



An Introduction to the Work of Jacques Ellul

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The writings of French sociologist/lay theologian Jacques Ellul are both desperately needed and vastly misunderstood. The corpus of his works is much too large (with over six hundred articles and forty books to his credit!) to be easily grasped, and yet a comprehension of the entirety is necessary in order to interpret the individual pieces properly.

Often readers get frustrated with Ellul because he frequently overstates his case to make a point. Moreover, details of his sketches are sometimes misleading because he paints them hastily with a broad sweep in order to give a comprehensive perspective. However, these problems can be easily overcome if we remember that he is serving as a prophet to awaken us to biblical truth and to stimulate our own thinking on the matters he introduces.

On a deeper level, much of the misunderstanding of Ellul's thought is caused by the fact that his work proceeds in two very distinct tracks that he rarely connects. On the one hand, Ellul writes tough sociology. He first became well-known in the U.S. because of *The Technological Society*, a wide-scoped critique of the overall phenomenon that he calls "Technique." This term encompasses for Ellul not just the machines or organization of technology, but the entire technological milieu that shapes present society and is characterized by its self-augmentation, monism, autonomy, universality, and the criterion of efficiency. The book warns of the effects of this milieu on economic and political matters, as well as on human beings.¹

Originally this book met with stiff criticism, and Ellul was accused of being unduly pessimistic. However, sociologists began more and more to recognize the truth of his insights, and thirty years later, when he published *The Technological System* (Continuum, 1980), Ellul himself acknowledged that the control of technicization was even greater than he had at first comprehended.

On the other hand, Ellul writes many books of biblical exposition and theology, which are characterized by a Christian hope that is sometimes falsely labelled

¹*The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage, 1964). The French version of this book was first published in 1954.

naive. Some of the most important of these include *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation* (Seabury, 1977), *The Meaning of the City* (which surveys the biblical concept from Cain to the new Jerusalem; Eerdmans, 1970), *Money and Power* (which suggests how the seemingly contradictory attitudes toward wealth in the Old and New Testaments can be correlated; InterVarsity, 1984), and *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (a study of 2 Kings; Eerdmans, 1972). An excellent overview of his perspectives in biblical exegesis is given by "Notes

Innocentes Sur la 'Question Herméneutique.'"²

In the autobiographical work, *In Season, Out of Season* (Harper & Row, 1982), Ellul emphasizes that these two tracks in which he works cannot be synthesized because of the basic irreconcilability of the revelation of God and the world. One specific aspect of his thought, however, precisely connects his sociology and his theology, and that is the biblical concept of "the principalities and powers."

The connection first came to my attention because of the section on "the powers" in *The Ethics of Freedom* (Eerdmans, 1976), in which Ellul lists the following possibilities of interpretation for the biblical notion:

Are they demons in the most elemental and traditional sense? Are they less precise powers (thrones and dominions) which still have an existence, reality, and, as one might say, objectivity of their own? Or do we simply have a disposition of man which constitutes this or that human factor a power by exalting it as such...? In this case the powers are not objective realities which influence man from without. They exist only as the determination of man which allows them to exist in their subjugating otherness and transcendence. Or finally, at the far end of the scale, are the powers simply a figure of speech common to the Jewish-Hellenistic world, so that they merely represent cultural beliefs and have no true validity? (151-2)

Ellul situates himself somewhere between the second and third interpretations because he is convinced that the New Testament *exousiai* and the power of money personified as Mammon correspond to authentic, spiritual realities independent of human decision and inclination. On the other hand, the powers do not act simply from the outside as a *deus ex machina*, but find expression, according to the biblical references, in social realities, in concrete human enterprises. Ellul insists against the "demythologizers" that the powers have objective reality and against the "socializers" that the victory of Jesus Christ can be grasped and lived out only by those who believe and who thereby engage in fighting for the liberation of others from the powers (160).

