The Limits of the *Ideology of Efficiency* in the Field of Education: Jacques Ellul and Simone Weil

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I. Ideology of Efficiency

Dealing with Ellul’s reflection, it is unusual to use the term *violence* associating it with a meaning that is not immediately one he favours among the great responsibilities of contemporary Christianity, which he feels has regressed since the radical, evangelical one of its origins. Instead, he treats the term *violence* only implicitly in relation to the sphere of education, when dealing with the issue of the consequences of applying the ideology of efficiency to every sphere and sector of civil and social life.¹

Jacques Ellul has, in fact, dedicated a book to the theme of violence, *Contre les violents* (1972). In the sense of the term that takes shape in that text, he believes that the acceptance of violence has become the main feature in the attitudes of many Christians in the twentieth century. Instead, he praises Christian realism, which requires us to see facts as they are, without evasion or illusion, without retreating in fear or horror when the result of an indulgent attitude towards violence becomes evident. The inevitability and necessity of violence is opposed to authentic Christian freedom, which is enacted insofar as one refuses force.

It is immediately clear to anyone familiar with Simone Weil’s thought how much contiguity and affinity can be identified with Ellul’s reflection on this issue. Weil interrogates the notion of force throughout her life. Not content with investigating it from the safe distance of her professorship in philosophy (which, in fact, she left when just twenty-five years old), she chose to experience force in her own flesh through weary labour in the factory and in the fields, of the kind that, by subtracting time, thought, and imagination, reduces man to a thing. The refusal of force would be found in the practice of non-violence, in the purity and balance of Romanesque art and architecture, in the sense of measure of Gregorian chant. And, above all, in the conception of love: namely, courtly love, made of patient waiting and respect for the other. Weil’s invitation is to turn our gaze to the beauty of Greeks and Occitans so as to free ourselves from the baseness of the environment we live in. In this article, I shift the attention to the second, less explicit meaning (one less linked to reflection on Christianity) that Ellul associates with the term violence. I am referring to the pervasiveness of violence, which is typical of the logic of efficiency, with all its consequences. Ellul refers to the ineluctable violence deriving from the ideology that justifies the pervasive and uncritical application of Technique in every field, leading to a system characterized by the marginalization of the fragile, the denial of respect for human beings and the environment, and, thus, to a universe governed by irrationality masked by rationality.

Here, therefore, I propose a reflection on the rationality, radical and controlling, that distinguishes the logic of efficiency when applied in the institutional educational field: a particular area of affirmation of state power. What does Ellul mean by the ideology of technology? And why does he associate Technique with a form of violence that must be countered by keeping a spirit that is alert and attentive to reality? Two fundamental theses emerge from his analysis: technical growth is characterized by self-growth and autonomy in choices; the traits that qualify the technical system as a “whole, a coordinated set of facts and methods” are rationality,

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2 “Ellul is a prophet, a dialectician, and an existentialist. Expecting him to be anything else will lead to great misunderstanding and disappointment. He is a prophet rather than a teacher in the sense that he brings a specific message, a word, from outside a given topic or situation that can illuminate something that has been missing or overlooked. He upsets and challenges conventions and assumptions and standard ways of thinking and seeing. He is strange and uncomfortable. He is not the systematic, constructive teacher but the troubling critic. He is a dialectician in that he fundamentally believes that we understand reality by grasping the simultaneous truth of what appear to be opposites and contradictions, paradoxes, anomalies.” See David Gill, Jacques Ellul on Living in a Violent World, www.davidwgill.org, Society of Christian Ethics Annual Meeting (Washington DC, 7 January 2012).


6 It is no longer the task of the machine to adapt to man, but it is now up to man to adapt to the machine.
unity, universalism, and the aforementioned autonomy. Technology actually maintains unchanged, in its modern evolution, two characteristics such as automatism and self-growth. Now, what does it really mean for the human? In particular, if automatism implies a choice made a priori and always oriented towards the technical path, man has no choice left. We are currently at the stage of eliminating everything that can compete with the technical method. Ellul has no doubts: until the latter has reached absolute perfection, its movement cannot be stopped. Technique will eliminate every minor force, revealing itself to be creative and destructive at the same time. The character of self-growth makes it even clearer: the human being has no decision-making power or creative role; he is integrated into the system and depends on it more than it does on him:

It is no longer the hand that chooses the group of means nor the brain that synthesizes the causes, but it is only the intrinsic uniqueness of Technique that ensures the cohesion of the means and the actions of men: this kingdom belongs to it.\(^7\)

