14

Environmental Violence and Agriculture

Incorporating Jacques Ellul's Theory of Technique and Technological Morality into the Environmental Violence Framework

PAUL STOCK

Engaging Environmental Violence

In this collection we take, as a given, that environmental violence (EV) is the sum total of harm (e.g., direct illness, lost years of life, climate change) caused by the release of both toxic and nontoxic pollution. Within the EV framework, Marcantonio argues that "the major driver behind the production of EV is *everyday life behaviors and patterns of consumption* that are so internalized and normalized that the violence they ultimately produce is either made invisible, seen as inevitable, or is incorrectly disconnected from its true causes" ([1], p. 3). In this chapter, I explore a set of social science theory, particularly that of French sociologist Jacques Ellul, around the role of technology in the wider culture. Ellul's theory of technique argues that, not just technology, but the cultural faith in technology, leads to the creation, production, use, misuse, and inability to control the harmful consequences of technology. To illustrate Ellul's theory in relationship to EV, I highlight the example of the violence in agriculture, while then describing one potential counter to the harm.

14.1 Introduction

This chapter explores environmental violence (EV) in relationship to agriculture. More specifically, I will examine EV and agriculture from the wider lens of Jacques Ellul's theory of technology with an emphasis on technique as it relates to violence. Ellul is an underappreciated theorist of technology, particularly in the United States, yet offers us a wider cultural and historical understanding of the role of technology and technique in relationship, especially to the unintended consequences of technology adopted uncritically. Next, I examine how technique interacts and causes violence through our interaction with nonhuman species and ecosystems. I then extend that relationship to our specific relationship with agriculture and look at both the violence through agriculture and the consequences.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:44:37, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009417150.018

I conclude with an examination of what an agriculture of flourishing might look like through the example of the Catholic Worker farms.

14.2 Environmental Violence

Marcantonio and Fuentes define EV as "direct and indirect harm experienced by humans due to toxic and nontoxic pollutants put into a local and concurrently the global ecosystem through human activities and processes" ([2], p. 3). The well-documented outcomes of EV include not only death, but also harm to physical and mental well-being. One of the most difficult things about EV is that, while we know that humans are the cause of this violence to other humans through the environment, it is difficult to see and assign responsibility. Further, many of those who are the victims of EV prioritize values other than their environmental well-being when considering their political choices [3].

The difficulty of seeing the harm done can, in part, be described as slow violence. O'Lear focuses on the process of science that occludes environmental harm as slow violence [4]. The harm to the environment from human activity is less able to be seen and much less talked about because the harm is often wrapped up in "complex" scientific explanations, rather than media-digestible bits. We can then see slow violence *to* the environment and *through* the environment. On the news we hear of oil spills, for instance, and instantly comprehend the damage *to* animals, watersheds, and ecosystems. It is more difficult to process the damage to humans, say, from consuming fish that have ingested oil drenched foods or swum in water poisoned by toxic releases. This kind of EV *through* the environment is far more difficult to see because it takes longer, both in the number of steps and the actual time. This picks up where Marcantonio and Fuentes [2] were discussing EV as pollution that, yes, harms environmental systems and nonhuman species, but for our purposes, harms humans with "the environment" as the vector of delivery of the violence.

While much of the harm from EV, as defined by Marcantonio and Fuentes, may not have the direct cause and effect visibility of, say, homicide, we can interrogate and draw conclusions about the effects of the systems that engender harm *through* the environment. I will offer the example of EV through agricultural practices, but, prior to that, I want to offer a wider theory of one of the causes of EV.

14.3 Ellul's Theory of a Technique, the Technological Society, and Technological Morality

Most of our critiques of technology, including the methods to produce the pollution at the heart of EV, tend to focus on particular technologies, or families of technologies, that either bear closer scrutiny or not. For instance, with the rise of

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:44:37, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009417150.018

social media, it is apps and particular regulations that come under fire, not cell phones in general, much less a wide critique of technology in our culture [5]. Historically, individual advances in technological development made their way into people's hands and then those advances were either adopted, discarded, or manipulated to work better over an appropriate period of time and in particular contexts. While a too brief summary of technological adoption, that scenario is just not what happens today. In fact, we are deluged with new, shinier, "better," technological options all the time at a rate far too fast for culture to make decisions about what is best in a given context. Within a milieu of advertising, venture capital, and eroding systems of moral norms, the consequences are many. Related to the environment, we have been inundated with synthetic chemicals, especially in combination, that within a lax regulatory system, have led to significant harm to human persons [6, 7]. In particular, much of this harm comes from agricultural chemicals and synthetic fertilizers. The harm to human persons (mainly in the form of various cancers and other diseases) accrues primarily to those who apply these chemicals or ingest water drawn from a polluted watershed or to their children.

