

Voting No Against the Machine

Thoughts on reading Ernst Jünger with the US election looming

by [Albert Norton, Jr.](#) (November 2024)



Oxenbridge Pond (Paul Nash, 1927-28)

Machine Unfreedom

In his 1951 book translated *The Forest Passage*, Ernst Jünger

presciently sets out his overriding concern with the gathering cloud of identity-conforming Machine technocracy, the tendency to what he called automatism. The concern has been sounded by others, in various ways. Max Weber warned in 1905 of the growing "iron cage" of technocratic efficiency in modern capitalism. James Burnham warned of the consequences of the rise of a managerial class in his 1941 *The Managerial Revolution*. Dwight Eisenhower famously cited consequences of the "military/industrial complex" in a speech in 1961. N.S. Lyons recently wrote that democracy "has long since been redefined to mean the uninterrupted rule of the managerial elite and the undiluted supremacy of their ideological values."

The phrase "managerial elitism" captures the idea of centralized and collectivized management, ever more presumptively a function of elite "experts" in this field or that, running the world "scientifically." Jünger's "automatism" might be called "algorithmic rationalism" or some variant. The elite managerial class perpetuating this ideology has been variously described among essayists in recent years as "the Machine," "the Pyramid," "the Cathedral," or "the Swarm." We must understand it is not limited to expansionist government in socialist democracies.

Automatism means we internalize the effects of systematizing technology and this changes our subjectively-felt relationship to the increasingly powerful collective, society understood as a social "system." This makes us ever more vulnerable to instrumental usage by the collective. We are trained to think and act like machines in order to be used as such. Technology makes us more open to machine-like manipulation, willing cogs in the operation of the managerial state.

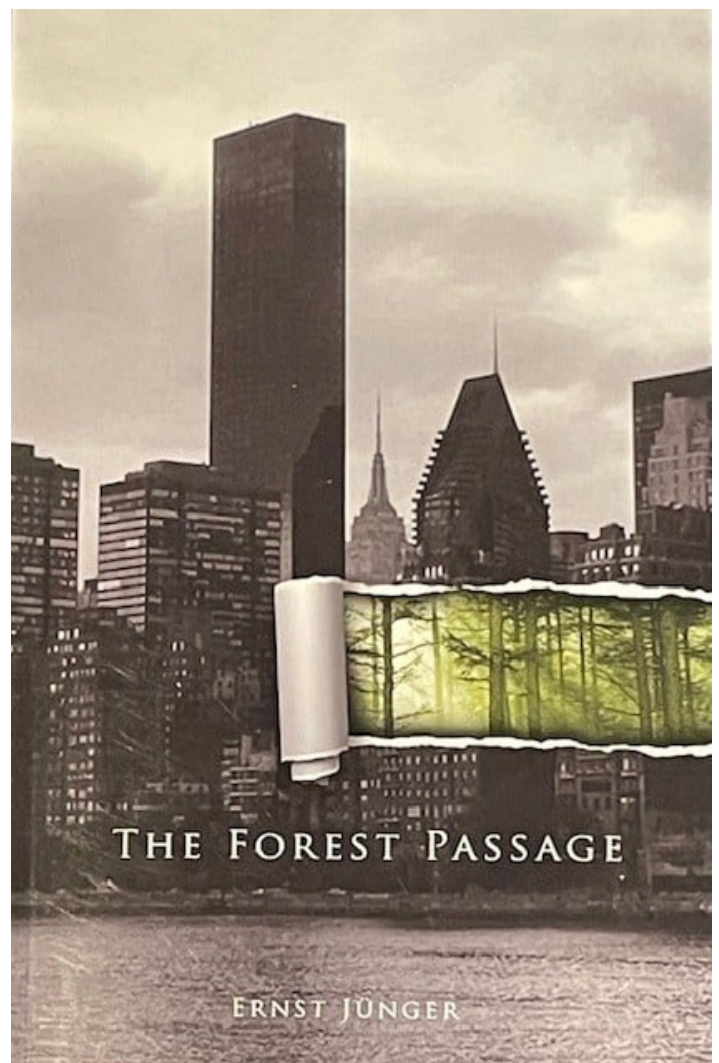
The concern is with power concentration in the increasingly amorphous, borderless collective. The movement is toward globalization of technically all-powerful and manipulative power centers including the state, but also ostensibly private

state allies and the unaccountable administrative state, all taking us to an ideology of hyper-rationalized and hyper-organized automation.

