becomes a kind of choosing. Every determination becomes a choice in this system, and every lack of exercising this power of the will, will be equated with not choosing. The only thing that determines volition or will it be the will itself. The will represents a kind of transcendent power, and something different from the determinism of natural laws, and responsibility can now be attributed for not doing some actions. Somehow man becomes a kind of *causa sui*, and an unmoved mover - so basically God (Schindler 2017: 40). Therefore, one comes to the idea that man is somehow outside the normal causal laws of nature, and that it can exercise a special kind of causality.

This capacity is seen as a condition for taking right and rational decisions, that is decisions that are looking to increase the good, or to obtain good, that is pleasure. Reason has become utilitarian. It no longer means the capacity to discern and contemplate the eternal truths that are the basis of our existence, but a pleasure and utility calculator, that tries to avoid unpleasant consequences. It is no more the capacity to transcend ourselves and get in touch with reality and its foundation. It becomes just a process of choosing, an instrument with no content or completely indifferent to the content. Choosing becomes a kind of technology, coherent in itself, but with no moral content, just like the technological system in Ellul's work. An act of choosing can be perfect reason and totally immoral, which was not the case in the classical understanding of reason. Now a rational agent is the agent that recognizes what it is and accepts the consequences of his choosing. The will's power of self-determination is not affected even by God, by his power of judgment. The wrong doer that accepts the consequences in front of God is still a rational agent. This modern interpretation of freedom, that Locke set forth, is a freedom for good or evil,

while in the classical sense true choice and rationality meant choosing good or the Good. This freedom is compatible with the technological system, which is impervious to moral, denies other values than itself, and transform and incorporates whatever it touches. Freedom in modern sense is power, potentiality, and increasing freedom means increasing the potentiality to actualize acts. But, being a power, a potentiality it still needs an object to actualize itself, and becomes the search of more power, and since happiness implies modifying something according to one's representation of pleasure, seeking happiness means trying to suspend or abolish every external determination, which now appear as self-determinations of the will, so as *alienations*. It is a quest without ending, being a quest of infinite power. The state comes to play a very important role in Locke's conception, despite what liberalism thinks. Since natural relation of men imply the reciprocal encroachment of freedom, since freedom and rights mean power, the state establish the limits of the legitimate use of power from the individual, the so-called freedom), but since everyone is prone to disrespect these limits, the state must intervene. And when one discovers other want and desirers that apparently do not affect other ones, the state must intervene to allow for these new desires to be fulfilled and therefore to create new rights that will be considered natural or inborn, and therefore to forbid everything that will get in the way of actualizing these rights. So, the state cannot be minimal, but must intervenes strongly, and will have to prescribe what one has to think and feel so that these new discovered rights and liberties, that are nothing but power to abolish an uneasiness, can come through even if there are objections against them, or the majority will be against them.

One of the most original French thinkers of the twentieth century was the sociologist and also protestant theologian Jacques Ellul, a very original thinker whose work encompasses many areas, a thinker that foresaw „almost everything”. His understanding of modern society, and of modern man can be epitomized by his thought of what he called technology or *le Système technicien*. His ideas can be understood also from what has been until now said. The modern man wants to dominate and transform the world, and to satisfy his own wishes and desires. This way of being or made of consciousness can be summarized under the understanding of modern world and man in the work of Ellul. His main insight into modern and contemporary world is that the technology builds a kind of world unto itself and it structures the way man thinks, feel, relates himself to the world. Not only that, the technological system expresses a new way of being for man. The bourgeois is in itself a kind of technical man (Ellul 2017). The technical or technological man and the attitudes and values that he embeds is behind or manifest itself in all the philosophical or literary descriptions that were used to characterize the bourgeois.

The bourgeois epitomizes the modern man and the modern world and its being-in-the-world. The bourgeois has many faces, but it is hard to find end expose the real one. Neither greed, nor commerce are its main features. Money, or accumulating money belong to the bourgeoisie system but it is not all, and not the

main feature, and neither is the ownership of the production means (Ellul 2017: 64). The reality behind the bourgeois and capitalist way of life is prior to them. Ownership of production means has always existed. The bourgeoisie was not created by it, by private property. The money belongs into a value system, in a worldview, but it is only an aspect of it, not the whole thing. The reality that the bourgeois expresses is deep and difficult to see (Ellul 2017: 74-75). The most depictions and attacks on the bourgeoisie are the expression of false consciousness and bad faith, being the sign of a truly philistine consciousness, which characterizes the intellectual, and most of the critics of the bourgeois, in the opinion of Ellul. The bourgeois, and his mode of existence has these features: he thinks that his own existence is new, that it represents a progress, that the sense and the meaning of its existence is universal, and that his way of life contains an surpasses the past ones or others. His ideology is the ideology of happiness, and he also possess the feature of assimilating everything that exist besides or beyond is value-system; this is also a feature of the technological system as mode of being. It does not tolerate other values and integrates external values, destroying their meaning. Happiness has here a specific meaning. It is not the meaning that Aristotle assign to it in his Ethics. It doesn't mean *eudaimonia*. Bonheur means something totally different from its original meaning, which meant the intensification by a transcendent power of a human activity, implying the divine and human co-activity, not hedonistic fulfillment (Ellul 2017: 81-82).