French sociologist Jacques Ellul's wider theory of a technological society starts from the premise that technique, not capital, is the determining factor in all of our societal relationships. By technique, Ellul emphasizes "the *totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency* (for a given stage of development) in *every* field of human activity. Its characteristics are new; the technique of the present has no common measure with that of the past." ([8], p. xxv, emphasis in the original). With this emphasis on efficiency, Ellul articulates that, while we commonly think of technology as only referring to machines, our current technological society seeks control and efficiency (that is, power), not just in our machines and digital tools, but in every area of life. In short, Ellul argues that technology has become a system unto itself under a wider culture of technique thus making it nigh impossible for the kinds of cultural checks outlined earlier to occur. As Ellul scholar, Richard Stivers articulates:

> Technology is the paramount sacred force in modern societies. It has supplanted nature and society in this regard. Ultimately what is experienced as sacred is one's life milieu. The myth of technological utopianism expresses our deepest desires and expectations for technology. The myth goes something like this: Science and technology (applied science) are directing us to a state of maximum production and consumption, a utopia. Technology provides the solutions to all environmental and human problems, thereby allowing society to achieve ever greater efficiency. The technological utopia is the "promised land of total consumption" [from Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*]. People are free to choose among the myriad of goods, services, and experiences … that will bring them maximum happiness, perfect health, and eternal youth. ([9], pp. 66–67)

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:44:37, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009417150.018

In our current milieu in which efficiency (in profit, in production, in consumption, in academics, in parenting, in politics, etc.) becomes the primary measure of success, we have turned winning into a value. We also seek to control and make efficient, not just our relationship with machines and the planet, but one another. Stivers contends that, "Manipulation leaves the other less free because it does not work rationally; human technique bypasses reason in its effort to control the other's instincts and emotions" ([10], pp. 85–86).

In a technological society dominated by technique, EV, as the release of toxic and nontoxic pollution, is understood to be an efficient way of controlling material resources; creating wealth; and manipulating other human beings. EV is considered rational in spite of growing evidence that the costs of such perceived efficiency leads to terrible harm both to specific human persons and to the wider flourishing of social and ecological communities.

These techniques pursue efficiency in all things, and that pursuit of efficiency creates metrics of success (e.g., test scores, crop yields, workplace productivity) that then become the goals of society. The creation of these metrics creates incentives to erode planetary systems and turn human relationships into ones based on competition, as opposed to dignity. Thus, technique erodes sociality, tradition, civility, and modes of operating entrenched in context. Ellul's is a historical theory. Prior eras looked to either the needs of survival (a milieu of nature) or institutions (the milieu of the social) that evolved over many years of interaction and trial and error. Ellul's insight about technique is that it pursues its own ends as it operates as a system, and all of our institutions are tied to it in a pursuit of efficiency for its own ends, without regard for the consequences to persons or communities.

Hannah Arendt connects violence to the loss (or even perceived loss) of power ([11], p. 63). That power, not enriching oneself, becomes the measure of success. For Ellul, this is technique at its height. Power for power's sake becomes the mark of efficiency. But *power* is for something to be able to do something. However, in a technological society, power becomes a goal in and of itself – a value. Those who have power are valued, those who do not are devalued or eliminated, as in the case of the Holocaust and other genocides [12]. Given that power is a value and any means necessary will be employed to get it, including violence. That violence will then be looked upon as appropriate because we culturally value power. We then turn science and technology into a tool to appropriate power, not to solve problems.

Ellul's wider theory of technique and the wider technological society offers us a few strengths, as opposed to, say, Marcuse or science and technology scholarship (STS) that does not engage Ellul. First, Ellul offers an alternative to Marxian (only) political economy that, in spite of really incisive critiques of capitalism, still tend to rely solely on the Revolution as the solution. Ellul offers a framework that

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:44:37, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009417150.018

allows for critique without necessarily offering a solution. That can be an unsatisfactorily hard pill to swallow. Ellul contends that our institutions, including the state, are as mired in technique as all the problems and cannot necessarily offer a remedy through more regulation, or better leadership, or green capitalism, or any other way. As I will point to later, while Ellul was a Christian, I think the more apt takeaway for what Ellul offers as a path forward more closely tracks with an interpretation of nonviolent anarchism as opposed to solely sanctioning Christianity as the solution to political and environmental problems, including agriculture. Second, Ellul has been dismissed as a technological determinist because, to his critics, he does not offer viable (or any!) solutions. Ellul fails to give in to a desire to develop a pathway forward simply because we want the possibility of a happy ending. The wider question is, does offering palatable solutions, in spite of their unlikelihood, warrant the cancellation of scholarship in today's language? I contend that it does not. I also put forward that I think there are some pragmatic reasons why Ellul, despite a brief moment in the 1960s with the English translation of the *Technological Society*, is dismissed, not only by STS scholars, but most social scientists [8]. Much of Ellul's work should be seen as a complement to that of his collaborator, Bernard Charbonneau, which has only recently been translated into English. Charbonneau, like Ellul, also suffered some of the parochialism of the French academy for deigning to not live in Paris. Charbonneau suffers the secondary indignation of having published explicitly about environmental issues prior to the global academy sanctioning them as anything more than the foray of scientific disciplines. This constellation of factors leaves Ellul and Charbonneau, and others in their wake, as an untapped resource of thought to help us frame today's issues, including that of EV.

Charbonneau, following Ellul, does not paint us a rosy picture for those actively concerned about politics or achieving outcomes that protect or enrich environmentally positive outcomes, whether we employ violence (in response to and then a self-perpetuating cycle) or resist using violence. In fact, Charbonneau illustrates the environmentalist's struggle at witnessing EV and feeling helpless while cautioning us with: "But by answering violence with violence, [the environmentalist] places himself on its turf and, in his turn, risks being seized by a rage driven this time by impotence" ([13], pp. 175–176). Overall, technique overrides the ability to care (sociologically) and, thus, build and maintain flourishing communities for all. Under technique all are devalued when power is the only form of success; people and places are devalued along with everything in them, including other species, food, or ecosystems.