The instrumentalist attitude toward self and others is abetted by disintegration of support institutions like family and church. Instead of political leadership of otherwise free individuals, we have the hive collective, and the chief function of the collective is to coerce ideology. The question now is how to hold on to one's individual humanity as against this tide, to retain our "primal relationship to freedom," in Jünger's words.

The Debased Vote

Jünger opens *The Forest Passage* with a discussion of elections, and what they really mean and don't mean. In light of the upcoming US elections, now is a good time to consider it.



The vote seems to be a personal choice of one set of principles over another, but it also constitutes approbation of the entire ideological system of the managerial state. It thus signals approval of corrupted democracy, the ever-expanding totalitarian Machine of managerial elitism that has wormed its way into our political structure and deposed the quaint notion of "we the people." The candidate's "policy" stance is a weak statement of sentiment as against the monolith of which he is a part. Increasingly, we vote for vibe, and fail to see the monster ideology unchangeable by individual candidates. This is not true consent of the governed, but manipulated appearance of consent. It is a vote in favor of the illusion of freedom rather than an exercise of genuine freedom.

Jünger writes that the voter:

is invited to make a free decision by a power that for its part has no intention of playing by the rules. This same power demands his allegiance, while it survives on breaches of allegiance. He is essentially depositing his honest capital in a crooked bank.

The upcoming election will be between Republicans and Democrats. It should instead be between freedom-lovers and the managerial elite.

The collective already absorbs individual agency in a range of human activity that is expanded obscenely beyond any reasonable boundary. But on top of that, elected components of the Machine cede away much of the responsibility reposed in them to power centers unaccountable to the vote: the administrative state, incestuous public/private partnerships, NGO's, foundations, international agencies, and even other countries. The managerial elite infests all of these, not just

those we pull the lever for.

We're trained to believe democracy gives us freedom to control our destiny, but only a massive pruning of the reach of the collective would do that. The modern democratic process by which the Machine keeps us docile will not. The managerial elite employs the forms of democracy to legitimize its ideological progression. We're not asked to approve the Machine or its ideology, just the political system which enables it. The vote cannot register dissent against Machine technocratic control because its ideology is bigger than any combination of elected officials we might vote in. Freedom-lovers bail water from the Titanic with a teaspoon.

Democracy requires competing candidates or parties, but the parties participate in a process and an ideology that perpetuates automatism and elite control. The resulting uniparty in effect exploits disagreement over inconsequential things to camouflage growth of the "scientific" management of people as if they were cattle. Fomenting hate aids the project of control because by vilifying other groups (like the other half of the uniparty, or groups out of favor such as Christians or straight white men) the vilifiers invoke the ideology of the Machine, further signifying commitment to the managerial state's ideological control.

The Machine's Ideology

Jünger called it "automatism." The expertise of elites in and out of government is management to unthinking automatism, the inexhaustible mechanization in all things, including human beings.

Elite managerialism infects the entire collective, and is synonymous with automatism. This is why voting for either Republicans or Democrats is still a vote for the Machine. Not that there's no difference between them—there is. But the

difference is within the limited range of possibility engineered by the socialist managerial elite.

Automatism is the unquestioned driver of the relentless “progressive” unreality of postmodernism. In this socialist postmodern democratic age, the personal is political, and so everything is presumed within the remit of the collective, and so the range of “issues” deemed appropriate for collectivist treatment is infinite. Purely private matters are few.

