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The Technological Society: A Dialogue

1. 'The Biology of Technique'

Jacques Ellul

always the same. I have no general
can save this."

Mencken's chief problem was, of course, his prodigious vanity. From time to time the great man would tell friends that he was engaged "in diagnosis of the democratic disease." His *Notes On Democracy*, published in 1926, revealed that he had no visible philosophy other than his all-repeated theme that mankind was composed of "gentlemen" and "boobs," — just what the difference was between the "inferior four-fifths of mankind" and the superior one-fifth Mencken never bothered to define. His one dubious contribution was the creation of a Frankenstein, the all-American Boob — a moronic ignoramus who "doesn't know what a Doric column is, or an etching, or a fugue. He is as ignorant of sonnets and the Gothic style as he is of ecclesiastical politics in Abyssinia. Homer, Virgil, Cervantes, Bach, Raphael, Rubens, Beethoven — all such colossal names are empty sounds to him." Sinclair Lewis, who wrote *Main Street* largely under the influence of too much Mencken, would almost certainly have flunked the entrance examination of Mencken's superior one-fifth academy.

By the late 1920s, Mencken and his magazine, *The American Mercury*, were a spent force. Like a broken-down vaudevillian who never quite knows when to get off the stage, Mencken lingered on doing his "act" until the depression came along. Then the millions who were out of work turned to their new radio sets for the "latest news," went to the movies for escape, bought *Time* — the first of the mass-circulation news magazines — for the "background" to the news. Meanwhile, businessmen called for salesmanship to get the economy rolling again and, of course, advertising expenditures soared. This was the big change — the role of mass communications — not the goings on at the Podunk Chamber of Commerce. Mencken, the social critic, had missed the target. In 1933, he resigned the editorship of *The American Mercury*; he had over twenty years to live, but he was never in the editorial chair again. He made sentimental speeches, wrote nostalgically about his early newspaper days, corresponded with scholars about his lifelong interest in philology and drank bock beer with his friends in Baltimore. A sealed envelope, opened after his death in 1956, contained his exit line: "Don't overplay it." Nobody did.

I am indeed grateful to Mr. Theobald for his conscientious and discerning review of my book, *The Technological Society* (*The Nation*, Oct. 19, 1964). However, I find myself in disagreement with several of his points, as for example when he asks whether I refer to a mythical past. The fact is I do not idealize the past, for I am all too well aware of its defects. Neither do I compare present-day society with a past society which might have been better. I simply address myself to *today's* problems without reference to the problems of any former society. Or again, Mr. Theobald interprets me as saying that technique destroys human society. In fact, I am perfectly well able to envisage a technological society which is not inhuman per se, but inhuman only in terms of what man has it in his power to become and the freedom he might achieve. But since these brief comments allow little room for extensive discussion, I shall confine myself to two points.

The main disagreement between Mr. Theobald and me concerns the root causes underlying technical development. Mr. Theobald believes that the present pattern of technical progress is due to military and economic rivalry among nations and to the race between production and demand, hence to causes not inherently technical.

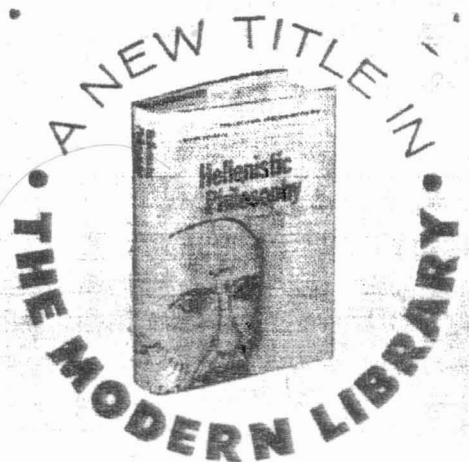
I, on the contrary, believe that because of its proliferation, the technical phenomenon has assumed an independent character quite apart from economic considerations, and that it develops according to its own intrinsic laws. Technique has become man's new milieu, replacing his former natural milieu. And just as man's natural environment obeys its own physical, chemical and other laws, our artificial, technical environment is now so constituted that it also has its own laws of organization, development and reproduction.

While I was one of the first to try

Jacques Ellul, the author of *The Technological Society*, published by Knopf last fall, is a professor of history and contemporary sociology at the University of Bordeaux. This article was translated by Mary Josephson.

to describe these characteristics of technology, the concept is today generally admitted by many eminent sociologists. Thus, in his latest work, one of the greatest of living anthropologists, M. Leroi-Gourhan, writes: "Analysis of techniques shows that in the course of time they behave in the same manner as living species, apparently possessing their own evolutionary force, so that they tend to escape from man's control. . . . We would seem therefore to be dealing with a veritable biology of technique." This is exactly what I was trying to convey. Technique evolves apart from man's intentions, following its own intrinsic causal processes, independent of external forces or human aims.

