

The absence of psychology in geopolitical issues

The Trump phenomenon interpreted through the work of C.G. Jung and Jacques Ellul

Since his return to the White House, Donald Trump has been making statements and signing executive orders that have left everyone dumbfounded. Whether in the United States or the rest of the world, analyses are multiplying in an attempt to understand the new administration's intentions, but they generally don't go beyond the geopolitical level. As the "Trump phenomenon" affects human beings both individually and collectively, I propose to call on psychology and sociology to understand its deeper origins.

In 2021, shortly after Donald Trump encouraged his followers to invade the U.S. Capitol, the historian Robert Paxton used the term "fascism" to describe this phenomenon. Now, the facts confirm his analysis: back in power, Trump is aligning himself with men wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes. And, by decree, he is withdrawing the U.S. from the Human Rights Council; making claims about annexing Canada, Greenland, and the Panama Canal; and pushing back against Ukraine while inviting overtures from Vladimir Putin and other autocrats. Recently, Trump and J.D. Vance publicly humiliated the Ukraine President, whose country is suffering from three years of Russian invasion. At the same time, members of Trump's team have shown sympathy for far-right European political parties. Finally, at home Trump is openly castigating the rule of law.

As with all totalitarian movements, the problem lies not so much in the personality of the leader as in the fact that millions of people trust him. But the phenomenon is totally atypical: while Trump enjoys the support of the entire high-tech industry and constantly extols the virtues of "artificial intelligence", he bases his propaganda on what many critics describe as "bullshit" ¹ it seems essential to me to examine this paradox.

From « Artificial Intelligence » to « Natural Bullshit » ²

To explain this paradox, I am drawing on the work of two European thinkers: the Swiss psychoanalyst C. G. Jung (1875-1961) and the French sociologist Jacques Ellul (1912-1994), even though both men are long deceased and never closely examined the history of the U.S. But despite my immense respect for the work of these two men, I believe that they can only shed light on the 21st century if they are brought into dialogue. In particular, I believe that the Ellulian concept of the *autonomy of technology* (of which the expression "artificial intelligence" is today the best illustration) can only be understood when explained by the Jungian theory of *autonomous complexes*. ³ I also think the Jungian analysis of the sacredness of the State, in *Present and Future* (illustrated today by the questioning of its legitimacy to regulate or not to regulate markets and digitized information), is only relevant if linked to the Ellulian analysis of the evolution of capitalism and technical innovation. ⁴

Jung and Ellul are very different men, both in character and trajectory. A generation separated them, they didn't speak the same language and their cultural references were far apart, even

¹ Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 1986. - Patrick Moreau, "De la bullshit", *Le Devoir*, Feb. 19. 2025

² By the expression "natural bullshit" I mean a lack of critical thinking. But if I want to use this expression, it is not for the sake of provocation but to highlight the fact that the lack of critical thinking is a synchronous effect of overvaluing the abilities of algorithms. Regularly, I keep reminding you that the expression "artificial intelligence" is nothing more than a vulgar oxymoron (Joël Decarsin, "Intelligence, disent-ils" ("Intelligence", they say...) *Sciences critiques*, Feb. 2, 2025). It is not necessary to be a psychologist to know that no computer is "intelligent" but that it simulates intelligence in an increasingly remarkable way. Now, it must be asked whether the lack of critical thinking has not reached such a level that the expression "natural bullshit" is ultimately the most relevant. At least explain to me how the policy of customs barriers imposed by Donald Trump, with all his succession of orders and counter-orders, is "intelligent".

³ Joël Decarsin, « Complexes autonomes et autonomie de la technique », proceedings of the conference « Technologies et inconscient », *Société Française de Psychologie analytique*, Paris, Apr. 10, 2021.

⁴ I'm writing this article especially for those who are interested in Jung's reflections, and also for those who are interested in Ellul's, in the hope that they will understand and compare their approaches.

if Ellul sometimes mentioned Jung. But like other intellectuals of their time, they analyzed two aspects of *modern world*. On the one hand, they note that Christianity, having lost its influence, had been replaced by a materialistic worldview. On the other hand, they acknowledged the difficulty for human beings to actualize their personality in an increasingly media-driven society, a factor that encouraged people to become increasingly conformist.

