

JEFFREY M. SHAW

ILLUSIONS OF FREEDOM

Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul on
Technology and the Human Condition



Illusions of Freedom

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Illusions of Freedom

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Illusions of Freedom

*Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul on
Technology and the Human Condition*

Jeffrey M. Shaw



The Lutterworth Press

For Robin, Kara, and Erin

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Preface

Nearly every facet of daily life has seen some kind of change over the last few decades. A proliferation of gadgets, devices, and ways of incorporating these objects into daily routines has drastically altered our ways of doing work, interacting with each other, and defining who we are. This book does not have anything to say about any of the new devices or technologies that have appeared over the last few decades, or at any time in the past. Rather, it is an examination of a slightly different set of opinions on the impact that these technological advances have had on our human condition. It is an attempt to give two particular individuals their chance to be heard, and in doing so, to allow readers to reflect on ways of thinking about technology that heretofore, they may not have considered. One should not read this book thinking that the opinions expressed by either Thomas Merton or Jacques Ellul are “correct” or “incorrect.” I have attempted only to compare their views on technology and its impact on freedom, and in doing so have hopefully allowed those who may not be familiar with either of these thinkers to investigate some of their other writing more thoroughly.

What impact does technology have on freedom in the thought of Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul? Contemporary technology has the potential to hinder humanity’s attainment of freedom in their opinion. Both thinkers offer unique perspectives on the impact that they believe technology has had on society in the twentieth century, and they both offer unconventional definitions of the concept of freedom. It is important to note at the beginning that neither Merton nor Ellul sought to provide definitive answers to the questions they posed, but rather to encourage others to begin thinking more broadly about the consequences of continued advances in technology. This book will hopefully encourage others to do just that, and to use the ideas that Merton and Ellul proposed not as answers to any particular question, but as avenues for further inquiry into the nature and meaning of life in contemporary society.

Preface

Examining the perspectives offered by Merton and Ellul on technology and freedom allows those working within the disciplines of theology, literature, and the philosophy of technology to incorporate works by these two Christian thinkers within a variety of disciplines. Somewhat ironically, many readers may encounter this book online, or read it via e-book or on a Kindle—just a few of the marvels that contemporary technology has bestowed upon us. As one progresses through this book, it should become apparent that neither Merton nor Ellul are leveling a critique against particular technological products (with the exception perhaps of nuclear weapons), but rather against the processes that compose what they believe to be an all-encompassing technological system. Of particular interest in developing this book is the assertion in the July 1998 edition of *The Ellul Forum* that “for anyone who has read Ellul, the similarity of Merton’s critique of technological civilization is startling and impressive. Virtually point for point, Merton and Ellul, writing about the same time, echo each other”¹ This study examines those mutual influences and addresses point-by-point a number of the similarities between Merton and Ellul regarding their critique of technology’s role in contemporary society, and its impact on human freedom.

Situating Merton and Ellul within the ongoing philosophical debate over the role of technology in daily life and on the nature of freedom is another purpose behind this book. The chapters which follow identify similarities between their thinking and areas in which they found common intellectual ground. It is an attempt to fuse Merton’s monastic response to the contemporary, technologically-focused world to Ellul’s secular, albeit theologically-centered response. As one of the first comprehensive attempts to compare these two worldviews, this study represents a small but hopefully significant contribution to the field of Merton and Ellul scholarship.

In addition to their own ideas, the study identifies some of the common antecedents to their thought. Neither Merton nor Ellul developed their ideas concerning the impact of technology on the human condition in a vacuum. Having engaged with many of the intellectuals of their time, both thinkers either directly incorporated outside thinking into their own worldviews, or in some cases changed certain aspects of their thinking based on engagement with the ideas of others. Specifically, the study will address their intellectual engagement with Karl Barth, Søren Kierkegaard, Aldous Huxley, and Karl Marx.

