THE TECHNOCRATIC DEFORMATION OF SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

In L'ilusion politique, the French sociologist Jacques Ellul describes the way the real of politics had been transformed. Politics has become pervasive in society whereby everything becomes politicized. On the other hand, politics in its proper function and sense disappears. It seems a paradox, but in reality, politics – like much everything else had been overtaken by the technical system, by the Technique, instead of real political decisions, politicians make are technical ones. They seek only efficiency. By the same token, something else is lost freedom and humanity. The perspective of a fully technocratic governance has been already described by Bertrand Russell – who was convinced that only a global one-world technocracy can save the world – a description that is terrifying and that shows the direction in which humanity is going these days.

Keywords: politics, technocracy, tyranny, freedom, totalitarianism.

THE DECEPTIVE NATURE OF PRESENT-DAY POLITICS

Are the days of real political life and democracy gone? According to the French sociologist Jacques Ellul's work, yes. The time of politics as such – and of democracy – is waning away. What is real politics? The activity to govern society, to make decisions that help society to maintain its coherence, to debate and implement values, to establish some ideals that should be followed; politics is not the administration of things, although it becomes so through technocracy. This dim view of things can be expressed using the title of one of his works – *L'illusion politique*. The vanishing of democracy (and freedom) and transformation of politics can be read from series of phenomena that may seem paradoxical at first glance: the vanishing of politics and the politicization of everything. One main fund of his is that everything has become politicized, meaning that the state has expanded its reach in all areas of life and that the people have abandoned their responsibility and left the state to bear it. Nevertheless, despite this, politics ceases to be what it was. What is this general politicization? As already explained, it is the expansion of the state in all domains of life, of regulations in each area. It is also the fact that people expect the state to do almost everything and the abandonment of people's responsibility to the state. Another feature of this predicament is the wrong impression that by taking part in political activities people are sovereign and they freely choose how to live their life and that by exercising different functions on different levels, the citizen

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assumes and exerts responsibility. Politics takes the form of a religion. Nothing can exist outside it[163].

This can be called a religion of statism, too. There are no more criteria or external instances that can evaluate politics. Only politics can judge politics. But politics is disappearing because the decisions that are made in the political life are no longer true political decisions. They are decisions of efficiency; they are technical decisions. And the state as such, in his essence is a technical enterprise. Bureaucracy in its omnipotence reveals the true essence of the State[164] – is a realm of technique, of the *système technicien*, no longer a realm of true and free decisions. The other domain which is also a technical one is, of course, the economic one. That the state has become the prisoner of the technical system and that it cannot impose values upon it, is exemplified by the case of China, which tried to develop itself following its own path, but failed, giving in to the demands of the technocratic development.

THE TECHNICAL SYSTEM – THE TECHNIQUE

What is le *systeme technicien*? Why is this important? The technique or the technical systems is the most important spiritual fact that confronts humankind in the present. It has invaded the way humankind thinks and feels and understanding it is the key to understanding the present predicament of mankind[165]. It not only mediates between mankind and nature, but it also mediates between man and the technological environment he lives in, and between individuals; individuals are increasingly getting in touch using technical means – phone, computer – and they are using increasingly psychological technical means. The contact between the individual and humanity as such, with the wide world takes place also by employing technical means, thus establishing long-distance relationships, which are the opposite of the short-distance relationship of the traditional kind. Man lives entirely engulfed in an artificial environment. Even the behaviour changed, becomes mechanical, technicized.

The technical system or la Technique is the totality of means/ power instruments, power structure, procedures, power phenomena, and recipes of efficiency that build up a new intermediary between man and reality, an intermediary that replaces the old symbolic mediations such as religion, art, etc. Technique is not something strictly tethered to a material thing or mechanism. A short definition of it is that technique is the ensemble of the most efficacious means in a society at a certain date[166]. Whenever there is a quest for efficient means or the most efficient means, there is technique. This very same process leads to the expansion and

[163] Jacques Ellul, *L'illusion politique [The political illusion]*, Paris, Le Table Ronde, 2004, p. 48.
[164] *Ibidem*, p. 217.
[165] Jacques Ellul, *Sistemul tehnicist [Technical system]*, Bucharest, Sens, 2022, p. 68.
[166] *Ibidem*, p. 48.