Jacques Ellul bases the essential outlines of his criticism of the myth of efficiency and the sacralisation of Technique on characteristics and peculiarities that he has described as arising since the mid-twentieth century. Thus, technical ideology appears as a kind of permanent race for innovation, fuelled by propaganda. It is not so much Technique, understood as the search for the most effective and efficient solution in every area, that threatens freedom, as the affirmation of it as a true religion shared by society as a whole. The concept of autonomous technique can, therefore, be restated in terms of affirming a “principle of efficiency,” strongly criticized by Ellul. The complete separation of the objective from the mechanism and the refusal to interfere with the principle of efficiency are at the basis of the autonomy of Technique.\(^8\)

We note how the notion of efficiency is closely linked to the modern idea of humanity as the author of its own destiny, but there is a risk, for each living thing, of becoming the object of effective manipulation. The assumptions of efficiency are exactly what the author discussed and found abominable: they hide the reality of technological society and lead to a situation of non-freedom. Hence, the principle of efficiency is the prototype of a bluff. The vagueness of the term “efficiency” is a double-edged sword: it is responsible for the blind acceptance and justification of the goodness of current technological development.

Ellul describes the pivotal problem of modern technological society as a paradox. On the one hand, the pursuit of efficiency characterizes success. On the other hand, all success is reiterated as effective. However, this framework of success or efficiency seems to leave no room for human freedom. The latter has traits that make it difficult to achieve, because, in reality, man is not at all passionate about freedom: this is not


an inborn need. According to Ellul, the needs for safety, conformity, adaptation, happiness, economy of effort, are much more constant and profound.

II. Jacques Ellul and Pierre Bourdieu

Ellul opposes the ethics of non-power to the logic of violence that is typical of the ideology of efficiency. In the formulation of the ethics of non-power, there are also relevant elements from an anthropological and philosophical point of view. The essence of man seems to be well-represented by something spiritual that must be preserved from the frenzy and chaos of the new technical modernity, organized as a totalitarian system. Here, the commonalities with Simone Weil are evident.

Human beings are made in such a way that they use artificial means for their own subsistence and permanence in the cosmos, but also, and above all, to make their own the moral law of not harming others; the moral imperative, for Ellul, is crucial. Ellul does not imagine an anti-technical solution for contemporary society and does not limit himself to advocating a perspective that contemplates the imperative of non-violence.

In dealing with the ethics of non-power, he argues that the human being in the technical system enjoys a fictitious power, which in reality remains alien to him. All technique is a function of power. It concerns exclusively the means, and the excess of these means ultimately proves to be the cause of the crisis in our civilization and our ethical system. Ellul points out, in a consciously pragmatic way, that any increase in power ends in a challenge or a devaluation of values. In order to set, accept, and respect limits, some commonly tolerated values are necessary, but, for Ellul, the increase in power tends to eliminate constructive values. Man, therefore, becomes unable to judge and effectively evaluate his actions, and the rule (for Ellul to be opposed) that is imposed becomes the following: everything that can be done must be done. This ethics of non-power would be inscribed at all levels of civic life: in politics, applying equity and sanctions even to those in power; in institutions that make competition the basis of organization, and, finally, in scientific research as well, for example, in what Illich calls radical research, which should provide the criteria that make it possible to determine the harmfulness threshold of an instrument and to invent solutions that optimize the vital balance.

It has been said that, for Ellul, there is a certain meaning of violence that sees it as the result of the uncritical application of the principle of efficiency. When addressing the issue of violence in relation to the principle of efficiency, it is appropriate to keep in mind Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence. As Pierre Bourdieu also argues, for instance, the State is, above all, the body that produces the categories with which we think about the world. It is the basis of consensus about the meaning of the social world and of adherence to the fundamental principles of

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the social order — the “logical” and “moral” conformism of which Durkheim spoke. In accordance with Bourdieu’s conception of symbolic domination, the State obtains order; not (only) through physical repression and coercion, but (above all) through the imposition of meanings. Reformulating the well-known Weberian definition, the state is, according to Bourdieu, the holder of the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence. A hidden, invisible, and soft violence that is exerted on minds and bodies through the inculcation of practical and cognitive schemes — the subjective symbolic structures through which individuals signify and build the world. Furthermore, a power overcomes, and, at the same time, the single and unified ground of every form of struggle is established as the ultimate authority for legitimizing the various forms of power subsisting in society. Homogenization of weights and measures, censuses, production of geographical maps, statistical evaluations express the effort to evaluate, measure, count, know, and show the close link between the constitution of the State and the development of disciplines such as statistics, cartography, demography. The hyper-specialization that characterizes university faculties and the evaluation of educational systems and the merit of researchers seem to evoke this logic that makes of measurement and fragmentation its foundation.