Technique pursues any means necessary for efficient outcomes, without guardrails as to what might be considered appropriate. As Weisberg writes, technique only seeks technical solutions to the exclusion of how we typically understand

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:44:37, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009417150.018

ethics and morality ([14], p. 48). Technological morality seeks only power [15, 16]. By concluding that we live in a technological milieu dominated by technique and a pursuit of efficiency with its own independent technological morality (it is out for efficiency and power), then violence as harm will only be understood as a necessity in pursuit of that self-same efficiency. We see examples in the managing of the Vietnam War, where the metric of success became body count (not limited to enemy combatants and, thus, we get My Lai) and previously during the Holocaust success was measured in the number of bodies "processed" [17, 18]. These distortions of living in a world, where success is measured by the number of human lives extinguished, are perhaps the most extreme examples and, yet, in a consideration of violence, the fact that these are just two among many examples, speaks to the pervasiveness of the relationship between technique and violence.

14.4 Technique, Agriculture, and Violence

In her work *Every Farm a Factory*, Ruth Fitzgerald outlines the rise of industrialization in agriculture. Efficiency – more than anything, including profit – guides the cultural shift [19]. Capitalism dominates the largest and wealthiest agribusinesses and farmers, while also entrenching an ideology of technological utopia in global agriculture under the phrase "Feed the world" ([20, 21], p. 343). James Scott offers: "If the logic of actual farming is one of an inventive, practiced response to a highly variable environment, the logic of [industrial] agriculture is, by contrast, one of adapting the environment as much as possible to its centralizing and standardizing formulas" ([22], p. 301). The practice of industrial agriculture has become sacred, inviolable under technique. Further, it actually undermines efforts of raising food within a community, with things like homeowners' associations that demand front lawns of grass, rather than food-producing gardens. With specific consideration to agriculture, we can talk about violence *through* the environment, both the spectacular, like the explosion of a fertilizer plant, and the slower effects of pollution, water, and financial destruction that sometimes take decades to become visible. The sacred logic of technique in agriculture also precludes advocating for solutions to abate said violence.

In our current situation, where EV is conceptualized as harm done to persons, the pursuit of efficiency in agriculture requires that we accept that success (in terms of yield, profits, and quarterly growth) costs human harm. Yet, this system that is deemed efficient and profitable, is only such for a very few and is propped up by billions of dollars in subsidies and other systems. On the whole, the consequences of this system lead to poisoning [23]; water pollution [24]; dead zones [25]; algal blooms [26]; hunger [27]; human harm [6, 7]; lower sperm counts [28]; lawsuits [29]; and hollowed out communities [30]. The EV of agriculture is clear. For the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:44:37, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009417150.018

rest of this chapter, I would like to illustrate how Ellul's theory of technique, and those in its wake, help us further utilize and expand the EV framework.

The broadest example of technique in agriculture is the historical and continuing colonization of land that falls within the United States. Further, the development of agriculture under a settler colonial regime built, and continues to maintain, institutions that marginalize many persons with historical ties to the land [31–33].

An EV framework applied to agriculture might exclusively focus on the toxic and nontoxic harm to human beings. By incorporating EV in dialogue with Ellul's understanding of technique and technology as a system, we can see that the harm goes beyond poisoning. I would like to briefly extend the ripple effect of damage from EV in agriculture related to persons and communities. Despite all the claims of technique of efficiency in modern agriculture, many rural communities, and those in them, are considered externalities and the outcomes to their livelihoods, communities, and selves are considered collateral damage.

14.4.1 Dispossession and Debt

Beyond the settler colonial reality of much of the United States, even those doing the colonizing have not been universally supported by technique. In the United States, we hear of the Farm Crisis of the 1980s. But in many ways the "crisis" was technique at work. Following agricultural secretary Earl Butz's "Get big or get out" pronouncement, farmers sought to grow – in terms of acreage and scale of production – aiming for higher yields to offset the excessive loans that banks encouraged, despite inflationary rates. The increased yields flooded the markets, leading to lost income, rather than the predicted windfall. A flooded market, in combination with dismantled price supports, led to financial chaos for many over-leveraged farmers [34, 35]. As a result, many American farmers became heavily indebted, particularly as land prices then took a tumble. In the pursuit of efficiency, banks created a farm bubble with the purpose of decreasing the number of farmers without regard to the impact on people's lives ([36], pp. 15–16).

Banks then foreclosed on the very people they had encouraged to borrow beyond their means.

> Today's disintegration of rural life, the breakup of family small town organizations and whole communities fits the pattern established by colonial powers throughout the Third World, a process happily described as the smashing up of social structures in order to extract the elements of labor from them. ([36], p. 159)

Farmers in Aotearoa, New Zealand, went through similar upheavals to their rural economy in the 1980s [37]. Those that survived foreclosure then took on a mantle

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:44:37, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009417150.018

of victors; those that were foreclosed on or went bankrupt or committed suicide didn't win. The logic of technique here then is about winning and power. Those that don't win are losers. In the wake of such upheaval, the communities that farmers and farms are embedded in change, often shrinking.

