

“This is Oil Country”: The Alberta Tar Sands and Jacques Ellul’s Theory of Technology

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The Alberta tar sands, and the proposed pipelines which would carry their bitumen to international markets, comprise one of the most visible environmental controversies of the early twenty-first century. Jacques Ellul’s theory of technology presents ostensibly physical phenomena, such as the tar sands, as social phenomena wherein all values are subsumed under the efficient mastery of nature. The effect of technological rationality is totalizing because technical means establish themselves as the exclusive facts of the matter, which creates a socio-political environment wherein ethical engagement is precluded. Analyzing the tar sands controversy through Ellul’s hermeneutic challenges environmental ethics to a more radical stance than the continuation of the technological worldview, and thus offers meaningful and hopeful alternatives to the status quo.

I. INTRODUCTION

From 30 August through 3 September 2011, 1,253 people were arrested in front of the White House in what was reported to be the “largest act of civil disobedience by environmentalists in decades.”¹ They were protesting the Keystone XL pipeline which, if the State Department found it to be in the American national interest, would be approved to carry oil from the Alberta tar sands² across the Canada/U.S.

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¹ George Zornic, “Civil Disobedience on Tar Sands Begins Outside the White House,” *The Nation*, 20 August 2011 (<http://www.thenation.com/blog/162883/civil-disobedience-tar-sands-begins-outside-white-house>).

² There is a rhetorical struggle over whether to call these bitumen deposits “tar sands”—a term used since the nineteenth century—or “oil sands”—which has more recently become the official designation used by industry, government, and the mainstream media. Because the term “tar sands” is perceived to carry a *negative* connotation (e.g., who likes tar?) while “oil sands” is supposed to carry a more *positive* connotation (e.g., everybody “needs” oil), there really is no value-neutral shorthand available; see Keely Kidner, “Oil Sands or Tar Sands? What These Words Really Mean in Alberta” (paper presented at Under Western Skies: Environment, Community, and Culture in North America, Calgary, Canada, 14 October 2010) and Jacqueline Noga and Gregor Wolbring, “The Oil and Gas Discourse from the Perspective of the Canadian and Albertan Governments, Non-Governmental Organizations and the Oil

border to refineries on the Texas coast. As a source of unconventional oil,³ the tar sands have until recently remained relatively untapped, comprising a sink of 240 gigatons of carbon which, if released, would raise global atmospheric concentrations of CO₂ by 120 parts per million. If this happens, says climatologist James Hansen, “it will be game over for the climate.”⁴ Large-scale protests have continued up to the time of writing. Alberta’s tar sands remain one of the most visible environmental controversies in North America, if not globally.

As is the case with most ecological controversies, environmental ethics receive little recognition and play no substantive role in the debate over the tar sands. However, the means by which ethics are excluded from this particular discussion are indicative of a troubling theme which concerns environmental disputes more generally, viz., the discursive and social dominance of technological rationality. Writing prior to and then alongside the modern environmental movement, Jacques Ellul offered a theory of the technological society which shows the denigration of ethical discourse to be built into the lifestyle discourse of technique. Because we already *live* as “techno-logical beings,” any ethic other than the efficient management of matter is an affront to who we (in the main) think we are. Ellul has recently received renewed scholarly attention.⁵ While he has been criticized for offering a technological determinism which speaks only about technology in the abstract and thus falsely,⁶ our analysis shows the tar sands to be a set of specific though non-deterministic circumstances which confirm Ellul’s theory.⁷ Specifically, the debate over the tar sands instantiates the subjugation of all other values to *technique* (or “technology”—for ease of expression, we do not trouble ourselves with Ellul’s

and Gas Industry,” *Energies* 7, no. 1 (2013): 314–33. We have decided to use the term “tar sands,” as our view is not fundamentally at odds with a negative assessment of the petroleum status quo in Alberta.

³ Conventional oil is pumped relatively easily from the ground and uses less energy to do so. Unconventional oil includes the energy intensive production of shale oil and tar sands bitumen.

⁴ James Hansen, “Game Over for the Climate,” *New York Times*, 9 May 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/10/opinion/game-over-for-the-climate.html>.

⁵ Jeffrey P. Greenman, Read Mercer Schuchardt, and Noah J. Toly, *Understanding Jacques Ellul* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2012); Helena Mateus Jeronimo, Jose Luis Garcia and Carl Mitcham, ed. *Jacques Ellul and the Technological Society in the Twenty-First Century* (Berlin: Springer, 2013); Jacob E. Van Vleet, *Dialectical Theology and Jacques Ellul: An Introductory Exposition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

⁶ E.g., Hans J. Achterhuis, ed., *American Philosophy of Technology: The Empirical Turn* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 1–9; Joseph Pitt, “The Autonomy of Technology,” in *Technology and Values: Essential Readings*, ed. Craig Hanks (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 87–96; Sally Wyatt, “Technological Determinism Is Dead; Long Live Technological Determinism,” in *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*, 3rd ed., ed. Edward J. Hackett et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 165–180.

⁷ Our initial foray in applying Ellul’s philosophy of technique to the tar sands began with disputations between competing “fact-based” discourses, especially over environmental science and potential impacts on the health of indigenous peoples in the region; Nathan Kowalsky and Randolph HaluzadeLay, “Homo Energeticus: Technological Rationality in the Alberta Tar Sands,” in Jeronimo, Garcia and Mitcham, *Jacques Ellul and the Technological Society*, pp. 159–75.

fine distinctions between the two terms, or his preferences for capitalizing them), and thus illuminates the general impotence of environmental ethics with respect to policy reform and social change.

In the first part of the paper, we present Ellul's theory of the technological phenomenon. In the second, we present public discourse over the tar sands and related pipeline projects as evidence of the sociological primacy of means over ends, efficient over final causality, and technological over moral discourse. In the third, we show how government and industry's attempt to construct Albertan identity in terms of oil fit Ellul's model of the naturalization and autonomy of the technological society. In the fourth section, we argue that introduction of environmental theology into the tar sands debate by the Roman Catholic bishop of the region reveals the iconoclastic potential of environmental ethics. As a result, we conclude that environmental ethics must not conceive of itself in merely reformist terms because it is already implicated by other actors as a more radical socio-political contestation about ways of life.

II. ELLUL'S CRITIQUE OF THE TECHNOLOGICAL PHENOMENON

As a series of mining developments, the tar sands may not sound like an example of technology; people customarily think of technology as "medium-sized dry goods," especially "advanced" items such as the latest smart phones or tablet computers (for this reason, we favor the term *technique* so as to avoid these connotations of *technology* in English). But this is precisely why the tar sands are paradigmatic of Ellul's understanding of technology. For him, the problem with technique derives from its status as a *value system*; mere tool use does not concern him. Vincent Punzo summarizes Ellul's definition of *technique* as "a way of organizing people and undertakings, a way of processing information, a way of decision making."⁸ Technology is a *techno-logic*, "a Weltanschauung that is potentially an insidious and pernicious determinant of social action."⁹ This techno-logic can be variously described as a mindset, worldview, culture, social process, "consciousness,"¹⁰ form of rationality, decision-making framework, "ideology,"¹¹ paradigm, interpretive schema, and yes, it produces all manner of dry goods we would not otherwise have. More importantly, however, it informs the values which characterize our so-called

⁸ Vincent Punzo, "Christian Hope in a Technological Age: Jacques Ellul on the Technical System and the Challenge of Christian Hope," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 70, no. 1 (1996): 21.

⁹ George J. Graham, Jr., "Jacques Ellul: Prophetic or Apocalyptic Theologian of Technology?" *The Political Science Reviewer* 13 (1983): 218.

¹⁰ David Lovekin, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (London: Associated University Presses, 1991), quoted in Kevin Garrison, "Perpetuating the Technological Ideology: An Ellulian Critique of Feenberg's Democratized Rationalization," *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society* 30 (2010): 197.