dominance of the means over society, of reintegration and subordination of purposes, aims, and means to the means. The means determine what aims can selected and achieved, not the other way around. When free to act, modern technique leads to decentralization, abolishing of hierarchy, and division of labour – eliminates the division between the work of execution and management work, it spares work time. It replaces human work as the main source of value. Scientific and technological innovation is producing value, replacing human work in this area. It is an open reality and develops in a non-repetitive, non-linear, polyvalent way. Technique is power, it consists of instruments of power, of phenomena and structures of power, which are structures, instruments, and phenomena of dominance[167].

This translates in society by the apparition and dominance of *Dienstleistungen*, the predominance of the class of technicians and experts. The source of inspiration for policies and political innovations are now technical domains and intellectual techniques spread in society. Technique is a system, meaning it is an organized whole, which subsumes and integrates all human activities in a new assemblage that is not the same thing as society. In earlier stages of human history, human activities were distinct and were loosely bonded in society. In a sense, the technique is a foreign body to society, nevertheless, a foreign body that cannot be given up. In this new aggregate, every part is under the dominance of different techniques and bound to the other techniques. It is ruled by the law of substitution of homogenous elements. One of the effects of the Technique is the process of abstractization, creating a virtual society. Every activity and phenomenon are transformed into abstractions, thereby erasing the principle of (social) reality. The map replaces reality, the non-real (consumer goods, political life) takes the place of the real through the process of broadcasting, offering some pleasant images that hide the underlying reality. The object that represents and embeds the technical system, the new quality that the Technique attained is the computer, a creation that affects the totality of human life, a creation that cuts across all domains. The computer is the junction of diverse techniques and is an embodiment of the organizational science.

The Technique is a medium, a mediation between man and everything else – even when it is an instrument or a way of organizing things. It is a complete and continuous mediation that has completely replaced older symbolic mediations. There are no other relations between man and nature save the ones Technique offers. Its mediation is total and complete. The Technique is a universe of means. It is total and exclusive, and it manifests in this way even in the relationships between individuals or groups. Here, everything becomes technicized, too. Human relationships cannot be allowed to grow naturally and spontaneously, they are no longer of experiences, tradition, symbolism, and so one. No, everything must be researched, and everything must be brought to light (psychoanalysis, group dynamics), made intelligible, and transformed into schemes that can be applied to obtain certain results[168].

[167] *Ibidem*, p. 13.
[168] *Ibidem*, p. 63.

Everyone comes with his or her own construction of the self and is integrated with the system by a technical communion. Since it is the only mediating system between man and reality, the Technique accepts no value system. No value is imposed upon it from outside. What values one chooses, and even what wishes are predetermined by what is possible, that is by the technical system. If something is doable, let's say a car that reaches 300 km/h, then it will be done (it had been done). The public will require it. Another effect it creates in people and society is the demand for equality. The pressure of public opinion is not as decisive as people usually think. It is a preformed, pre-determined opinion, adapted, and obedient to every possibility that the Technique possesses. Another feature of the technical mediation is the fact that is sterile and sterilizes whatever it touches. It is superficial, univocal, though stable. It imposes order and clarity but without deepness. The richness of the older symbolic systems is gone, evacuated. The way people think, and feel is affected and changed in a profoundly. The relationship between Technique and man is not mediated. In the present-day world, man's consciousness and feelings are formed under the influence of the Technique, by the simple fact that man is born in this medium. Consciousness had become a mere reflex of it[169].

Another feature of the technicized society is the predominance of the means over the ends. The technique is, besides being an artificial environment, a search, and accumulation of means and instruments of power. A great deal of activity is dedicated to the multiplication of means, which, is another name for the quest for power, maybe the will to power for the sake of power. And if the production of objects in every domain proliferates, this is just an expression of the dominance of the Technique.