14.4.2 Depopulations and School Closures

Depopulation is defined as "chronic population losses that prevent counties from returning to an earlier period of peak population size" ([38], p. 3). The consequences of the move toward both industrial agriculture and technique have set much of rural America into a depopulation slide ([38], p. 5), emphasizing that "more than 80 percent of all rural farm counties today are depopulating" ([38], p. 15). Related to depopulation, but without a clear indicator of the causal direction, are school closures. Sageman argues: "The costs of school closures to communities can be substantial, even if they go unacknowledged" ([39], p. 21). Tieken and Auldridge-Reveles argue: "School closure, then, might be best understood as a form of educational redlining [40], continuing a cycle of marginalization, outmigration, and appropriation that, ultimately, furthers spatial injustice" ([41], p. 939). Using certain metrics of technique, city, county, and state bureaucrats then make policies to make the most efficient use of available funds without a wider lens to the harm that shrinking communities intentionally might have.

14.4.3 Devaluation

Further, there is a devaluation of persons using similar techniques. When farmers' farms are foreclosed, it is not just a process of turning property over to a bank, but it forecloses on the identity of many farmers. What becomes of a farmer who cannot farm? [42]. As Davidson argues: "To fail several generations of relatives … is a terrible and for some an unbearable burden" ([36], p. 95). And that failure is felt as a "collective trauma, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared" ([43], p. 154).

A key passage of Bell's book that examined Iowa farmers in the late 1990s describes:

> The devastation of local communities wrought by economic dislocation is also a devastation of selves … I was in the presence of the deeply wounded. Of farmers without farms. Of men deprived of much of the means to masculinity as they understand it. Of people whose principal source of connection with their heritage (again, as they understand it) has been ripped away from them. ([42], p. 135)

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:44:37, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009417150.018

Bell then quotes anthropologist Kathryn Marie Dudley, who writes: "The loss of a farm is not just the loss of material possessions, it is also the loss of a sense of community and one's place in the world" ([44], p. 164). For farmers dislocated from their farms, it means that it is not just their material life that has been upended, but their sense of self. That includes damage to both their masculinity and their personhood that has been wrapped up in their relationship with the land [45–47]. In contemporary agriculture, not only the farmer specifically [48], but their sense of self, their personhood, is devalued. Technique, in this case, the EV of the harmful farm practices, first, combined with the financial and cultural violence that took away what they held sacred and what provided stability to their sense of self – owning and running a farm, identity as a farmer, an intact notion of masculinity, and a sense of community belonging [16, 49]. Kansas dairy farmer, Jason Schmidt puts this in the context of honor culture and writes: "In these cultures, a person's reputation and the perception of invincibility are of utmost importance" [50]. The notion of being considered a good farmer feeds into a rural and farmer honor culture. The cultural expectations of tidy farms and new technology (whether they are effective or not for growing food) contributes to agricultural violence by expecting farmers to use toxic chemicals and machinery that contributes to GHG emissions [51]. Again, under technique, the biggest achievement is to appear like one is pursuing efficiency, even if the farming methods at play are not necessarily growing more food nor making a profit. So the cultural expectations of being a good farmer then also require indebtedness for the chemicals and new tractors, while also leading to outcomes that may indicate failure or losing. Thus, the same logic that seeks efficiency, leads to EV and the devaluation of actual farmers and the hollowing out of their communities.

Farmers are, thus, devalued, along with country and rural people in general ([52, 53], p. 274). The consequences of this devaluation take many forms including violence to others and oneself. Domestic violence rates increase in the wake of foreclosures. Especially during the 1980s, there were many stories of farmers (again, almost exclusively men) killing bankers or others they blamed for the loss of the farm. Others committed suicide. In fact, "farmer" often ranks near the top of the list of professions with the highest suicide rates [54–56]. Davidson noted that suicides are vastly underreported in rural areas, as they are often reported as farm accidents or hunting accidents ([36], p. 94).

One last consequence of technique in agriculture related to violence after economic and personal dislocation, is a period of disorientation that leads many to seek a new story to help rebuild their identity. Bell refers to this as seeking a phenomenological lifeline that leads to a tendency for farmers to join militias and point their rage to the bankers and the government [42, 53, 57].

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:44:37, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009417150.018

The violence in agriculture, and how technique plays out in mainstream agriculture, encourages the use of land, soil, water, animals, and persons associated with it, as cogs in machines' ever-renewable and shinier technology. Much of our agriculture is practiced on colonized Indigenous land, continuing a long separation. The agricultural economy privileges commodity production that, neither feeds the world, nor enriches local economies, while at the same time, draining aquifers unnecessarily and prioritizing technological fixes that lead to ever increasing reliance on pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides that directly poison persons and watersheds. This agricultural system uses huge amounts of fossil fuels, while producing methane that contributes to climate change through GHG emissions. In addition to these direct examples of EV in agriculture, rural communities lose population and, thus, the ability to maintain themselves or develop in meaningful ways. Last, farmers and rural persons are (morally) devalued, which can lead to involvement in further violence that is either interpersonal (the killing of a banker) or more sociological (via involvement in militias and events like the January 6th insurrection). The future of agriculture is being shaped now and the following section imagines a few pathways.