In one of the most personal passages on the subject, Ellul describes the connection between the powers and social realities as follows:

Political power has many dimensions, e.g., social, economic, psychological, ethical, psycho-analytical, and legal. But when we have scrutinized them all, we have still not apprehended its reality. I am not speaking hastily or lightly here but as one who has passed most of his life in confrontation with their question and in their power. We cannot say with Marx that the power is an ideological superstructure, for it is always there. The disproportion noted above leads me to the unavoidable conclusion that another power intervenes and ind wells and uses political power, thus giving it a range and force that it does not have in itself.

²*L'Évangile, Hier et Aujourd'hui: Melanges Offerts au Professeur Franz J. Leehardt* (Genève: Editions Labor et Fides, 1968) 181-190; reviewed by Ronald Ray, "Jacques Ellul's Innocent Notes on Hermeneutics," *Interpretation* 33/3 (July, 1979) 262-82.

The same is true of money...[and] technology. (153-4)

It is this consciousness of the powers and their relationship to social realities that undergirds Ellul's sociological assessments, though he has couched his perceptions in such terms as "necessity" in order not to cloud the issues with biblical terminology. His insistence that he speaks out of a lifelong confrontation with the question of the powers shows us that the concept is a key to interpreting his work and heightens our awareness of the need for taking more seriously the nature of the battle against them.

The dialectic of Ellul's two tracks of work is linked by the powers in so far as the hope and grace of his theology must be related to the concrete situation of the powers at work in the world. On the other hand, only on the basis of true freedom through faith is he "able to hold at arm's length these powers which condition and crush me...[and to] view them with an objective eye that freezes and externalizes and measures them" (228-33). Ellul specifically includes among those powers that he can freely assess objectively the modern state, social utility, money, and the technological society (234, 256).

One of my purposes in this article is to create a framework for the reading of Ellul's works by outlining this connection of his sociology and his theology through the concept of "the principalities and powers." The foundation for this theme was explicitly laid in a series of three of Ellul's earliest articles, written in 1946 and 1947. Furthermore, those articles include, in their incipient form, most of the major themes of his later works. They remain untranslated, however, and consequently often are unnoticed by scholars who discuss his work. I will sketch their contents, therefore, to see the range of Ellul's concerns and the reasons that his thought deserves careful attention.

The first article in the series, "Chronique des Problèmes de Civilisation I: En Guise d'Avertissement," written shortly after World War II, criticized Ellul's contemporaries for being obsessed with exterior problems without searching for their profound reality. He warned that if postwar society continued on the same foundations and fundamental structures humanity would die—spiritually and perhaps also materially.³ For forty years he has continued to issue such warnings. An excellent contemporary example is "Theological Reflection on Nuclear Developments: The Limits of Science, Technology, and Power."⁴

Anticipating criticism that his work is pessimistic, Ellul declared that it is not a question of optimism or pessimism, but of knowing that the world is the domain of Satan and that human beings, including himself, are radically sinful. God miraculously not only conserves, but also saves—and saves in such a way that the prince of this world is subordinated to the salvation of humankind by the victory of the Savior. Thus, it is not pessimism, but rather realism, to state that civilization as construed by human beings is going toward death, for the situation is understood within the lordship of Christ, who has already definitively won the victory, vanquished death, and accomplished God's work.

In this 1946 article Ellul explained the connection of the two tracks of his future work by calling himself a citizen of two cities who must, by means of the discern-

³*Foi et Vie* 44/6 (Sept/Oct, 1946) 678-87.

⁴In Jim Wallis, ed., *Waging Peace: A Handbook for the Struggle to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (Harper & Row, 1982).

ment of spirits, examine different facts and examine them differently. His work is to seek the final roots of the present situation and to judge these daily facts spiritually, i.e., with true Christian realism.