1. Fasching, “In This Issue,” 1.

Both Thomas Merton and to a lesser extent, Jacques Ellul, have had their lives recounted and their ideas presented in a number of works since their deaths, and this study will not attempt to provide a complete review of either author's entire body of work, nor a complete biographical account of their lives. Similarities between their upbringings will be identified, establishing the pattern through which the study will attempt to compare their thought on a point-by-point basis, noting similarities and differences throughout. Examining Merton and Ellul through theological, sociological, and political lenses allows a point-by-point comparison of a number of different ideas that directly relate to the impact that they believed technology has had on the human condition. This comparison identifies commonalities of thought and traces some of the antecedents to their thought. Merton the Roman Catholic and Ellul the Protestant offer remarkably similar conclusions regarding the impact that technology has had on the human condition. As Christians, they provide a distinctly Christocentric view of freedom, and it is against this unique view that the impact of technology and the idea of progress is evaluated. While many readers will not agree with the definition of freedom that both men present, some may find that their analysis of technology's impact on our human condition still resonates in the twenty first century. In other words, one does not have to subscribe to a Christocentric view of freedom to necessarily find points of agreement with the specifics of the critique that is presented in these pages. In summary, both Merton and Ellul are examples of men not only thinking about the impact that technology has had on human freedom as much as they are individuals firmly committed to living out the ideals that they spent their lives articulating.

Acknowledgments

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For permission to include excerpts of Jacques Ellul's poetry I would like to thank Didier Schillinger of Opales Publishing in Bordeaux, France. Also providing helpful Merton-related material was Albert Romkema, owner of one of the largest collection of Merton artifacts in existence. I would also like to thank two individuals at Wipf and Stock Publishers—Christian Amondson for his oversight of the project, and Jacob Martin for his guidance at the earliest stage of the editing process. The entire Wipf and Stock team provided timely and helpful assistance along the way.

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Most importantly, my wife, Robin, and daughters, Kara and Erin, suffered through my many absences while I was writing this book. Robin's suggestions and encouragement led to the publication of this dissertation in its current form—without her help, it would not have seen the light of day. It is therefore dedicated to them with, as always, my deepest gratitude and affection.

1 Introduction

Technology has been a liberating force, which has for millions of people increased standards of living and longevity. Whether in the field of healthcare, nutrition, computers, weaponry, transportation, and education, various innovations and technological advancements have radically changed the way of life for many people on the planet over the last centuries, with very noticeable changes even just over the last decade or two. Millions, if not billions of people have benefited tremendously from the march of progress. Who would argue otherwise? Two twentieth-century figures have a different view of the impact that technology has had on the human condition. Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul viewed technology differently than their contemporaries. In order to understand their particular points of view, one must first come to terms with their definitions of both technology and freedom. This introductory chapter will provide those definitions, as well as provide an overview of the chapters that outline the various perspectives that Merton and Ellul used to advance their argument that technology can and should be seen as a hindrance to humankind's attainment of freedom.

It should be noted that this book is not an attempt to label either Merton's or Ellul's particular point of view as "correct," or more accurate than other points of view that one might encounter in contemporary culture regarding technology. It is incumbent on the reader to discern the merits (or lack thereof) of the arguments presented herein. The intent is to compare the viewpoints that Merton and Ellul offer, identifying similarities, and occasionally differences, between their assertion that technology has had, and continues to have, a negative aspect. An additional objective is to provide scholars working in the fields of Merton and/or Ellul studies with avenues for further inquiry regarding the intellectual approaches that these two men brought to bear on this topic, as well as on other topics relating to

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the human condition in contemporary society. One final hope is that this book might compel the general reader to investigate both Merton and Ellul more closely, inviting new participants to the debate about our interaction with technology. Seven chapters support this discussion, focusing on three overarching perspectives through which Merton and Ellul formulated their thinking on technology. The first perspective will be the theological, followed by the sociological, and finally the political, presenting a general trajectory from the transcendent to the immanent. Following the examination of their political perspective will be a chapter comparing their literary output.

Chapter 1 is the introduction, which provides the definitions of technology and freedom that Merton and Ellul employed in their writing. Readers will note that these definitions are radically different from anything that might be encountered in popular culture, or encountered in the Western philosophical tradition in general. The similarity between their particular definitions of freedom is striking, and the chapters which follow illustrate the implications of their adherence to this definition.

Chapter 2 will provide an overview of both men's lives, although the intent is not to provide a simple biographical sketch. The objective will be to identify some common experiential sources for their worldviews as adults, specifically, their similar religious conversion experiences, and their upbringing in rural environments. The chapter will also address Ellul's theory of *technique* and explore both Ellul's and Merton's use of the dialectic as an intellectual device.