¹¹ Garrison, "Perpetuating the Technological Ideology," p. 197.

civilization. Ellul goes so far as to suggest that technology doesn't influence our culture; it is rather the very context in which our culture exists.¹² It *is* our culture.

The technological rationality which dominates the globally dominant culture is not, for Ellul, age-old but rather quintessentially modern. What he calls technical operation is simply the fact that human beings have always had to use tools and techniques to navigate their environment.¹³ The *technical phenomenon*, on the other hand, refers to the momentous unification of the theoretical sciences (logos) and the practical arts (technē) through mathematization starting in the sixteenth century.¹⁴ It is only in the context of this latter technical phenomenon that Francis Lord Bacon could say "Human knowledge and human power meet in one," or could actor-network theory refer to both scientists and engineers as practitioners of "technoscience."¹⁵ Previously, Western culture had kept scientific knowledge (the purview of intellectual elites) separate from practical manipulation of the physical world (the task of lesser social classes), but modernity put abstract reason to work, systematizing empirical experimentation so that the mechanical processes of material reality could be more efficiently replicated and harnessed.¹⁶

Thus, when Ellul spoke to the prospect of nuclear energy in the 1980s, he distinguished between scientific knowledge for its own sake, and the use of that knowledge to literally gain power: "If it were simply a matter of knowing the constitution of matter, I don't think there would be any problem. . . . Unfortunately, in atomic research we are not dealing with knowledge, so much as manipulation, transformation and disintegration."¹⁷ The intricate understandings of the hidden workings of the physical universe provided by physics, etc., have exponentially increased our ability to redirect it toward ends of our own making. Technical logic insists on *doing* something with that knowledge; "unused" or "useless" are synonyms for negative value in mainstream culture, as when uncut forest is considered "lost" timber value.¹⁸ The technical phenomenon thus embodies the will to power which

¹² Jacques Ellul, "Ideas of Technology," in *1984 and All of That*, ed. Fred H. Knelman (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1971), p. 12.

¹³ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), pp. 19–20.

¹⁴ Cf. George Parkin Grant, "Thinking about Technology," in *Technology and Justice* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), pp. 11–34.

¹⁵ Francis Lord Bacon, *The New Organon*, trans. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath, in *Human Life and the Natural World: Readings in the History of Western Philosophy*, ed. Owen Goldin and Patricia Kilroe (Peterborough: Broadview, 1997), p. 108; Sergio Sismondo, *An Introduction to Science and Technology Studies*, 2nd ed. (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 81.

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, "The 'Vita Activa' and the Modern Age," in *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition, an Anthology*, ed. Robert C. Scharff and Val Dusek (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 352–68.

¹⁷ Jacques Ellul, "A Theological Reflection on Nuclear Developments: the Limits of Science, Technology and Power," in *Waging Peace: A Handbook for the Struggle to Abolish Nuclear Weapons*, ed. Jim Wallis (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), pp. 115–16.

¹⁸ The development of methods of "ecosystem valuing" is an example of the calculative rationalization of nature. Nature's "ecosystem services" are calculated for their (primarily economic) benefits, and

Nietzsche saw in the history of the West: "this attitude of power and control . . . is the driving spirit of the technical system."¹⁹ Whereas in ancient Greece *logos* remained limited to intellectual mastery, the whole purpose of modern *technē-logos* is to allow humans to physically master every aspect of the material world.

But to what end? How *ought* we to physically master the material world? Ellul's ethical point about technical power is that it is not directed toward any telos other than itself. Action, usefulness, or material mastery are *themselves* our culture's ultimate categories of value, not action toward something else, usefulness for a purpose, or material mastery to a particular end. The "technical *millieu*," he says, "is formed by an accumulation of means which have established primacy over ends."²⁰ Ellul's claim is that human toolmaking used to be circumscribed by customs, traditions, and/or ethics, but because systematic abstract reason became identified with natural science's intellectual mapping of the physical world, the capacity for metaphysical or qualitative reasoning to limit technical operation was progressively eliminated. Technical means were increasingly evaluated in terms of material possibility—and the only (ostensibly) empirically identifiable value which can guide technical operation is *efficiency*. To submit technology to any value other than efficiency would be to make the technology less efficient, and "everybody knows" that inefficiency is undesirable and bad.

Of course, all of a society's causal operations are directed to one end or another; we don't extract petroleum for its own sake, after all, but for its use value. Ellul's point about techno-logic is that we do not (and do not feel the need to) submit these ends to scrutiny; indeed, our culture hardly knows how. What we use energy *for* is outside the realm of technoscientific and thus authoritative discourse. All ends other than technique itself are considered merely subjective or completely relative; if an end or goal is ever subject to appraisal, our society generally assumes that the standard of evaluation will be nothing other than (putatively) democratic aggregation of individual subjective preferences.²¹ Ends or values themselves cannot be the topic of rational consideration because rationality is technical/scientific and can thus refer only to the control of material particles. Efficiency, meanwhile, is not understood to be a value itself; it is supposed to function the same way that

techniques are being developed to monetarize what were previously considered nonexchange values, such as spiritual, aesthetic, and cultural meanings for nature. See Randolph Haluza DeLay, Nathan Kowalsky, and John Parkins, *How Canadians Value Nature: A Strategic and Conceptual Review of Literature and Research* (Ottawa: Environment Canada, 2009).

¹⁹ Punzo, "Christian Hope in a Technological Age," p. 29.

²⁰ Ellul, "Ideas of Technology," p. 12.

²¹ For one example out of many, when asked if using cloning technology to genetically resurrect Neanderthals was ethically desirable, the Harvard synthetic biologist George Church said, "Well, that's another thing. I tend to decide on what is desirable based on societal consensus. My role is to determine what's technologically feasible. All I can do is reduce the risk and increase the benefits" ("Interview with George Church: Can Neanderthals Be Brought Back from the Dead?" *Spiegel Online International*, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/george-church-explains-how-dna-will-be-construction-material-of-the-future-a-877634.html>).

“objective fact” supposedly does. Scientific rationality examines the facts and, when the most efficient means of action have been determined, deliberation ceases. The purposes of human or social activity are passed over in uncritical silence; the only thing that we can rationally deliberate about is the most efficient mode of technical operation.

Overall, Ellul says that the “term *technique*, as I use it, does not mean machines, technology, or this or that procedure for attaining an end. In our technological society, *technique* is the *totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency* (for a given stage of development) in *every field of human activity*.”²² All ends other than technique are considered merely subjective, whereas efficiency occupies the prized position of value-neutrality. Because technical efficiency functions as the limit of what is pragmatic and possible, it is no longer considered a value; “values” are rather dismissed as mere emotion or sentiment. Moreover, because technical rationality is only applicable to material realities, *rationality itself* is seen as inapplicable to anything which is not reducible to strictly physical components. Accordingly, as we explain below, Ellul argues that every field of human activity will be understood materialistically. No matter what our culture might deliberate about, the only legitimate options will be the “pragmatic” ones, those which make technological sense within the framework of the societal status quo.

Because of the invisibility of non-technical values, the current technological trajectory is assumed to be unchangeable. The effect of technique’s rejection of any values other than the increase of efficient causal power is the *naturalization* of the technical phenomenon, or what Ellul called “the technological bluff.”²³ When technology functions as our environment (both concretely and intellectually), we take it wholly for granted—as if its existence *as is* were necessary or “second nature.”²⁴ Although there is no conscious propaganda to ensure that we take it for granted, our culture assumes that we won’t notice our technological milieu. It is, after all, only a necessarily efficient assemblage of means (operating in the background) while our attention is directed toward (necessarily and hopelessly) subjective goals. Thus, when technoscientists provide us with “the facts,” we are supposed to be swayed by those “facts” and not pay attention to the social goals that those “facts” are invoked to buttress. If we actually do notice these social goals, we are supposed to think that they cannot be critiqued because they are objectively buttressed by these (unassailable) “facts.” If those social goals are nevertheless critiqued, the values which underlie the critique will be derided for not being “facts” but rather based on “emotion,” the antipathy of “reason.” The technological society *is the fact*; we are to understand that the current trajectory of the status quo is the way things must be. Any uncertainty about technological hegemony is

²² Ellul, *Technological Society*, p. xxv (original emphasis).