Attaining happiness was not the aim of every society everywhere, but is the aim of bourgeois society. This ideology has deep roots though, and one can see that in Locke's work, in its hedonistic conception of good. For Ellul this ideology has expanded with the help of the development of industry, communication, together with the hope of prosperity and with the help of the activist individualism that went along with those. Wherever industry and commerce develop, also technology, and where prosperity or the possibilities of prosperities arise, there will be the ideology of happiness too. It thrives on the development and diffusion of prosperity, and technology, and it depends upon wealth and consuming wealth. It is also a strong motivator for work, and engaging in the cycle that produces wealth. Happiness builds the foundation of technicist world (Ellul 2017: 93). Just like the technology itself it covers all life, all conceivable activities and it assign value to it, because other transcendent values are excluded. The whole world is made up of things, things without mystery, things that can be manipulated. This is the world of the primacy of action and technology. Possession, private property is only a consequence of this way of being. What counts is possession of thing, dominion over them, building the means to build a world. Work an action are the most important (Ellul 2017: 110-112). The universe must be conquered and transformed through work. And this way of being requires technology and lead to a technological mode of consciousness that becomes all-pervasive.

Technology is required because modern man has no transcendent horizon, no transcendent value and seeks only itself and the realization of his wishes, obtaining a so-called happiness. This attitude produces a technology or a technological system that may be regarded as being all-pervasive, a kind of technological consciousness which seeks to obtain the most efficient order in all domains of activity: work, leisure etc. Technology embodies the traditional goal of all human thinking the overcoming of the distance between thought and world. Problem is that in the context of the technological system man is no longer able to control his destiny or even the technological system, which is use and efficiency in itself, and recognizes no other values outside itself. It is completely impervious to moral reasoning or moral reasons, so it accepts no moral criticism at all. This technological system does not appear out of thin air and need something akin to a host to survive. This host is a given society or a given culture. It evolves and grows without end just like a cancer cell and takes over its host becoming thereby the intention or maybe the consciousness of that culture. Technology becomes the universal mediator between man and everything, between man and nature, man and himself – let us think about the so called changing of gender- and denature whatever it touches. It transforms human thinking and feeling, it transforms desire itself, it becomes choice itself, the default value of choosing. Even the metaphor of man or brain is a computer that is used in cognitive sciences attest the truth of Ellul's views on the matter.

Though for Ellul the idea of a human nature is problematic, if he even accepts such a notion this nature was lost after the Fall from Eden, technology transforms human nature. Basically, if man has a nature it does not stay unchanged from the contact with the technology, or with the surrounding cultural medium, or it can be found what when it confronts and tries to get over necessity. So the nature of man seems to be something that either is worked out or it is revealed in confrontation with an opposing reality. Of course, technique and technology exist since the dawn of man, man does not live where he was supposed to, and as a being characterized by lack, a *Mangelwesen*, he needs technology and instruments. Otherwise he won't survive. Maybe the Fall has made him into a prosthetic being after all. But man has developed the technology so it becomes a means for utmost efficiency. Ellul defines technique and technology as a collection or universe of means which are used to attain an end with the most efficiency possible. Of course, these methods have to be rational. As technology is seen as a kind of consciousness or a mode of being, an ontological determination it can not be restrained to or identified to strictly technical application, be it using a hammer, or an iPhone, etc. Every activity can be transformed in a kind of mechanical device. Even such activities such as meditation are touched by the machine, one speaks about meditations techniques. Labor management, management as such, urban planning, administration are all manifestations of the machine. Doing politics has changed. The politician can not take real decisions. He has to rely on experts, on technicians so that he could do his

job. The machine represents the ultimate ideal of the technological system, which is not surprising since modernity tries to obtain a scientific kind of ruling of society, based on scientific laws, if possible formulated in mathematical form.

The way man thinks to himself or relates to himself has changed. Man becomes something abstract. The way the subject sees himself has changed. It is no longer the entire, the whole man with his body, but only the thinking abstract self, a position that was prepared by Descartes, or rather a through his distinction between body and the thinking self. I am not the one with my whole body, but an abstract entity. Man is no longer a natural object between many. The consciousness makes one what he is. And this consciousness is no longer attached to attributes as male or female, to give an example. If I feel I am a woman, and I am borne male, that I must change body, I am a woman etc. What the technological systems pursues here is the identity without difference. This is an example of the way that the technological system has become the universal mediation between man and nature, man and himself, and expresses also the will to power. Every obstacle on the road to power/happiness must be removed. Changing the sex of one's body, although impossible since the DNA and the body's blueprint stay the same, give satisfaction to this quest for power. This attitude is expressed also in other form, in philosophical forms, one of which is the transhumanism movement (Pabst 2017: p. 174).

