

BOOK REVIEW

The Technological Bluff, by Jacques Ellul, translated by G. W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1990. xvi + 418 pp. no price.

Faced with yet another book by Jacques Ellul, another on technology, the most obvious question to ask is whether, even in over 400 pages, there is anything new. *The Technological Bluff* certainly contains much that will be familiar to readers of Ellul and, with some important modifications, his view of technique remains broadly unchanged from his analyses in *The Technological Society* (ET 1964) and *The Technicological System* (ET 1980). However, there is also in this volume a great deal which is original and of enormous value to anyone interested in understanding our modern world.

As in those earlier studies. Ellul here distinguishes technique, by which *he* means that which *we* often refer to as technology: computers, robots, etc., from technology. Technology, for Ellul, is properly to be understood as our thinking and discourse about technique. Unlike his two earlier books, this work is not primarily about technique but about technology. Its central thesis is that the technical system no longer faces opposition from society and that the way in which we think and talk about technique "envelops us, making us believe anything, and, far worse, changing our whole attitude to techniques" (p. xvi). This phenomenon is the technological bluff of the title.

This basic argument is outlined in his foreword and introduction. There he claims that such technical innovations as the laser and genetic engineering have not led him to alter his analysis of modern technique. Indeed, the great innovation, 'infinitely more important than all the technological discoveries' (18), is the technological bluff through which technique is viewed as reassuring, innocent and ordinary.

The bulk of the book comprises an analysis and critique of this technological bluff and, although the focus is on technology, there are numerous valuable comments on many other fields of study. Although the book merits being read in full, each of the four parts and most of the individual chapters could (I think) be read and understood on their own.

Before examining this technological bluff, the first part of the book (chapters 1-4) returns to and supplements Ellul's earlier analysis of the technical system. Here he offers another significant characteristic of technique: uncertainty.

In the first chapter, building on his oft repeated claim that "technique carries with it its own effects quite apart from how it is used" (p. 35), Ellul illustrates the ambivalence of technical progress showing that it always contains a complex mixture of positive and negative elements

STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

which cannot be dissociated. One of the many examples given to illustrate this is that cars not only enable us to travel more quickly and conveniently but in so doing cause congestion and thousands of deaths.

The first part proceeds to show that this uncertainty not only explains our repeated failure to foresee and to predict technical development (chapter 2) due to the existence of both positive and negative feedback (chapter 3), but that uncertainty is increased through the internal contradictions of the technical system (chapter 4). Although he illustrates these claims with numerous examples (many, both here and throughout the book, draw on the French experience although parallels can easily be found in Great Britain or the United States), his argument is that the characteristics of uncertainty is found not only in certain individual techniques but in techniques as a whole. This means that we now live in a world where uncertainty is "the situation into which the populace is thrust without being in the least aware of it" (p. 33).

Ellul maintains that our lack of awareness of this and other realities of our technical system is due to our technological discourse which is full of fictional claims attempting to mask the true situation and to make us feel comfortable and happy in the technical system. Several of these myths are outlined and criticised in part two of the book.

Among the many great claims made for technique and technical progress are that they are always and only directed to human fulfillment, that they have created a new technical culture, and that they remain under human mastery. In chapters five to seven Ellul proceeds through each of these common claims made for technique and, with varying degrees of persuasiveness, undermines them and reveals them to be part of the technological bluff which conceals the harsh reality of the technical system from us and encourages us, instead, to embrace it.

Following a short chapter questioning technique's claims to be rational (a theme to which he returns in the third part) Ellul traces the development of ideologies of science focussing on the present situation where science is viewed as the solution to all problems and "scientists will not accept philosophical, theological, or ethical judgment" (p. 187) as science must be allowed to continue along its own path. Finally, Ellul attempts to demonstrate that our society is marked by recourse to experts whose word is always final and yet who are, in reality, an inextricable part of the technical system which they are unable to criticise.

The third and longest part of the book is entitled 'The Triumph of the Absurd'. Following an attempt to relate technical progress to the philosophy of the absurd through examples of technical, economic and human absurdity, Ellul analyses the underlying principles of the 'unreason' which he sees as characteristic of the modern technical world and evident supremely in our response to pollution, the Third

BOOK REVIEW

World and nuclear technology. He reassesses the relation between technique and political economy in the light of developments since the treatment in his first work on technology, *The Technological Society*. Among other elements this includes some valuable analysis and examples in support of Ellul's claim that there is today a complete dissociation between the monetary and the real.