²³ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1990); Wha-Chul Son, “Reading Jacques Ellul’s *The Technological Bluff* in Context,” *Bulletin of Science Technology and Society* 24, no. 6 (December 2004): 518–33.

²⁴ Punzo, “Christian Hope in a Technological Age,” p. 22.

simply an inability to "face the facts." In Bourdieu's terms, technique is the *doxa* to an entire social system, viz., the taken-for-granted conditions of practical action, the universe of the undiscussed and undisputed.²⁵

This naturalization of technique implies the full techno-rationalization of human activities: because it is unchangeable, human individuals and societies must adapt themselves to the technological system, not the other way around.²⁶ The requirements of naturalized efficiency call "for a social order perfectly malleable to the demands of technique, requiring that political, economic, and educational structures be constantly open to meet these demands."²⁷ A technological society cannot be subject to other, heteronomous values, such as those dictated by "tradition" or non-technical "morality." If individual instinct or religious values appear to clash with technique, the technical phenomenon will absorb and integrate these "forces by giving them a place within its structure," insofar as they can be fitted to the logic of the machine.²⁸ If not, they are marginalized. According to George Graham, the "force of [Ellul's] sociology is to show that technology permeates all human activities and prepares us through education to feel at home, so to speak, in the technological system."²⁹

Feeling at home will lead to happiness, Ellul says, because sociological processes "will secure human psychic equilibrium in the technological milieu . . . through the adaptation of human beings to the technical milieu. Psycho-sociological techniques result in the modification of men [sic] in order to render them happily subordinate to their new environment. . . ."³⁰ But because technique is only applicable to physical materiality, human beings will ultimately be treated as nothing but physical matter by technique when they are happily adapted to the technical system:

When Technique displays any interest in man, it does so by converting him into a material object. . . . It can only act on man by lessening him and putting him in the way of the quantitative. . . . In our times, technical growth monopolizes all human forces, passions, intelligences, and virtues in such a way that it is in practice nigh impossible to seek and find anywhere any distinctively human excellence.³¹

If the technical system were subject to the heteronomous nature of the human being, then it would be subject to a standard other than itself. But because technique is supposed to be an unchangeable and closed system, humanity must be subject to it.

²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 168.

²⁶ Ellul, *Technological System*, p. 244.

²⁷ Punzo, "Christian Hope in a Technological Age," p. 23.

²⁸ Ellul, "Ideas of Technology," p. 15.

²⁹ Graham, "Perpetuating the Technological Ideology," p. 226.

³⁰ Ellul, "Ideas of Technology," pp. 12–13 (original emphasis removed).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Kevin Garrison summarizes thus: modern techno-logic is “a continual move toward rationalizing all aspects of human life, placing those aspects within a technical sphere, and destroying all possibilities for thinking or acting outside that sphere.”³² Thinking in any other manner implies that the technological society could fundamentally change, that it can and should be subject to values external to itself. Saying so, of course, is supposed to be nonsensical, irrational, impractical and useless. Ellul argues that attempting to think outside technological rationality is, strictly speaking, heretical; technique acquires a *sacred* character.³³ Anything which cannot be assimilated by technological rationality is an unimaginable threat to it. Whenever the technical system seems to be flawed or disagreeable in some manner, the only conceivable option is to view these problems as technical problems that technical progress will eventually solve.³⁴ The *only* reasonable solution to any problem is a solution that will “save” the technological system; and the only conceivable solution that will save the technological system is *more* technological manipulation of matter. Technology is thus *sacrosanct* in that it cannot be in any way be dispensed with, and to maintain that untouchable holiness humans must have *faith* in future technology as a salvific force.

All this amounts to Ellul’s (in)famous claim that technology is *autonomous*:

... technology ultimately depends only on itself, it maps its own route, it is a prime and not a secondary factor, it must be regarded as an “organism” tending toward closure and self-determination: it is an end in itself. . . . The technological system, embodied, of course, in the technicians, admits no other law, no other rule, than the technological law and rule visualized in itself and in regard to itself.³⁵

This does not mean that the technical phenomenon actually achieves self-consciousness, intentionally directing society toward its own ends as if it literally had a mind of its own. Ellul clearly states that he is “not personifying in any way,” but “simply using an accepted rhetorical shortcut”³⁶ in the same way that “liberal economists . . . speak of the laws of the market.”³⁷ Ellul is also clear that he does not mean that technology’s autonomy is absolute.³⁸ Rather, “the technological society is a totalizing *potentiality*.”³⁹ Ellul’s sociological analyses thus exhibit a tension between the way the society actually is, the way it sees itself, and the way it will be if current trajectories are maintained. He is telling us what the technological system tacitly tells us is true, and that he thinks this story is false.

³² Garrison, “Perpetuating the Technological Ideology,” p. 197.

³³ Punzo, “Christian Hope in a Technological Age,” pp. 24–25.

³⁴ The very term *side-effect* attests to the assumption that no problem with technology is essential to technology itself.

³⁵ Ellul, *Technological System*, pp. 125–26.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 335.

³⁷ Punzo, “Christian Hope in a Technological Age,” p. 23.

³⁸ Ellul, *Technological System*, 138–39.

³⁹ Garrison, “Perpetuating the Technological Ideology,” p. 197.

The irony of technological autonomy is that techno-logic is an idea of our own which nevertheless controls us: "[h]umans are in control, as the constructivists show, but their control is always subverted by giving control to the technological 'bluff.'"⁴⁰ Punzo explains that although "human beings are the agents of choice, choosing one technique over another," in a technological society

... we can no more be said to be agents of such choices than [we] can be said to have a choice to make when deciding whether four is quantitatively more than three. Faced with questions of technical progress, humans caught up in the system are more appropriately understood to be apparatuses for registering the results to be obtained by different techniques. The choices are made for them by the requirements of the technical milieu in which they find themselves. Once one line of action is seen to entail maximum efficiency, the decision has been made.⁴¹

Those of us with the power to make decisions that direct our society are beholden to the form of rationality Ellul describes as technical. Those who may be masters of technical systems are themselves "spiritually taken over by the technological society; they believe in what they do; they are the most fervent adepts of that society. They themselves have been profoundly technicized."⁴² Politicians, meanwhile, "are subject to the wishes of their constituents who are primarily concerned with the happiness and well-being which they think Technique assures them," whereas scientists and technicians are too specialized to exercise control over technique itself.⁴³ (And, as Ellul points out, nobody listens to philosophers.⁴⁴) In sum, *human freedom* is ever diminished by the increase of technical rationality; techno-logic is intrinsically anti-democratic.⁴⁵ It is the only way that humans are allowed to think.

This is why Ellul's "focus isn't on machinery per se, but rather 'efficient techniques' and the dystopian vision associated with a technological tyranny devoid of freedom where mechanism replaces humanity"⁴⁶ — with one exception: Ellul is not the pessimist he is made out to be by critics. In spite of places where he says that "no solution can exist,"⁴⁷ his fuller position is that he "never said that technology was not dependent on anything or anyone, that it was beyond reach, etc."⁴⁸ Ellul sees his analysis as opening possibilities for undermining the totalizing impetus of the technological system. In his theological writings, he further develops the *hope* that he has in the face of his philosophy of technology: put simply, "we must

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 201.

⁴¹ Punzo, "Christian Hope in a Technological Age," p. 23.

