



ГУМАНИТАРНОЕ И СОЦИАЛЬНОЕ ЗНАНИЕ.
ИДЕИ, КОНЦЕПЦИИ, ПАРАДИГМЫ



Общественное сознание
в динамике современности



DOI: 10.30727/0235-1188-2020-63-9-7-17

Original research paper

Оригинальная исследовательская статья

**The Elucidation of the Modern World
in the Thought of Jacques Ellul**

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Abstract

Looking specifically into criticism of technical modernity, the article endeavors to follow and reveal the anti-conformist reflections of one of the French authors and academics best known abroad. Indeed, Jacques Ellul developed a long-term intellectual system adopting a singular dialectic that allows him to be multidisciplinary and to make multiple entries in sociological, philosophical, legal, historical, and theological fields. He has developed an approach that went far beyond the simple consideration of the technical tool as a potential means of alienating man, to offer his readers an authentic technical system as well as of all its implications. Basically, Jacques Ellul masterfully explained the mechanism according to which the modern man, in order to escape his tragic destiny by an attempt to eclipse the sacred, will paradoxically strive to become the creator of a space totally mastered by the techno-sphere, which has gained autonomy, notably through imposition of an ideology of its own. Modernity has inaugurated a process of autonomy from which the bourgeois project benefited even before technological governance came about, to exonerate itself from the presence of man. Ellul's objective is to draw the reader to the consideration of the real loss of individual freedom in such an environment, which encompasses both the public space and those issues that are most intimate to man. This task of awakening to the very topical issue will be enhanced with methodological considerations involving, in particular, current propaganda issues and political illusions.

Keywords: alienation, autonomy, determination, justification, freedom, modernity, progress, propaganda, the sacred, science, technology.

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For citation: Réveillard C. (2020) The Elucidation of the Modern World in the Thought of Jacques Ellul. *Russian Journal of Philosophical Sciences* = *Filosofskie nauki*. Vol. 63, no. 9, pp. 7–17.
DOI: 10.30727/0235-1188-2020-63-9-7-17

Объяснение современного мира в философии Жака Эллюля

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Аннотация

В данной статье излагаются и анализируются антиконформистские размышления Жака Эллюля, особенное внимание уделяя его критике современного мира технологий. Эллюль, один из французских писателей и ученых, чьи работы широко известны за пределами Франции, детально разработал свою интеллектуальную систему на основе специфической диалектики, которая позволила ему действовать в рамках мультидисциплинарности и систематически переходить в области социологии, философии, юридической науки, истории и богословия. Он положил начало подходу, выходящему далеко за рамки простого рассмотрения техники как потенциального средства отчуждения человека, и предложил своим читателям четкое понимание технологической системы, а также всех ее аспектов и их последствий. Жак Эллюль мастерски объяснил механизм, согласно которому современный человек, чтобы избежать своей трагической судьбы через попытку затмить священное, парадоксальным образом стремится стать творцом пространства, полностью освоенного техносферой, отнявшей его автономию, особенно через навязывание собственной идеологии. Современность открыла процесс автономии, из которого буржуазный проект смог извлечь выгоду до того, как пришло техноуправление, чтобы освободить себя от присутствия человека. Цель Эллюля – привлечь читателя к размышлению о реальной потере его свободы в такой среде, которая охватывает как общественное пространство, так и частную сферу. В статье, помимо рассмотрения актуальных проблем, предлагаются методологические соображения, касающиеся, в частности, вопросов современной пропаганды и политических иллюзий.

Ключевые слова: отчуждение, автономия, самоопределение, оправдание, свобода, современность, прогресс, пропаганда, сакральное, наука, техника.

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Для цитирования: *Ревейяр К.* Объяснение современного мира в философии Жака Эллуля // *Философские науки*. 2020. Т. 63. № 9. С. 7–17. DOI: 10.30727/0235-1188-2020-63-9-7-17

Jacques Ellul (1912–1994) as an author is much more recognized abroad, particularly among American academics, than in France. His integrity of intellectual output is considerable, therefore his work is constantly studied and debated, as shown by the recent publication of a new work in French by one of his best scholars, Patrick Chastenet [Chastenet 2019], who also edits the *Cahiers Jacques Ellul*. We also have to mention the International Jacques Ellul Association, which has extended its connections under the brandname of Technologos, as well as its English equivalent, the International Jacques Ellul Society, which publishes the *The Ellul Forum* journal.

