

THE POLITICS OF GOD AND THE POLITICS OF ELLUL

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Jacques Ellul holds that politics is relative but that contemporary thinking has assigned ultimate value to it: "All life today is in fact oriented to politics. . . . Politics has gradually invaded everything . . . all our judgments are political."¹ In his writings Ellul tends to view from a political angle nearly every problem he examines. Most of his fifty-some books, as well as many of his hundreds of articles, involve his political philosophy to a high degree. The following overview of Ellul's political thought will necessarily skim over issues that deserve closer analysis, express some personal impressions not shared by other readers of Ellul, and leave many apparent contradictions unresolved. If it provokes spirited response and debate, this article will accomplish one of its primary objectives.

In order to deal at least summarily with the multiple facets of politics according to Ellul I will touch on his relevant definitions, his views on the state and politics (including how he sees both of these as related to power and technique), his treatment of politics in the Bible and the Church (the central thrust of this article), his personal political experience and practice, and his stance concerning Marxism and anarchism.

Although Ellul has maintained the same basic position on most political questions over the years, his emphasis certainly has varied. In addition the fundamentally dialectical nature of his thought tends to puzzle many American readers, who misinterpret him or accuse him of inconsistency.² As if these factors did not sufficiently complicate any attempt to present Ellul's view of politics, we must also distinguish his solid convictions from his frequent hyperbole. In interviews he has maintained that many of his "impossible" statements stem from a felt need to counteract trends he viewed as extreme at one time or another in France.³ In practice, seasoned Ellul readers usually develop the habit of mentally "toning down" many of his statements that seem outlandish on the surface, in order to take certain of his arguments seriously.

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¹ J. Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom* (ed. G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 374; see 375.

² J. Ellul, "Epilogue: On Dialectic," *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays* (ed. C. G. Christians and J. M. Van Hook; Urbana: University of Illinois, 1981) 291-308; J. Boli-Bennett, "The Absolute Dialectics of Jacques Ellul," *Research in Philosophy and Technology* 3 (1980) 171-201; D. B. Clendenin, "Introduction," in J. Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom* (2d ed.; Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1989) xxvi-xxxviii.

³ Interviews of J. Ellul by J. M. Hanks in Pessac, France, 1981-1982 and 1985.

Sometimes Ellul's statements fail to ring true because he refers primarily or entirely to French politics or the Church in France, assuming a French readership. In a special preface to the American edition of *The Political Illusion* Ellul points out the problems potentially growing out of this assumption, but he also points out the value of the French political example as a warning for other countries.⁴ American readers stand in great need of an introduction to Ellul's life and thought that would place him in the modern French context. With such a tool, those who read Ellul and other contemporary French intellectuals would grasp their arguments much better.

Why bother with such a complex writer? If we find reality itself complicated, we will not shrink from struggling to comprehend the ideas of one of France's foremost twentieth-century thinkers. Ellul's early training in Roman law led to his long-held chair at the University of Bordeaux (where he taught from 1943 to 1980). Courses he offered there in Roman law, the history and sociology of institutions, Marx and Marxism, technique, and propaganda were complemented by his direction of graduate theses and his teaching at Bordeaux's Institute of Political Studies (1947–1980).

Alongside his teaching responsibilities Ellul participated actively in the World Council of Churches, local politics, and at both national and local levels in the Reformed Church of France, to mention just a few of his involvements. He was instrumental in establishing and directing a pioneer program to help juvenile delinquents and remains active in local ecological efforts. Through his well-circulated books and articles he has become a national figure whose name and views are widely cited. Since readers usually know him as either theologian or sociologist, they often express surprise at discovering Ellul's "other" side. Both aspects of his work contribute to the sum of his political views.⁵

I. POLITICS AND THE STATE

Ellul takes pleasure in reducing overblown concepts to their proper size. He continually rebels against our society's dangerous tendency to idolize itself and its various facets. Politics for Ellul amounts merely to "an honest concrete exercise in administration or management . . . it has no spiritual, ideological, or doctrinal content."⁶ We are not to interpret this definition as a call to dismiss politics as unimportant, however. On the contrary, Ellul maintains that the small, technical tasks of politics deserve careful attention in spite of the limited nature of their results.