⁴² Ellul, "Ideas of Technology," p. 15.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

⁴⁵ Ellul, *Technological System*, pp. 130–32.

⁴⁶ Gary Bowden, review of *Living in the Labyrinth of Technology* by William H. Vanderburg, *Canadian Journal of Sociology Online*, July–August 2006, <http://www.cjsonline.ca/pdf/labyrinth.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Ellul, "Ideas of Technology," p. 19.

⁴⁸ Ellul, *Technological System*, pp. 138–39.

destroy the deified religious character of technique.”⁴⁹ Borrowing a concept from his Protestant background, he advocates the *iconoclastic desacralization* of the falsely sacrosanct technical phenomenon. Our societies must accept that petrol-burning machines and all the rest of it “are relatively useful, but not all that important.”⁵⁰ But such “iconoclasm is possible only to the extent that one is able to give up the religious assurances of one’s culture.”⁵¹ Indeed, Ellul envisions techniques which lack the will to power but nevertheless exercise “human power and [make] use of the resources of the earth, ‘in order that they might manifest the glory of God, which is their true, if not their only purpose.’”⁵² Only when this more “philosophical attitude toward life” is in play can the democratization of technology be expected to break the autonomy of the technological phenomenon.⁵³

III. “TELLING IT LIKE IT IS”: THE TAR SANDS PHENOMENON

Our thesis is that Ellul’s theory of technique illuminates the socio-political landscape of Alberta’s tar sands, the larger social systems of which they are a part, and the marginalization of environmental ethics. Public controversies concerning the tar sands date back several years prior to the currently high-profile protests over major pipeline projects which would transport Alberta’s bitumen to overseas markets.⁵⁴ In 2008, a fundraising dinner by then Premier Ed Stelmach was interrupted by Greenpeace protesters who hung a banner from the rafters proclaiming “\$telmach: the best Premier oil money can buy—Stop the Tar Sands.”⁵⁵ The Provincial Government of Alberta began responding with an extensive public relations campaign focused on “telling it like it is” and providing “facts” to counteract the ostensibly emotional environmentalist criticisms of the tar sands.⁵⁶ When film director James Cameron visited the tar sands shortly after his eco-blockbuster *Avatar*, Premier Stelmach warned against “waging a mean and dirty PR campaign

⁴⁹ Jacques Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks*, 2nd ed., trans. Willem Vanderburg (Toronto: Anansi, 2004), p. 89.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 129. Put this way, he asserts that all societies—even if not explicitly religious—are not secular either.

⁵² Punzo, “Christian Hope in a Technological Age,” p. 28; citing Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (New York: Seabury, 1977), p. 233.

⁵³ Garrison, “Perpetuating the Technological Ideology,” p. 198.

⁵⁴ Space precludes extensive detail about the tar sands. Readers are directed to Andrew Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands: Dirty Oil and the Future of a Continent* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2008) and *Political Ecology and Governance in Alberta*, ed. Laurie Adkin, Byron Miller, and Naomi Krogman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).

⁵⁵ Graham Thomson, “Greenpeace Might Have Overplayed its Oilsands Card,” *Edmonton Journal*, 26 April 2008, <http://www.canada.com/edmontonjournal/columnists/story.html?id=45ce5fa9-6831-43b2-916b-ead03819adb8>.

⁵⁶ “Alberta. Tell It like it is,” Government of Alberta, <http://oilsands.alberta.ca/tellitlikeitis.html>; “Facts and Statistics,” Alberta Energy, <http://www.energy.alberta.ca/OilSands/791.asp>.

attacking Albertans” instead of engaging in “reasoned debate, based on evidence, fact and values.”⁵⁷

This mention of values was explicitly embraced by pundit Ezra Levant in his book *Ethical Oil: The Case for Canada's Oil Sands*,⁵⁸ as well as the advertizing campaign launched by Alykan Velshi's EthicalOil.org organization, himself a policy analyst and assistant to various Canadian federal ministers. Federal environment minister Peter Kent went on to claim that the Alberta tar sands produced ethical oil. In these cases, the argument was that Canada's human rights record makes its oil “more ethical” (as if that were a quantifiable thing) than that of the Middle East, but given that critics were concerned with the environmental and social costs of the tar sands themselves, this was a red herring. The Ethical Oil campaign amounted to a form of branding, using normative vocabulary to sell product, rather than being an invitation to a “vigorous, ongoing debate about the ethics of energy,”⁵⁹ let alone an ethic which could provide limits or normative guidelines for how tar sands development should proceed.

The tar sands controversy reached American attention in autumn 2011. High-profile environmentalists such as Bill McKibben, Wendell Berry, and Wes Jackson called for nonviolent public disobedience in front of the White House to pressure President Obama to deny a permit for the Alberta-to-Texas Keystone XL pipeline. Twelve hundred arrests followed (including James Hansen and McKibben) and protests have continued to the time of writing. Shortly thereafter the Alberta-to-British Columbia Northern Gateway pipeline hit the news. Opponents overwhelmed public hearings along the route. Controversy ensued over what the pipelines' economic and environmental impact would be.⁶⁰ Pipeline companies sparred with celebrity opponents over whose views had the most “errors” and “inaccuracies.”⁶¹ When the Dalai Lama and other Nobel laureates publically opposed the Keystone XL pipeline, the president of the Oilsands Developers Group worried that “we are

⁵⁷ Frank Landry, “Ed Barks Back at Oilsands Critics,” *24 Hours*, 29 September 2010, p. 4.

⁵⁸ Ezra Levant, *Ethical Oil: The Case for Canada's Oil Sands* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2010).

⁵⁹ Chris MacDonald, “The Ethics of ‘Ethical Oil,’” *Canadian Business*, 6 October 2011, <http://www.canadianbusiness.com/business-news/industries/energy/the-ethics-of-ethical-oil/>; cf. John Hiemstra, “The Masterful Illusion of ‘Ethical Oil,’” *Comment Magazine*, 7 December 2011, <http://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/3012>.

⁶⁰ Lara Skinner and Sean Sweeney, “Pipe Dreams? Jobs Gained, Jobs Lost by the Construction of Keystone XL,” Cornell University Global Labor Institute (2012), http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/global-laborinstitute/research/upload/GLI_KeystoneXL_012312_FIN.pdf.

⁶¹ Sheldon Alberts, “TransCanada goes on Pipeline Offensive,” *Nanaimo Daily News*, 22 September 2011, <http://www2.canada.com/nanaimodailynews/news/story.html?id=bace5317-03d8-424f-afb9-3ab8265f8411>; Robert Redford, “Punching Back at Big Oil,” *Huffington Post*, 24 September 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-redford/keystone-xl-pipeline_b_978835.html. Cf. Wendy J. Palen et al., “Energy: Consider the Global Impacts of Oil Pipelines,” *Nature* 510, no. 7506 (2014): 465–67; and Peter Erickson and Michael Lazarus, “Impact of the Keystone XL Pipeline on Global Oil Markets and Greenhouse Gas Emissions,” *Nature Climate Change* 4 (September 2014): 778–80.

being outgunned in the PR arena.”⁶² Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and others criticized the January 2012 rejection of the original application as “political” and based on “false information,” while the then newly elected Premier of Alberta, Alison Redford, responded with a pledge “to fight the ongoing oil sands PR war by ‘telling Alberta’s story.’”⁶³

With respect to the Northern Gateway pipeline, the Canadian Minister of Natural Resources, Joe Oliver, issued an open letter voicing concern that his country’s regulatory system was being “hijacked” by foreign-funded “environmental and other radical groups,” who were essentially filibustering the environmental review process to advance “their radical ideological agenda” rather than facing the “historic choice” of either continuing to sell oil to the United States or diversifying by selling it to Pacific Asian countries. Minister Oliver encouraged “quicker and more streamlined” environmental reviews which would consider “the evidence dispassionately and then make an objective determination . . . based on science and the facts.”⁶⁴ Enbridge, the company that would build this pipeline, claimed that it “will prevail in the messaging war” because “what we’re talking about is the facts.”⁶⁵