There are several reasons why Ellul's work has been recognized so late by intellectual and academic communities. Far from confining himself to a single theme, Jacques Ellul managed to work and diversify his research pathways, based on the most required dialectical methodology. He never ceased trying to satisfy his need to elucidate the world. This was a created world, of course, but also a deeply disturbed world, transformed by the decisive evolution of technology at the heart of the overall human activity. Thus, going beyond the study of technology alone and its industrial consequences, Jacques Ellul's work made it possible to realize how technology has created a total system that is beyond all human capacity to "organize," as it deprives man of making ultimate use of his freedom. Now, Ellul not only reconstructed the historical process that led to this predominance, this omnipotence of technology, he also made it explicit by deconstructing all of its anthropological implications, consequences and intellectual, social, and sociological mechanisms. This is what differentiates him from Heidegger, who, even where he insists on the globalizing empire of technology until the very "oblivion of Being," remains a philosopher of ontology and abstraction.

Jacques Ellul is most up-to-date because he anticipated evolution of many subjects that we see today as relevant challenges.

First of all, Ellul demands freedom

Jacques Ellul used to explain the meaning of his work proceeding from the central idea of freedom: “Nothing that I have done, lived, or thought can be understood if it does not refer to freedom” [Ellul 1981, 162], and then adding that “to exist is to resist [...], to resist the demands of the social environment,” and also to conformity with the world and its commonplaces, to which he devoted a book [Ellul 1966] following militant Léon Bloy (see: [Bloy 1902; Flaubert 1913]), Ellul’s dialectic anti-system as an alternative to exercise of freedom. In fact, the entrance into the comfort of the essentially bourgeois social environment is based on the acceptance of a set of ready-made images, shared thoughts and evidence that reflects usual life. This evidence, firmly seated in the social environment, up to the most intimate and interior wells of conscience, is embodied in stereotyped assertions that supposedly explain everything in an irreducible way, and serve as an unquestionable (or even dogmatic) parade in any discussion. These are the commonplaces served by positive sentiments. Ellul denounces the stifling effect that they provoke on conscience, with its necessity of freedom for self-fulfillment through personal judgment. The cardinal component in the ideology of happiness is constituted by the totalitarian concept of progress, which is definitely a bourgeois phenomenon, “the idea of progress precedes the true logical and universal development of the sciences. [...] Long before, there appeared an irrational conviction that human history was essentially about progress. [...] How then can we fail to understand that this absolutisation of the term through validation of *what increases* is strictly linked to what is precisely quantitative, that is, to economic production? It is the model of production growth that progress is built on. [...] Progress is made of this *continuous* accumulation of material values and wealth” [Ellul 1967, 118–120].

“The bourgeoisie is another name for modern society” [Furet 1995, 20]. It designates the class of men that has gradually destroyed, through free activity, the old aristocratic society founded on the hierarchies of birth. Now, Furet continues, “the bourgeoisie no longer has a place in the current political order [...]. It persists solely in economics [...]. A class without a status, or fixed tradition, without established outlines, it has only one fragile title to domination: wealth.” This social category is further defined by economists, as the bourgeoisie displays universal values in a revolutionary framework, thinking themselves liberated from traditions, religious and political, and rather uncertain

as to how a free man can be equal in right to all others: “it is in relation to the future that it regulates its behavior, since it must invent itself, at the same time as the community of which it is a member” [Ellul 1967, 118–120].

Just as Jean Baudrillard [Baudrillard 1970], Jean Brun and Augusto del Noce defined it so well for society of opulence, for example, Jacques Ellul perfectly understood the new sociological atmosphere to which bourgeois society has given impetus: “In the capitalist state, man is less oppressed by financial powers [...] than by the bourgeois ideal of security, comfort and assurance [...] It is this ideal that gives the financial powers their importance” [Ellul & Charbonneau 1999, 165].

It is the *embourgeoisement* (“bourgeoisification”) of modern society that authorizes freedom as a pretext, i.e., the self-justification of the choice of instincts to follow one’s natural inclinations, and it is, according to Ellul, a direct attack on freedom by application of economic liberalism and also of political liberalism, “which allows the bourgeois class to justify its dominance over the working class. [...] The principle of justification as such constitutes a negation of freedom. Self-justification is people’s greatest enterprise, after will to power” [Ellul 1975, 273ff.]. Liberalism won victories over the two messianic ideologies of the 20th century and gradually imposed its bourgeois order and, according to del Noce, the world of opulence against the traditional world of contemplation and transmission. “The bourgeoisie did not only make the revolution in order to take power, but also to institute the triumph of Reason by the State” [Ellul 1969/2008a, 96]. Thus, we must also add to the analysis of the decline of civilization through materialism, the real change of spirit that modernity represents in its philosophical paradigm.