This ideology, now in an expressed form, intends on the basis of biotech, nanotech etc., to create a union between man and machine, to transcend humanity in the direction of singularity. Inherited order, tradition, boundaries that are corporality, biology are seen as unnatural boundaries, that deny the full development of humanity. These boundaries are according to the transhumanist point of view, irrational, and they imposed artificially upon our minds, and a technological enhanced humanity must take place of the old one. It is a denial of our reality, an expression of the will to power, and becoming God, transcending time and space. Denial of all the natural constraints is the first condition for attaining the aim. Life itself comes under the power of man, and its sacrality is thereby denied. Movies like the *Space Odyssey* are advocating exactly this vision, and in the last of the book from Arthur Clarke there is a union between the human hero Dave Bowman and HAL, the living computer (now redeemed), producing HALMAN, and both of them fight the defect Monolith. It is in my view a continuation of the way people like John Locke have conceived mankind and the faculty of the will, but is not something new. Though contemporary transhumanism is expressed in scientific and materialist language its roots are deeper and can be found in alchemy, which is a kind of technology not to obtain gold, but to recreate in man a power that makes him equal to the Gods/or God himself (Livingstone 2015). So, an old religious and symbolic representation lies even at the heart of a seemingly modern endeavor.

The transhumanist ideal of uniting man and machine to attain a kind of godhood seems not far behind and maybe this is the force and ideal that hides in the technological system. Everything must be reduced to mathematical and logical

scheme, henceforth no room for spontaneity of man, no room for freedom. Everything has to become a problem, so that the utmost rational and efficient solution may be found. It is a bit like for a hammer everything is a nail. Technical operations are not technical phenomena. The last kind build on the first, that are really technique that are used in many areas, involving the body of the worker, and when learned can become spontaneous and natural routine. The technological phenomenon appears when consciousness intervenes and tries to find a better way to accomplish the task at hand the concern is not the tree that has to be cut down but the instrument. The concern of the technological consciousness pertains now to the artefact not to the object in the natural world. The idea of alternative ways to do something arises; therefore the rational calculation steps in to find the best means to achieve an end. These instruments become objectified reason, and the technology becomes a way of apprehending and judging the world, that denies or ignores differences or subjectivity.

The abstract technical man appears in the world. The world this man indwells is a world of embodied rational conception, which are not distinguished from the natural objects. From now on, the technological system becomes autonomous, automatic, self-serving, self-augmenting, universal and monistic. No other value-systems are allowed to coexist, to set limits to its development. Even what we call freedom, that is choice become technical. Usefulness is the main mark of value. But this usefulness is as universal and not particular, and reality is determined or is reduced only to the measurable and doable. Mystery is something that this technological system cannot tolerate, everything that is transcendent has to become imminent to it, must be reduced to the light of causal explanation. Truth is also reduced to evidence. The technological system cannot also tolerate or accept the sacred, though the technique itself becomes a kind of untouchable sacred, never to be put under scrutiny or doubted. Even things like destruction of natural family, marriage for all, and gender swap are expression of this system. For Ellul, the best expression of this technological nightmare is the city, which he opposed to Eden. Cain is the first one to build a city, attempting to provide a solid base for his existence outside the relationship with God. The City is technology, and, as he says in *The Meaning of the City* (2003: 17-38; 105) God views the city as an independent being from her inhabitants, a place in which dwell fallen powers. Technology is the expression of man's wish to become or attain Godhood, as transhumanist ideology attests (Pabst.2018), and is the expression of unadulterated will to power: man trying to put himself instead of God, trying to become the ontological principle of the whole existence.

This is the insight that the French sociologist and protestant theologian expresses in his works, reminding us that this quest for power does not bring liberty or happiness. But bring conflict and slavery, even in another form. What kind of freedom will someone have in a smart city (the future urban dwellings for humankind), where the city computer or watcher (the future version of the present

day experts/technicians/wise men) decide what he has to eat, vegetables instead of meat – because eating meat damages the environment, where one could get access to internet or to by a computer only one thinks only what is deemed politically correct? As solution to this predicament Ellul proposes entails an ethic of non-power, and the hope of the transcendent intervention, since only god can breach the closure of this technological system, the expression of the will of power and of sin, a notion that modernity tries to forget or to deny, but whose consequences can be seen plainly in the world. One can disagree with the theological foundation and proposal that Ellul makes, but the main insight - which the idea of the technological system supports, is this. Modernity represents the attempt of man to attain autonomy or independence, to attain mastery over nature or even space and time that is to become God. Another name for this is the former theological but now political concept of sovereignty. The consequences cannot be but bad. And here Ellul reminds us of Heidegger and his saying „Nur ein Gott kann uns retten”.

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