By June 2012, Canada’s Parliament withdrew from the Kyoto Accord, completely overhauled Canadian environmental review policy and fisheries and endangered species protections, all as part of the omnibus budget implementation Bill C–38.⁶⁶ The new requirements allowed cancellation of 2,970 environmental project reviews that summer.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, the federal government defunded scientific research bases, fired half the staff of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, and eliminated 1,689 jobs in Parks Canada.⁶⁸ Peter Kent, Minister of the Environment, defended these cuts in the name of “more efficient and sustainable” agencies, and thus as part of his government’s “effort to eliminate the deficit and contribute to current and future prosperity.”⁶⁹ By the end of 2012, a second omnibus budget implementation bill made still more sweeping changes to environmental protection laws. Tony

⁶² Bill Kaufmann, “Oilsands Losing PR War, says Energy Pioneer,” *Calgary Sun*, 8 September 2011, <http://www.calgarysun.com/2011/09/08/oilsands-losing-pr-war-says-energy-pioneer>.

⁶³ Tanara McLean, “This is a ‘Political Rejection’ Analyst,” *24 Hours*, 20–22 January 2012, p. 3.

⁶⁴ Joe Oliver, “An Open Letter on Canada’s Commitment to Diversify Our Energy Markets and the Need to Further Streamline the Regulatory Process in Order to Advance Canada’s National Economic Interest,” *Natural Resources Canada*, 9 January 2012, www.nrcan.gc.ca/media-room/news-release/2012/1/3520.

⁶⁵ “‘Hear the Facts’: Enbridge on Pipeline,” *24 Hours*, 25 January 2012, p. 3.

⁶⁶ Lee Berthiaume, “Bill C–38 Primer,” *Star Phoenix*, 12 June 2012, <http://www2.canada.com/saskatoonstarphoenix/news/story.html?id=0bcb1393-1365-4b6c-a2cd-511de408a424&p=2>.

⁶⁷ Mike De Souza, “Federal Government Cancels 3,000 Environmental Reviews on Pipelines, Other Projects,” *Calgary Herald*, 23 August 2012, <http://www.calgaryherald.com/technology/Federal+government+cancels+environmental+reviews+pipelines/7136029/story.html>.

⁶⁸ Laurie Adkin et al. to Stephen Harper et al., 18 June 2012; cf. Chris Turner, *The War on Science: Muzzled Scientists and Willful Blindness in Stephen Harper’s Canada* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2013).

⁶⁹ Peter Kent to Laurie Adkin et al., 21 August 2012.

Clement, President of the Treasury Board of Canada, defended them, saying "We cannot be in a situation where we are paralyzed by rules that are in place that did not advance the economic agenda of our society."⁷⁰ It was later revealed that these sweeping changes to Canada's environmental legislation were precisely what a 12 December 2011 letter, authored by four Canadian energy industry associations, asked Ministers Kent (Environment) and Oliver (Natural Resources) to implement.⁷¹

The dominant discursive strategy underlying the above disputes is technological rationality. While then Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach invited debate based on evidence, fact, and values, ethical discourse was either appropriated as a form of image control (e.g., "ethical oil) to maintain the efficient functioning of the petroleum status quo in Canada, or dismissed as "political" and thus subjective, not fact-based.⁷² Decisions about the tar sands are repeatedly claimed to be determined by "objective" science as opposed to irrational "ideology." Any position which questions the legitimacy of current practice is posited as dangerously "radical" and even ethically suspect. Efficiency is repeatedly cited for justification of speedier environmental approval processes, reduced and streamlined environmental regulations, and limitations on public hearings. Efficiency is the same "objective value" invoked (without recognizing it as a value) to maintain the current economic agenda. It becomes the reason for defunding scientific research that would potentially indict current petroleum extraction practices for causing environmental damage, even while current science is said to lack the definitive proof required to justify a change of course. So prior to analysing what, if any, substantive ethical principles inform development of the tar sands or its opposition, critiques in general are defamed as value-laden—that is, subjective, misinformed, inefficient, and irrational. The technical irrelevance of environmental ethics is the condition for the possibility of environmental critique.

But not only is technoscientific rationality presented as the solution to objections maligned as value-based, the technique of public relations is applied to convince recalcitrant citizens of "the facts" rather than engaging in substantive ethical discourse with them.⁷³ Success in the "messaging war" is seen to depend solely on the possession of accurate information. The facts are, of course, contested; at the least a selection of "facts" must be drawn from the welter of details and creatively framed in a carefully constructed message. But it is facts, not ethics, which are

⁷⁰ Jessica Murphy, "Budget Bill Voting Begins," *24 Hours*, 5 December 2012, p. 5.

⁷¹ Canadian Petroleum Products Institute, the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, the Canadian Energy Pipeline Association, and the Canadian Gas Association to the Honourable Peter Kent, Minister, Environment Canada and the Honourable Joe Oliver, Minister, Natural Resources Canada, 12 December 2011, document released under the Access to Information Act, http://www.greenpeace.org/canada/Global/canada/pr/2013/01/ATIP_Industry_letter_on_enviro_regs_to_Oliver_and_Kent.pdf.

⁷² Randolph Haluza-DeLay, "Assembling Consent in Alberta: Hegemony and the Tar Sands," in *A Line in the Tar Sands: Struggles for Environmental Justice*, ed. S. D'Arcy, T. Black, T. Weis, and J. K. Russell (Toronto: Between the Lines Books, 2014), pp. 36–54.

⁷³ Ellul has written extensively on propaganda as a form of technique, and we have only scratched the surface of the potential his analysis has for future research on the tar sands.

seen as objectively determining. The concomitant assumption is that value-based objections can be resolved by rhetorical salesmanship alone. Because there are no external ethical standards that a rational human could appeal to vis-à-vis a technological system, it is simply not possible for a technological system to make (technological) sense of a human who levels a moral critique against it. In this respect, technological rationality cannot treat critics as moral agents, but only as unreasoning technical objects to be managed by nonrational persuasion. Dissent is seen as a technical problem that can be “solved” by manipulating dissenters (much as physical engineering manipulates matter) with bureaucratic techniques (such as reducing who has standing in public participation) or discursive techniques (such as rhetorical talking points, marketing, buying ad time, branding). This is an example of adapting humans to the technological system rather than the inverse. It is a reason why Ellul says that technique is inhuman: public relations techniques do not treat us as agents capable of rationally evaluating different forms of society or behavior.

However, technological rationality also infects *critics* of the tar sands, who are, of course, just as active in the “PR war” as government and industry. Unsettling images of moonscaped surface mining and oil-soaked ducks present “facts” that are supposed to speak for themselves. Rather than articulating moral principles which would allow movement from factual premises to normative conclusions, activists merely spar with opponents over which job numbers or pollution statistics are the most accurate.⁷⁴ This shrinks the scope of debate. As a consequence, critics advance only those “reasonable” alternatives to the petroleum status quo which remain within the larger framework of efficient management. When James Cameron visited the tar sands, he concluded that the tar sands could either be a “curse” or a “gift” depending on whether it is “managed properly.”⁷⁵ Hopes to replace fossil fuels with alternative energy sources typically exist within the imaginary of technique, the belief that our high-energy-use societies can be saved if we only use the right kind of technology. It appears too difficult to imagine any solution to these problems other than more technological rationality: “What is lost in the submission to an ideology of technique is the loss of choice: the answer to any technological question is answered a priori from the technological ideology as saying technology can lead to a humane, potentially utopian existence through the application of the correct technique, democratization or otherwise.”⁷⁶ Anything else fails to face the facts.