14.5 The Future of Agriculture

If technique is as violent as it is, what can we expect in the future? Many will look to more institutional control – regulations, subsidies, and partnerships between public and private finances. If technique unfolds, as agribusiness and many investors believe, then we will continue to see major investments and policies geared toward colonizing space, lab innovations, and promises of Big Data breakthroughs.

EV comes from the gap between presumption of technology as magic and its reality as technique of manipulation and adjustment. In his book *Technology as Magic*, Richard Stivers indicates how technique continues to mystify us because it creates illusions like magic [58]. We are swayed by the utopian promises, both in our day-to-day lives and in the contributions of technology to solve our social and ecological problems. Despite clear indications otherwise, most people perceive, and we write about, new technologies as if their introduction is one of neutrality; a new gadget is created and it enters society and is, thus, either adopted or not depending on its usefulness. Ellul's great insight was to understand technology/technique as a system [59]. Within this system, technique is not, nor can it be, neutral. It is embedded and implicated in the logic of power and violence [60]. As the limits of Earthly production take shape in parallel with unprecedented indications of ecosystem collapse, some have taken up the notion that humanity should seek to colonize space as the future of the species. Taken to its logical conclusion, we will see agri-business increasingly partner with the mostly private industries

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:44:37, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009417150.018

pursuing a new space race. If we can't feed the world, we'll feed the worlds! It is not a coincidence that people who do not live in a community on a daily basis – for they are walled off by their wealth – demand and create systems that dismiss Earth as a spent resource. To talk of repair is weakness. As Kendra Pierre-Louis writes: "The false belief that the only way we can deal with current and future problems is to expand outward is an extension of colonialist ideals" [61].

14.6 Agriculture of Flourishing

If we then take, as a given, that there is EV in agriculture, what response do we, as persons, have? Ellul, Stivers, and others, as opposed to many, see the state and other large-scale institutions as compromised by technique and, therefore, unable to counter technique's effects. This would carry over to asking for state regulations and policy or restructuring to counter effects of technique because the state is technique as well [62].

On one hand, we could argue that the strength of Ellul's critique and the example of the Catholic Worker, offered later, rely solely on their basis in Christianity [63]. However, personalism or nonviolent anarchism are not confined to Christianity and offer widespread possibilities for flourishing that aligns with other arguments, including bioregionalism, traditional ecological knowledge, and more contemporary openness to bridging Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of being in the world. Rather than looking to the state or other institutions corrupted by technique, the argument is to live in the world cooperatively with others without resorting to manipulating them. So what recourse do we have to understand and survive an environmentally violent world? For Ellul, our hope comes in a stance of nonpower [64]. By this, he means that whenever we are given the chance to hold power over others, we must abdicate in the hope of re-establishing or creating a new sacred that does not revolve around power. This stance of nonpower, to reject a technological morality that prioritizes winning as a value, like nonviolence, does not equate to passivity or indifference. As Stivers argues, "It is an ethic that must find some tiny crack in a structure of near total power" ([12], p. 181).

We can interpret that idea of nonpower in a number of ways – I tend to focus on care and community – both ecological and social – that follows and merges the ideas of Tove Pettersen [65] on mature care and Wilkinson [66] on both social and ecological community well-being [49]. By mature care, Pettersen means "The notion of mature care, however, involves as much concern for oneself as it does for others. Mature care implies a balancing between the interests of self and others" ([65], p. 14). Others might refer to this combination of mature care and community well-being as flourishing [67]. These examples share a focus on decentralized power structures and an emphasis on cooperation.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:44:37, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009417150.018

The counter to technique and a technological morality is the pursuit of caring relationships in community toward social and ecological flourishing. As Robin Kimmerer puts it: "All flourishing is mutual" [68]. What do we mean by an agriculture of flourishing?

As Michael Bell writes, with an emphasis on creating phenomenological lifelines and what I would describe as re/creating new sacreds: "But growing food is only one dimension of what I would argue is the purpose of agriculture: cultivation—the care and tending of creation, human and nonhuman, social and ecological" ([42], p. 248).

As I have written elsewhere:

> The focus on values means we have to better articulate what it is a just agri-food system looks like – we have to articulate what a flourishing food system(s) means. Sociologist Christian Smith [67] argues in the wider idea of societal flourishing that, "the promotion of personal flourishing toward the common good is the criterion by which all societies must be judged, the central standard of any social ethic" ([67], p. 212). By extension then, how persons experience food systems is just as important, if not more so, than the food system's market successes. To get there, to that teleological end, of better food systems, then we have to flex our imaginations. [69] ([49], p. 95)

It is only in recognizing the power of nature as the real, actual, physical home, and life-giving place of being human, that we can pursue actual freedom from our knowledge of nature, from the state, and from institutions that seek to undermine that freedom. Bernard Charbonneau wrote: "Freedom is but a sham if it fails to take into account the necessities (clean air, clean water, access to land for food) ruling any reality" ([13], p. 80). Both Ellul and Charbonneau conclude that an emphasis on specific relationships with specific persons and specific places is the antidote to the totalitarian (from both Left and Right) impulse of modernity.