Ellul noted that at that time the question of civilization was singularly complicated, almost desperate, because of the complexity of organizations, the enormous quantity of problems, the frenzy of the economy, the long disinterest of the church, and the despair of so many people. His purpose was to make an inventory of forces, beyond their social and economic forms, which condition life in modern times. These forces are identical throughout the world; they are common in all of civilization; they are independent of human will; they have a reality not easily separable from their temporary form; and they give the present age a radically new character. The folly of our times, he asserted, is that one pretends to give solutions without seeing the problem of these forces. The foregoing description is immensely important, for this is Ellul's initial understanding of the powers which lays the foundation for all of his subsequent sociological, biblical, and ethical work.

Ellul emphasized that the essential separation of the material and spiritual domains of modern society prohibits seeking fundamental spiritual causes for economic or political problems. Consequently, the major fault of Christianity is that it has sought to deal with social problems with a charity that does not fulfill the necessary spiritual conditions to be effective.

Also in this first article Ellul anticipated the critique that his comments are just intellectual pursuits when what is necessary is action. Though asserting that such thirst for action is perfectly legitimate, he warned that action without thought is in the hands of Satan and a major characteristic of our times. Christians are told not to be conformed to the present age, but to be transformed. It is a question not of doing nothing, but rather of not acting according to the modes of the present age. Christian action requires a work of spiritual and intellectual elaboration, which he has endeavored throughout his career to stimulate and provide.

Moreover, Scripture constantly affirms that life is a matter less of *doing* than of *being*. Thus, the inventory which Ellul proposed to give in future articles must have as its goal to give elements for thinking sanely in this age so that Christianity can be lived in a concrete fashion in the midst of its difficulties. He recognized that it is not a question of any action if it is not a question of the Christian life itself.

Ellul listed that promised inventory the following year at the end of "Problèmes de Civilisation II." This article criticized utopian proposals concerning French reconstruction for their failure to understand the complexity of reality and for their idealism.⁵ As in many of his later works, Ellul insisted that purely technical solutions are necessarily fragmentary. Problems are badly posed because in an age of specialization they are isolated from the rest and not perceived in light of the entirety. These comments especially point to the need for the kind of wholistic assessment which Ellul attempted seven years later in *The Technological Society* and again thirty years later in *The Technological System*.

Also in this second article of the series, Ellul clarified as follows his meaning for the term "structures" (called "forces" in the previous article):

Underneath the phenomena which we are able to see in the social, political, and economic domains, there are some permanent forces of which the tracks are

found in each of the phenomena considered, and which assure to our times its unity under its chaotic and disordered appearance. Exactly as in a tapestry, there is an invisible chain which assures the unity of the material and which is the fundamental element upon which is developed the patterns and the exterior ornaments.

By the word “structure” Ellul did not signify merely the temporary superstructures of the economy or politics, which can be changed without changing society itself. Nor did he mean eternal structures as philosophers would name permanent elements. Rather, he was concerned about those structures which authentically characterize modern society.

These structures are common to many phenomena of our society, and, therefore, give a certain unity to its totality. Furthermore, if they were modified, all of civilization would be put in question. Because these structures are misunderstood, techniques and utopias have been equally inefficacious.

Finally, a structure concerns the individual lives of persons. It is a decisive force in the organization of their lives, the order of their thoughts, behavior, and habits, and, at the same time, such power tends precisely to annihilate them. At this point Ellul listed the following as essential structures: technique, production, the state, the city, and war.

That list outlines much of Ellul’s work in hundreds of articles and scores of books over the next forty years. The third article of this initial series dealt specifically with the structure of politics.⁶ All the details of his description prefigure much of his later work in sociology—his criticism of nationalism; of (non-Christian) realism’s criteria of success and utility; of the way in which a morality of means necessitates the use of propaganda to arouse the support of the masses; of the reduction of politics to imperialism, leading fatally to conflicts that are more and more vast; of the moral hypocrisy inherent in realism of action; of the law of things in the economic domain and the consequent vanishing of the real person; of the trait of illusion which characterizes political realism. These ideas were all expanded especially in *Autopsy of Revolution* (Knopf, 1971), *The Political Illusion* (Knopf, 1967), *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* (Knopf, 1965), and *Violence; Reflections from a Christian Perspective* (Seabury, 1969).