⁷⁴ Of course, resolving factual disputes is a necessary component of effective activism, but it is not sufficient. While articulating moral principles is difficult and contentious work, ethics are what is ultimately at stake.

⁷⁵ Andreas Morse, “World is Watching: Cameron,” *Metro News*, 30 September 2010, p. 1.

⁷⁶ Garrison, “Perpetuating the Technological Ideology,” p. 202.

IV. "I AM ALBERTA OIL"⁷⁷: THE NATURALIZATION OF TECHNICAL IDENTITY

These facts, however, have value significance: tar sands advocates imply that oil is a necessary component of one's own identity. Cenovus Energy Inc.—an oil company operating in the tar sands which promotes itself as “committed to applying fresh, progressive thinking to safely and responsibly unlock energy resources the world needs⁷⁸—runs professionally produced advertisements which remind Canadian audiences that their historic ingenuity, which conquered the wilderness, will also overcome any challenges posed by the tar sands.⁷⁹ The introduction to the Alberta government PR campaign states: “There never was a better time for us to tell the world about our oil sands. Our energy. Ourselves. It’s up to us, as proud Albertans, to tell it like it is.” Albertans are supposed to view the tar sands as part of being Albertan and therefore as something to be defended as one would defend oneself. Proud Albertans are supposed to know this identification to be a fact (something to be told “like it is”), not as (as their distinction would have it) a subjective opinion about values or ethics.

Therefore, because opposition to these tar sands effectively disenfranchises one as an Albertan, the adaptation of oneself to the demands of the tar sands (rather than the other way around) is a prerequisite of belonging to one's own homeland. One think-tank tells Canadians that “Canada’s economic growth since the turn of the millennium . . . would not have been achieved without the contributions of western Canada’s oil and gas industry.”⁸⁰ Oil industry associations tell Canadians that the “world needs energy, lots of it” in order to justify the deregulation and rapidity of resource extraction. The “huge increase in the appetite for energy in this world” is a *need*, a fact the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) takes for granted *prior* to addressing environmental responsibility or sustainability.⁸¹

⁷⁷ I Am Apparel, <http://www.iamapparel.ca>.

⁷⁸ “About Us,” *Cenovus Energy*, <http://www.cenovus.com/about/index.html>.

⁷⁹ “Canadian Ideas at Work,” *Cenovus Energy*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0vYTFve7tA>. On the construction of Albertan identity in terms of energy production, see Haluza-DeLay, “Assembling consent” and Randolph Haluza-DeLay, “Alberta Internalizing Oilsands Opposition: A Test of the Social Movement Society Thesis,” in *Protest and Politics: The Promise of Social Movement Societies*, ed. H. Ramos and K. Rogers (Vancouver: The University of British Columbia Press, 2015).

⁸⁰ Robert Gibbins, *Look Before You Leap: Oil and Gas, the Western Canadian Economy and National Prosperity* (Calgary: Canada West Foundation, 2010), p. 6, <http://cwf.ca/pdf-docs/publications/look-before-you-leap.pdf>. The wonderful products made from fossil fuels are also touted. A series of advertisements from Cenovus point out how oil is integral to numerous modern innovations: the sprinting blades of double-amputee paralympians (“More than Fuel: Artificial Limbs Ad,” *Cenovus Energy*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xsreoCdGYo>), tablet computers (“More than Fuel: Touch Screen Ad,” *Cenovus Energy*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4_8dL-wL9g), and pregnancy ultrasounds (“More than Fuel: Ultrasound Ad,” *Cenovus Energy*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4k_8CnH9I0).

⁸¹ “Canada’s Oil Sands—Come See for Yourself,” Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, <http://www.capp.ca/canadaIndustry/oilSands/Dialogue-Resources/oil-sands-videos/Pages/Oil-Sands-Tour.aspx>.

Unconventional sources of oil (shale oil, tar sands, etc.) compensate for the declining ability of conventional oil to satisfy the demands of ongoing growth in worldwide energy consumption, and the Alberta tar sands comprise a crucial component in North American energy security.⁸²

Our Ellulian analysis sees this as the naturalization of the tar sands, a feature of the technological phenomenon. The identity of the self is supposed to be so entwined with the technical society that the latter is held forth as the unquestionable ground of existence as we know it. It is our succour, a necessary condition for the possibility of modern life, and to criticize it is to attack oneself. This is why the phrase “economic suicide” comes virtually unbidden when slowing down (let alone stopping) tar sands development is entertained—to threaten the system is to threaten the self, an absurd act. This naturalization of the tar sands is achieved by the characterization of our lifestyles as fossil fuel dependent.⁸³ But the “fact” that “we all need energy” is cast as orthodoxy, with criticisms or alternatives cast as heterodox. An Ellulian analysis shows that such naturalization is a metaphysical projection of the technological phenomenon (what Ellul calls the technological *bluff*). Our society’s institutional momentum requires us to face the facts, those purported facts being that *we cannot live without oil* (or high levels of energy from any source, for that matter).

The tying of our identity to the naturalized petroleum status quo means, moreover, that critics of the system are required to step entirely outside the system before they are allowed to say anything about it. The system is naturalized through a Catch-22: criticizing the system from the outside is irrational, while criticizing it from the inside is inauthentic. Critics of the tar sands are consistently derided for owning cars, houses, and generally living a modern way of life. Naturalization means that critics are both stuck in the petromobile society, and dismissed for lacking an alternative praxis. The only way to avoid the charge of hypocrisy is to attain the impossible moral purity of existing completely independently of the technological system. Ethical evaluation of the system, then, is triply illegitimate: the system dismisses external critiques as irrational, comprises the condition for the possibility of value, and thus dismisses internal criticisms as inauthentic.

A system entirely insulated from negation is one that cannot (and will not) stop itself, the character of technique that Ellul calls autonomous. Autonomy does not exist “out there” in tools or devices—technological autonomy is *in us*, internalized into our prereflective interpretive schemas. Not only are the tar sands defended by appeals to factual efficiency while dismissing any discourse that might be maligned as

⁸² Christopher Helman, “Mitt Romney’s Bold Vision for America’s Energy Independence,” *Forbes*, 23 August 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/christopherhelman/2012/08/23/mitt-romneys-vision-for-americas-energy-independence>.

⁸³ Cf. Matthew Huber, “The Use of Gasoline: Value, Oil, and the ‘American Way of Life,’” *Antipode* 41, no. 3 (2009): 465–86.

emotional, subjective, or value-laden, they are self-legitimizing and self-perpetuating when seen as necessary, socially naturalized, and thus immune to moral evaluation. Some philosophers of technology hope democratization can overcome technocratic rationality,⁸⁴ but this has not been happening in Alberta.⁸⁵ It would require both a population thoughtfully reflecting on the doxic conditions for various courses of action, and reform in the political and bureaucratic spheres to provide the social space and deliberative structures for having such a debate. But insofar as Albertan identity is defined in terms of oil and the tar sands, any potentially negative moral evaluation of them is unthinkable. Because of the naturalization and autonomy of the tar sands, Alberta appears as a hypnotized province, pre-rationally resistant to independent assessments which automatically seem foreign and heterodox.⁸⁶ The challenge provided by Ellul to environmental ethics is that it must contest the interpellation of the technological system or be doomed to irrelevance.