Jung's reflections on this subject began in the early 1930s, when he was over 50 years old. For the first time, he moved away from the field of psychology *stricto sensu* to engage in anthropological reflection. Noting the growing number of neurotic patients, he concluded that people were focusing more and more on the external world and neglecting their inner world, to the point of no longer even considering that their thoughts and actions originated beyond their conscious mind - in this case, in the unconscious:

*"During the 19th century, the metaphysics of the spirit gave way to a metaphysics of matter: psychologically speaking, this represents a tremendous revolution in worldview. The beyond was relocated to the here and now. [...] The mind came to be viewed only as a byproduct of matter. [...] Such is the dominant mentality today, which, for unconscious reasons, exerts a sovereign force of suggestion on all weak minds and draws them in."*⁵

Jung argued that by focusing on external events, modern man only takes the psyche seriously when it malfunctions (psychiatry), or when he wants to influence others (propaganda).⁶ According to Jung individuals remain unaware of the meaning of their actions, which seemed all the more concerning to him at a time in history when people were coming out of the First World War. In those "crazy years"⁷, people seemed to want to cultivate carelessness at all costs and not learn any lessons from the conflict... to avoid another. Unfortunately, we know all too well what happened next.

At the same time, Jacques Ellul began to read and comment on authors who criticized the mass industrialization that was spreading from the U.S. to Europe. Among them were Robert Aron and Renaud Dandieu, authors of a book titled "American Cancer"⁸, who denounced "the supremacy of industry and banking over all life" and called for a *spiritual revolution*. But against the tidal wave of materialism, no such spiritual revolution took place.

Jung was right in observing that "spirit" no longer held value, and that no one seemed interested in *self-knowledge* or in understanding the causes and consequences of their actions. Already by the 1930s claiming resistance against materialism was like trying to build a sandcastle during a tsunami. In fact, "modern man" poured all his energy into shaping the external world through technology and sacrificing all ethical concerns. What remained was an obsession with being as efficient as possible in all areas of life. And it must be said that, on two occasions, Donald Trump has been most effective in coming to power by constantly insulting the truth and all the old values.

The pursuit of efficiency replaces old values

In 1954, Jacques Ellul defines technique as stemming from "the preoccupation of the vast majority of men, to seek in all things the absolutely most effective method."⁹ This should be kept in mind when, seventy years later, Trump appoints the head of *high tech* to lead the *Department of Government Efficiency*. So, let's agree that when a U.S. president makes

⁵ C.G. Jung, « Das Grundproblem der gegenwertigen Psychologie » (« A fundamental problem of contemporary psychology »), lecture published in Zürich in 1934 in *Wirklichkeit der Seele*.

⁶ One of the great theorists of industrial propaganda was American Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays.

⁷ In French, *Roaring Twenties* are called "années folles". – Translator's note

⁸ Robert Aron and Renaud Dandieu, *Le cancer américain*, 1931

⁹ Jacques Ellul, *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle*, 1954. Tr. *The Technological Society*, Knopf, 1964

such disjointed remarks as Trump does, it can no longer be commented only in political terms but also requires an anthropological reading. The concepts of "artificial intelligence" / "natural bullshit" appear then appear as a fatal alliance.

One cannot analyze the Trump phenomenon without addressing the origin of these terms. In other words, one cannot examine current events without linking them to the slow evolution of Western civilization since the birth of the *religion of Progress* in the 18th century—nor can we ignore the fact that *progress* in technical domains often brings with it a not only intellectual but also moral *regression*. Let us now explore how Jung demonstrated this point.

It is important to recall that Jung was a psychiatrist who collaborated with Freud from 1907 to 1913, the year of their falling out. While both men shared the idea that the psyche is divided into two broad parts—conscious and unconscious—they developed radically different interpretations. Freud viewed the unconscious as a reservoir of thoughts repressed by the ego, primarily due to bourgeois moral propriety. Jung, without denying this entirely, considered it secondary. For him, the unconscious was the matrix of the entire psyche, which he called the Self. The unconscious does not only manifest reactively, in pathological contexts, but also creatively, in healthy ones.