The third chapter will look at Merton and Ellul from a theological perspective, and begins with an overview of Karl Barth's (1886–1968) thought and its impact on both men. Barth's thought regarding the nature of freedom is foundational to Ellul's entire body of work. Merton refines some of this own thinking on the subject of freedom through his engagement with Barth's work. Critiques of the institutional church, referred to as the "visible church" as opposed to the "invisible church," are examined in this chapter, as both Merton and Ellul saw a disconnect between the individual practice of Christian faith and the institutional structures that purport to further such practice. They believe that the church has a specific role in helping humankind to identify the true self, and that technology has hindered the church in this regard. The true and false self are addressed in detail in chapter 4.

Chapter 4 examines the sociological perspective. Both Merton and Ellul were deeply influenced, but in different ways, by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). English philosopher Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) also influenced various aspects of both men's thinking. This examination consists of another set of point-by-point Merton-Ellul comparisons beginning with their thinking on propaganda and the notion of the "mass man." The idea of self-transcendence in their thinking will also be addressed. Throughout Merton's writing, one finds references both implicitly and explicitly stated referring to the need to cast away the false self and seek the true self, allowing us to recognize and accept the gift of true freedom. Ellul does not emphasize the necessity to transcend the false self as emphatically as Merton does, but this idea is still one that he proposes as an essential step on the road to attaining freedom. Also discussed in this chapter will be technology's role in the furtherance of propaganda and the role that it plays in hindering self-transcendence, the City as the ultimate manifestation of *technique*, and their respective views on non-violence.

Chapter 5 will cover the political perspective. Karl Marx influenced both Merton and Ellul. This profound antecedent to their thought is addressed first, followed by a point-by-point comparison of Merton's and Ellul's views on the city—a phenomenon that they both see as the ultimate manifestation of human technology, and a major impediment to the discovery of the true self, a discovery which both men believe to be a first step on the road to achieving freedom. Another point of comparison is their similar approach to social work and Roman Catholic social teaching, which provides an example of the type of life that one might live upon accepting the gift of true freedom as defined in chapter 2. Although a Protestant, Ellul shares an affinity for the work and writing of Roman Catholic luminaries such as Dorothy Day (1897–1980) and Peter Maurin (1877–1949). Day and Maurin both profoundly influenced Merton. Ellul, although a member of the Protestant French Reformed Church and not a Roman Catholic, provided some of the intellectual framework for this movement although he did not participate in the movement directly.

Merton and Ellul often directed their societal critiques at both the capitalist societies of the West and the communist societies of the East. A section is devoted to this tendency in their writing. This chapter concludes with a look at their quest for a "third way" in politics. While this third way does not directly correlate into a prescription for achieving true freedom, it suggests that both men believe that one can evade the grip of propaganda

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and *technique* to various degrees, ultimately serving as a point of departure from which one can potentially overcome the false self.

The sixth chapter evaluates Merton and Ellul as poets and literary figures. Both men wrote poems that allowed them to express many of their ideas regarding the insidious effects of technology on the human condition. In addition to comparing their poetry, this chapter will also look at their engagement with the work of Albert Camus (1913–1960) and Eugène Ionesco (1909–1994). Also considered in this chapter will be an assessment of the status of language and the written word in both Merton's and Ellul's thinking. They identify the Revealed Word as the source of human freedom, and this chapter focuses on their thinking regarding the tension between word and image in contemporary society. The seventh chapter concludes the study, introducing some avenues for further inquiry.

DEFINING TECHNOLOGY

Both Merton and Ellul refer to technology throughout their writing. At times, their reference is to a particular technological product, such as the automobile, the television, or even to the simple tape recorder. However, for the most part, when referring to technology, it is the technological process—the rationality and efficiency that has culminated in the idea of progress—that is being questioned. Ellul expresses this idea as “*technique*.” He wrote, “*Technique* refers to any complex of standardized means for attaining a predetermined result. Thus, it converts spontaneous and unreflective behavior into behavior that is deliberate and rationalized. The Technical Man is . . . committed to the never-ending search for “the one best way” to achieve any designated objective.”¹ With this statement, Ellul presented his forceful thesis that contemporary society is a “civilization committed to the quest for continually improved means to carelessly examined ends.”² It is the predominant theme of much of Ellul's work—a theme with which Thomas Merton agrees. Despite their different faiths and the fact that they never met or corresponded directly with each other, “Ellul and Merton are strikingly similar in their perception of *technique* and of *technique's* hold on the world.”³ Speaking of technology, Merton wrote:

1. Ellul, *Technological Society*, vi.

2. Ibid.

3. Davenport, “Jacques Ellul and Thomas Merton on Technique,” 10.

Technology. No! When it comes to taking sides, I am not with [those] who are open mouthed in awe at the “new holiness” of a technological cosmos in which man condescends to be God’s collaborator, and improve everything for Him. Not that technology is per se impious. It is simply neutral and there is no greater nonsense than taking it for an ultimate value . . . We gain nothing by surrendering to technology as if it were a ritual, a worship, a liturgy (or talking of our liturgy as if it were an expression of the “sacred” supposedly now revealed in technological power). Where impiety is in the hypostatizing of mechanical power as something to do with the Incarnation, as its fulfillment, its epiphany. When it comes to taking sides I am with Ellul . . .⁴

Merton’s agreement with Ellul on this point is the framework for this book. *Technique’s* deleterious impact on contemporary society will be the focal points for the chapters that follow.

It is also necessary to situate Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul within the framework of the debate over technology and the human condition. Carl Mitcham, a leading contemporary thinker regarding the nature and philosophy of technology, believes that “technology, or the making and using of artifacts, is a largely unthinking activity.”⁵ This particular description of technology captures the essence of the word as it relates to this study. Technology not only refers to specific products but also to the largely unthinking processes that result in the manufacture of both the products themselves and the perceived needs that precede the appearance of the products. Mitcham also provides a link between technology and theology—a crucial idea that both Merton and Ellul spoke about at length:

Theology has generally concentrated on analyzing an apparently contingent or disconnected series of moral problems obviously engendered by technology (industrial alienation, nuclear weapons, the social justice of development, biomedical engineering, mass media, etc.) without either systematically relating such specific issues or grounding them in more fundamental reflections on the relationship between faith and technological reasoning.⁶

In other words, Merton and Ellul will approach the issue of technology through the theological lens, and in doing so will address nuclear weapons

4. Merton, *Dancing in the Waters of Life*, 166.

5. Mitcham, *Thinking through Technology*, 1.

6. Mitcham, “Technology as a Theological Problem,” 3.

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and social justice—issues which Mitcham raises in the above quote. Nuclear weapons are of course part of the environmental backdrop against which both men wrote—having done the bulk of their writing during the height of the Cold War. The social justice of development is emphasized as part of Merton's Roman Catholic social teaching, and the Protestant Ellul will engage this topic in his work. Both writers addressed mass media—Merton through his elaboration on the concept of the “mass man” and Ellul in his in-depth analysis of propaganda. Mitcham has thus introduced the problem confronting theology and theologians—how can one address these issues in a comprehensive Christian manner?

Many philosophers equate technology with machines. In particular, Lewis Mumford (1895–1990), an American urban planner and philosopher, did so in nearly all of his writing. According to Mumford, “the ‘machine’ may exist in other forms than as a physical object. The parts may not be metals but human beings; the organization may not be that embodied in the machine but an organizational chart; the source of power may not be electricity or the combustion of gas but muscle power or the pride of men; and the task may not be the manufacture of a product but the control of a nation.”⁷ Mumford not only equated technology with machines, but also with process, and more importantly, with the pursuit of power and control. This autonomous pursuit of power and control is similar to Ellul's theory of *technique*. However, Mumford dismissed Ellul as “a sociological fatalist,” and so it is difficult to draw too many comparisons between Mumford and Ellul.⁸ Others would dismiss Ellul as too pessimistic—offering no way out of for the individual seeking to escape the technological society. Even Merton would at times find Ellul's writing to be too pessimistic.