What, then, are some examples of farmers practicing and enjoying freedom and mature care that counters technique and technological utopianism? Who are these farmers working in a morality of flourishing? Examples include movements to return land [31]; care for and with nonhuman species and ecosystems that are seen as relations in and of themselves [68, 70]; the Landless Peasants in Brazil [71]; encouraging autonomy like in repeasantization [72, 73]; reclaiming historical narratives like White's *Freedom Farmers* [74]; and those pursuing agricultures of nonpower, wherever they may be, including small farms in the midst of industrialized agriculture [32] or new farmers in Kansas [75]. Other examples can be found in iterations of agroecology, regenerative agriculture, and permaculture.

I would like to conclude briefly, with a focus on some of the farmers I have worked with in the United States, to offer some specific illustrations, but more so, to look forward to hearing examples that you may have to share with me.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:44:37, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009417150.018

14.6.1 Catholic Worker Farms

The Catholic Worker movement began in the 1930s, combining the journalistic talents of Dorothy Day and the everyday theology of Peter Maurin. What began as a newspaper focused on justice and translating the Catholic Church's social teaching, quickly grew into a series of decentralized houses of hospitality with a self-declared mission to care for one's neighbor. Without government funding or any official role in the Catholic Church, the Catholic Worker movement defies easy political spectrum pigeonholing. On one hand, Catholic Workers (it is not a membership organization) tend to support and live out the social justice teachings of the Church, including operating in a decentralized power structure, supporting unions, feeding and housing the poor, and protesting for nuclear disarmament, which aligns more with those on the left. On the other, many Catholic Workers also support Church teaching on things like abortion, birth control, and hierarchy that tend to align with the political right. For our purposes here, what is important is that from that original newspaper in 1933, the Catholic Worker movement has grown to over 175 houses of hospitality (www.catholicworker.org/communities/directory-picker.html) and many more organs of communication, including newspapers, newsletters, blogs, websites, zines, and multiple farm efforts. These farm efforts began with a small farm in Easton, PA in 1936, with more efforts sponsored by New York City (where Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, the co-founders lived most often) and other Catholic Workers since the 1930s.

In recent years, Catholic Workers' farms can be found on multiple continents, including Aotearoa, New Zealand, Europe, and North America. In North America, a cluster of farms have emerged in the Driftless Bioregion of the Mississippi River, including farms in Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Much of this comes from the longstanding efforts of Anathoth Community Farm (www.catholicworker.org/communities/houses/wi-luck-anathoth-community-farm.html), but also many others that call this region home and have come to be Catholic Workers [16, 76–78].

In terms of an agriculture of flourishing and resistance to technique, I highlight these Catholic Worker farms, for they grow their own food, intentionally make less than the taxable threshold for income as a war protest; read; and educate themselves about issues, not only related to fair and just food production methods, but on how to build and maintain community, including doing significant work learning and teaching about Indigenous ways of being, and are in dialogue with their Indigenous neighbors. These Catholic Workers, who have access to land, education, and networks of communication, use them to build community, healthy soil, protect water, and educate neighbors and future generations, all of which exhibit ways of understanding an agriculture of nonpower or an agriculture of flourishing.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:44:37, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009417150.018

I have seen similar examples of farmers in Kansas, both Christian and not, who work the land with the hope of producing food for their families and their customers in ways that reflect love, cooperation, and community building, not competition or power-seeking [75]. "According to Ellul, re-gaining some control over technological development … requires extricating from the public's mind the spell of the 'technological bluff', breaking their fascination for technologies" ([79], p. xvi, [80], p. 220). In some ways, it is through food that it is both most difficult and easiest to understand technique's violent role in agriculture. Difficult, because technique aims to occlude the harm it does to the water, the soil, the animals, and the persons involved in picking our fruit and vegetables, driving the trucks, or working in the restaurants and grocery stores. But food also offers the easiest path to flourishing because we each have some way of connecting to food in personal ways that can effect change either through growing, learning online or in person, or through cooking, sharing meals, and asking questions. In our daily habits, we may not affect the complete necessary sociological changes to call this bluff, but we can equip ourselves to practice the eating and growing of food based in nonpower and cooperation. And we can do it together.

References

[1] Marcantonio RA. *Environmental violence in the earth system and the human niche*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 2022.
[2] Marcantonio R, Fuentes A. Environmental violence: A tool for planetary health research. SSRN Journal [Internet]. 2021 [cited Feb 25, 2022]; Available from: www.ssrn.com/abstract=3986264
[3] Hochschild AR. *Strangers in their own land: Anger and mourning on the American right*. New York: The New Press; 2018.
[4] O'Lear S. Geographies of slow violence: An introduction. In: *A research agenda for geographies of slow violence: Making social and environmental injustice visible*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing; 2021. pp. 1–20.
[5] Haidt J. Why the past 10 years of American life have been uniquely stupid. The Atlantic [Internet]. Apr 11, 2022; Available from: www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/05/social-media-democracy-trust-babel/629369/
[6] Carson R. *Silent spring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; 1962.
[7] Steingraber S. *Living downstream: A scientist's personal investigation of cancer and the environment*. New York: Vintage Books; 1998.
[8] Ellul J. *The technological society*. New York: Vintage; 1964.
[9] Stivers R. *The illusion of freedom and equality*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press; 2008.
[10] Stivers R. *Shades of loneliness: Pathologies of a technological society*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers; 2004.
[11] Arendt H. *On violence*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World; 1970.
[12] Stivers R. *The culture of cynicism: American morality in decline*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell; 1994.
[13] Charbonneau B. *The green light: A self-criticism of the ecological movement*. London: Bloomsbury; 2018.
[14] Weisberg Z. Biotechnology as end game: Ontological and ethical collapse in the "biotech century". *NanoEthics.* Apr 2015;9(1):39–54.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:44:37, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009417150.018

