

Joël DECARSIN

Complexes autonomes et autonomie de la technique
Lectures croisées de C.G. Jung et Jacques Ellul

(Autonomous Complexes and Autonomy of Technic
Cross-readings of C.G. Jung and Jacques Ellul)

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SUMMARY

In 1954, Jacques Ellul published an extremely dense and well-documented book entitled “La Technique ou l'Enjeu du Siècle” (*Technique or the Challenge of the Century*) which, thanks to the influence of writer Aldous Huxley, was translated and published in the USA in 1964, albeit under the title: *The Technological Society*.

From the very first pages, Ellul outlines the process of industrialization that began in Europe at the end of the 18th century. He notes that human beings developed an elaborate set of techniques designed to optimize work and increasingly shape the natural environment to suit their desire for comfort. According to Ellul, all these techniques now form a highly structured whole: *La Technique*.¹

Having reminded us that what makes a technique valuable is its efficiency, Ellul then puts forward an original ideal: techniques forming now a system, “the quest for maximum efficiency in all things” (to use his own words) has become the cardinal value, gradually replacing all traditional values, whether in the economic sphere or in private life.

So much so, in fact, that the status of technology has changed altogether. Therefore, it is no longer relevant to consider it as a set of means to an end, for it has become an end in itself in its own right, to the point where the notion of technical progress is now being taken for granted by almost everyone. From this perspective, no one would dream of criticizing it without immediately being seen as technophobic and backward-looking.

Technique is unconsciously made “sacred” because it is seen as a means of achieving greater and greater happiness on Earth; it is no more and no less than a substitute for the salvation of the soul in Christian civilization. According to Ellul, the *ideology of progress* is the main reason for the “progressive” decline of Christianity.

¹ Ellul vigorously rejects the overly restrictive term “technology”. According to Ellul, technology is not only “machines”, “computers”, etc... it also encompasses all immaterial techniques, such as work organization techniques, propaganda techniques such as the advertising and entertainment industry, serving to decerebrate humans... thus preventing them from becoming fully-fledged individuals).

But because this transformation took place *slowly* and *unconsciously*, Ellul concludes that technique must be seen as an **autonomous process**. Strictly speaking, it constitutes the *Zeitgeist*, and is therefore *totally indisputable*.

Ellul's idea quickly provoked a thousand negative reactions. For many, in fact, the idea that humans are alienated by their tools and methods is unacceptable: progress certainly brings its own set of problems, but it seems obvious that humans still have the resources to use technical means to solve problems caused by other techniques. Even intellectuals who are critical of the "religion of progress" are reluctant to accept the idea of technical autonomy. Rather, they remain convinced that there are good and bad uses of technology, and that man will always find the moral resources to sort them out.

The rest is history... technique now governs almost all human activities in an increasingly restrictive way. If it was the "challenge" of the 20th century, it is now the "inevitability" of the 21st. And if Ellul failed to demonstrate that the infatuation with technology constituted an ideology in its own right - a belief - it is because he failed to integrate the fact that beliefs and ideologies originate in the unconscious.

In particular, Has failed to the central teaching of Carl Gustav Jung, for whom the unconscious manifests itself largely autonomously (and not merely reactively to stimuli, as Freud in particular considered).

Jung's theory undoubtedly lends credence to Ellul's (the two men very often make comparable, if not identical, diagnoses). At the same time Jungian theory explains why Ellul's theory was never fully recognized. In short, Ellul never really took the question of the unconscious seriously.

But the opposite can also be said. Specifically, while the functioning of the unconscious is based on the symbolic, at the end of his life Jung was deluding himself about the idea that human beings could individuate in a meaningful way by engaging in a nourished dialogue with the unconscious. He had certainly understood that mass society was the major obstacle to the individuation process, but he failed to grasp the fact that if society has become massified, it is first and foremost because it has that if the primary principle of technique is the quest for maximum efficiency, this de facto the eradication of the notion of symbolthe sign (by definition monosemic) has killed the symbol (fundamentally ambivalent by nature) and with it the very, vital principle of contradiction.

Even if it's a long time coming, it's essential for Jungians and Ellulians to meet one day around the same table. Fundamental for their own reflection, and therefore fundamental for all those whom they would help to benefit from it.

EXTRACT

What Ellul calls “technique” is the projection into reality of an archetype that a Jungian might call “Faust”. I’m suggesting here that each of the two theories, Jung’s and Ellul’s, explains what the other lacks. If Jung, for example, is more difficult to accept today than in the past, Ellul gives us the reason. According to Ellul, “we have passed from an organic world, where symbolization was an adequate and coherent function of the environment, to a technical system, where the creation of symbols has neither place nor meaning.”

Similarly, Ellul’s concept of the “sacred transferred to technique” is incomprehensible to anyone unfamiliar with the psychoanalytic notion of transference. This is because Ellul himself rejected theories of the unconscious outright: “I’m horribly suspicious of them,” he said, “because I’ve had in my hands, if I may say so, in terms of the cure of the soul, so many people demolished spiritually and psychologically by psychoanalysis that I retain a certain mistrust of them”. More than that, Ellul is openly uninterested in introspection: “I’m not at all interested in knowing who I am”. (It could be said that Ellul’s disinterest in his ego stems directly from his faith. Feeling himself to be continually under God’s gaze and in constant dialogue with him through prayer, Ellul attaches no particular importance to his states of mind. For all that, he is not devoid of will, but his will, he says, is to do God’s will. In this case, to destroy the idols of the State, technics, and money...)

Why should we seek to connect the thoughts and teachings of Ellul and Jung? What do the two men have in common, and what do they have in common that sets them apart from other critics of modernity? Undoubtedly, this begs the question of *transcendence* - or more precisely - the question of the *need to refer to transcendence*. Here, “transcendent” can be understood as that which is experienced by the ego as not coming from overhanging it.

In many ways, God plays the same role for Ellul as the Self does for Jung. However, far be it from me to suggest that the two are equivalent and that human beings could *choose* between one or the other, as one chooses a dish in a restaurant! For the simple reason that, under the circumstances, we don’t “choose” anything, we “are chosen”.

On this point, the two men are in total agreement.