It is in this sense that we must understand why Ellul links infringement of human freedom to the specific atmosphere of bourgeois society, basing on a quasi-prosopographic sociological approach. From this, it follows that the bourgeois methodology for the accomplishment of its objectives goes through a kind of social systematization or justification, an “explanatory system” legitimizing its domination and exploitation, whose motives will be socially approved by the creation of “driving forces [that] are not only imaginary, theoretical, [otherwise] they would not deceive anyone: they are *explicit*. One of the permanent games of bourgeois consciousness consists in avoiding the profound in order to

revert to the obvious. [...] Evidence is the most certain asset of false consciousness. [...] This, there develops a disguise of the real condition, but it is a disguise that is more real than the real material things, because it is invested with obviousness” [Ellul 1967/1998, 47–48]. For Ellul himself, however, the question of freedom remains nothing less than obvious. Because many other needs can preoccupy him more and that to assume, not as a claim shared by all humans, but its real application in concrete life requires courage and a sense of responsibility which few men possess: “Man is much more afraid of true freedom than he desires it” [Ellul 1975, 36].

Modern technology

It is precisely because he identified technology as the primary threat to the freedom of modern man that his work, which was to have the greatest impact and to which he devoted most of his books and articles, pursued the objective of demystifying and demythologizing the technological society.

However, the very great power of Ellul’s intuition did not confine itself to the study of a production system, of the consequences of machinery growth, or to technological productivity shown in industry. It goes far beyond this, in the sense that it perceives the historical evolution of a phenomenon that has gradually become totalitarian in the framework preferred by modernity. This technical phenomenon has in fact become an exclusive mediation of something completely different: “there is no longer any other relationship between man and nature, all this complex and fragile set of links that man patiently wove together, its poetic, magical, mythical, and symbolic features disappear: there is nothing but technological mediation that imposes itself and becomes total” [Ellul 1977, 43–47].

In its place, the progressive assertion that nothing should stand in the way of the process of power, of infinite appropriation by technology, as a kind of morality of immoderation, has been completely assimilated by humankind in modernity, “Technology is not content to be the main or determining factor, so it has become a System, and man is at the service of technology much more than served by it” [Ellul 1977, 43–47]. Ellul concludes this morality to be “comprehensive and global for the whole of society. It is a collective Morality that is essentially total and even totalitarian. It is a morality which increasingly atrophies personal virtues and personal morality, and which leads to the disappearance of the individual moral sense to the extent that it makes

all problematic issues disappear” [Ellul 1964, 160], it is the priority of means over ends [Chasteney 2019, 57]. We must ask ourselves the question about this outcome, and if Ellul studied Marx so well, it was because in the latter’s reflections the first necessary support for his own intuitions, even where he almost totally departed from the philosophical, sociological, and political conclusions of the German philosopher; since, according to the latter, the technical process would ultimately replace human labor as a producer of wealth (see also: [del Noce 2010]). In the industrialized world, investors are obsessed with the profitability of their means of production. The multiplicative factor of the desired growth of this economic activity lies in the capacity of an exponential increase in the productivity, not of labor but of production. As this productivity has become totally dependent on the development of technology, the growth of its control over production has reached a point of no return, by expelling man from the process, as the computer system “is strictly non-human.” This is how technological progress is not “technology that evolves, it is not technological objects that change because they are perfected [...] it is a specific feature of technology that it requires its own transformation. [...] Progress is not ‘technology that progresses.’ [...] It is the conjunction between the technical phenomenon and progress that constitutes the technological system. It is the conjunction between the technical phenomenon and technological progress that constitutes the technician system” [Ellul 2004, 91]. According to Ellul, then we moved from technology to the technical and computerized society, from relegation of capital and capitalism to the practical determinism of technology, which consequently appropriated the capacity for production of value, and whose primary and exclusive destination certainly remains that of profit [Ellul 1988/2004b, 571].

The Ellulian reflection is essential here, in order to understand the conceptual upheaval of the world through a reversal of the hierarchy of decision-making scales: when he asserts that technology has taken power in the modern world, it means that technology has gone beyond the status of an indistinct means intended to increase a particular production, to invade the sociological and political field and to assume autonomy with respect to human decision-making. In this way, technology completely reverses human relationships and man’s social capacity, as well as inner and outer, personal and public qualities.

Sacralization and its expression

But the progress of reflection is not complete in the work of elucidation, because Ellul will explain that “it is not technology that enslaves us but the sacred when it is transferred to the technology” [Ellul 1973, 316], which is a key to understanding the psychology of the modern situation. The extreme dependence of man on the technical environment is all the more important because the man of modernity refuses to consider that he really sacralizes modernity which has become his divinity, as since the rationalism of the Enlightenment, man has been publicly autonomous from Creation, and has liberated himself from God, nature and its laws to the benefit of science, rationalism, and scientism. The modern rupture rests on philosophical foundations whose statements reflect little of its real nature, modernity being supposed to allow man to achieve autonomy through the anthropocentric organization of society and liberalism supposed to place, among other things, freedom at the forefront of the principles that govern human relations. In both cases, modern alienation, perceptible by everyone, came to illustrate in a practical order the reality of these philosophical systems. Indeed, in the long history of modern times, if we first moved from theocentrism to anthropocentrism, rationalism as the destroyer of rooted and stable society led to a new wave of sacralization, that of the technological idol, via science and the technostuctural power of the state whose matrix is ownership of information. Technology was proved to be autonomous from economic structures, science, and politics. Technological autonomy is thus ensured by liberation from any limits that might have been set by distinctive human elements. Technology has become free and independent at the price of the breakdown of stable and traditional structures (free from issues of profitability and efficiency), such as those related to contemplation and communication.