Seen from another angle, the danger in politics centers in its relationship with power. A second Ellulian definition, related to Matt 20:20–25, calls politics "a means of conquering others and exercising power over

⁴ J. Ellul, *The Political Illusion* (New York: Knopf, 1967) xiii–xxi.

⁵ J. M. Van Hook, "The Politics of Man, the Politics of God, and the Politics of Freedom," *Essays* (ed. Christians and Van Hook) 128.

⁶ *Ethics* 382; J. Ellul, *Les Combats de la liberté*, vol. 2 of *Ethique de la liberté* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1984) 115.

them."⁷ In this second definition politics would seem to involve the state's power, but in other contexts Ellul takes care to distinguish politics from the state. In his seminal *The Technological Society*, for instance, Ellul claims the state has lost most of its decision-making capability, so that we should no longer label it "political."⁸

In practice, however, Ellul usually follows common usage, considering "political matter" to be "the domain and sphere of public interests created and represented by the state." "Politics" he defines as "action relative to this domain, the conduct of political groups, and any influence exercised on that conduct."⁹ In spite of Ellul's apparently contradictory definitions, developed for use in differing contexts, we will not go far wrong if we see in his ordinary use of the word "politics" a concern for the tendency to use the power of the state for the purpose of controlling people. In Ellul's view politics can and should be restricted to less fearsome activities, such as administration.

The problem of limiting power requires further exploration. Ellul sees the exercise of power as "always dangerous"¹⁰ and believes the state "will grab as much power as it is allowed to grab,"¹¹ to the great detriment and danger of the individual. He describes factors at work in our time that offer the state unprecedented opportunities for arrogating power to itself. These involve primarily its alliance with technique and the sacred status our society has granted it. But he also sees political power as the domain of Satan, who grants it to people so they can subjugate each other.¹²

Sacredness as a characteristic of the state and of technique receives its most convincing treatment in Ellul's *The New Demons*, where he maintains that the traditional sacredness of political power has been enhanced in our day through its abstraction.¹³ He argues that our present-day sacreds remain mysterious and unassailable, so that criticism of them provokes outrage, panic and passion. The state gives meaning to life, and we look to it for the solution to all our problems. In return it requires us to make unprecedented sacrifices and to condone all kinds of evil perpetrated in its name. This is specially true, Ellul maintains, as the state has grown to absorb "into itself the entire life of the nation," forming the "nation-state,"¹⁴ and as the state has allied itself with technique, our other sacred focus.

⁷ J. Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 62. See also *Ethics* 385; *Combats* 100.

⁸ J. Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Knopf, 1964) 279; see also *Combats* 100.

⁹ *Political Illusion* 3 n. 1. Ellul also quotes favorably M. Weber's definition: "Politics is the leadership by a political body called the state, or any influence exerted in that direction" (*Political Illusion* 15 n. 6); see also politics defined in terms of power in this note.

¹⁰ *Ethics* 383.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 392; see also 396 and *Political Illusion* 11, 71, 76.

¹² *Ethics* 55; see also *Anarchy* 57–58; J. Ellul, *Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in a Perilous World* (San Francisco: Harper, 1983) 234–248.

¹³ J. Ellul, *The New Demons* (London: Mowbrays, 1975) 80; see also 57, 70–87. In these pages Ellul establishes revolution as a sacred in tension with the state, and sex as a sacred opposing technique. These four poles—state and revolution, technique and sex—form the fundamental factors of our society. See also *Political Illusion* 19–21.

¹⁴ *Ethics* 395; see also *Demons* 83.

In his most recent book on technology Ellul examines technique's role in politics and economics, where technique "is like a key, like a substance underlying all problems and situations. It is ultimately the decisive factor."¹⁵ This means that politicians will not manage to bring technique under their control, as many assume they will. On the contrary, technique increasingly determines politics.¹⁶

If the state, politics and technique sound like personified forces in Ellul's argument, that is no accident. Often faulted for such language, he claims to follow Biblical precedent in his treatment of the "powers," among which he includes the law, religion, and money, as well as the state.¹⁷