Together, Republicans and Democrats advance the interests of the Machine, the “scientific,” centralized, top-down management of all of life, saving only those inconsequential details left to individuals, tokens left to aid us in our self-delusion of individuality and autonomy. You can identify with brand x instead of y because you’re unique. But you can’t prefer your homeland or your people because that would be bigotry. You can deviate somewhat from political talking points of platforms on offer, because you’re unique. But you can’t advocate for the ability to opt out of the Machine altogether. You can quibble over lesser points of Machine ideology, because you’re unique. But you can’t throw over the Machine altogether, because that means hiding alone, naked, and hungry in the wilderness. We have choices about little things but not big things.

The American promise is inverted. We have what the state gives us, rather than the state having what we give it.

Management elites support the uniparty because it secures their elite status. This isn’t just craven careerism, however. Elite expertise means sound management. Sound management means elite expertise. They’re trying to improve society, who could argue with that? Automatism is not expressed in creeds, it is expressed as a sum of positive attributes like efficiency, improvement, expertise, and prosperity, but without counting the human cost, nor the constricted philosophical premises.

The managerial elites take precepts of automatism as a given; as being self-evidently right. They don't have to be persuaded to it as a totalizing system like classical Marxism or religion. It is an uber-ideology, one that inhabits and empowers political movements but is not recognized as a movement unto itself. It will empower equally democratic socialism or Bolshevik totalitarianism or fascism, because these, like the Machine, are about Control. It is an enemy, however, of freedom. Automatism and the Machine it produces preclude consideration of that most important of all political questions, now and in all times and all places: *Who decides?*

The benefits of automatism personally to management elites is not recognized as a motivating factor in embracing it. They don't just produce automation, they are products of it. The underlying assumptions have been drivers their whole life, wherein you "succeed," whatever that means, incrementally and through striving, competition, and "getting ahead," not to put others down but to personally excel and thereby benefit the world with your striving. Who could argue with that? So automation self-reinforces, its individual agents unaware of its erosion of individual agency, because it's felt less by the automatizers, and more by the non-elites caught in its machinery.

Ernst Jünger:

The hopeless encirclement of man has been long in the preparation, through theories that strive for a logical and seamless explanation of the world and go hand in hand with technical development.

Note particularly that phrase "logical and seamless explanation." This is what is meant by "ideology:" the reduction of the complexities of human experience to a

manageable system. It is about acquiring control; about listening to the serpent in the Garden to make ourselves gods. Through ideology we give in to our desire for instrumentalizing usage of the world and others in it. Our desire is for an all-encompassing and comprehensible system that we control in our illusion of sovereignty over all things. Automation follows, replacing God.

The opposite of Machine automation may seem like fearsome chaotic void. Even the gray of the automated “logical and seamless explanation of the world” may seem preferable to the dark of the unknown; of mystery, chaos, confusion, and fear. People in this position, isolated, lonely, full of trepidation for the future, pushed and pulled in different directions by would-be masters, may opt for Machine automation, the seamless explanation. It will be understood as less than ideal, but then the ideal seems unattainable. The murky gray of managerial socialism seems an acceptable compromise. It at least does not conjure those other holocausts, associated with identifiable human dictators.

The inhuman Machine is a dictator, too, but it has benefits. We all have food, so long as we take it from the “hand” of the Machine. We all have business to attend to, meaningless in a large sense, perhaps, but then the Machine trains us not to think in a large sense. Rather, in the sense of today’s focus on trifles and on this make-work, this commute, this corporate passivity, this personal estrangement, this tasteless food, this infantile TV program. We wake up daily to do it all over again, and though from a high angle it is indistinguishable from the activity of a gerbil on a treadmill, it engages in the moment. In this way our life-blood drips out of us a bit at a time, until we are too old and feeble to second-guess how it was spent. This is the gray life the Machine delivers us. Everything is wonderful all the time. Isn’t it? Isn’t it?

The Passage

All fear besides fear of the Lord is ultimately fear of death. How do we escape the fear of death? By recognizing that there are some things worse than death. How can anything be worse than death? Why would we ever choose death over dishonor, or indignity, or capitulation to Machine ideology?