Jung believed that if, instead of constantly wanting to shape the outside world, men explored their unconscious as one explores a continent, the world could only get better. Conversely, if this is not the case, the unconscious will behave in an anarchic, uncontrolled, and destructive way. Over time, people may even get used to such a destructive path. As we have become used to Trump's provocations until we handed him back the reins of power...

Jung saw the psyche (or "spirit") as a reality that is just as objective as matter. During the Christian era - when God was believed to have taken human form - spirit and matter were seen as consubstantial. But since the West has "de-christianized," it overvalues matter and devalues spirit (this word itself has become hollow). And the more this is the case, the more, by way of compensation, he *projects all sorts* of unconscious fantasies onto the objectual reality. This applies to individuals, groups, and entire masses. In this sense, ideologies can be considered collective, unconscious products. As one insists on bending reality to fit their desires, they not only begin to take their desires for reality but also slip into full-blown denial of reality. Mental confusion and denial are two sides of the same civilizational downfall.

In the U.S., this confusion between reality and truth, and this denial of reality, manifest in countless ways. Consider just two examples, vastly different but equally illustrative of Trumpism: the creationist who believes Adam and Eve were the first humans, and the president's advisor who labeled Trump's lies as "alternative facts."¹⁰ Failing to recognize that both confusion and denial originate in the unconscious, we lazily label it all "post-truth"¹¹ an empty and absurd expression. The problem only deepens as modern man shapes reality through increasingly sophisticated technical means, to the point of being unable to live without them, granting them an outsized place in his imagination. When we talk today about *screen addiction* or *digital dependency*, we're only scratching the surface, half a century after Ellul warned us about the "sacralization of technique."¹²

One could argue that the *sacralization of technique* is nothing new and that it has been happening since the Neolithic era when humans began cultivating land using increasingly efficient methods. Ellul acknowledges that the process is ancient but notes that it only accelerated dramatically in the 18th century as the population became denser. This led to

¹⁰ This expression was coined in 2017 by Kellyanne Conway, who was then advisor to Donald Trump in the White House.

¹¹ Joël Decarsin, "Le vrai nom de la post-vérité" (The Real Name of Post-Truth), *Encyclopédie de l'Agora*, Feb ; 14, 2021 <https://agora.qc.ca/chroniques/le-vrai-nom-de-la-post-verite>

¹² Jacques Ellul, *Les Nouveaux possédés*, 1973; Tr. *The New Demons*, Seabury, 1977.

the exponential rise of techniques and urban expansion (which, incidentally, should also be understood as a technical phenomenon).

- Psychological consequences of technological expansion: This expansion is not only seen as an *absolute necessity* but also as a source of material comfort that people equate with “happiness”¹³, the ultimate symbol of emancipation: the famed *technical progress*.

- Psychological consequences of urban expansion: The resulting overcrowding and all it entails, including the moral pressure to *conform* to social norms, or alternatively, the desire to transgress them through violence. To paraphrase Jung in my own words: “A person’s morality is inversely proportional to the size of the mass in which they are immersed.”

In mass society, what philosopher Hannah Arendt called the “banality of evil” is only exacerbated. The more we strive to shape the world, the more our relationships with others are reduced to superficial moral codes, while genuine ethical questioning (beginning with our relationship to truth and goodness) is de facto disqualified. The critical thinking itself is deactivated. That the current U.S. president comes from the world of reality television and the brain-dead entertainment industry suddenly makes perfect sense.

“Progress”: legitimization of domination... so, moral regression

Let us now see how one can articulate the thought of Jung and that of Ellul. While the first analyzed humanity’s relationship to reality through the lens of “exteriority-interiority,” the second framed it in terms of “action-attention”¹⁴: “The highest form of resistance to this technicist society, the truly revolutionary posture, is an attitude of contemplation rather than frenetic activity.”¹⁵

We can synthesize both frameworks in a diagram contrasting the ideology of **progress** with an old and *repressed* idea : **regress**.



Jung refers to the totality of the psyche (both conscious and unconscious) as the Self, and he sees the tragedy of “modern man” as his identification with only the ego, which is merely the most visible part. By doing so, this so-called modern man gives *free rein*¹⁶ to all unconscious impulses, without the slightest control by reason.