The context of this reflection is, therefore, the transition from a liberal democracy of a Welfarist-Keynesian cast to the post-democratic neo-liberal governance, which, on the productive level, is characterized by post-Fordist production and by the free market. It is marked by a reform process that extends to the public sphere the aims of effectiveness, efficiency, and transparency, which have long characterized the sphere of private companies, and by the rethinking of the services that characterized post-World War II societies (starting with education and health). The principle of accountability assumes centrality to support the increase in productivity by selectively allocating economic resources.

Why is Ellul’s reflection relevant in this regard? Here we are dealing with a system that is based on methodological individualism and on the mathematization of economics and that becomes concrete in the field of education with the widespread use of evaluation as an allocation device of resources, only on a selective basis of research areas, subjects, and efficient structures. For example, in the neo-liberal university it manifests itself in the application of a strategy to increase student tuition, a growth in the role of private institutions in training and research, and the creation of competition for access to state funding. A concept of efficiency is established, which shifts the responsibility for the growth of production and productivity to the individual, aiming to obtain observable effects on the market. The value of each thing

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is, therefore, defined on the basis of its ability to obtain a realization in the market. The link between economics and politics is dictated by reasons of government.

In the 1960s, Economics of Education rethinks education as an investment in human capital: it describes education as an investment designed to give the individual the skills the market needs, in order to focus investments on subjects, structures, and students that bring immediate economic repercussions on the market. We arrive at the paradox of basing education on evaluations of opportunities that respond to demand/supply calculations.

The purpose of education no longer seems to be the reduction of inequalities, but that of ensuring the production of human capital that can be spent on the market. This was thought of in a moment of prosperity of capitalism (between the sixties and eighties of the twentieth century) and of a strong and constant economic growth. But with today’s crisis, one wonders if all training paths should not be rethought, since, in this way, two worlds are produced: an elite of “excellence,” “who lives in a useful and efficient world in which everything works,” as Bataille said, despite the absence of a relationship between the human being and the world; and an excess multitude that lives amidst its contradictions.

As the philosopher of technology Andrew Feenberg argues, several thinkers criticize the objectivist understanding of the technologized world. This is the case with Lukács and Heidegger. In the latter, the critique takes the form of a return to the Lebenswelt. In Lukács, on the other hand, the meaning of social objects — including technologies — is shown as relative to the total system in which they are involved. Lukács was primarily concerned with the effects of reification on knowledge and social action. Today we can and must go much further, Feenberg suggests. The difference, in the current era, is that reification and the objectivist understanding are intertwined with the design of the numerous technologies that structure daily life. This everyday rationality appears increasingly distorted by the development of advanced capitalism. Lukács’s concept of reification and Marcuse’s concept of one-dimensionality are intended to describe this situation precisely. The recovery of the normative wealth of experience is the necessary basis for a revival of democracy. Mass media, yesterday, and social networks, today, played an important role in shaping a one-dimensional rationality.

III. The Cultural Logic of Efficiency: The Example of Research Evaluation and University Guidance

Speaking of violence, Simone Weil, comparing our civilization to a tree that produces the fruit it deserves, wrote that, today, science, history, politics, the organization of

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work, and even religion offer to man’s thought nothing but brute force. Some of her reflections almost seem to complete Ellul’s vision of the world, but in a more proactive sense, ideally representing the *pars construens* of a theory, in comparison with the social criticism developed by Ellul, aimed more at grasping the critical issues of the reality (*pars destruens*) of his time. Before going deeper, however, a step back is necessary. In this section, I point out some critical reflections by Ellul around education and universities that seem to anticipate some elements of the critique of neo-liberal cognitive capitalism. My thesis is that they represent a clear example of the application of the principle of efficiency to the management of knowledge, which is also interesting for understanding the current times of technological revolution that invests and concerns the so-called human capital.