THE ETERNAL RETURN OF THE SAME

Chairman Mao had the intuition that the way the former USRR went on, was not a success. If China was to go the way of massive industrialization, would have been the same. A proletariat social class would have been born out of the necessity of creating capital. The Chinese leader tried to avoid this fall. The whole concept was to accede to a stage of high technological development and industrialization without creating a proletarian class. The new Chinese way was supposed to get all the good results of Western industry and science without the unplanned negative side effects, without all the negative aspects surrounding them.

> "It is about the complete and total shaping of man, of the state, of society with the help of radical new principles and methodologies. Genuine new. And this action is

[169] *Ibidem*, p. 67.

truly a new origin. The world was starting anew. Let's make from the past a blank state. China was the first to accomplish this feat"[170].

Thus, China tried to introduce a new way of developing itself, different from the URSS and Western model, a third way. Two principles lay at its core. Giving up the economism, and the quest for efficiency. The thought of Mao is in this sense un "anti-economisme". In other words, the economy is neither the explanation of everything nor the target of every action (revolutionary or otherwise) of mankind. According to the view of the Chinese statesman, economic rationality is not the most important thing in the revolution. The economic imperative must be overcome in the minds and souls of mankind. The same can be said about the imperative of efficiency. The obsession focused on economics and technical efficiency had to be vanquished. The revolution should not entertain the cult of the Machine. Western technique was not to be seen as a prerequisite for attaining a communist society, happiness, and equality. China was supposed to become a great power by the sheer virtue of will, and energy. Devotion, sacrifice, etc. were deemed more important than machines, than Technique – in the form of bureaucracy or otherwise. This line of thought amounts to the deification of Mao's thought, thought that moves and changes things. Mao's thought was deemed to be creative – just like God's[171], it moved and created things. It is efficacity in itself! All of this is because of the attempt to circumvent the whole Western history of development and expansion of the technical system.

This new faith had other requirements: the fusion of social classes, no more separation between manual labor and intellectual activity – the Western work division is thus denied: no more specialization. All the sectors of society had to go in one direction, they had to develop in balance with each other – no overproduction in agriculture and underproduction in industry, etc. The revolutionary process had to take place simultaneously in all domains of society and had to transform all the structure be it in economy or administration. Therefore, due to the refusal of the Western way, there were no concentrated industry sites, and no industry plants in cities. Instead, there were plants build on rural land, scattered all over the territory of China, using local workforce. At the same time, there was the initiative of local ingenuity, which was supposed to supplant the lack of technicians, engineers, machines, etc. Everything was decentralized and whatever successes were reported in building a machine, or something different, there was no administration at work. The initiative started from the base, a base inspired and educated according to Mao's thought. It was supposed to be a new mode of production[172]. A large number of people, united by an iron will were deemed to accomplish the same work as a

[170] "Il s'agissait d'un remodelage total de l'homme, de l'État, de la société, avec des principes et des méthodes radicalement nouveaux. Originaux. Et c'était en vérité une origine. Une naissance nouvelle. Le monde prenait un nouveau départ. Du passé faisons table rase. La première, la Chine le réalisait", in Jacques Ellul, *Changer de révolution [Changing the revolution]*, Paris, La Table Ronde, 2015, p. 163.

[171] *Ibidem*, p. 165.

[172] *Ibidem*, p. 169.

machine. This view ignored that machines are not only more productive than human beings but that they accomplish another type of work that man does not.

Another invention was that of moral stimulus that had to replace the quest for gain. The hard work had to be done without getting or searching for gain or profit and without seeing it a s a personal success. The money the worker gets, is just a sum of money that allows the worker to live and, thus, to work. There was no consideration of the differences between different kinds of work, they were all equally important, no hierarchy of salaries, and so on. A true socialist/communist would take the mod difficult work without hoping for kind of improvement for his or her situation. From this vantage point, the intellectual work was not superior to the manual one or vice versa, no difference between peasants and workers from urban areas. Everything must become one. All this required a big mobility of the workforce, the availability of each worker to go wherever he or she was needed. Because of this, there was an attack on the family and attachment to the family. A psycho-cultural mutation (a Great Reset) had to be accomplished. Eradicating the past was a necessary step toward attaining this new psycho-cultural renovation of man. No mobility without uprooting the people. Eradication of the past is also something that a fully technocratic governance of the world would want, too[173]. As Bertrand Russell stated, in the new world order run by a one-world government, one could study Shakespeare only with a special permit from the government[174], and most of the cultures of the past, would not be translated and made accessible in the unique tongue that would be the common language of humanity.