V. ETHICS AS ICONOCLASM

Ellul sees the hegemony of technological "second nature" as having a sacred character, being sacrosanct or that which cannot be touched. The high-energy lifestyle of contemporary North American culture functions as the ultimate source of meaning. Life is meaningless without petroleum wealth: "To think of a world without wide open highways, electrified homes, and cheap and abundant gasoline, is for many, unimaginable. Illustrated nicely by Gulf Oil's recent ad campaign slogan—'Life . . . one mile at a time'—the command over space powered by cheap oil gets naturalized as a most basic aspect in the constitution of life itself."⁸⁷ Because the tar sands are seen as necessary (as in the language of Ari Fleischer, President George W. Bush's press secretary) to our "blessed" high-energy culture, they become an icon—an image which conveys an experience of that to which we devote our lives.⁸⁸ The autonomy of the system *is* its pseudo-divine ultimacy: the system's demands must be obeyed without question, anything other than tinkering reforms to the technological system would be radical, and radicalism is automatically

⁸⁴ E.g., Andrew D. Zimmerman, "Toward a More Democratic Ethic of Technological Governance," *Science Technology and Human Values* 20, no. 1 (1995): 86–107; Andrew Feenberg, *Transforming Technology: A Critical Theory Revised* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Karl Rogers, *Participatory Democracy, Science and Technology: An Exploration in the Philosophy of Science* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁸⁵ Haluza-DeLay, "Internalizing Oilsands Opposition"; cf. Evan Bowness and Mark Hudson, "Sand in the Cogs? Power and Public Participation in the Alberta Tar Sands," *Environmental Politics* 23, no. 1 (2013): 59–76.

⁸⁶ John L. Hiemstra, "Canada's Oil Sands Developments as Icon of Globalization," in *Globalization and the Gospel: Probing the Religious Foundations of Globalization*, ed. M. W. Goheen and E. Glanville (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent Press, 2009), p. 194.

⁸⁷ Huber, "The Use of Gasoline," p. 477.

⁸⁸ Cf. Jacques Ellul, "The Technological Order," *Technology and Culture* 3 (1962): 410.

out of the question (heterodox) because it is apocalyptic (i.e., threatens “life as we know it”). Instead, we must have faith that a techno-managerial approach will provide salvation from any and all “problems” that might arise therein, including the current destructive effects of tar sands development.

Critics have accused Ellul’s analysis of being pessimistic, presenting “an elaborate hall of mirrors, deliberately designed to leave no passage out.”⁸⁹ Such observations miss that for Ellul, the way out is religious. Because of the sacralization of technique, theological anthropology—an account of being human in relation to the rest of creation/nature and the divine—is crucial for understanding and resisting the technological society.⁹⁰ The fact that this sounds ridiculous to most ears is a testament to our enframing by the logic of physical manipulation; surely religion is the pinnacle of irrationality when compared to scientific reasoning! Ellul’s anthropology insists that humans are suited for purposes other than being fitted to a technological system. For him, the divine breaking into our framework (i.e., revelation) “prevents society from locking itself into a finished system,”⁹¹ providing an out from technical enclosure. While he positions his anthropology in Christian terms, we do not see this as exclusivism unsuitable within a pluralist society.⁹² The point is that the technological society can only be overcome by philosophical reflections that are not exclusively founded on the conditions created by the technological society itself. Social theory calls for its own transcendence of social relations, but until recently modernity has “rendered out of court” metaphysical claims, a situation that is in flux now with the “post-secular” turn.⁹³

Showing how this trans-disciplinary theological anthropology works for Ellul, he writes:

We must be quite clear that what we believe is that God’s promise, received in faith, borne by us, truly changes the conditions in which we live and act. In other words, the presence of faith in Jesus Christ alters reality. We also believe that hope is in no way an escape into the future, but that it is an active force, now, and that love leads

⁸⁹ Langdon Winner, *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), p. 177; quoted in Garrison, “Perpetuating the Technological Ideology,” p. 197.

⁹⁰ There appear to be analogues with political theology here (e.g., Giorgio Agamben and Paul W. Kahn) worth exploring in a separate paper.

⁹¹ Jacques Ellul, *In Season Out of Season: An Introduction to the Thought of Jacques Ellul*, trans. Lani K. Niles (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), pp. 221–22; quoted in Graham, “Jacques Ellul,” p. 223.

⁹² For more on religious discourse in a pluralistic society, see Charles Taylor, ed., *Multiculturalism: The Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), and for its application to environmentalism, see David Schlosberg, *Environmental Justice and the New Pluralism: The Challenge of Difference for Environmentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), and Randolph Haluza DeLay, Michael DeMoor, and Chris Peet, “That We May Live Well Together in the Land. . . : Place Pluralism and Just Sustainability in Canadian Studies,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 47, no. 3 (2014): 226–56.

⁹³ Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan Van Antwerpen, eds., *Habermas and Religion* (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2013).

us to a deeper understanding of reality. Love is probably the most realistic possible understanding of our existence. It is not an illusion. On the contrary, it is reality itself.⁹⁴

Alberta's own home-grown ecosaboteur, Wiebo Ludwig, once noted that environmental activists talk a lot about oil but not a lot about love.⁹⁵ As unrealistic as it may sound, love functions for Ellul as a standpoint from which to gaze at the system from the outside. The nearly universal accessibility of the concept of love is a reminder that Ellul's religious language is not exclusive, but is an attempt to articulate the possibility of innovative social alternatives which derive from unexpected quarters, be they religious or not.⁹⁶

In an instance of synchronicity, however, the only insertion of substantive normative discourse into the public tar sands debate came from Roman Catholic Bishop Luc Bouchard, whose ecclesiastical jurisdiction at the time included Fort McMurray, Fort Chipewyan, and the Athabasca tar sands. His extensively researched pastoral letter to the faithful of his diocese⁹⁷ presented theological reasons for why safeguarding the natural environment is a moral obligation for Christians, summarized the environmental effects of the tar sands, and concluded by saying:

Any one of the above destructive effects provokes moral concern, but it is when the damaging effects are all added together that the moral legitimacy of tar sands production is challenged. An even more alarming level of concern is reached when the scale of proposed future expansions . . . is taken into account. It is then that the full environmental threat of the tar sands and the resulting gravity of the moral issue involved is most deeply felt.⁹⁸

This caused a flurry of media attention, but very few responses addressed the moral issues themselves. Bouchard reported the most common sort of negative responses were along the lines of "Kindly tell Bishop Bouchard that I will stay out of his God business if he stays out of my oil sands business." Bouchard interpreted such statements as excluding the tar sands from moral consideration and denying

⁹⁴ Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age*, pp. 87–88.

⁹⁵ Personal communication. Wiebo Ludwig was a conservative religious leader in northern Alberta who led a self-sufficient religious commune. Sour gas wells drilled near the communal property and homes led to altercations with rural neighbours and the oil and gas industry, including wellsite bombings and a gunshot death. Ludwig was eventually convicted for involvement and spent nearly two years in jail. See Andrew Nikiforuk, *Saboteurs: Wiebo Ludwig's War against Big Oil* (Toronto: Macfarlane, Walter and Ross, 2002). He died in the spring of 2012.

⁹⁶ E.g., Susan Power Bratton, "Loving Nature: Eros or Agape?" *Environmental Ethics* 14, no. 1 (1992): 3–25; Craig Millar and Yoon Hong-Key, "Morality, Goodness, and Love: A Rhetoric for Resource Management," *Ethics, Place and Environment* 3, no. 2 (2000):155–72; Cynthia M. Chambers and Narcisse J. Blood, "Love Thy Neighbour: Repatriating Precarious Blackfoot Sites," *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 39–40 (2009): 253–79.

⁹⁷ Luc Bouchard, "The Integrity of Creation and the Athabasca Oil Sands," Pastoral Letter to the Diocese of St. Paul, Alberta, Canada, 25 January 2009, <http://www.crc-canada.org/sites/default/files/files/BISHOP%20BOUCHARDS%20PASTORAL%20LETTER%20ON%20TAR%20SANDS.pdf>.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

the right of religious persons to “challenge our economic system.”⁹⁹ Industry and government representatives responded, he said, like they were “reading from the same page.”¹⁰⁰ They ignored the moral question as if it was already settled that tar sands development should proceed in the manner that it has, instead using “skilful . . . public relations language” to reiterate their technical efforts to reduce tar sands impact,¹⁰¹ with the exception of the president of Syncrude (the largest producer in the tar sands) who pointed out the social good of creating jobs through bitumen extraction.¹⁰² Levant’s book *Ethical Oil* addressed Bouchard only on a few matters of fact and not on the moral questions he raised. Bouchard remarked that, overall, these responses indicate a prevalent societal belief that issues of economics are above moral comment and that the tar sands should only be dealt with by technical experts.