It must be premised that Ellul is a teacher; he was a long-time professor of History and Sociology of Institutions at the Faculty of Law and Economic Sciences of the University of Bordeaux and, holding various positions at national level in the Reformed Church of France from 1958 to 1977, he was also involved in the prevention of juvenile delinquency. Thus, he revealed a fair sensitivity to the issues of education (see an early critique by his close associate Charbonneau, 1937) and addressed the question of the consequences of the affirmation of the ideology of efficiency.

Ellul defines the universities in the twentieth century as a “technical mechanism of a technical society,” which adapts too much to the logic of a technique that is autonomous, and, therefore, self-reproducing. Hence, they essentially respond to the need for placement of manpower, neglecting the importance of giving space to the humanities.

On the contrary, it must be emphasized that it goes without saying (apparently) that one of the major elements of our society, the University, is required to adapt immediately and necessarily to the technical structure …

The University was becoming a technical school in order to occupy a place in the technical society. We would be scandalized if it did not adapt more quickly and better to the technical system.

Fools totally ignore what the role of the University should be, they mock the importance still given to the humanities, to Latin, to history, to philosophy. … These are the same questionable characters who will make pompous speeches on the civilization of tomorrow and technical humanism.18

For Ellul, universities respond so well and so quickly to the needs of technology that they risk self-disintegration due to their overly simple adaptation to the world of tomorrow. In his opinion, the famous “crisis” of the French University would have


18 Ibid., 125.
as its only deep cause the inability of this institution to carry out technical training; the so-called “preparation to enter society.” 19 We must not forget that technical training is increasingly specialized and requires incredible rigour. For example, the training of a computer programmer involved, already in Ellul’s time, six distinct specializations (system programmer, management programmer, and so forth). And Ellul wonders how such a specialized individual could have the slightest chance of criticizing or controlling the technical system. Furthermore, when entering a profession, one finds oneself merely practising certain techniques. Whatever the profession, it is above all a participation in the “technical system” through what is produced or spread. Again, how could each individual and citizen radically question what is now the plot of his life? The technical man appears, in synthesis, divided between two ways of being. On the one hand, he is in direct contact with his own technique, his own specialization; he is extremely competent in his field, he knows and clearly sees what he has to do with ever-greater effectiveness. But all of this has value in a strictly limited sector. On the other hand, he is at everyone’s level, he knows the world and the political and economic problems only through partial and partisan information, he has a “semi-understanding” of the issues, a portion of factual knowledge, and competence in his own area is not useful in any way to understanding or comprehending the general phenomena on which, after all, everything depends.

In Italy, in recent years, many studies by young researchers have focused on a harsh criticism of the consequences of the spread of neo-liberal ideology particularly in the field of university research evaluation. My thesis is that, in his analysis, Ellul was colliding with the very dawn of that era of neoliberalism that today characterizes cognitive capitalism and the social, techno-economic, and cultural ecosystem in which we are immersed. The Italian scholar Francesca Coin, for instance, has examined the conceptual relationship between the notion of evaluation and the law of value. She identifies the crisis of the law of value in the transition between industrial and cognitive capitalism. 20 In this context, universities are analysed as the new frontier of accumulation, the field designed to perpetuate and hide the crisis in the law of value and to compensate the crisis of the measurability of control. Looking at evaluation as the very embodiment of the law of value, the researcher argues that, while the restructuring of education promises efficiency, productivity, and excellence, evaluation seems a desperate attempt to sacrifice progress in the name of control.

It is widely believed that governments must adopt effective mechanisms for directing, evaluating, and controlling the activities carried out by universities and research institutions in the research field, teaching, and the so-called “third mission” (transfer of technologies, services to the socio-economic context, business creation, etc.). How do we retrieve other dimensions in proposals for improving the educational systems and the institutions in charge of its regulation? One possibility to find new interpretations of the causes of the crisis in Western democracies could

be recirculating the thought of those philosophers and scholars whose knowledge has been marginalized in university studies, because not very functional and productive according to a logic of optimization and efficiency. And Simone Weil is an exemplary representative of this type of thinking.