Propaganda

To illustrate the expression of the technological ideology, two new avenues were remarkably opened by Ellul as their demystifier: propaganda and politics.

Liberal strategies of democratization have certainly viewed their main objective in social appeasement and preservation of the ruling elite; but these goals were at odds with the idea that real government should be exercised by all people. For example, what has the period of 60–70 years of television given to almost the entire social body of a given country? Ellul responds by asserting that the intensive practice

of television “anesthetizes the *reflexive* act of consciousness and inhibits speech. It makes speech a *residual* act” [Ellul 1988/2004b, 281] within one of the most advanced means of conditioning that has ever existed. The lies of modernity affect all information processes, such as that of hiding the realities of urban life, lie by omission [Ellul 2003] (see also: [Gruca 2013, 64]), but also the culture about which Ellul quotes at length from Baudrillard, affirming the extent to which the culture resulting from Technology is “the absolute opposite of the culture conceived as: (1) delegated heritage of works, thoughts, and tradition; (2) continuous dimension of a theoretical and critical reflection. Critical transcendence and symbolic functions. Both are also denied by the cyclical subculture, made up of obsolete cultural ingredients and signs, by the cultural actuality. We see that the problem of cultural consumption is not related to cultural content *per se*, nor to public culture... what is decisive is that culture is no longer made to last... it is the rapid progress of technology that dooms culture to be the opposite of what it has always been, immediate consumption of a technological product without substance. Baudrillard rightly notes that in the long run there will be no difference between mass culture (which combines contents) and avant-garde art (which manipulates forms), as both of these will be determined by the functional imperative of technology, which implies that everything must always be up to date” [Baudrillard 1970, 151] (see also: [Ellul 1992]). As we can see, propaganda in society of technology has an omnipresent and multiform character, that of a methodology of conditioning conscience and intelligence, a complex system that also uses the whole range of public relations to adapt the individual man in a mass society to new social norms, to new ways of mass consumption. And when a person is entirely adapted to this society, “when he ends up obeying with enthusiasm, because convinced of the excellence of what he is made to do, the constraints of organization will no longer be felt, indeed society will no longer be constrained, and the police will then have nothing to do. Civic and technical good will and the enthusiasm of the social myth, created by propaganda, will have definitively solved the problem of mankind” [Ellul 1962/2008b, 14].

Political Illusion

According to Ellul, modern man is entirely absorbed by the “sacralization of technology” and even if he had the will, he would be unable to shake off the yoke through institutional means, all politics being “a gigantic illusion.” According to Ellul, the politicization

of modern man passes through two mixed beliefs that give it a mythological character: that the State must recover all prerogatives, even the most intimate ones, and that politics is possibly everyone's business [Ellul 1965, 40]¹.

As for the nature of the regime, Ellul shows no illusions, affirming that "democracy is no longer a means of controlling power but a means of organizing the masses" [Ellul 1965/2004c, 210]. According to the bourgeois interpretation [Sombart 1928/1966, 342; del Noce 2015], democracy was conceived as the government of the people by a minority by means of "opinion": but the actual political practice did not correspond to the theoretical affirmation of power of the people. Modern democracy first of all provided means of promoting the social and political hegemony of the prosperous oligarchic bourgeoisie within the framework of a materialist worldview; and the corresponding revolutionary process was a historic opportunity. A kind of synthesis took place to guarantee the dominant group relative social and political peace. But the irreducibility of the technological system required a subjective construction of reality, which we can call ideology, intended to be an elaborate means of subjecting the members of the social body to technicist governance, with the rationality of the modern state, with expanding monopolies and the phenomenon of concentration, as indices of absolute efficiency, in short, the technocratic fact and governance through expertise... technological expertise.

* * *

As a true intellectual eye-opener, Ellul alerted his readers to an awareness of the world in which they lived; but also in logical connection with the observation to which his work had led him, Ellul used this quotation from Paul's Epistle to the Romans: "Be not conformed to this world." He also developed a Christian spiritual and theological approach full of hope, adopting an eschatological vision of the world, which he owed in part to Søren Kierkegaard, and which implied the existence of the Totally Other.

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¹ See also the chapter "Politics first!" in *Exégèse des nouveaux lieux communs* [Ellul 1966, 95ff.].

C. RÉVEILLARD. *The Elucidation of the Modern World in the Thought of Jacques...*

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