Obviously I cannot recapitulate here an exposition which occupies the greater portion of my book. But this view of technique leads me to think that modifications in economic structure, a *détente* in international relations, and improved cooperation among nations will cause practically no change in the technical phenomenon. I do not believe that the mere fact of being able to exploit largely all our resources gives man any particular freedom of choice regarding technique itself. These choices in reality are determined by factors within the



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technical apparatus, and this determinism becomes more rigorous as it grows ever more complex. This is not equivalent—according to my way of thinking—with socialization in the traditional sense of the term, as Mr. Theobald seems to believe. The result will be a greater integration of the individual into a society rigorously organized, not on an ideological but on a technical basis, using technical means. In this society the individual's apparent wider possibilities for action and self-expression will be basically illusory.

Technique would not be modified by changing the external factors which presently affect it. These external factors give technical society its secondary characteristics, which are sometimes excessive. This is what I wanted to show when I spoke of the concentration camp, but I also said in the last chapter that this is an accidental result which we can expect to disappear. However, while we can expect the secondary characteristics to disappear, this will not result in any fundamental change in the nature of the problem.

My second point bears on Mr. Theobald's correct view of my book as a description of what has happened because man has remained largely unconscious of the many implications of technique and has sought only to profit from it. By extrapolation, my book is also a warning of what may happen if man does not come to understand what is happening and makes no attempt to control the situation. I never denied that technique has brought some elements of well-being and happiness. If I failed to discuss this, it is because it seemed to me so obvious and so well known as scarcely to bear repeating that, thanks to technique, man is better fed and enjoys many improvements in his lot.

On the other hand, I never intended to describe any inexorable process or inevitable doom. I simply declared that because man does not seem to realize the extent of the problem, because our freedom of choice and of judgment is being reduced, because our technical milieu is becoming more complex, the evolution that I described seems increasingly likely. It is therefore only the ever-increasing probability of this development that I sought to emphasize.

When it is argued that man can act effectively when confronted with this situation and can find means to

change the course of evolution in technical society, I would like to believe it. But the problem must be posed in concrete terms: Of whom are we speaking when we say "man"? I myself do not believe in the existence of "man" in the abstract. Whom, then? The intellectuals? The technicians? The politicians? Exact analysis shows to what degree they are powerless since it is they who are most involved in this evolution. Nor could any individual be effective because his personal decisions could not possibly influence the source of society. Philosophers and artists are completely eliminated from the reckoning by the mere fact of their being nontechnical men. (All that obviously calls for lengthy proof!) Thus, what is needed is a kind of psychological and spiritual revolution affecting a considerable group of people. But at present, it seems to me that this has not yet begun and that it is not scientifically predictable.

The worst of illusions, however, would be to believe that, one way or another, the problem will resolve itself. The Marxists live in a utopian dream which claims that all technical difficulties will automatically be resolved by the transition to a Communist society. However, it is equally illusory to think that any historical or economic evolution will automati-

cally call forth a positive response to its challenges; or yet to believe—as many do—that technical progress itself will resolve the problems created by technique. In fact, only the more obvious, fragmented problems will be so resolved. For instance, while automation frees men from the misery of work on the assembly line, even more perplexing questions arise during the process; for technique spawns problems ever more vast and complex than those it resolves.

The principal feature of my work was an attempt to portray technique as a global phenomenon—hence the imperfections of my book! But I am sure that it is only by becoming aware of this phenomenon that men can become convinced of the necessity of finding a global answer to the challenge. Invariably it is when man finds himself in the presence of radical danger that he learns to react and to devise a response. So long as man hurls 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.

2. 'The Path to a New Freedom'

Robert Theobald

The object of this brief reply is not to break new ground in my debate with Ellul but rather to clarify our areas of agreement and disagreement.

First, I agree with Ellul that, in large part, "the technical phenomenon has assumed an independent character quite apart from economic considerations, and that it develops according to its own intrinsic laws. Technique has become man's new milieu, replacing his former natural milieu."

Having accepted this reality, my review attempted to discover the reasons why man was failing to control technique and what initial steps would be required to allow us to turn technique to man's benefit. It was in this context that I stated that major

change in the socio-economic system would be required if we were to have any chance of controlling technique. I argued then, and still believe, that the existing necessity to keep demand and supply in balance, the existing necessity that each country earn enough from its exports to pay for its imports, and the existing necessity for each country to attempt to be in a position to deter potential attack makes it impossible to control technique for man's benefit. Indeed, I would go further and claim that the existence of these constraints makes it almost impossible for society even to perceive the long-run implications of technique.

Thus, I claim that major changes in the socio-economic system are prerequisites to the control of technique for man's benefit. It should be noted that I do not infer by this that technique does not have certain inherent requirements and characteristics.

Robert Theobald is the author of *Free Men and Free Markets* (Clarkson N. Potter).