The Maoist attempt at a revolution inside a revolution failed. With Chou Enlai came the return of the Western way of doing things, to the dominance of economy and technocracy[175]. The irony is that everything that was done to achieve the Chinese new way, was still a process that took place in Western Europe at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and set up the base for the textile industry! It was an unconscious repetition of something that had already taken place in Europe. The Chinese way is not new and was not a model for the future of the West. It was an image of Western Europe's past. Despite all efforts, the road led to the birth of a new proletarian class and to a technological society. After Mao's death, all the pieces necessary for this fell into place, with great success. Henceforth the main preoccupation of the Chinese leadership began to center exclusively around the topics of economic and technical development, that is efficiency. Automatization, specialization, heavy industrialization, and concertation of the workforce were now on the table. The stimulus for productive work in extra monetary gain is again approved policy. Though intellectuals were still sent into rural areas or industrial plants to work, the conviction that good work is specialized work began to gain ground again. The division of work starts to be felt again, the plants from the rural

[173] *Ibidem*, p. 173.
[174] Bertrand Russell, *The Scientific Outlook*, London and New York, Routledge, 2009, p. 157.
[175] Jacques Ellul, *op. cit.*, 2015, p. 176.

areas are given up, just as the improvisation without tools and plan is abandoned. Complete industrial plants – plants wherein whole objects were produced – were also abandoned, and specialized plants took over. Heavy industry appears and works are beginning to be replaced by machines. Even if not explicitly stated, the principle of "only through ourselves" is given up and China starts to buy entire plants and knowledge from the capitalist countries; new commercial treaties with the USA are signed, and many industrial missions are sent around the globe to visit technical expositions, etc. Technical development is now seen as essential[176].

After 1979, the enterprise become the central actor of the new Chinese society, and technical development becomes the number one task, even over class struggle. There was no liberalization or freedom. The law was just an instrument of the state, used to manage the country. Agriculture ceases to be a field for social experimentation, becoming again a domain of efficiency, of producing what is necessary to sustain the Chinese people and the new technical development. And the peasants are coopted in the process of increasing the production. The days of moral stimulus are gone. The steel cage of efficiency imposes itself everywhere, even against the ideology of class struggle. Pragmatism is the rule and everything that hinders production – technique and efficiency must be fought off. Abstract egalitarianism is set aside because of diverse competencies and the difference or even opposition between intellectual and manual labour is asserted and even considered to be an objective one. The division of labour is good since it increases production and helps, thus, the progress of society[177].

The Maoism is gone but the planification stays. Even private property makes a comeback. This is no surprise since it was found that the private moneyed interest is the main motivation for the individual to work. This new regime is, of course, completely under the aegis of the accumulation of capital. This is a clear sign that the Chinese solution to modernization has failed. The Western ideal of increased consumption, of making less and less effort had spread throughout China. The technological system had vanquished China and conquered the hearts and minds of the Chinese people [178].

This third way was built upon the supremacy of thought and will. The cultural revolution was part of this new model[179]; it expressed the will to transform human existence, habits, ways of thinking and feeling, etc. Albeit it had to transform from the ground up the society and the soul of the Chinese people, it had to end and leave place for what came afterward: bureaucracy, conformity, the primate of economics over other aspects of society, etc. This is unavoidable when someone tries to become a modern, competitive nation.

The Chinese leadership saw what happened to the USSR which became Westernized through conformity and technicization – Marx after all is a Westerner.

[176] *Ibidem*, p. 182.
[177] *Ibidem*, p. 189.
[178] *Ibidem*, p. 225.
[179] Jacques Ellul, *De la révolution aux révoltes*, Paris, La Table Ronde, 2011, p. 206.

