

4. Jacques Ellul (1912-1994): A Thinker of “Curmudgeonly Luddism”? January 14-16

I could not wait any longer to get around to Jacques Ellul and I regret now the unflattering reference I made in the previous essay to his critique of contemporary science and technology. It was inspired by a recollection of my reading, well over twenty years ago, of his book, *The Technological Bluff*, of which the English translation was published in 1990. My reading of it must have been very cursory because my recollection of it showed that I had not truly engaged with the thoughtful Christian and humanistic principles which ultimately motivate his critique but that the only things that stuck in my mind were his polemics against television, the video player and recorder, the hosts of minor electronic gadgets sprouting up everywhere, and, last but not least, the computerized sorting of mail. Actually, Ellul shows himself to be a remarkably knowledgeable and sophisticated critic. The original French version of his book must have been published in the late 80's because he shows himself impressively *au courant* with the state of French technology, together with that of other developed countries, at that time; thus, the French had seen in the preceding decade the introduction of high-speed trains, the *trains à grand vitesse*, one of which, between Lyons and Paris, I had the pleasure of riding in 1983. Equally impressive was the introduction of the videophone, although this never caught on widely and, I imagine, has been completely superseded by the home computer and the smartphone. However, having reread Ellul's book more carefully and also now in the light of Harari's book, I think Ellul was a first-rate critic of the dire effects, at both the individual and collective level, of the mindless proliferation of technology.

However, all this being said, I continue to disagree with some of Ellul's jeremiads. From my own experience I know that watching television or playing movies on the VCR is not necessarily a recipe for the shutting down of one's mind. My introduction to television after my immigration to Canada in 1958 when I was fourteen indubitably widened my mental horizons, and I think I have successfully combined it ever since with my love of reading. Of course, I recognize at the same time that children who are brought up nowadays on a wholesale diet of television, computers, and digital gadgets are seriously shortchanged in their overall intellectual and psychological development. In my memoirs I have underlined that the almost complete absence of movies in my childhood in the Netherlands left me cut off from great artistic achievements in film culture. Fortunately, the VCR's on which I must have played many hundreds of movies, both new and old, since the mid-80's—and, more recently, the Turner Classic Movies channel—have truly helped me to close that gap. Also, it was googling that allowed me to make the first step, only a few days ago, in going back to Ellul. The twelve-page essay by James A. Fowler which I found, “A Synopsis and Analysis of the Thought and Writings of Jacques Ellul,” provided me with an excellent introduction to the whole range—philosophical, theological, and social-critical—of his thought. There are many other times I have been served well in this way by googling, with a trip to the library not infrequently following.

Ellul's litany of the downsides of scientific and technological progress sometimes

gets tiresome, even ridiculous. Here I prefer to think of challenges—challenges which can be met and indeed are being met, even if not perfectly. One of Ellul's most unwarranted pessimisms concerns aging populations. Yes, thanks to the phenomenal rise in average life-spans in many countries, for the first time in human history large majorities of their populations can expect to live to a good old age and these seniors and elderly will increase in numbers as time progresses: do we have the material and human resources to deal with this what Ellul obviously regards as a serious problem—which, I may add, is also raised, over and over again, in my province of Nova Scotia? This alarmism irritates me. The vast majority of the over-70 segment of the population does not need extraordinary care; these women and men mostly lead happy and productive lives surrounded by family and friends and in the very midst of their communities—it continues to amaze me how many of them are active in volunteer work. The small minority which does indeed require special looking after does not pose an insuperable problem. We cannot help but be immensely grateful for the immense rise in the standard of living on all fronts since the beginning of the 20th century which now permits so many seniors to live in general well-being among us.

Since the publication of Ellul's book almost three decades have passed by, and there can be no doubt that the challenges facing humankind are even greater today. Indeed, if they are not met, calamity faces us. Everyone is familiar with the massive threat posed by climate change, in which, for the first time in history, human agency plays a crucial role. This challenge is, fortunately, being met by the new technology of renewable energy to which nearly all of the planet is now committing itself, despite some last rearguard actions of the deniers, and this fact offers us great cause for hope. Like Ellul himself, however, I am far more concerned with the spiritual aspect of his critique of today's science and technology; in this respect his critique resonates powerfully with Harari's analyses and predictions in *Homo Deus*. I fully agree with Ellul that science and technology carry the potential to de-humanize us, to push us beyond the boundaries and limits where we lose those aspects of our being that are a *sine qua non* for our full God-created humanity. Like him, I consider myself a Christian humanist and thus the wonderful saying of the great second-century church father, Irenaeus, truly resonates with me: "The glory of God is humanity alive."

Ellul's final sustained critique of science and technology dates from the late 80's when the digital revolution was already beginning to make its impact, but it is now as we are well into the second decade of the 21st century that we are beginning to appreciate fully the social, political and, above all, the psychological dislocation it is wreaking as it increasingly transgresses those boundaries and limits which define our essential humanity. In the previous essay, I praised Harari for casting his spotlight on the ominous trend towards the uncritical creation and utilization of the so-called artificial intelligence which is dramatically accelerating automation and robotization in both the private and public sectors of our society and economy. In Canada and the United States alone millions will be side-lined and thrown out of work. The vague promise that many will be retrained is fatuous: retrained for what? The jobs destroyed are those where live, face-to-face human interaction, not mechanical efficiency, lies at their core. This what is at stake: artificial intelligence, decoupled from the mind in all its glorious complexity of

personhood, of intellect, feeling, sensation, mood, and temperament, as Harari sees it so well, falls ruinously short here.

I must emphasize myself that there is another ominous social-economic-political side to all of this: the automation and robotization, artificial intelligence's handiwork, are being promoted by corporations, some of them huge multinationals, whose basic *raison d'être* is profit, while at the same time they have been spectacularly successful in lulling the public's awareness by feeding their restless appetite for digital novelty. As a result of what has been a veritable revolution in political thinking and practice since the late 70's, that is, the so-called neoliberal turn, which has left its deep imprint even on social-democracies, corporate interests far too often reign supreme, and inequality in income and wealth has risen beyond all pale and reason. Small government is in vogue again, and government as well, big or small for that matter, has also caught the digital fever.

I hope I am not sounding complacent and self-congratulatory in saying that I am trying, with perhaps some success, to step back from this *Brave New World*. It is, of course, so much easier for me, being single, retired, and financially comfortable. Unlike so many who are juggling their many responsibilities of job, family, and finances in today's stressed-out society, I have the leisure to step back from the hurly-burly, to practice mindfulness, to cultivate deep relationships with family and friends, and to enjoy the best fruits of our culture. Finally, I like to think that with my volunteer work, humble as it is, I can make some payback.