Typically, Ellul concluded that there is no way out of this situation, though his religious works richly offer the Christian hope that stands in dialectical tension with these harsh realities of the world. He did not reduce Christianity to a spiritualism, but asserted instead that it is a true realism, for it recognizes the state of total and irremediable sin into which a human being is plunged, as well as the patience and grace of God. Central to Christian realism is the concordance between sociological investigations and the Word of God (the two tracks of Ellul’s work), for God does not detach us from reality, but rather plunges us into all of it—both the material in its complexity and the eternal in its unity.

The contentions that God’s revelation alone is sufficient or that revelation is irrelevant to the real problems of humanity and society are equally false attitudes. Compared to political realism which is conformism because its criterion is the unrolling of history, the realism of Christianity is revolutionary (in the sense of changing the course of history) because its criterion is the lordship of Jesus Christ,

which must be incarnated in a world which seems to be nothing but the incarnation of the principality of Satan. The deplorable conformity of Christians shows a lack not of virtues or of courage, but of realism, and an abstraction of their spiritual life.

The ideas of the preceding paragraph are especially significant for this discussion, for Ellul specifically contrasts the incarnation of the lordship of Christ with that of the principality of Satan as the revolutionary life of true Christianity against the conformity of political realism. This recognition in 1947 of the importance of the concept of “the principalities and powers” makes more clear Ellul’s later sociological descriptions of the illusions of politics. He compares the desired combination of realism and spirituality to the realistic political attitude of the judges and prophets.

Christians must not try to place the facts into a presupposed theory more or less Christian. Instead, we utilize the revelations we have been given to gain a view of the phenomena more profound and more true than our experience or sense or reason is able to give us. God has given us a new means of knowledge, which we must employ concretely—and this revelation teaches us that the phenomena are signs of a deeper reality, that of the powers. Christian realism always stands, then, in opposition to political realism because it constantly puts political, economic, and social phenomena in their place.

Beginning with the usurpation of the divine throne by humankind, realism leads progressively to usurpation by all the material powers; human beings themselves are dethroned to the profit of the economy or some technical application. Each power of the world seeks to usurp a place that is not its own. Political realism favors all these economic, political, spiritual, and cultural aggressions; Ellul calls it “the master of the demonic ballet.” Christian realism, on the other hand, teaches us the existence of an important order: “seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all the rest will be thrown into the bargain” (Ellul’s translation of Matt 6:33).

Christian realism, thus, involves consequences directly opposed to those of political realism. It is essentially active and authentic; not static, but dynamic; never a mere matter of words, but rather an effort to penetrate into reality and to transform it. It is always an anti-moralism since, rather than giving a rule of life, Jesus announced the liberty of the gift of the Holy Spirit—an idea thoroughly expanded in *The Ethics of Freedom*.

For Christian realism the criterion of life and action, of the good, the just, and the true, is the Kingdom of God which is already present, but hidden in our midst. This kingdom will come independent of our will and the course of history, for it is also already real through the victory of Christ over all the powers which direct the course of history. Space limitations prevent an explication here of Ellul’s development of the implications of a kingdom perspective for the church. He explored them early in his career in *The Presence of the Kingdom* (Westminster, 1951), which Ellul himself suggested to me as the first book to be read as an introduction to his thought.

Ellul continually insists that such realism *must* be the perspective of Christians for their work to be of service since it is the only method of thought subject to God’s revelation and able to replace political realism. This insistence shows us the reason for his own work—an attempt realistically to recognize in social reality the working of the powers and to offer the alternative of Christian freedom.

Two other relatively early and yet untranslated articles clearly show the concept of “the principalities and powers” as the link between Ellul’s sociological and theological tracks, and these articles also stress some of the fundamental ideas greatly expanded in his later works. “Sur la Pessimisme Chrétien” (1954) emphasized the impossibility of human efficacy against the powers, and, on the other hand, the assurance that in Jesus Christ they are vanquished. The article stressed the importance of the Christian task of destroying the world’s false hopes and consolations, which explains the seeming brutality of Ellul’s sociological assessments, and it renewed Ellul’s constant emphasis on the freedom of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, as opposed to a moralistic system or ideology, which is itself bondage to the powers.⁷ This lack of moralism in Christian ethics was later explored in his *To Will and To Do: An Ethical Research for Christians* (Pilgrim, 1969).