[15] Stivers R. Towards a sociology of morality. *The International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy.* 1996;16(1/2):1–14.
[16] Stock PV. The sociology of environmental morality: Examples from agri-food. In: *The Cambridge handbook of environmental sociology* [Internet]. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 2021. pp. 429–44. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108554558.027
[17] Gartner SS, Myers ME. Body counts and "success" in the Vietnam and Korean wars. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History.* 1995;25(3):377.
[18] Todorov T. *Facing the extreme: Moral life in the concentration camps*. New York: Metropolitan; 1996.
[19] Fitzgerald DK. *Every farm a factory: The industrial ideal in American agriculture*. New Haven: Yale University Press; 2003.
[20] Rosin C. Food security and the justification of productivism in New Zealand. *Journal of Rural Studies.* 2013;29:50–8.
[21] Vanderburg WH. *Our war on ourselves: Rethinking science, technology, and economic growth*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press; 2011.
[22] Scott JC. *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; 1998.
[23] Boedeker W, Watts M, Clausing P, Marquez E. The global distribution of acute unintentional pesticide poisoning: estimations based on a systematic review. *BMC Public Health.* Dec 2020;20(1):1875.
[24] Mateo-Sagasta J, Zadeh SM, Turral H. *More people, more food, worse water?: A global review of water pollution from agriculture*. Rome, Italy: FAO; 2018.
[25] Bailey A, Meyer L, Pettingell N, Macie M, Korstad J. Agricultural practices contributing to aquatic dead zones. In: *Ecological and practical applications for sustainable agriculture*. Springer; 2020. p. 373–93.
[26] Wurtsbaugh WA, Paerl HW, Dodds WK. Nutrients, eutrophication and harmful algal blooms along the freshwater to marine continuum. WIREs Water [Internet]. Sep 2019;6(5). Available from: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/wat2.1373
[27] Anderson MD, Rivera-Ferre M. Food system narratives to end hunger: Extractive versus regenerative. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability.* Apr 2021;49:18–25.
[28] Hayes TB, Hansen M. *From silent spring to silent night: Agrochemicals and the anthropocene*. Kapuscinski AR, Locke KA, Barnosky A, editors. Elementa: Science of the Anthropocene. Jan 1, 2017;5:57.
[29] Gillam C. *Whitewash: The story of a weed killer, cancer, and the corruption of science*. Washington, DC: Island Press; 2017.
[30] Carr PJ, Kefalas M. *Hollowing out the middle: The rural brain drain and what it means for America*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press; 2009.
[31] Brewer J, Stock P. Beyond extension: Strengthening the federally recognized tribal extension program (FRTEP). *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development.* Jun 6, 2016;1–11.
[32] Carlisle L. *Healing grounds: Climate, justice, and the deep roots of regenerative farming*. Washington, DC: Island Press; 2022.
[33] Farrell J, Burow PB, McConnell K, Bayham J, Whyte K, Koss G. Effects of land dispossession and forced migration on Indigenous peoples in North America. *Science.* Oct 29, 2021;374(6567):eabe4943.
[34] George S. *How the other half dies*. New York: Penguin Books; 1991.
[35] Spitz P. Silent violence: Famine and inequality. *International Social Science Journal.* 1978;30(4):867–92.
[36] Davidson OG. *Broken heartland: The rise of America's rural ghetto*. New York: Free Press; 1990.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:44:37, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009417150.018