II. SOLUTIONS

Critics generally agree that Ellul offers more analysis of modern society's problems than solutions for those problems. He often counters that we cannot possibly hope to find adequate solutions before grasping the precise nature of the problems we face. He conceives his role as one of helping to dispel some of the myths that cloud our vision and prevent us from seeing our reality clearly. Ellul remains convinced that his most useful contribution lies in sociological and theological analysis, the areas of his expertise, rather than in detailed prescriptions for the rest of us to follow. He has no desire to develop a "following" or to see the formation of a "school" of Ellulian disciples. His firm belief in democracy restrains him from dictating what others should do. In spite of this strong, consistent stance, however, in some of his books Ellul hints at possible ways out of our present binds. Occasionally he develops a proposal in some detail.¹⁸

Ellul's personal political practice provides additional insight into his approach to solutions. We can consider his life as an illustration of the motto he often repeats: "Think globally, act locally." He reports the results of his overall thinking in books and articles with a view to provoking others' reflection and takes a concrete stand on regional issues he can investigate carefully and feels strongly about. His many articles and letters to the editor in the national *Le Monde* and in Bordeaux's *Sud-Ouest* suggest the flavor of this lifelong involvement: pleas in favor of various refugees, arguments against the spread of nuclear power, a concerted campaign against the "development" for tourism of the nearby coast of Aquitania (one of Ellul's many environmental concerns), and so forth.¹⁹

¹⁵ J. Ellul, *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 9.

¹⁶ *Technological Bluff* 10–11; *Technological Society* 254–255; see also *Political Illusion*.

¹⁷ *Ethics* 152–160; see also 144–151; *Anarchy* 83–85; J. Ellul, *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective* (London: SCM, 1970) 162–166; *Money and Power* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1984) 75–99; *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 174–190.

¹⁸ E.g. J. Ellul, *Changer de révolution* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1982) 178–179, 247–258, 268–279; *Technological Bluff* xiii.

¹⁹ See Ellul bibliographies for details: J. M. Hanks assisted by R. Asal, *Jacques Ellul: A Comprehensive Bibliography, Research in Philosophy and Technology* supplement no. 1 (1984); J. M. Hanks, "Jacques Ellul: A Comprehensive Bibliography, Update, 1982–1985," *Research in Philosophy and Technology* 11 (1991) 197–299.

One of Ellul's efforts on a national scale involved the French Reformed Church in the mid-1980s. Sensing the dearth of communication between the hierarchy of the Church and the rank and file, he embarked on a solitary campaign to redesign the Church from the ground up. He appealed for what he called the "Estates General of Protestantism," to be open to all who were interested in the future of the Church. As people met and reflected on what the Church should be and do, a new organism would be formed and the elaborate ecclesiastical bureaucracy bypassed or perhaps eliminated.

Because of his stature, Ellul's appeal received considerable media attention. But he fell ill just before the well-attended conference of laypersons and clergy in Paris that he had targeted to consider his proposal. When he could not travel from Bordeaux to Paris to defend his ideas in person, they received only minimal attention and his project failed.

We should note Ellul's emphasis on the individual's involvement and decision in his "Estates General" undertaking and the way the proposal avoids appealing to any kind of power structure. Indeed, the threat felt by the Church hierarchy when Ellul suggested including the entire Church in basic decision-making probably explains why his proposition met with rapid defeat.

During World War II, in an earlier era of his political activity, Ellul took part in the French resistance movement. He served in government immediately after the war as adjunct mayor of Bordeaux. Often cited as the experience that taught him how insignificant politicians' decisions have become in a technical age, Ellul's time in office left him with a desire to participate in autonomous groups for the purpose of achieving change rather than to run for elective office.²⁰

Ellul's advice concerning politics can be summarized in terms of a recommendation that we discover and maintain its relative status. In an age where entire societies look to the state and politics to solve every imaginable problem, our best course lies in the opposite direction: finding ways to limit the reach of political power. All movements fail, in Ellul's eyes, when they assume that political solutions can remedy the ills they deplore. Real problems have no political solution, so it is important not to pose them in political terms. And political problems themselves do not have solutions at all—only "accommodations."²¹

With dogged consistency Ellul has applied his belief in the relative nature of politics to one trend after another over a period of decades. Measured by this principle, the vast majority of efforts are found wanting: personalism, the communist party, anticommunist efforts, socialism, the World Council of Churches, Marxist-Christian dialogue, most liberation theologies, the Church in France, politicized feminist movements, and so on. Ellul does not condemn all these movements outright. On the contrary, often he

²⁰ J. Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on His Life and Work* (ed. W. H. Vandenburg; New York: Seabury, 1981) 21–23; *In Season, Out of Season: An Introduction to the Thought of Jacques Ellul* (San Francisco: Harper, 1982) 45–56.

