My Personal Review:
Before proceeding with this review, let me just say that no fewer than a hundred pages could be trimmed from its content without diluting its message at all. Many of the examples used in the book are extremely dated; while I think I'm fairly well read, I confess that I'm not really up on the vicissitudes and catfights of French academic sociology in the early 1960's (to give but one example). With that being said, this book is worth well worth the time spent reading its 436 pages. This is undoubtedly one of the most important books of the twentieth century, and if you accept its thesis you won't be able to look at the political milieu in the same way ever again. (If you agree with it and it doesn't change the way you look at things, you haven't grasped its importance.) Most political theorists take ideology to be a central point from which "real world" consequences emanate. In other words, a Communist or libertarian ideology in practical use will produce a particular type society and individual divorced from the actual technical workings of the society. Liberals and conservatives both speak of things in such a manner as if ideology is the prima facie cause of existence - but as Ellul shows in painstaking detail, this is wrong. What almost everyone fails to grasp is the pernicious effect of technique (and its offspring, technology) on modern man. Technique can loosely be defined as the entire mass of organization and technology that has maximum efficiency as its goal. Ellul shows that technique possesses an impetus all its own and exerts similar effects on human society no matter what the official ideology of the society in question is. Technique, with its never-ending quest for maximum efficiency, tends to slowly drown out human concerns as it progresses towards its ultimate goal. '"...the further economic technique develops, the more it makes real the abstract concept of economic man."' (p. 219) Technique does not confine itself merely to the realm of technical production, but infiltrates every aspect of human
existence, and has no time for "inefficiencies" caused by loyalties to family, religion, race, or culture; a society of dumbed-down consumers is absolutely essential to the technological society, which must contain predictable "demographics" in order to ensure the necessary financial returns. "The only thing that matters technically is yield, production. This is the law of technique; this yield can only be obtained by the total mobilization of human beings, body and soul, and this implies the exploitation of all human psychic forces." (p. 324). Ellul thoroughly shows that much of the difference in ideology between libertarians and socialists becomes largely irrelevant in the technological society (this is not to say that ideology is unimportant, but rather that technique proceeds with the same goals and effects.) This will doubtlessly please no one; liberals want to believe that they can have privacy and freedom despite a high degree of central planning, and libertarians want to believe that a society free of most regulation and control is possible in an advanced technological society. Libertarian fantasies seem especially irrelevant given the exigencies of a technological society; as Ellul notes, as technique progresses it simply cannot function without a high degree of complexity and regulation. "The modern state could no more be a state without techniques than a businessman could be a businessman without the telephone or the automobile... not only does it need techniques, but techniques need it. It is not a matter of chance, nor a matter of conscious will; rather, it is an urgency..." (p. 253-254). Can anyone really doubt Ellul here, especially seeing as how twenty-plus years of conservative promises to downsize government still result in more regulation and bureaucracy with every passing year? Planning, socialism, regulation, and control are the natural consequences of technique; an increasingly incestuous relationship between industry and the State is inevitable. "The state and technique - increasingly interrelated - are becoming the most important forces in the modern world; they buttress and reinforce each other in their aim to produce an apparently indestructible, total civilization." (p. 318). This is not an optimistic book. Given that the nature of technique is one of a universal leveling of human cultures, needs, and desires (replacing real needs with false ones and the neighborhood restaurant with McDonalds), Ellul is certainly pessimistic. He does not propose any remedies for the Skinnerist nightmares of technique somehow leading to a Golden Age of humanity, where people will enjoy maximal freedom coupled with minimal want: "...we are struck by the incredible naivete of these scientists... they claim they will be in a position to develop certain collective desires, to constitute certain homogeneous social units out of aggregates of individuals, to forbid men to raise their children, and even to persuade them to renounce having any... at the same time, they speak of assuring the triumph of freedom and of the necessity of avoiding dictatorship... they seem incapable of grasping the contradiction involved, or of understanding that what they are proposing." (p. 434).

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