¹³ “Happiness is a new idea” said the French revolutionary Saint-Just in 1794 And this idea was theorized by the British utilitarians and forms the foundational pillar of economic liberalism.

¹⁴ This typology is reminiscent of the Chinese yin/yang polarity, but while Ellul showed no interest in Taoism, Jung was passionate about it

¹⁵ Jacques Ellul, *Autopsie de la révolution*, 1969. Tr. *Autopsy of Revolution*, Knopf, 1971.

¹⁶ One can easily link this to freedom of libertarianism: an idea of freedom *without any connection* with the concepts of equality and brotherhood, as is the case of the motto of the French republic : *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*.

The more one tries to shape the external world through technology, the less one is capable of understanding what the Self truly is. Conversely, in a vicious cycle, the more the ego is magnified¹⁷, the more the technician who molds the world becomes the social ideal. At best, art, poetry, and philosophy become quaint hobbies; at worst, the very idea of interiority is flatly denied.¹⁸

“Me, myself and I”: the deadlock of narcissism

Technology is the most refined symbolic form not only of capitalism¹⁹ but also of ego inflation and the broader will to power. Yet to avoid acknowledging (even to oneself) this hubris and to continue its harmful effects with a “clear conscience”, modern man manipulates language as we saw with the expression “artificial intelligence” and the word “progress” which he uses to justify his control and domination, of both the Other and of reality.

This intellectual sleight of hand serves a dual function: it hides reality (through denial) and disguises the will to power as a narrative of emancipation.²⁰ Ellul showed how the *ideology of happiness* underpins the ideology of progress.²¹ At first glance, the only possible rescue would lie in an ethic based on dialogue with an entity that transcends the ego. For Jung, that would be the unconscious. For Ellul, it is the Christian God, without any confessional intermediaries. But in a society consumed by commodity fetishism, ethics has zero “value,” while technology becomes capitalism’s lifeblood²². God, being instrumentalized (in the Nietzschean sense, “dead”), and the unconscious remaining unidentified on a collective level, the ego stands alone. Left to itself, it governs nothing, it *drifts*, submerged by its own prosthetics.²³ One excess has chased out another. And, by striving for omnipotence the ego ends up powerless in the face of the very process it triggered itself²⁴, to the point that its relationship with reality is now fundamentally altered.

Progress having been erected as a myth, the real was first devalued into an abstract “spectacle”²⁵ in which man is no longer an actor but a passive and irresponsible spectator. Unfortunately, things have gotten worse since then to a time in which the real is flatly *denied*.²⁶ And this denial is possible because the critical thinking as been stunned, anesthetized, *disconnected*. The expression “natural bullshit” only becomes clear when one has taken into consideration every word in this statement by Jacques Ellul: “*It is not technology that enslaves us, but the sacred that has been transferred to technology, which prevents us from activating our critical function*”.²⁷

¹⁷ This is particularly visible in the concept of “positive thinking,” coined in 1952 by American pastor Norman Vincent Peale, who is known as a major influence on Donald Trump.

¹⁸ In 1947, in his essay *La France contre les robots* (“France Against the Robots”), French writer Georges Bernanos summed it up as follows: “You cannot understand modern civilization unless you first admit that it is a universal conspiracy against all forms of interior life.”

¹⁹ Joël Decarsin, “Définancieriser l’économie ? La véritable révolution intellectuelle,” (“Definancialising the economy? The real intellectual revolution,” *Le Monde*, December 19, 2011).

²⁰ When Donald Trump says “MAGA,” one should translate “great again” as “decadent.” And the “deep state” he denounces is nothing more than the world of algorithms he slavishly relies on. Ellul showed as early as 1965 how politics is entirely shaped by technological “imperatives” (*L’illusion politique*; 1965. Tr. *The political Illusion*, Knopf, 1967).