There is no other way to build a modern army, to entertain advanced scientific research. The Cultural Revolution was partially a revolt, not a true revolution. It was a revolt against the complete and total technicization, of total rationalization and total over-organization of all sectors of life that the first stages of the Communist revolution had produced. The whole movement was planned though and one of its intents was to produce a kind of man that does not fall into the trap posed by the extension of the technical system, by the expansion of technical progress. It was a kind of askesis, an enterprise of destroying the egoism in people, of destroying a mindset of privilege, and of destroying the habitude of comfort. Therefore, intellectuals had to go and do manual work in the fields, etc. It was an attempt to recreate the human personality in the figure of the hero which is always working in the service of the community and to destroy private interest. The main drive behind it was to rekindle the dynamism of revolution, an attempt to give new life to it, to stop the process that leads to burecratization and stiff organization. The establishment of permanent contradiction was supposed to achieve exactly that. The basic principles of this enterprise, born from Mao's thought, were twofold: fighting off the economism and the quest for efficiency[180]. The technique had to be put under the dominance of politics/ideology. Human thought and will should prevail, not technical/economic necessity. The saying "It doesn't matter what color the cat has, as long as it eats mice" is an expression of the quest for efficiency inherent in the technical system that governs the hearts and the minds of mankind. As already seen, the attempt failed.

CONCLUSION

The decisions that are being made by politicians are increasingly technical in nature, based on the ephemeral and on necessity. The digitalization of everything is a good example. Services, payments, etc. are going to be digitalized even if some of this will lead to the denial of personal freedom and liberties. Political parties did not say no to such a decision. But the realm of technique is not just the economic or money reals. It is also the domain of psychological and propaganda techniques. Advertisers employ specific techniques in order to get a certain result from consumers, to elicit a response in them that incites them to buy certain products, to do certain actions. How to do things with words (J. L. Austin) is something that the ancient discipline of rhetoric taught, even if it is about provoking a certain mental or emotive state in a person or in crowd. In this sense, the psychological techniques applied to stressed people are meant to bring them back into the fold, into the technical system, not to be free and express themselves as they are. They are meant to make them able to adapt to the system and work as parts of the machine that society has become.

[180] Jacques Ellul, *op. cit.*, 2015, p. 163.

A technical decision is focused on the moment at hand, with pure actuality whilst a real political one has other salient features; it implies real reflection, and it pertains to long-time interests of the community. If there is a necessity haunting these decisions, it differs from the technical necessity. True political decision requires time and reflection, the role of such a decision is to leave an imprint on society, to help it to maintain its existence, not to extend the technical system to the whole of existence. Politics has to introduce elements of continuity in the flux of becoming. Politics must create and maintain the coherence of human groups[181]. Since the takeover of society by the technical system and the transformation of government in governance, this is no longer the case. Efficiency is the supreme norm:

> "Efficiency is the law governing politics. The winner is not the one who is the best, but the one who is the most powerful. The meaning of the words is reducible to only one: the most efficient"[182].

Because of the technical progress in the past two centuries, the space for political decisions has been diminished since all the hopes have been invested in the development of technology. But technology, or the technical system, is not something bound to material technique, industry, etc. It is foremost a spiritual phenomenon, a search for efficiency, and a medium that mediates between man and nature, man and himself, man, and God. There are now techniques of organization inspired by cybernetics, which see man in terms of an algorithm or as just an information-processing machine that must respond to the stimuli of the environment. Most of the political decisions are made by so-called experts and are not based on values. The measure that politicians propose must be efficient, otherwise they must go and leave the place to people who make sound efficient decisions. Once a decision has been made, let us say, to connect a sector of public life to the internet, then other decisions will go in the same direction, etc. Ellul's contention is something that found its expression in one of the fundamental texts of modern and contemporary geopolitics:

> "The post-industrial society is becoming a 'technotronic' society: a society that is shaped culturally, socially, and economically by the impact of technology and electronics – particularly in the area of computers and communications"[183].

A technocratic governance will never care for what matters to real politics and people. What matters is efficiency, and, until now, the technocracy and the progress of the technical system engulfing the whole of society was not complete; sometimes the most efficient solutions or techniques will not be applied because they would provoke a diminution of the profit on an enterprise, etc. The technical system will become truly dangerous, apud Ellul, in the moment when it will orient itself after an external

[181] Jacques Ellul, *op. cit.*, 2004, pp. 60–61.