²¹ *Political Illusion* 190, 205–206, 220; *Ethics* 381–382.

finds significant pockets of hope for the future precisely within some of them. But he deplores the repeated tendency of such groups to shoot themselves in the foot by centering their efforts around political solutions.

As suggested above, we must guard against misunderstanding Ellul's point here: He does not at all suggest that we abandon politics as a useless endeavor. He insists, rather, that we must keep politics in its place—a secondary, relative place that holds much less importance than we usually give it:

De-politicizing . . . is not a rejection of politics. It is a rejection of illusion and ideology. . . . De-politicization implies a true interest in political questions. It implies involvement. What is superfluous will be stripped away, but politics itself will be taken seriously. . . . De-politicizing comes after engagement and not before. It is the attitude of those who are already committed to politics and not of those who regard such commitment as absurd and useless.²²

Such a tightrope act requires discretion and motivation of a kind that Ellul does not spell out in his purely sociological works (roughly half his output). To understand him more fully we must turn to his theological books, where we discover his concrete suggestions for political involvement, which he directs to the Christian believer.

III. POLITICS IN THE BIBLE

Ellul examines the Biblical judgment on politics in the OT, in Jesus' life and teaching, in the Apocalypse, and in Paul's writings. He finds Israel criticized for making the same mistake as our modern organizations when the nation looked to politics for the solution to its problems, with disastrous results.²³ Biblically speaking, Ellul believes the monarchy offered no long-term solutions for Israel, but it provides us with a model of God's view of political leaders. Summing up sections of his study on 2 Kings, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, Ellul posits in *Anarchy and Christianity* that "in the biblical accounts 'good' kings are always defeated by Israel's enemies, and the 'great' kings who win victories and extend their borders are always 'bad.'" In this way the OT presents the God of Israel as "an enemy of royal power and the state."²⁴

According to Ellul, Jesus not only fails to show any interest in politics but also makes fun of the question of how to deal with the Roman occupation—the central issue of his day. Jesus does this "by subjecting politics to a kind of ridicule" in Matt 18:24–27 and elsewhere.²⁵ With respect to Matt 20:20–25, Ellul reaches a sweeping conclusion regarding Jesus' teaching on political power:

²² *Ethics* 384; see also 378–379; *Combats* 103, 106–107, 117; *Anarchy* 84–85; *Political Illusion* 200–201.

²³ *Ethics* 359.

²⁴ *Anarchy* 50; see also 46–49, 51–53; J. Ellul, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (ed. G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

²⁵ *Ethics* 372; see also *Combats* 103–105; *Anarchy* 56–71; *Subversion* 114–121.

All national rulers, no matter what the nation or the political regime, lord it over their subjects. There can be no political power without tyranny. . . . But we note also that Jesus does not advocate revolt or material conflict with these kings and great ones. . . . Let them be. Set up a marginal society which will not be interested in such things, in which there will be no power, authority, or hierarchy. Do not do things as they are usually done in society, which you cannot change. Create another society on another foundation.²⁶

Paul also shows "a supreme indifference towards politics," in Ellul's view. In contrast, most of the other early Christians express utter hostility toward the state, which they repeatedly call into question.²⁷

IV. POLITICS AND THE CHURCH

Ellul traces the loss of that hostility in the Church at the time of Constantine and the disastrous effects that ensued. He believes that "the recognition of the state and the entry of Christians and the church into politics have produced . . . a mutation that amounts to subversion."²⁸

Present-day Christians cannot escape political involvement, however, as we have seen. Ellul tends to lose patience with contemporary believers who take political positions based ostensibly on their Christian commitment, whereas in reality their stance stems from other concerns: "Leftist convictions about progress, reason, productivity, and happiness are no more authentic or Christian than rightist ideas of country, hierarchy, honor, and order. . . . No choice on Christian grounds can be made between justice, equality, and revolution on the left and liberty, tradition, and responsibility on the right."²⁹ Noting that we cannot remove ourselves from the political scene and should not try to do so out of fear or weakness, Ellul stresses the importance of being aware of what we are doing in the political realm.