²¹ Jacques Ellul, *Métamorphose du Bourgeois*, 1967. Not translated. A summary of this theory can be found in a lecture I gave in Marseille in May 2010: <https://www.millebabords.org/IMG/pdf/ideol.pdf>

²² The Trump phenomenon - and more broadly, libertarianism - is the ultimate expression of the “freedom of the free fox in the free henhouse”, as we say in France. The only real novelty is that Trump speaks shamelessly, whereas his predecessors used doublespeak. Paradoxically, he “speaks truth”, without euphemisms.

²³ At best, the ego can still maintain appearances: this is the meaning of the ambient narcissism, symbolized by the selfie: all at the surface of the water, nothing deep.

²⁴ This validates - among others - the myth of Prometheus and Goethe’s tale of the Sorcerer’s Apprentice. In *Psychology of the Unconscious*, Jung analyzes this phenomenon under the term “enantiodromia”.

²⁵ Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 1967. Tr. *Society of Spectacle*. Black and Red, 2002.

²⁶ Climate scepticism and more generally the conspiracy theory are the most obvious manifestations of this denial.

²⁷ Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons*, op. cit.



Pieter Brueghel the Elder, *The Parable of the Blind Men*, 1568
Tempera on canvas, 86 x 154 cm, Capodimonte Museum, Naples (Italy)

Trump is not the only one failing to *activate* his critical function; he is the blind man leading all the blind people -into the precipice.²⁸ He is being tracked not only by all those who voted for him, but also by the leadership of the Grand Old Party, who one by one have bowed to him, paralyzed by the *effectiveness* of his bluff. Also, by those who continue to treat him as if he were just another head of state. And even by those who don't take to the streets as he increasingly

unleashes his fascist rhetoric.²⁹ Above all, he is followed by all the people who *believe* in algorithms the way their most distant ancestors believed in good and evil spirits.

Bringing together the thoughts of Jung and Ellul seems essential, not only to explain how a man who publicly expresses himself no better than a nine-year-old child could be elected and re-elected President of the United States³⁰, but also to explore the *deeper* causes of the denial surrounding the climate catastrophe. *Understanding* the physical causes of that catastrophe is not enough if we fail to *become aware* of its psychic roots: namely, the desperate pursuit of material comfort that offers, on Earth, the equivalent of what Paradise once symbolized in Judeo-Christian culture.³¹ At that point, we shift from talking about the *pollution* of nature to analyzing its *desacralization* by technology.³²

The totalitarianism of the 21st Century

People often express surprise that autocracy seems to be triumphing over democracy all around the world. But this forgets that the Enlightenment's vision of democracy was inseparable from an imperative of education, of which the *Encyclopédie* was the emblem. That ideal has long since been dismantled by the brain-deadening industry³³ (notably reality television, Trump's own background), which mass-produces Panurge's sheep.

In 1993, shortly before Ellul's death, a journalist asked him: "Do you think that in the 21st century totalitarianisms such as Communism or Nazism will emerge?" Ellul answered immediately: "Without a doubt. I can already see one, and I can even name it: *conformism*."³⁴ He was, of course, referring to conformism to the technological order. When I heard him speak this way, it recalled a small quote by Jung that I had copied onto a scrap of paper and

²⁸ The parable of the blind men in Matthew's Gospel (Mt. 15:12) seems to me the best illustration of the Trump phenomenon. In this case, the precipice into which Trump is leading Americans may first take the form of economic chaos. Already, many of his former supporters are turning against his border and tariff policy plans. Tesla's share price is in free fall and, since Inauguration Day, acts of destruction have multiplied against the company's facilities. Jung calls Jung calls *enantiodromia* this type of sudden transition from fantasy to reality.

²⁹ While the "Hands Off" movement suggests that protest may slowly be replacing paralysis, existential concerns (inflation, unemployment, etc.) still outweigh concern for freedoms. The day an American citizen risks a fine, prison, or death for criticizing their leaders - like in Russia, China, or other dictatorships - we will have crossed another threshold.

³⁰ *Trump's Words: The Mechanics of an Effective Rhetoric, The Conversation*, October 16, 2024.

³¹ Joël Decarsin, "Crise climatique. L'impossible prise de conscience" (Climate Crisis: The Impossible Awakening), in *Puissance de l'Ombre. Entre individuel et collectif*, AJPO Conference, Toulouse, March 25, 2023.

