

Fostering Freedom, Transcending Technique

Review of

*Illusions of Freedom: Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul
on Technology and the Human Condition*

By Jeffrey M. Shaw

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Reviewed by **Gordon Oyer**

In our globalized culture, bombarded with digital images and mesmerized by gushing streams of data, resources like Jeffrey Shaw's comparative study of Jacques Ellul and Thomas Merton add vital perspective. Shaw's objective seems modest: to demonstrate similarities in their thought regarding the relationship of technology and human freedom. In doing so, he intends not to synthesize their thought or resolve questions on technology. Rather, he seeks to familiarize casual readers with both writers and offer "avenues for further inquiry into the nature and meaning of life in contemporary society" (ix). Given their prolific output, however, coupled with Merton's eclectic interests that resist categories and Ellul's penchant for "a-rhythmic . . . free verse, expression" that can be "contrary" to his own prior statements (22), Shaw's task is more ambitious than it may seem.

In his comparison, Shaw describes similarities in background, introduces writers who influenced both, and reviews numerous "point-by-point" similarities in their work. He organizes this content thematically in chapters that address worldview, theological, sociological, political and literary perspectives, and summarizes it in a concluding chapter. The backbone of this material, outlined in an introductory chapter and threaded throughout the others, consists of Ellul's concept of technique juxtaposed with a Christocentric understanding of "freedom."

Though what we consider "technology" and its products become manifest through technique, as Shaw explains, the concept itself encompasses much more. Technique reflects an impetus for organizing human activity that prizes rationality, efficiency and productivity above all else. It tends toward autonomy, self-direction and self-sustained expansion independent of human intent. Left unchecked, technique's driven search for "the one best way" to accomplish something ultimately channels our "spontaneous and unreflective behavior" into its flow. The society it shapes has replaced a "natural milieu" with a "technical milieu" and embodies a "quest for continually improved means to carelessly examined ends" (4) under the nebulous guise of "progress." As Shaw demonstrates, Thomas Merton's skepticism of technology and its products inclined him to embrace Ellul's assessment. Drawing on Kierkegaard, Merton's own reflections on what he termed "mass society" expressed similar concerns for our inclination toward unreflective behaviors that are socially determined for us rather than consciously chosen.

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Most would reject the definition of "freedom" these men advance as their antidote to an existence determined by technique. They do not appeal to autonomy, unlimited consumer options or guaranteed rights to make unconstrained choices. Theirs is a freedom through embrace of the "gospel message" provided by "Christian revelation" – a choice to pattern one's life upon this message in order to live out the will of God. Though for Ellul Christ offers the only path to God's will, Merton remained open to the validity of others. In more secular terms, "freedom" requires first recognizing the controlling power of technique and then consciously choosing to act "other" than it compels. For Ellul, freedom rests in this dialectic tension between human "necessity" (what is needed to function in society, commonly expressed through technique) and choices that oppose it. For Merton, it requires facing one's socially constructed "false self" to discover one's divinely intended "true self." Shaw sees these efforts as similar expressions of "self-transcendence." In both cases, actual attainment of full freedom is rare if even possible, though Merton proves more optimistic about realizing one's true self than Ellul does of overcoming technique. Both present freedom as more of a perpetual path to follow than a fixed destination.

Shaw notes in comparing backgrounds that both writers were born in France to artist parents of non-French origin, the household of neither was expressly religious, they both enjoyed childhood freedom to explore in rural settings, and both underwent similar religious conversion experiences as young men. Regarding theological perspectives, Shaw explains Karl Barth's understanding of freedom and dialectic methodology, which significantly influenced Ellul. He finds Merton sympathetic to some of Barth's ideas, which provided mostly affirmation of already-developed views rather than formative influence. Both Ellul and Merton contended that the institutional church had not only capitulated to technique, but typically served as its agent. Shaw also notes Merton's explicit and Ellul's implicit appeal to contemplation and prayer in seeking freedom and opposing technique.

Shaw next points to Søren Kierkegaard and Aldous Huxley as examples of common sociological influence. He then explores (mainly) Merton's application of Kierkegaard's thought on social "leveling" that creates "mass man," and shares Merton's resonance with Ellul's treatment of propaganda and advertising. Technique's inclination to enlist violence for greater efficiency renders the non-violent commitments of Merton and Ellul as self-transcendent choices that oppose technique. Both also believe that within cities, technique's social impact intensifies. In his dialectic analysis of social ills and forces of production, Karl Marx provides a common antecedent to certain political perspectives of Merton and Ellul, though neither wrote as Marxists. For these Cold-War-era writers, US and Soviet models both reflected variations of technique rather than genuine alternatives. The gospel message of freedom may demand profound social restructuring, but neither writer advocated armed revolution, which merely replaces one expression of technique with another. Shaw suggests Merton and Ellul share a "third way" in politics. He also includes material on Merton's interaction with the Catholic Worker movement, which resonates with Ellul's thought. His chapter on literature examines their similar reverence for the power of "the word" (divine and human) as a vehicle for truth and their common dismay at its distortion, which has rendered language meaningless within the milieu of technique. Merton's literary criticism of Camus, Ionesco and the myth of Prometheus, as well as certain passages of poetry written by each, also suggest similarities.

Toward the end of facilitating further inquiry, *Illusions of Freedom* might be strengthened by an index, and omissions from the bibliography render some footnote citations untraceable. The distinction between "similarity" and "influence" sometimes blurs; the book might benefit from greater clarity on

the extent of Ellul's influence on Merton. It is not always clear when quotations provide the voice of Merton or Ellul or of one of their interpreters.

That said, this book finds its strength in the array of thoughts and ideas it presents. In doing so, it certainly achieves its goal of demonstrating considerable similarity between the thought of Merton and Ellul. Shaw chose his subjects well – their position at the dawn of our digital age grants them a special perspective on forces that began to accelerate then and overwhelm us now. His work also succeeds in introducing numerous tangents that invite further inquiry. An appendix suggests other resources on Merton and Ellul, while Shaw's conclusion names related topics for more original research, such as the influence of Gandhi and Niebuhr, G. K. Chesterton's views on technology, and current thinkers on technique.

To me, the material also invites more exploration of how Aldous Huxley's writings and personal interactions intertwined with both. The role of Lewis Mumford – whom Merton appreciated but who failed to appreciate Ellul – also piqued my curiosity. Further, Shaw notes Merton's distinction between alienated "collectivities" and genuine "communities," but one wonders what the latter look like in the midst of technique. Did they believe "free persons" mainly function in isolation? Perhaps material on the Catholic Worker movement hints at alternatives. Overall, *Illusions of Freedom* represents a worthy resource for more exploration by students of Merton or Ellul and others seeking signposts to navigate within technological society.