We would do it if we understand that death is not annihilation. Something comes afterward, in which honor, dignity, and self-respect have ultimate and timeless significance. This is true even if our imagination extends only to how we are regarded by our survivors. But it is true in a deeper, more significant sense as well. What we do matters. Moral compromise and evasion is not worthy of us. Enduring the elite collectivists smiling their condescending smiles at us is not worthy of us as self-sovereign human beings. Living like cattle in the pens devised for us by Machine utilitarians is not worthy of us as God-breathed human beings.

Jünger, again:

This is the gullibility of modern man, which coexists with a lack of faith. He believes what he reads in the newspaper, but not what is written in the stars.

We must understand that everything important to us and about us is not given to us by Machine elites. They take it from us. They formulate an entire web of collectivist interactions which “serve” us but also ensnare us, a spider’s web we don’t recognize until it’s too late. They take from us and collectivize safety, security, prosperity, and “freedom” of the limited brand-choosing sort. But these originate with us. The collective through its elite engineers takes it from us,

masticates it, removes the nutrition, and then, maybe, feeds it back to us as tasteless mush. In this way we come to believe the collective is the source of our potency. Without it we are defenseless, we feel.

But it's all backwards. Take the inviolability of the home, which the collective promises to provide:

In reality, it is grounded in the family father, who, sons at his side, fills the doorway with an axe in his hand.

That is the source of all power, ultimately, if not blanching from our bones in the collective's iron cage management of us. That fortitude, that resilience, that immovability is what is taken from us. It is dissolved by the therapeutic collective at great resource-draining cost and returned, if at all, in time of need in diluted form, exercised in an impersonal way that yet keeps the collective's interests foremost. Try filling the doorway with your sons instead of calling the state to protect you. See where that gets you.

These are matters of moral courage, and courage is the guarantor of all other virtues. Where is the church in all this? It is distracted and literally de-moralized, chasing after rhinestone baubles dangled by the culture, on little strands of feel-good sentiment that seem to vaguely resemble something the church said, long ago, when revelation was fresh. We worship our safe little baby in the manger and forget God the Father filling the doorway, axe in hand. The church is handmaiden to the state, and the state is prostrate to the elite ideology shared out and enforced among the power centers of Big: big tech, big media, big academia, big NGO's, all in ideological lockstep.

The church universal will prevail with Christ, we know, but it

is timid and compromised now:

[W]hen open prayers are heard even in churches not for the persecuted but for the persecutors, at this point moral responsibility passes into the hands of individuals, or, more accurately, into the hands of any still unbroken individuals.

And so moral responsibility must be held here, in the individual bosom. Trust in the true God rather than the god of automation. Religious institutions may fail, but individual faith rebuffs ideology. It fosters self-sovereignty under God, holding still a place for mystery and the creativity of residual chaos; a tolerance for the unknown. Faith enables us to tap into the dimensions of irrationality and myth, the deep wisdom at home in the forest of Jünger's grand metaphor. It is a vehicle of individual self-sovereignty as against the darkness we will always have with us. It does not seek this-life resolution of the tragic sense. It seeks instead a kind of reconciliation of the disciplined self with the undisciplinable void.

The Election

The Republican/Democratic divide is meaningless; the real divide is between the elites and the governed. Elites who align either Republican or Democrat are all members of the uniparty, the managerial state which is engaged in taking your freedom one little bit at a time. Our job is to stay agitated against each other and remain thereby inert as a political force.

Elites of the managerial state are alarmed that anyone would

vote for someone as “nasty” as Trump, but probably they sense there’s more to it: that he’s perceived as rejecting the uniparty and so potentially a wedge for the people to have a say for a change. Consequently, he may have the effect of slowing the ideology of technocratic control so resistance to Machine totalitarianism has some more time to gestate.

So there’s this little watered down gesture you get: to vote or not for the uniparty. If choosing one over another can have any effect on the managerial iron cage, use it accordingly. But understand it’s a small gesture in favor of the vote for *No*. Our emphasis on elections distracts us from the unwelcome realization that we’re captive.

We must free ourselves.

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Albert Norton, Jr is an attorney and author. His most recent book is [*The Mountain and the River: Genesis, Postmodernism, and the Machine*](#) (New English Review Press 2023).

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