[37] Stock P, Peoples S. Commodity competition: Divergent trajectories in New Zealand pastoral farming. In: Almås R, Campbell H, editors. *Rethinking Agricultural Policy Regimes: Food Security, Climate Change and the Future Resilience of Global Agriculture*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing; 2012. pp. 263–84.
[38] Johnson KM, Lichter DT. Rural depopulation: Growth and decline processes over the past century: Rural depopulation. *Rural Sociology.* Mar 2019;84(1):3–27.
[39] Sageman J. School closures and rural population decline. *Rural Sociology*. Mar 17, 2022;ruso.12437.
[40] Tieken MC, Auldridge-Reveles TR. Rethinking the school closure research: School closure as spatial injustice. *Review of Educational Research.* Dec 2019;89(6):917–53.
[41] Holzman M. *A rotting apple: Education redlining in New York City*. Cambridge, MA: Schott Foundation for Public Education; 2012.
[42] Bell M. *Farming for us all: Practical agriculture & the cultivation of sustainability*. University Park, PA: Penn State Press; 2004.
[43] Erikson KT. *Everything in its path*. New York: Simon and Schuster; 1976.
[44] Dudley KM. *Debt and dispossession: Farm loss in America's heartland*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; 2000.
[45] Anderson KG. Masculinity and environment. In: Legun K, Keller JC, Carolan M, Bell MM, editors. *The Cambridge handbook of environmental sociology*. New York: Cambridge University Press; 2020. pp. 103–16.
[46] Gahman L. *Land, god, and guns: Settler colonialism and masculinity in the American heartland*. London: Zed Books; 2020.
[47] Campbell H, Bell MM, Finney M. *Country boys: Masculinity and rural life*. University Park, PA: Penn State Press; 2006.
[48] Stock PV, Forney J. Farmer autonomy and the farming self. *Journal of Rural Studies.* 2014;36:160–71.
[49] Stock PV. Food utopias, (mature) care, and hope. *The International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food*. Apr 8, 2022;89–107.
[50] Schmidt J. How 'honor culture' threatens Kansas farmers' mental health and what we can do about it. Kansas Reflector [Internet]. May 23, 2021 [cited Dec 2, 2021]; Available from: https://kansasreflector.com/2021/05/23/how-honor-culture-threatens-kansas-farmers-mental-health-and-what-we-can-do-about-it/
[51] Burton R, Forney J, Stock P, Sutherland LA. *The good farmer: Culture and identity in food and agriculture*. London: Routledge; 2021.
[52] Berry W. The prejudice against country people. The Progressive [Internet]. Apr 15, 2002; Available from: www.iatp.org/news/the-prejudice-against-country-people
[53] Leiker JN. Rage of the rural minority: The High Plains farm crisis and farmer activism in Colorado and Kansas. *Great Plains Quarterly.* 2019;39(3):265–89.
[54] Bissen S. Yes, U.S. farmer suicide is significantly higher than the national average. *Organisms Journal of Biological Sciences*. Sep 11, 2020;V. 4:17–25.
[55] Tiesman HM, Konda S, Hartley D, Menéndez CC, Ridenour M, Hendricks S. Suicide in U.S. workplaces, 2003–2010. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine.* Jun 2015;48(6):674–82.
[56] Hammersley C, Richardson N, Meredith D, Carroll P, McNamara J. "That's me I am the farmer of the land": Exploring identities, masculinities, and health among male farmers' in Ireland. *American Journal of Men's Health.* Jul 2021;15(4):155798832110352.
[57] Stock CM. *Rural radicals: Righteous rage in the American grain*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; 1996.
[58] Stivers R. *Technology as magic: The triumph of the irrational*. New York: Continuum; 1999.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:44:37, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009417150.018

[59] Ellul J. *To will and to do*. Philadelphia, PA: Pilgrim Press; 1969.
[60] Ellul J. *Violence: Reflections from a Christian perspective*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers; 2012.
[61] Pierre-Louis K. Expanding horizons. Atmos [Internet]. Mar 4, 2022; Available from: https://atmos.earth/the-expanse-space-colonization-kendra-pierre-louis/
[62] Ellul J. *The political illusion*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers; 2015.
[63] Whelan MP. *Blood in the fields: Óscar Romero, Catholic social teaching, and land reform*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press; 2020.
[64] Ellul J. Technique and non-power. In: Woodward K, editor. *The myths of information: Technology and post-industrial culture*. London, UK: Routledge and Kegan Paul; 1980. pp. 242–7.
[65] Pettersen T. *Comprehending care: Problems and possibilities in the ethics of care*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield; 2008.
[66] Wilkinson KP. *The community in rural America*. Westport, CT: Praeger; 1991.
[67] Smith C. *To flourish or destruct: A personalist theory of human goods, motivations, failure, and evil*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; 2015.
[68] Kimmerer RW. *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed; 2013.
[69] Meadows D. Envisioning a sustainable world. In: Costanza R, Segura O, Olsen JMF, editors. *Getting down to Earth: Practical applications of ecological economics*. Washington, DC: Island Press; 1996. pp. 117–26.
[70] Whyte KP, Cuomo C. *Ethics of caring in environmental ethics* [Internet]. Gardiner SM, Thompson A, editors. Vol. 1. Oxford University Press; 2016. Available from: http://oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199941339.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199941339-e-22
[71] Hernandez A. The emergence of agroecology as a political tool in the Brazilian Landless Movement. *Local Environment.* 2020;25(3):205–27.
[72] Ploeg JD van der. *The new peasantries: Struggles for autonomy and sustainability in an era of empire and globalization*. London, UK: Earthscan; 2009.
[73] Nelson J, Stock P. Repeasantisation in the United States. *Sociologia Ruralis.* 2018;58(1):83–103.
[74] White MM. *Freedom farmers: Agricultural resistance and the black freedom movement*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press; 2018.
[75] Stock PV, Darby DB, Hossler T. Experiments in the field. Writing with the Light, Cultural Anthropology [Internet]. 2019; Available from: https://culanth.org/fieldsights/experiments-in-the-field
[76] Stock PV. *The original green revolution: The Catholic Worker farms and environmental morality*. Fort Collins: Colorado State University; 2009.
[77] Stock PV. The perennial nature of the Catholic Worker farms: A reconsideration of failure. *Rural Sociology.* 2014;79(2):143–73.
[78] Stock PV. Contradictions in hope and care. In: Stock P, Carolan MS, Rosin C, editors. *Food utopias: Reimagining citizenship, ethics and community*. London, UK: Routledge/Earthscan; 2015. pp. 171–94.
[79] Ellul J. *The technological bluff*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 1990.
[80] Compagnon D. From risk management to democratic governance of the development of technique: Insights from the work of Jacques Ellul. *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology.* 2014;18(3):203–24.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:44:37, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009417150.018