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Utopia and Hope: A Response to Jacques Ellul and Technological Utopia

J. Wesley Baker

For those of us living in the highly technological environment of the Western world, we daily see the advantages technology has brought to our lives. Efficiencies in business, advances in medical diagnosis and treatment, changes in approaches to teaching and learning—these are a part of our everyday lives. As Porat's (1977) analysis first revealed, we have come to this point as our major economic base has moved from agricultural to industrial to informational. Those in the Eastern world, whose economies remained agriculturally-based as the West moved through these transitions, have taken note and have often adopted, as national priorities, goals to move to industrial- or information-based economies as quickly as possible. For all of us, East or West, Ellul's sociological critique of *la technique* is inconvenient. His call for us to examine the values of the technological system and the negative impact they can have stands in the way of an unreserved embrace of a system that produces such evident advantages.

These are the kinds of struggles that I believe are at the root of Professor Yang's attempt to find a reconciliation through the concept of "Utopia." The Republic of Korea, through an aggressive program of industrialization and importation of technology, has become one of "Four Tigers of East Asia" and its economy is currently ranked as the 13th largest in the world. Should it put the brakes on its rapid development until it can consider the potentially negative impact a technological system will have on its traditional society? In face of the seeming impracticality of this, there must be a way of finding a positive side to technology. This Professor Yang seeks to do through his "Utopian" approach—one in which we recreate "the present in order to advance toward the new future." He suggests that human use of technology can actualize humans ("With technology, human beings become human beings.") and, at a broader level, can open up opportunities for change, creating "a stage for a new world"—" the unlimited world of imagination" or Utopia. His What has made the study of Ellul's position on la *technique* particularly difficult is his refusal to merge the two analyses into a single comprehensive critique (Ellul, 1970, p. 6). Rather than synthesizing them, as a dialectic thinker Ellul played these two tracks against each other, each of his sociological works countered by a theological work. His work as whole, he explained, "has from the first turned on 'the contradictions between the evolution of the modern world [notably the technical evolution] and the biblical content of revelation" (Holloway, 1970, p. 20; brackets in the original).

In his sociological work, Ellul viewed social development in systemic terms and sought to show us how the technological system would develop apart from our intervention. "I analyze reality," he said. "I see its most probable course of

view is that Ellul's critique masks these possibilities. "Ellul regards technology as an idolatrous religiosity," a position, he argues, that leads to hopelessness in the face of autonomous technology, rather than an acceptance of our responsibility and the possibility of "self-control of technology."

Professor Yang offers a standard criticism of Ellul when he contends, "Ellul's assertion that technology will eliminate a meaningful mankind because of its autonomy is too serious." It is this common reading of Ellul that causes him to look for an alternate view "where technology is set free from mechanics and gets closer to human beings." In this response, I will argue that, when viewed in its totality, Ellul's analysis is not unrelievably pessimistic, but that Ellul presented a hope that is not far from Professor Yang's theological optimism.

To address the question of Ellul's pessimism, let us begin by going back to a written debate between Robert Theobald and Ellul in 1965. Theobald comes to the debate having read *The Technological Society*, so he is familiar with Ellul's statements about the autonomy of technology. Yet, through the exchange, he is taken aback by something Ellul says, something that seems irreconcilable with his assumption of where Ellul stands. I find Ellul's position on this issue ambiguous: he seems at many points in his book *The Technological Society* and in his reply to deny man's power to influence the technological environment. Indeed, at times, he appears to believe in a rather extreme technological determinism. Yet in spite of this, at the end of his reply, he quite clearly states that man can find "the path to a new freedom" (Theobald, 1965, p. 569).