The following two chapters focus on the absurdity of gadgets and waste. by gadgets Ellul means "mechanical or electrical objects which are amusing or entertaining and which we can take up or leave as we pleas" (p. 262). He has immense fun running through the variety of gadgets with which we are all familiar, persistently asking the simple question, "What use?" in order to show that they meet no real need. Much of what he writes here is undoubtedly true but his vigorous, polemical approach, while entertaining, will irritate some. The chapter on waste ("the ineluctable consequence of the technical system that is in constant development", p. 287) deals with private waste but has as its main concern the social and collective waste illustrated by such projects as Concorde. The central problem here is that *no one* is held responsible for the decisions which produce this waste. The final chapter of this part returns to economic matters and looks at the technological bluff of the need for increases in productivity.

The final part of the book, entitled 'Fascinated People', looks at humanity in modern technical society and argues that we are totally unable, contrary to the claims of technological discourse, to master technique because we are fascinated and obsessed by it. Following two chapters outlining this fascination with regard to such technical phenomena as television, telematics and advertising, the penultimate chapter looks at the various diversions—games, sport, the automobile etc. — which distract modern man from thinking about himself and his condition in the technical system.

The final chapter and afterward helpfully draw all the disparate themes of the book together and restate the basic thesis of the work. 'Terrorism in the Velvet Glove of Technology' argues that the discourse of technological bluff is nothing short of 'terrorist' by which Ellul means that it is "moulding the unconscious with no possibility of resistance" (p. 384). Among the agents Ellul blames for this terrorism, which presents us with no alternative but technical progress, are intellectuals and the churches who "if they do not basically engage in this technicisation, they are afraid of appearing reactionary and thus calling down upon themselves the scorn and derision of the parties of progress" (p. 395). In his 'Last Words', Ellul concludes by summing up, in terms of three elements, his analysis of the complete integration of humanity into the technical system: humanity adapted to technique, fascinated humanity and diverted humanity. Combined these lead to, among other things, "completely erasing responsibility from our society. Everyone has become irresponsible. . ." (p. 406).

STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Given both his overall analysis in *The Technological Bluff* and several of his specific comments (for example, "If we ever perceive that we are on the wrong road, it is impossible to turn back", p. 345), Ellul will again face the accusation of being unreservedly anti-modern and an unqualified pessimist. However, he ultimately refuses to predict that there is no escape for humanity. Instead he closes the book by warning that we are free. There is an alternative: "Seeing the Hydra head of trickery and the Gorgon face of hi-tech, the only thing we can do is set them at a critical distance, for it is by being able to criticise that we show our freedom" (p. 411).

As in Ellul's many other works, this volume provides a large amount of material which will enable us to carry out this necessary criticism of our modern world. Its valuable insights are, however, combined with much that many will find ridiculous. To take just one example, Ellul claims that the increasing presence of immigrants from the Third World and the associated spread of Islam "will undoubtedly lead to the disintegration of Western society as a whole" (p. 235). Ellul also frequently, especially in the third and fourth parts, allows argument to be replaced by assertion and polemic: "The automobile is an engine of death . . . Everywhere it passes, it kills . . . the bloody sacrifice, equal to that of the Aztecs, is accepted with complete passivity and even content . . ." (p. 375).

Nevertheless, despite both these criticisms, *The Technological Bluff* provides a commentary on the modern world which all concerned with ethics would do well to heed and to evaluate critically. While reading and reviewing this volume the technology displayed in both the Gulf War and the reporting of it, the debate over 'virgin births' by A.I.D., the release of the Birmingham Six due, in large part, to the discrediting of expert technical evidence, and the irresponsible expense of the collective waste of millions of inaccurate poll tax bills which computers spent weeks producing, all vividly illustrated the significance and power of Ellul's analysis. If Christian ethics is to address such issues then Ellul's *The Technological Bluff* is essential reading for, in the words of Os Guinness' dust jacket recommendation, in it he "skillfully opens up issues that are challenging to understand more challenging still to resolve, yet irresponsible to ignore".

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