He urges Christians to assume as their peculiar responsibility in politics the important tasks that unbelievers find it difficult or impossible to accomplish, such as the adoption of realistic attitudes, leading to the relativization of the political sphere, as noted above. Since Christians hold other matters to be ultimate in life, they can put politics in its proper place. Believers should find it easier than other people to view their political involvement with a certain detachment, since their primary attachment lies elsewhere. Ellul stresses he is not advocating political indifference for Christians when he recommends that they take a certain distance from politics.³⁰

²⁶ *Anarchy* 61–62.

²⁷ *Ethics* 372; *Anarchy* 71–74; *Subversion* 116.

²⁸ *Subversion* 133.

²⁹ *Ethics* 376; see also 374–375, 384; *Combats* 108; J. Ellul, *False Presence of the Kingdom* (New York: Seabury, 1972) 141–145.

³⁰ *Ethics* 381. This passage forms an ironic contrast to Ellul's depiction of politics as enabling people to rise above their social and religious differences as long as hatred of a common enemy unites them (*Political Illusion* 20; see also 170–172); *False Presence* 176–177; *Violence* 70, 156–157, 164.

This demystifying posture leads to surprising possibilities: humor, for one, an ingredient Ellul regularly stresses with regard to relative matters, whatever their importance.³¹ Also, since he believes no genuinely theological reasons move believers to choose one political party or tendency over another (since parties usually provide good arguments for their point of view), the Christian Church has the opportunity to offer itself as a unique locus of political encounter. Ellul does not, of course, suggest that we turn local church meetings into political free-for-alls, nor does he advocate that sermons deal primarily with political themes. Rather, he believes that the church, with representatives from a variety of political persuasions, should serve to defuse conflict and to reconcile people whom the world would expect to behave like enemies:

Christians . . . are more united among themselves by their faith than they are with their political associates. . . . Their political position comes second and their confession of Christ comes first . . . they are closer to their brothers in Christ in the opposing party than they are to non-Christians who share the same political view. . . . Others will . . . look with astonishment at these odd people who instead of doing like others, i.e., hating one another for political reasons, are full of love for one another beyond these secondary barriers. . . . Christian freedom means . . . that political adversaries can be fully united in Christ. . . . If Christians, belonging to different parties, are basically and totally united among themselves, . . . then they build a bridge between the different groups and opposing factions. . . . They promote better understanding. . . . They serve as interpreters. . . . They lessen the hostility. . . . As reconcilers, are they not witnesses to the covenant? . . . Loyalty to fellowship in Christ is not compatible with unconditional party loyalty. This is the same choice as the choice between God and Mammon.³²

Although Ellul confesses that he has not yet observed such a group of believers, he remains hopeful in the light of the freedom available to Christians.³³

Ellul views the presence of believers in the different strata of political life as an opportunity for witness, much like their presence in neighborhoods and places of work. He considers it vital that Christians bear witness in all places, including "all political parties and movements. All opinions should have Christian representatives. . . . Their splitting up into various movements, far from manifesting the incompetence of Christian thought or the inconsistency of faith, will be a striking expression of Christian freedom."³⁴

Although Ellul maintains that we do not really assume our political stances for reasons stemming from our faith, he proposes a test for those who contend that they support a revolution because their theology has led them to side with the oppressed. Once a revolution has triumphed, accord-

³¹ *Ethics* 382–383; *Combats* 116.

³² *Ethics* 379–380; see also 375–376; *Combats* 113; *False Presence* 190–197.

³³ *Ethics* 381.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 379; see also 378; *Combats* 111–112.

ing to Ellul, Christians must transfer their support to the cause of the losers, who constituted the oppressors during the revolutionary period. Every time I have explained this principle of Ellul's it has met with stark disbelief and shock, but the logic of his reasoning seems inescapable: Once a revolution has ended, the new leaders proceed invariably to oppress their former oppressors, so that anyone who claims to side with the oppressed must switch sides and proceed to defend the newly oppressed.³⁵

Relativizing politics offers still another benefit: Since Christians do not believe politics offers them a way of salvation, they can eliminate emotion and anguish from their political involvement.³⁶ Is there any likelihood that Ellul will spot this attitude in some group of believers in the United States in this election year? Could an understanding of Ellul's principle enable us to discuss the abortion issue in the Church without the usual political overtones? Or at least broach the question of foreign aid?