What Theobald bumped up against is a common stumbling block for many of Ellul's critics—the assumption that his sociological critique of la *technique* is all there is. As I have noted elsewhere, "Ellul's work follows two separate tracks—the more widely known sociological works and the less well-known, but crucially important, theological writings" (Baker, 1991, p.10). development, but that doesn't mean I approve of it; on the contrary, what I see is the interaction of blind forces, nature taking its course, and the human role is precisely that of mastering or preventing this chain of events" (Ellul, 1981/1982, p. 46). Thus, *The Technological Society* was written as "a warning of what may happen if man does not come to understand what is happening and makes no attempt to control the situation" (Ellul, 1965, p. 568). But, contrary to the common criticism, this did not lead him to fatalism. He did not "believe in a permanent determinism, in the inexorable course of nature" (Ellul, 1981/1982, p. 106) and "never said that technology was not dependent on anything or anyone, that it was beyond reach, etc." (Ellul, 1977/1980b, p.139). It is only if no action is taken, if people resign themselves to what they see as the inevitable

course, that Ellul speaks of things deterministically. "Fate operates when people give up," he says (Ellul, 1981/1982, p.106). With this background, we can now put into context the statement that caused Theobald such consternation:

> So long as man lulls himself into thinking his perils imaginary, that ready-made solutions exist, or that others will devise a remedy, he will do nothing but wait. I am still convinced, however, that if we can be sufficiently awakened to the real gravity of the situation, man has within himself the necessary resources to discover by some means unforeseeable at present, the path to a new freedom (Ellul, 1965, p. 568).
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> To summarize, Ellul's sociological works describe how he viewed the development of the system, but—and in each of these statements he consistently adds this condition (though his critics just as consistently miss it)—that development would occur only if we do not intervene to change it. Amid his analysis is the hope of intervention.

This hope is the theme of his religious writings which "confront" the sociological analyses. The "path to a new freedom" may be discovered by those who have been awakened to the likely course of the technological system and seek to intervene in its development. But who can intervene into a system that seems so complete and autonomous? The integrating nature of the technological system leads Ellul to argue that no one within the system can provide us with help in breaking the power of the system. Thus he called for an "exterior intervention," a term that goes back to his 1948 work, *The Presence of the Kingdom*. At its core the call is religious.

The possibility of an "exterior intervention," Ellul (1948/195 1) argues, "can only come from the admission of a superior authority which is imposed from outside on the mind of man, and gives him a rule, while at the same time it restores to him his genuine function" (p. 135). Writing as a Christian, Ellul (1981) says the "Christian Revelation" provides "the outside vantage point that permits the critique of the system" because God is outside the system which binds us (pp. 100, 102). He contends that "Christians in particular are called" to challenge the system of la *technique* "because it is possible for them to see the true situation of man better than other people, and because, better than others, they can see where this ought to lead, and what is its aim" (Ellul, 1948/1951, p. 143). Rather than, as Professor Yang contends, "sanctifying the concept of technology," Ellul's religious argument results in what Christians (1989) calls a "prophetic witness" which "confronts technicism and insists on desacralizing it" (p. 137; cf. Ellul, 1980a, p. 247). In sum, Ellul believed that an "exterior intervention" is possible because of a God who is Wholly Other and therefore completely outside the technological system. Surely this is not far from Professor Yang's argument: "The total otherness of God is the source of revolutionary iconoclasm. Thanks to the otherness of God, the people go to a new world with the hope of a new people. Theology should insist on the otherness of God to prevent technology from falling into technological determinism that is also the spirit which technology embraces."

Professor Yang argues for a positive side of technology, that "[t]echnology should exist for improving human beings." Ellul (1972/1973) recognized the positive contributions of particular technologies, as well. He readily admitted that technology (as contrasted with the technological system) does have a place, that "there is a legitimate use when it is put back into the movement of hope. That is the only place from which one might, with a great many difficulties moreover, rethink the whole problem of technology and come up with the true import of man's tremendous discovery" (p. 237). "What we have eventually to do as Christians," he wrote, "is certainly not to reject technology, but rather, in this technological society and at the price of whatever controversy, we have to cause hope to be born again, and to redeem the time in relation to the times" (p. 232).

Although Ellul did not present us with a program for how to accomplish this, he did, in his religious work, provide hope that we can find a "path to a new freedom." "In aiming a certain number of challenges, objections, and basic criticisms at the foundations," Ellul (1981/1982) said, "we can make Technique change its orientation and begin . . . what we might call a new historical period in which it will once again be in its proper place, that of a means subordinated to ends" (p. 208)—a hope, I would submit, that is the same, in spirit, at least, as Professor Yang's "utopian imagination" which "works toward negating and deconstructing the present, and finally establishing the new system."

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