Jacques Ellul and Technique

The issue of autonomous technology
Has technology developed a momentum that expresses certain laws of development that are both inherent in it and inevitable, that is, over which human beings no longer have control? ISSUE: whether technology constitutes a power or force of its own, beyond the control of its human creators. Does technology determine rather than serve our intentions and purposes? Does technology possess a logic or a will of its own?

Ellul: “technique has arrived at such a point in its evolution that it is being transformed and is progressing almost without decisive intervention by man….There is automatic growth of everything which concerns technique….technique engenders itself. When a new technical form appears, it makes possible and conditions a number of others.” Ellul’s basic argument is that technique has become everywhere autonomous. It is beyond the control of ordinary men and women, beyond the control of the most powerful technocrats: even their power functions only within the narrow confines of the system. Human freedom becomes narrowed and conditioned by the technological gridlock.

Technique as form of life
Technique is an ensemble of rational and efficient practices; a collection of orders, schemas, and mechanisms. Technique is nothing less than the organized ensemble of all individual techniques which have been used to secure any end whatsoever.

“In our technological society, technique is the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency in every field of human activity.” Ellul emphasizes rationality, efficiency, procedure

By technique he means far more than machine technology. Technique refers to any complex of standardized means for attaining a predetermined result. Thus, it converts spontaneous and unreflective behavior into behavior that is deliberate and rationalized.

The Technical Man is fascinated by results, but the immediate consequences of setting standardized devices into motion. He is committed to the never-ending search for “the one best way” to achieve any designated objective. In our progressively technical civilization we witness the ever expanding and irreversible rule of technique extended to all domains of life.

The Technological Society is a description of the way in which an autonomous technology is in process of taking over the individual values of every society without exception, subverting and suppressing these values to produce at last a monolithic world culture in which all nontechnological difference and variety is mere appearance.
The main characteristics of technology or technique according to Ellul:

1. It is the new and specific milieu in which man is required to exist, one which has supplanted the old milieu, that of nature. So we live in a new milieu and one which has supplanted an older milieu of nature. We are required to exist in this new milieu.

2. This new technical milieu has the following characteristics (from Ihde, *Philosophy of Technology*):
   a. It is artificial
   b. It is autonomous with respect to values, ideas, and the state (think about what it means to be autonomous: to be free of or independent of these other things; how does Feenberg and Winner deal with these questions about the autonomy of technology?)
   c. It is self-determining in a closed circle. (Merton: technique produces all this without plan; no one wills it or arranges that it be so. Our technical civilization does not result from a Machiavellian scheme. It is a response to the laws of development of technique.)
   d. It grows but according to a process that is causal but not directed to ends (we need to think about the issue of ends and means in Ellul’s account of technology)
   e. It is formed by an accumulation of means that have established primacy over ends; (primacy of means over ends) (technique transforms ends into means. What was once prized in its own right now becomes worthwhile only if it helps achieve something else. And, conversely, technique turns means into ends. “Know-how” takes on an ultimate value.”
   f. All its parts are mutually implicated to such a degree that it is impossible to separate them or to settle any technical problem in isolation

3. The development of the individual techniques is an ambivalent phenomenon.

4. All social phenomenon are situated in Technique.

5. Technique comprises organizational and psychosociological techniques. Ellul refers to the adaptation of human beings to the technical milieu, modifying men in order to render them happily subordinate to their new environment (a la Huxley, who praised Ellul’s book).

6. Modern man’s state of mind is completely dominated by technical values, and his goals are represented only by such progress and happiness as is to be achieved through techniques. Ellul points out that in light of the autonomous nature of technology, the human individual himself is to be an ever greater degree the object of certain techniques and their procedures (pedagogical techniques, psycho-techniques, vocational guidance testing, personality and intelligence testing, industrial and group attitude testing). “To say that man should remain subject rather than object in the technological society means two things, viz., that he be capable of giving direction and orientation to Technique, and that, to this end, he be able to master it. Up to the present he has been able to do neither.”