The researcher recruitment system and the evaluation of the research quality of the researchers themselves and of the university institutions is just one example, but, in light of what Ellul had already noted about the state of health of institutions and education in France, we wonder what he would think, say, of the recent French case of the mechanical use of technology in the educational guidance systems of young scholars. In this case, technology as a tool has found its maximum implementation and the idea of guidance has undergone — from programmatic government technology to real and concrete technology applied to the recruitment system — a transition. The conditions of access to university studies had remained the same since the mid-1980s but following controversy over the selection procedure promoted by a 2017 circular, the French government intervened, in March 2018, with a law on guidance and on student success, approving the use of an online platform: Parcoursup. It is an application designed to collect and manage the educational and professional wishes of future students of French public higher education. With the latter, university enrolment is definitively preceded by a national registration procedure that allows applicants to benefit from an assessment of their expectations and the skills a student needs for the chosen sector. The novelty of using this software bursts into an underfunded university system, which, for many, tends to aggravate social inequalities. A logic of fragmentation, hyper specialization, and application of the principle of efficiency still prevails.

IV. The Ethical Path Outlined by Simone Weil

Simone Weil’s whole life was focused on the search for truth, combined with a basic ethical-pedagogical inspiration which led her, during her existential journey, not to an escape from the world, but towards incarnation and being present and in relation to others in a radical form. The theme of attention to the other, in fact, is the leitmotiv of all of Weil’s thought. If we look closely, we find in Weil’s human and cultural story all the great social nodes of contemporaneity. Starting in 1933, Weil denounced the three monsters of contemporary civilization: money, machinery, and algebra (i.e., quantity), between which she saw a basic analogy.

That miracle of the soul and of the human conscience to which Weil refers seems to represent a meteor, a shining example of an existence devoted to charity towards one’s neighbour, attention to the other, especially when the other is the “frail,” the

21 It can be said that the same “mystical turning point” of the French thinker did not involve an abandonment of political engagement, but a work of deepening in the direction of a transcendence in the very heart of reality, intensely living the struggles and spanners of her time, moved by a heartfelt need for justice, truth, and a powerful feeling of solidarity.
one who is struck by misfortune (le malheur). The experiences gained in school up to the years 1937-1938 reveal a fruitful thought: precisely through the letters sent to family, friends, and pupils, solidarity and ethical-pedagogical reflections are highlighted, and, still today, they constitute a reason for reflection on rethinking the educational fact at the centre of the contemporary debate.

Thanks to these philosophy lessons in 1933-1934, which could be reconstructed from the notes of a student, it is possible to recreate the human and didactic profile of this exceptional teacher, who has always lavished on her pupils’ important cultural knowledge, useful for the formation of their personality.

Weil reconfirmed her methodology, preserving the essential principle of teaching (which she also put into practice by living her experience in the factory), according to which all the economic-philosophical discourses of alienation, assembly-linework, and exploitation of marginalization could rise to the value of knowledge only if one experienced them exclusively in one’s own flesh. It can be said that her studies and her life and thought choices are inspired by a pedagogy that intends to make room for the less fortunate and the side-lined of society. Her pedagogical thinking, therefore, illuminates the educational emergency of our time arising from a negative separation between thinking and acting (a theme also dear to Jacques Ellul), a coherence that we find in her teaching of a philosophy “exclusively in act and practice.” Attention to her work and to her students is, for Weil, the rarest and purest form of generosity; as part of the care for others, it includes the need for protection and listening, for brotherhood: it is the fusion between dedication and freedom.

In Simone Weil’s pedagogy, education and culture are interrelated: the most important part of education is teaching what it is to know. The primary task of education is to develop attention leading to a change, to make room for the voice of others, not only to understand their existential reality, but to act so that a just society is not utopian, but the real one. In 1942, she stated: “Although it seems to be ignored today, the real and almost only interest of studies is to train the faculty of attention.”

The recommendations given to her students concerned, in the first place, studying without thinking about grades and with the same attention paid to all disciplines, because they are all fundamental for knowledge and for the formation of attention; secondly, she suggested looking at the possibility of failure without seeking justifications, because she recognized an important educational and formative value to error (a perspective that is far-removed from the logic of efficiency). She also argued that intelligence could only be guided by desire. The joy of learning is indispensable for studies, as is breathing for runners: “where joy is absent there are no students, but poor caricatures of apprentices who at the end of their apprenticeship will not even have a job.”


24 Simone Weil Lezioni di filosofia (Milano: Adelphi, 1999), 330.
Technological innovation and efficiency need not necessarily be rejected; what is problematic is the libertarian model that governs these technologies and does not allow the virtuous social development that human beings need. If we are not up to thinking of this as an interminable task, it is not hard to believe that we will have a humanity that gains in efficiency, but also in fragility, inevitably yielding to the logic of force and of calculating rationality; the same ones that, in the twentieth century, produced disasters and injustices.

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