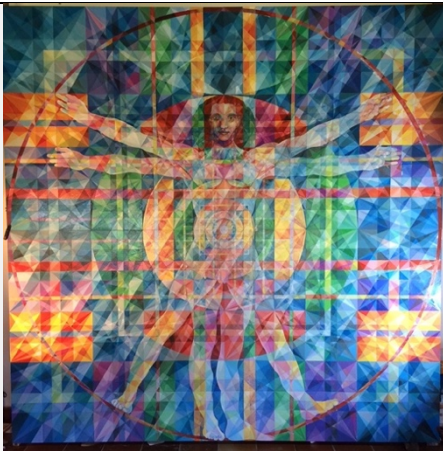
³² Jacques Ellul: "Plaidoyer contre la défense de l'environnement" (A Plea Against Environmental Defense) *France Catholique*, January 14, 21 and 28, 1972 – https://technologos.fr/doc/Plaidoyer_elleul.pdf

³³ Conceptualized in 1995 under the term *tittytainment* by Zbigniew Brzezinski, former advisor to President Carter.

³⁴ Serge Steyer, *L'homme entier* (documentary), 1993 – http://www.film-documentaire.fr/4DACTION/w_fiche_film/98_1

pinned to the wall of my student room fifty years ago: “Only a subject who is as well organized in their individuality as the collective is in its structure can resist a mass.”³⁵

Joël Decarsin, Aix-en-Provence, France, April 21, 2025
(Translation: PhD Jeffrey M. Jenson, Boulder, CO)



Artist by training and vocation, I taught visual arts to teenagers for forty years.

I discovered the thought of Carl Gustav Jung at the age of 21, and I used it as a compass to navigate the images that emerged on my canvases, images I initially didn't understand at all.

Later, faced with the absurdities of life (bureaucracy, “contemporary art,” interactions with robots, and above all the steam-roller that is the education system), I turned to Jacques Ellul.

That's when I understood that if “progress cannot be stopped,” it's not because we don't want to stop it, but because we've become entirely incapable of doing so: “the machine” has run away from us.

For three years, I was involved with the *Jacques Ellul International Association*. I redesigned their website, worked closely with Ellul's translators in South Korea, and launched a local group in my region (Marseille and Aix), in the tradition of the one Ellul created in Aquitaine in the 1930s with his friend Bernard Charbonneau, an early environmental thinker.

Feeling somewhat constrained in the Ellul association, which functions more like a scholarly society, I founded in 2012 a more activist organization called *Technologos*, with the slogan “thinking technology today,” drawing also on other techno-critical thinkers such as Lewis Mumford, Günther Anders, and Ivan Illich. Despite the richness of the exchanges, I became disillusioned for two reasons; one formal, the other related to content.

- Although I had drafted the association's statutes to operate in a federative model (to “act locally”), the cohesion never materialized, and—true to old Jacobin traditions—the association adopted the classic top-down structure: *outside Paris, no salvation!*

- While the quotation that forms the keystone of Ellul's thought (about “the sacred transferred to technique”) was accessible to me because of my psychoanalytic background, it was generally misunderstood by those around me. As a result, the association's discourse gradually took on a technophobic tone.

In 2015, I slowly distanced myself from *Technologos* and moved closer to the French Jungian milieu, hoping to highlight the complementarity of Jung's and Ellul's works. But ten years later, I sadly observe that Jungian therapists, while not indifferent to political and social events, tend to keep them on the periphery of their thinking, as though these events had little impact on their patients' psyches.

The warning Jung issued in 1957 in *Present and Future*, regarding the sacralization of the State, has never been republished in France, as if nothing had changed since the Cold War. Also, I observe that only six days after Trump's inauguration at the White House, a conference on Jung was held in Paris with not a single mention of “Present and Future” and was even titled “Present and Becoming”.

³⁵ C.G. Jung, *Gegenwart und Zukunft*, 1957. Tr. h In other works, Jung outlines countless ways to become “as organized in one's individuality as the mass is in its collectivity.” Referring back to the diagram, I would summarize this aim as “to act upon interiority”: interpreting one's dreams and expressing one's psychic life symbolically - visibly, audibly, or otherwise.