Like Ellul, Bouchard’s religious framing is not exclusive; nor is the resistance and hope borne of it. What characterized Bouchard’s letter in general was that it was an *ethical* interruption into the technical framework, subjecting the tar sands to outside (i.e., non-technological) moral evaluation. First, his analysis did not start with the inevitability and efficiency of petrol extraction. Second, Bouchard implicitly desacralized technique by submitting it to a moral standard other than itself. Third, his anthropology did not presuppose that humans are products of a socio-technical regime. Another Roman Catholic commentator responded to the “I am Alberta Oil” branding by proposing a different vision of identity: “Who am I? The answer must be: ‘We are beloved daughters and sons of God, called to live in right relationship with God, neighbour and all of creation (including the oil).’”¹⁰³ These theological perspectives do not define being human as what the technological system (in this case, oil) interpellates us to be; religious or not, we are to be and act out of a different identity, out of anthropologies that go beyond and indeed subvert our classification as essentially consumers of oil.

Eugene Hargrove has, in a series of editorials in this journal, lamented the general failure of environmental ethics to gain traction in environmental policy making. He points out not only the widespread ignorance about the existence of the forty-year-old field, but weaknesses in education that has created several generations of policy makers who can comprehend only instrumental value. Received academic wisdom currently sees scientific and economic decision making as “objective,” whereas anything else that might be considered value-laden is subjective, biased,

⁹⁹ Sharon Abercrombie, “Abuse of Creation: Bishop Joins Voices Challenging Expanding Oil Sands Extraction in Canada,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 14 May 2010, p. 16.

¹⁰⁰ Ramon Gonzalez, “Letter on Oilsands ‘Struck a Nerve,’ Says Bouchard,” *Western Catholic Reporter*, 8 March 2010, <http://wcr.ab.ca/old-site/news/2010/0308/oil030810.shtml>.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² “Richard Warnica, “Bishop Assesses Fallout from Letter,” *Edmonton Journal*, 28 February 2010, p. A5.

¹⁰³ Bob McKeon, “Base Energy Policy on Christian Values,” *Western Catholic Reporter*, 24 May 2010, p. 15, <http://wcr.ab.ca/old-site/columns/bobmckeon/2010/bobmckeon052410.shtml>.

arbitrary, and emotional. With such "inoculation against environmental ethics," generations of citizens are produced who can scarcely conceive of alternatives to the managerial status quo.¹⁰⁴ This is a precise example of what Ellul refers to as techno-rational autonomy.

But even though "scientific, economic, and legal (not ethical) discourses are the exclusive languages spoken in the temples of environmental policy making," Donald A. Brown points out that each "of these technical languages rests on a set of unexamined norms that pretend to be ethically neutral but hide numerous controversial ethical issues. . . ."¹⁰⁵ He suggests that environmental ethics should be translated into language—and applied to issues—that policy "priests" will find sensible,¹⁰⁶ but doing so would require inserting ethics into a framework of rationality that cannot recognize it as anything other than irrational. Rather, Hargrove sees that "many of the presuppositions upon which economics and policy are based would be thrown into question" by the insertion of environmental ethics therein.¹⁰⁷ This is precisely what Ellul calls iconoclasm: the use of non-technological reason to unmask the ultimacy given to technique.

Ellulian hope, therefore, is based in rational inconsistency with governments, industries, or even ENGOs that do not frame the issues beyond technocratic management; the antidote to pessimism is the iconoclastic denial of technological rationality's discursive primacy. In other words, if environmental ethics is to exist as a dialectical partner of environmental policy, it will be radical in the sense of going to the root.¹⁰⁸ The rank and file of the North American population may find it difficult to believe that even though we justify our societies by appealing to technical rationality, we are where we are not because of inexorable progress but rather because of ideological and economic contingencies that have been socially naturalized and reified. If environmental ethics were critically to assess the logic of matter manipulation by articulating values other than efficient instrumentality, it would deny the naturalization and autonomy of the contemporary social order and the worldview which perpetuates it. The purpose of environmental ethics, if it is to fit Ellul's critique, is to project alternatives to the hegemony of technical mastery and thus affect the cultural and identity politics of the cultures we inhabit.¹⁰⁹ Environmental ethics must dispute oil, and the social realities it promulgates, as the ultimate source of meaning.

¹⁰⁴ Eugene Hargrove, "Overcoming Environmental Newspeak," *Environmental Ethics* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 115.

¹⁰⁵ Donald A. Brown, "Environmental Ethics and Public Policy," *Environmental Ethics* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 111.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Eugene Hargrove, "What's Wrong? Who's to Blame?" *Environmental Ethics* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 3.

¹⁰⁸ Eugene Hargrove, "Should Environmentalism be Radical?" *Environmental Ethics* 17, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 339.

¹⁰⁹ A failing of most tar sands opposition movements has been their underwhelming effort to do so; see Haluza-DeLay, "Internalizing Oilsands Opposition."

VI. CONCLUSION

The debate over the tar sands, therefore, is a complex mixture of public relations and political rhetoric, the denigration of opposition as radical or ideological, the “scientization” and “economization” of political discourse alongside the undermining of scientific research infrastructure, and the positivist bifurcation of fact and value, where the latter is seen as hopelessly subjective and therefore socially irrelevant. The dominant political voices of government and industry make recourse to engineering, technocratic management and political spin to validate their often explicit belief that there is no alternative other than oil for meeting increasing energy demands or economic growth. Thus oil, and the tar sands in Alberta, are advanced as key components of individual and collective identity, naturalized and inoculated against criticism. The technique of energy economics and automobility become institutionally manifest and control the social, ecological, and political spheres. The only way for environmental ethics to say anything *to* this way of life is to be seen as radical, standing conceptually outside the system, which automatically invalidates it in the eyes of the system.

The Alberta tar sands, therefore, reflect a profound and pervasive technical rationality, suggesting that Ellul was right to say that techno-logic is the context in which modern culture exists. Technique takes the central sociological place that capital held in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, being even more salient in the twenty-first century in light of accelerating ecological destruction. All the capital of the oil corporations would be insufficient to cause such social, ecological, and spiritual desolation without the dominant intellectual framework of limitless material manipulation to justify its deployment to great and deleterious global effect.¹¹⁰ Because oil (to say nothing of fossil fuels more generally) is a manifestation of the colonizing of lifeworlds ever more thoroughly by technique, it—and environmental ethics—needs to be seen in terms of a struggle over the production and reproduction of life and livelihoods.

When both the attacks on and defenses of the tar sands are couched within the logic of technique, environmental ethics is bound to be irrelevant. The question being debated is how to manage the resource, not whether techno-rationality should define our identity, constitute the ground of action, and dominate our discourse. Classical philosophy of technology can provide crucial insight into the intractability of contemporary environmental policy toward ethics: the active neglect of environmental ethics is the result of a technological mindset that has come to increasingly dominate the globe. Given the increasing global climate costs of our carbon economy, but also the relative lack of government initiative and public

¹¹⁰ For this reason, Ellul does not see capitalism as the root cause of the problem. Historically, communism was just as much given over to the technological phenomenon. While we support rational criticism of the economic status quo, proposed economic alternatives must avoid being dominated by technical rationality.

will to move to new energy economies, the question of technique's imposition of an all-encompassing structure on human action is not only a crucial question for environmental ethics. It may be the central question of the twenty-first century.

PHILIP CAFARO



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