Merton's critique of technology originally centered on the actual products of modern technology rather than on any particular process. Once he entered the monastery, he had hoped to put himself out of the world's reach, but technology caught up with him. The abbot at that time, Dom James Fox, began a modernization project shortly after Merton entered the monastery at Gethsemane in Kentucky in December 1941. “The noisy tractors, replacing horses and wagons, annoyed a Merton who had come to the monastery seeking silence, and had suddenly found it becoming a place

7. Miller, “Effect of Technology,” 6.

8. Mumford, *Myth of the Machine*, 290–91; quoted in Fasching, *Thought of Jacques Ellul*, viii.

of noise and distraction.”⁹ Merton came face to face with the distractions that he had specifically sought to escape. It would be another two decades before he would read anything written by Ellul and before he would begin to formulate his thought regarding the deleterious influence that technology had on society as a whole.

In the meantime, Merton would correspond with Lewis Mumford, and some of Mumford’s ideas regarding the rapid pace of urbanization influenced Merton’s thought on the impact of technology upon contemporary society. However, once Merton had considered the impact that technology and the idea of progress was beginning to have on society as well as on the Church, he would later proclaim, “I also think that the [Vatican] needs to rest on a deeper realization of the urgent problems posed by technology today. (The Constitution on Mass Media seems to have been totally innocent of any such awareness.) For one thing, the whole massive complex of technology, which reaches into every aspect of social life today, implies a huge organization of which no one is really in control, and which dictates its own solutions irrespective of human needs or even of reason.”¹⁰ In this passage, Merton clearly identified technology with a process and a phenomenon rather than simply pointing to some particular product or machine. He also mentioned the mass media, which will be covered in chapter 4. Pointing out the fact that no one actually controls technology’s advance is another facet of this passage, placing Merton firmly in agreement with one of Ellul’s central tenets regarding *technique*. Merton continued, “Technology now has reasons entirely its own which do not necessarily take into account the needs of man, and this huge inhuman mechanism, which the whole human race is now serving rather than commanding, seems quite probably geared for the systematic destruction of the natural world, quite apart from the question of the ‘bomb’ which, in fact, is only one rather acute symptom of the whole disease.”¹¹ Merton equated actual products of technology with the technological process—a common tendency in much of his Cold War writing. However, he again demonstrated an affinity for Ellul’s concept of *technique* through his assertion that the entire process is one that continues to operate outside of humankind’s control. He concluded this lengthy discussion with the following:

9. Shannon, “Can One Be a Contemplative?,” 12.

10. Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 383–84.

11. *Ibid.*

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I am not of course saying that technology is “bad,” and that progress is something to be feared. But I am saying that behind the cloak of specious myths about technology and progress, there seems to be at work a vast uncontrolled power which is leading man where he does not want to go in spite of himself and in which the Church, it seems to me, ought to be somewhat aware of the intervention of the “principalities and powers” of which St. Paul speaks. I know this kind of language is not very popular today, but I think it is so important that it cannot be left out of account. For instance I think that the monumental work of Jacques Ellul on *La Technique* is something that cannot be ignored by the Church Fathers if they wish to see all the aspects of the crucial question of the Church and the world.¹²

These statements represent the pinnacle of Merton’s thought regarding technology. It is informed by Ellul’s theory of *technique* as well as by his own personal experiences in dealing with the Church hierarchy—experiences which will be covered in detail in chapter 3.

Responding to the question of whether or not he was against technology *per se*, as opposed to specific technological products, Merton wrote, “What I am questioning is the universal myth that technology infallibly makes everything in every way better for everybody. It does not.”¹³ He also stated that “there has never been such abject misery on earth as that which our technological society has produced along with the fantastic plenty for very few. What I am ‘against’ then is a complacent and naïve progressivism which pays no attention to anything but the fact that wonderful things can be and are done with machinery and with electronics.”¹⁴ These statements demonstrate that Merton’s fully developed thought regarding technology was remarkably similar to Ellul’s, although Merton would occasionally gravitate towards radical anti-technology statements while criticizing other facets of the social and political scene in the 1960s. For example, he remarked that “in our technological world we have wonderful methods for keeping people alive and wonderful methods for killing them off, and they both go together. We rush in and save lives from tropical diseases, then we come in with napalm and burn up the people we have saved. The net result is more murder, more suffering, more inhumanity. This I know is

12. Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 383–84.

13. Merton, *Road to Joy*, 98.

14. *Ibid.*, 99.