Finally, in “Foi Chrétienne et Réalité Sociale” (1960), Ellul again explicated his own tasks: to show the whole (e.g., of the technological society), to face reality clearly (in what might seem to be brutal sociological analysis), and yet to know hope (usually offered by him in a separate theological work, such as *Hope in Time of Abandonment* [Seabury, 1973], in order not to water down the rigor of the sociological analysis).⁸ This article most clearly revealed Ellul’s answers to the debates about how Christians can respond to the powers. He emphasized that we expose them as the idols that they are and desacralize them in practical ways—a task which he undertook later in both *A Critique of the New Commonplaces* (Knopf, 1968) and *The New Demons* (Seabury, 1975). We overcome the divisions that the powers cause by establishing communication, especially between enemies. We can see more clearly than others the nature of reality and therefore stand as a source of tension in society to raise awareness of the powers. Finally, we do not claim to be the kingdom of God—a false ideology which he criticizes in *False Presence of the Kingdom* (Seabury, 1972)—but live as a sign of its truth.

This direct connection between Ellul’s theology and sociology by means of “the principalities and powers,” established in his earliest articles, is again overtly made in his recent book, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Eerdmans, 1986), which explicates the concept most thoroughly. There are several major problems with this explication, however, which cannot be thoroughly delineated within the limitations of this article. They can be summarized under these confusions between his comments in earlier works and contradictory statements in *Subversion*:

1. whether or not the powers are entities in themselves;
2. whether or not the powers are originally creations conformed to God’s will, but deflected from their purpose in the fall;
3. whether Mammon and Satan are both powers and on the same level or if the powers are agents of Satan, subservient to him.

These confusions point to the need for much greater study of the ontology of the powers in the biblical references, as well as of the concept of “the principalities and powers” in Ellul’s work to assess the changes in his perspectives. However, *Subversion* provides otherwise an excellent summation of Ellul’s mature thought on the failure of contemporary Christianity.

Two other recent books which I highly recommend combine more overtly

⁷*Foi et Vie* 52/2 (1954) 164-80.

⁸*Free University Quarterly* 7/2 (1960) 166-77.

Ellul's biblical-theological and sociopolitical perspectives. *The Humiliation of the Word* (Eerdmans, 1985) trenchantly exposes the ways our image-oriented society—and even the church—has lost the truth of language. This is one of his most important works especially for those of us who serve the church by explicating the Word. The newest work to appear in English, *Jesus and Marx: From Gospel to Ideology* (Eerdmans, 1988), reviews several key books that try to combine Christian and Marxist thought and exposes their weaknesses. Joyce Main Hanks, who frequently translates Ellul's works and wrote an excellent introduction to this book, has stressed its foundational importance.⁹

Ellul's early articles lay the foundation for linking his theology with his sociology in the biblical concept of "the principalities and powers." Only the assurance that the powers have already been defeated by Christ gives one both the courage realistically to face the true nature of politics, economics, and technology in the twentieth century and the necessary hope to continue in the struggle against the powers operative in these social realities. On the other hand, Christian realism about the powers in their social manifestations is necessary to keep the theological notion from becoming an abstraction. The dialectical confrontation of Ellul's sociology and biblical ethics sharply criticizes much of contemporary Christianity's approach to the powers and their social realities. The work of Jacques Ellul calls us back to the Ephesian emphasis that the weapons for the battle against the principalities and powers must be, first of all, spiritual.

⁹This book is harshly criticized by Michael Baumann's review in *The Ellul Studies Forum* (Nov, 1988), a journal which provides a communications network among scholars interested in Ellul's works and in the conjunction of theology and a technological society.