Ellul warns that since believers cannot offer their full allegiance to a party (or a union) they will not make ideal members from the point of view of the political faithful. Christians nonetheless can bring priceless qualities to their participation in politics: respect and caring for their adversaries, honesty, discretion, independence of judgment, discernment (an ability to see undercurrents beneath the rustle of current events), and a concern to keep situations open when the world tries to eliminate all possibility of change. Ellul considers prayer the most important of all political actions: "much more important than all the declarations, demonstrations, elections, etc."³⁷

Warning and confronting society become possibilities for the discerning Church when an appropriate attitude toward politics has developed. A prophetic stance enables believers to discern future conflicts before they become full-blown and thus to speak out in time. For many long-time readers, Ellul's writings find their place in this prophetic tradition. If the Church does its job prophetically he suggests that it can dissipate tensions and contribute to the preservation of our world, which he believes to be bent on committing suicide.³⁸ Since believers speak of justice and love, instead of relying on the means of force—as the state does—they also have the authority to speak to it. They should speak out whenever they find power held up as sacred, he says, and they should defend the poor.³⁹

For this to happen, however, the Church must have something to say, and it must discern the identity of the truly poor rather than getting all its information through the media. Failure on both counts has produced scathing condemnations by Ellul, who deplores the condition of a Church

³⁵ *Violence* 138–139

³⁶ *Ethics* 381, *Combats* 114–116

³⁷ *False Presence* 112, 146, 179, 186–189, *Combats* 114, *Violence* 165–166

³⁸ *Ethics* 387–388, *Presence of the Kingdom* 19–20

³⁹ *Ethics* 389, 385, 391, 408, *Violence* 151–156, 160, J. Ellul, "Rappels et réflexions sur une théologie de l'état," in J. Jullien, P. L'Huilher and J. Ellul, *Les Chrétiens et l'état* (Tours: Maison Mame, 1967) 176–179

that merely follows the world's concerns—but so ineptly that it is always out of step, taking up causes long after they have ceased to constitute genuine needs. The contrast between this floundering Church and the Biblical, prophetic image of the people of God on the watchtower, warning of dangers the world has yet to notice, could hardly be more striking.⁴⁰

V. MARXISM

Ellul's most controversial facet for many readers in the United States is the degree of influence his reading of Marx has undoubtedly had on him. By way of contrast, I do not believe I have read anything written in France that takes issue with Ellul at this point. Nor have any of my many conversations with French thinkers taken him to task for any Marxist ideas he might have expressed, although many criticize him on other grounds (most often they berate him for his "conservatism").

Ellul first read Marx as a young person and found there for the first time explanations that helped him understand what was happening in France, primarily from an economic point of view.⁴¹ He never joined the Communist party and found himself increasingly disillusioned by the party's activities in the 1930s. But Marx remained significant in his thinking:

It was Marx who convinced me that people in the various historical situations they find themselves, have a revolutionary function in regard to their society. But one must understand exactly which revolution it is; and in each historical period one must change, one must rediscover. This was an element that Marx planted in my life and that has never changed. Another element, certainly, was the importance of reality. (I am not speaking of materialism.) Marx assigns major importance to the concrete material reality that surrounds us. Both the intellectual and the spiritual minds tend to forget this reality, to disguise it, as though it could ultimately be masked. But because of Marx's influence, whenever I speak, I instantly ask myself in terms of what economic situation I am speaking, what my interests are. . . . A third element of Marx's influence of course, was my decision to side with the poor. . . . For Marx, there is a complete analysis of the psychological, sociological and economic situation of human beings, and the poor person is the person deprived in all these areas. . . . In the religious area or in regard to the Church, Marx had no influence at all, for the good reason that I was not particularly touched by his arguments about religion and God.⁴²

Other areas where Marx has influenced Ellul include the importance of dialectical thinking, sociological study, human freedom, and ends and means. Ellul and Marx part company when it comes to global explanations and systems, which Ellul rejects, and Marx's belief in progress and in the

⁴⁰ *Ethics* 387–388; *Combats* 123–124; *Season* 104–107; *Subversion* 153–155; J. Ellul, *The Betrayal of the West* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 85–125; *Jesus and Marx: From Gospel to Ideology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 13–14. Ellul's image of the watchman comes from Ezek 3:16–21; 33:1–20.