[182] "La loi de la politique c'est l'efficacité. Ce n'est pas le meilleur qui gagne, c'est le plus puissant, et tous les termes se ramènent a un seul: les plus efficace", in *Ibidem*, p. 69.

[183] Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages. America's Role in the Technotronic Era*, Westbrook, Greenwood Press, 1970, p. 9.

purpose, which, in this case, is mankind. The appeal of the technical society is great. Technique – which is the end of science – offers results. They can be seen and felt. They are not disputed. The extension of the technique in society has produced another effect. It has negatively affected the capacity to symbolize. Instead of entertaining symbolic relationships to reality, mankind entertains a technical one. Another consequence of the instauration of this kind of being-in-the-world is the fact that it solves the problem that itself generates thereby moving forward by this very process.

On the former political level, the form that this development takes the quest for a unique, world government made up from technocrats. The example of scientific government that Bertran Russell gives is the USRR[184]. A brief description of how such a system would look can be found in the work of Bertrand Russell along with some warning about it and science/technology in general. Will scientific government curtail the freedom of the individual? The answer is yes. Such interferences will be carried in practice, based on some scientific justification, and based upon the fact that, being a scientific form of government, there will be no extra criteria acknowledged to guide the act of governing. Technique and science will make the government so strong that the governments will not need to hear outside opinions[185]. The technocratic rule of the world will be based on the governmental view of truth, that is the idea that a belief about something is true in so far as it permits the manipulation of that thing – pure pragmatism[186]. Science has become more sadistic, he writes[187]. It eliminates all other sources that give meaning and value to life such as love. It is a negative development of modernity, a quest for power for power's sake. The development of science and technology has produced and, hence, will continue to produce uniformity and loss of individuality:

> "Modern inventions and modern technique have had a powerful influence on promoting uniformity of opinion and making men less individual than they used to be"[188].

Among the chief agents of this uniformization process, one can count the press, the cinema, and the radio. To this list, television, video games, and the Internet must be added. Through science and technique, man has acquired power over the external world and now, over human beings, too. Advertising and education are two ways to exert power over mankind, for example. Education follows two purposes: to develop the individual and teach him knowledge and to form him according to the aims of the state (or whatever organization). This kind of power hides harbors the most powerful threats to human life[189]. Power in itself is not evil, affirms Russell, but the quest for power as such it is, and an entire system based on it – on the search of efficiency – is evil, inhumane, cruel, and devoid of any meaning of existence.

[184] Bertrand Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 154.
[185] *Ibidem*, p. 165.
[186] *Ibidem*, p. 198.
[187] *Ibidem*.
[188] *Ibidem*, p. 140.
[189] *Ibidem*, p. 135.

The paradox is that the necessity of the erection of such a scientific/technological dictatorship is affirmed by Bertrand Russell since it is seen as the only way to avoid annihilation and to confront problems such as overpopulation, diminishing resources, etc. Without such a government, there would be no peace. Such a government cannot be set up without considering the modern development of science. Science and technology possess more influence in the modern world than art or other human pursuits and since their influence will grow, the movement toward such a scientific government would be unavoidable. At the beginning only some small groups of persons will understand the necessity thereof, as H.G. Wells, so clearly puts it. The rationale, the justification for this lies in science and technology, which constitute a body of knowledge accessible only to a select few. In due time, this justification, in one form or another, will be poured out to the masses. Nevertheless, the true well of technological development is the will to power[190].

The completion or the progress of science and technology requires an ever-growing centralization of society, a remodeling of it and of mankind. It is not science and technology that will be adapted to man, *but the other way around*. The development of science and technology has important consequences for human life that will affect it even in its more obscure and intimate corners:

> "But scientific technique has so enormously increased the power of governments that is has now become possible to produce much more profound and intimate changes in social structure that any that were contemplated by Jefferson or Robespierre"[191].

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[190] *Ibidem*, p. 151.
[191] *Ibidem*, p. 150.