⁴¹ *Season* 11.

⁴² *Perspectives* 11–13.

centrality of work for the meaning of human life. Ellul's dialectic differs in many ways from Marx's, and he rejects materialist philosophy.⁴³

The stark contrast between Ellul's debt to the thought of Marx on the one hand and his vehement opposition to the contemporary political thought that hails Marx as its hero on the other has often bypassed superficial readers and failed to convince others. The fact remains that we would find it difficult to name a scholar more opposed to Marxism and Marxist governments of all sorts than Ellul. His scathing criticism of such regimes has appeared in so many of his works that careful readers cannot remain ignorant of his views.⁴⁴

Ellul's strong opposition to Marxism comes through perhaps more strongly in *Jesus and Marx* than elsewhere. In this study he especially explores the influence of Marxism on certain contemporary theologians and the devastating effects of this combination. Ellul draws a sharp distinction between Marx, who spoke to the situation that prevailed in his day, and Marx's followers, who persist in applying Marx's solutions to the very different problems of the present.⁴⁵

Living and working in a political climate very different from the anti-communism that has sometimes dominated in the United States, Ellul has felt free to pursue a kind of dialogue with Marx and even with Marxism. I remember vividly a public lecture he gave at the University of Bordeaux in 1982 on "What Christians and Marxists Can Learn from Each Other." He did not suggest much possibility of either side convincing the other but instead recommended a lot of listening, since the point of view of each group enables it to point out important weaknesses in the other's practice.

Ellul's position in such a dialogue remains utterly clear: Although he makes use of certain aspects of Marx's thinking, his Christian commitment has not wavered, publicly or privately, since his conversion as a young person. This firm commitment and his strong democratic leanings do not prevent him from seeing many similarities between governments of the left and of the right. As the influence of technique increasingly dominates power structures all over the world, he believes political differences between regimes tend to evaporate.⁴⁶ Although this point of view has shocked some readers, it may also be that the recent demise of many

⁴³ *Perspectives* 16, 27; D. C. Menninger, "Marx in the Social Thought of Jacques Ellul," *Essays* (ed. Christians and Van Hook) 17-30; *Jesus and Marx* 12-13; *Ethics* 333.

⁴⁴ Examples abound in Ellul's writings. Here is a sample: "The Communist party is a machine for propaganda and conflict which uses the poor as much as it serves them and . . . the real objective is not the rehabilitation or happiness of the poor but the victory of Communist countries. . . . Marx showed no compassion for the most disinherited (the 'proletariat scum'). He had absolutely no interest in them. . . . The result of the Communist revolution has not been to wipe out misery but to plunge a whole new class, the older middle class, into misery. . . . I cannot believe that there is anything Christian about accepting the enormous sufferings that have been inflicted on the world by Communism, equal at least to those inflicted by Hitlerism, capitalism, or colonialism" (*Ethics* 377). See *Jesus and Marx* 22-24; *Betrayal* 126-131.

⁴⁵ See esp. *Jesus and Marx* 6, 15; *Political Illusion* 45; *Season* 3; *Combats* 173-197.

⁴⁶ *Political Illusion* 38-39, 70, 96-97, 150-151; *Combats* 131; *Perspectives* 46.

European Marxist states and economies will have the effect of making Ellul's appreciation of Marx's thought seem like less of a betrayal.

VI. ANARCHISM

Like the free use of Marx in his thinking and writings, Ellul's frequent references to anarchism often shock non-European readers. In the United States many think of anarchism as advocating unbridled chaos—a society utterly lacking in order of any kind. As Ellul takes pains to point out, however, this common misconception stems from a lack of familiarity with a whole body of anarchist theory and writing perhaps more readily accessible in Europe than here.

In any case, Ellul does not advocate an anarchist society: "My aim is not the establishment of an anarchist society or the total destruction of the state. Here I differ from anarchists. . . . Furthermore I do not believe that anarchist doctrine is the solution to the problem of organization in society and government. I do not think that if anarchism were to succeed we should have a better or more livable society. . . . I am not fighting for the triumph of this doctrine."⁴⁷

What then does Ellul mean to suggest? As a tactic for slowing the growth of the behemoth the modern state has become, as a means of protest and counterbalance, Ellul suggests that the Christian can consider adopting an anarchist position. To oppose an all-powerful state he believes we need to take a radical, confrontational stance. In his view the only way we can begin again to invent a new political order that would take individuals into account is to reject the present order, in which all states are totalitarian.

By adopting an anarchist position Ellul believes we can take the first step in consciously calling into question the growth of the state and its tendency to crush people with its power. He wants to open Christians' thinking to a possibility they may have rejected without considering seriously: "Among the political options, if they take a political path, they should not rule out anarchism in advance, for in my view this seems to be the position which in this area is closest to biblical thinking."⁴⁸

Ellul does not, of course, recommend violence in any form but suggests all sorts of other anarchist options: "pacifist, antinationalist, anticapitalist, moral, and antidemocratic anarchism. . . . There remains the anarchism which acts by means of persuasion, by the creation of small groups and networks, denouncing falsehood and oppression, aiming at a true overturning of authorities of all kinds as people at the bottom speak and organize themselves."⁴⁹ Ellul's manner of calling for the "Estates General of Protestantism" clearly reflected this pattern.

⁴⁷ *Ethics* 396–397, see *Anarchy* 21

⁴⁸ *Anarchy* 4, see 21–23, 45–46, *Ethics* 297, 396, *Combats* 132

⁴⁹ *Anarchy* 14–15

In spite of his recommendations that we look into anarchism, Ellul expects our firmly-held conceptions about the state to work against our adopting such a stance: "We cannot conceive of society except as directed by a central omnipresent and omnipotent state."⁵⁰

VII. CONCLUSION

Such a positive attitude toward anarchism fits naturally with Ellul's long-held belief that our society needs to experience a peaceful revolution based on small, autonomous groups. Particularly since its alliance with technique began in earnest, the state, Ellul believes, has tried to eliminate resistance and to produce a homogeneous society. In any attempt to foil this tendency

it is important above all never to permit oneself to ask the state to help us. This means that we must try to create positions in which we reject and struggle with the state, *not* in order to modify some element of the regime or force it to make some decision, but, much more fundamentally, in order to permit the emergence of social, political, intellectual, or artistic bodies, associations, interest groups, or economic or Christian groups totally independent of the state, yet capable of opposing it, able to reject its pressures as well as its controls, even its gifts.⁵¹

Such groups should be widely diversified and constitute points of tension over against the monolithic state. Ellul suggests that young people may find themselves especially motivated to oppose society, but he also mentions more consciously formed groups that make him hopeful, such as ecological and antinuclear movements, consumer groups, neighborhood associations, and some women's movements.⁵²

Understood as part of this context, Ellul's version of anarchism no longer seems so far removed from what we already know. On the other hand, whenever our churches, our institutions of higher education, or our associations break down along political lines we have returned to upholding the illusion that "everything is political." Only as our groups create healthy tensions within society will we be able to provide focal points that draw away from overpowering political concerns, in Ellul's view.

Can we find any way to categorize Ellul on politics? Probably not, but recently some have pointed out important similarities in Ellul's emphasis and the rather political definition of the "confessing church" in publications by J. H. Yoder, S. Hauerwas and W. H. Willimon. I have not yet found an opportunity to ask Ellul about his response to these writers. My guess is that he has read them all (he gives evidence of a considerable familiarity with Yoder's work) and would acknowledge certain parallels, maintaining that he has staked out a rather different territory, especially with regard to the importance of the individual.

⁵⁰ *Political Illusion* 12; see also 13; *Anarchy* 104-105.

⁵¹ *Political Illusion* 222 (italics his); see 221, 209.

⁵² *Perspectives* 74-75.

I have yet to meet anyone who agrees with Ellul at all points, especially when it comes to politics. His recent stances with respect to Israel and South Africa have exasperated many of his longtime followers. Undaunted by such reactions, he continues to stake out with great freedom the bold positions he believes in: He sees no reason to adopt views for the purpose of pleasing other people. As he tries to be penetrating in his analysis of contemporary society and to apply Biblical principles and insights with consistency, his example can serve to stimulate our best thinking. As a dialectical thinker, however, he fondly hopes that we will reach entirely different conclusions.