

Sign, Structure, and (Christ) Event: Illuminating Ellul's Anarchic Hermeneutics

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“Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction”
— Pope Benedict XVI (Ratzinger)

“The exception explains the general and itself. And if one wants to study the general correctly, one only needs to look around for a true exception. It reveals everything more clearly than does the general.”
— Soren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*

“The will to system is a lack of integrity.”
— Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols (I.26)*

Thesis

Today, I want to advocate for a way of seeing. In his book, *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, the American anthropologist James C. Scott writes that if you put on anarchist glasses and “squint” at various phenomenon with these optics, “certain insights will appear that are obscured from almost any other angle.”¹ I want to deploy this “anarchist squint” with Ellul’s hermeneutics, especially as they relate to what he means by ‘being a sign.’ I will demonstrate this way of seeing through the philosophy of the event. In doing so, I am not arguing for a hermeneutic skeleton key through which all of Ellul’s theological texts ought to be seen and heard. Instead, I want to argue that Ellul’s event—or, more appropriately, his events—set the horizon for his anarchic hermeneutical approach, and that once we are able to see the anarchic nature of the event itself, we are given a new slant on approaching Ellul’s texts.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE EVENT

¹ James C. Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces On Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play* by James C. Scott (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), xii.

To begin, let's look briefly at the philosophy of the Event, a subject area that has occupied continental philosophy for the past 40 to 50 years. The contemporary Slovenian poststructuralist, Slavoj Žižek, describes the Event as "a traumatic intrusion of something New which remains unacceptable for the predominant view."² The Event's basic feature is "the surprising emergence of something new which undermines every stable scheme." It is a "Truth that shatters our ordinary life...a trauma which destabilizes the symbolic order we dwell in." Finally, in the event we find "the rise of a new 'Master-Signifier', a signifier which structures an entire field of meaning."³

Evental philosophy is an exploration into the exceptionality of an event, or how it stands apart with regards to the context in which it is birthed. A theory of the event examines ruptures, traumas, and semiotic breaks as a deviation to the general rule of things. It is not concerned with causes and effects and it is not to be thought in terms of dialectics: it is not a 'negation' that brings about some sort of dialectical sublation or change. The event does not seek to synthesize the general rule of things with the event but to see the event as an injection of the Real into an order that stands in dire need of change. It is a transgression that could lead to new possibilities and shatters any attempt at dialectical sublation.

The contemporary French philosopher, Alain Badiou, is one of the foremost writers on the theory of event. As he puts it, the event is an incalculable happening that founds the creation of an unforeseen possibility. However, for Badiou, and for most evental theorists, the event itself counts only to the extent that it also shapes one's subjectivity. For what is needed in the ruptured space of the event is a decision on the part of the subject: when new possibilities are opened up by the event, one must seize them and translate them into forms of life that transcend the

² Slavoj Žižek, *Event: A Philosophical Journey through a Concept* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2014), 70.

³ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

possibilities offered by the state of things. This is what Badiou calls one's conformity to and participation in a truth procedure. To participate in a truth procedure is to take the consequences of the rupture that was opened up by the event into the "real world". In Badiou's nomenclature, it is to participate in 'militancy', or a form of life that militates against the systems that actively shape our life.⁴

So there are two primary dynamics in the theory of the event: first, an exceptional, unforeseen and incalculable happening; and second, a decision to reorient oneself around the consequences of that event and to create a form of life that is perpetually doing so.

ANARCHISM

Now, I want to argue for a fundamental, irreducible relationship between the rupture of the event itself and anarchy. When we think of anarchy, I want to suggest we think about a relationship...of the exception...to the general instead of thinking of anarchy as a synonym to "chaos" and "disorder".

Historically, the word 'anarchist' takes its pejorative meaning from the English Civil War in 1642. It was a term of abuse used by various Royalists against those who were fomenting rebellion and who were supposedly without *archē*, or 'without rule'. Since that time, anarchism has been associated with this sense of rebellion as well as with those who lack the ability to fall into the established norms dictated by the dominant power (be it a state, economic, technological, or religious power). However, far from signaling a nihilistic ideology of chaos and violence, I want to suggest that anarchism—as a political theory that coalesced in the eighteenth

⁴ For more on Badiou's typology, see Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003).

and nineteenth centuries, but also as a certain spirit—signifies an indeterminate and perpetually re-configuring praxis that circulates around a matter of central concern: non-hierarchical constellations of power. Anarchism is a theory and praxis that does not permit a given position to become totalized or closed. It perpetuates itself as an agonist force, or a force of confrontation and contestation, and it is by and through that force that alternative organizational configurations in the social, political, religious, and economic spheres begin to take shape. Thus: anarchism is not against order and organization but instead contests for *alternative orders and forms of organization*.

For instance, as it concerns the actions and concerns of real human beings, the political theory of anarchism, especially via theorists such as Pierre Joseph Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin, and Peter Kropotkin, centers upon non-hierarchical issues of mutualism and cooperation and how they might reconfigure the dominant orders of the day.⁵ This was simultaneously a campaign that sought positive liberty, or freedom-for the individual and for groups, just as much as it was one that sought negative liberty, or freedom-from various oppressive structures such as radical state power and the exploitative power of capitalists.

What concerned the classical anarchists most was a theory and praxis that took stock of the elements and modes of power that had coalesced into a solidified and unquestionable whole, and to begin generating vital social movements that undermined and transformed that whole. In this way, anarchism is like a contextualized generator of change: it meets the issues of one's time and location with novel solutions that deviate from the norm.

⁵ For quick reference, see Peter Alekseevich Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* (Charlestown, SC.: Createspace, Inc., 2016); Petr Alekseevich Kropotkin and David Priestland, *The Conquest of Bread*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2015); Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Proudhon: What is Property?* ed. Donald R. Kelley and Bonnie G. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, ed. and trans. Marshall Shatz, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

So, to clarify: my point here is not to make a comparative thesis, to compare Ellul with an anarchist writer like Proudhon, for whom Ellul expresses admiration in a handful of texts. My point is to see how anarchist theory and praxis shares an affinity with the sort of structural reconfigurations that result from an Event, and to offer a reading of how Ellul's events shaped his hermeneutics and embodied semiotics. There is something deeply disruptive, something truly anarchic in a truth-event. To the one who is seized by the event, it is an occurrence of exceptional intensity, a cutting against the grain that authorizes a reinterpretation of all that is.

ELLUL: EVENT(S)

Now, thus far, I have discussed a(n) (anarchic) theory of the event (singular). But when we look at Ellul's narrative we see something interesting: broadly construed, he had two events: the first with Marx and the second with Jesus of Nazareth. Concerning Marx, much can be said. As Marva Dawn tells the story, Ellul was a young law student supporting his ill and unemployed parents. As he puts it: "(with Marx) I discovered a global interpretation of the world, the explanation for this drama of misery and decadence that we had experienced. The excellence of Marx's thinking, in the domain of economic theory, convinced me...[I]t was the first breakthrough giving me a general interpretation of the world, my first general education."⁶

The power of this 'general interpretation' can be seen in almost all of Ellul's writings.. For instance, in *Presence in the Modern World*, Ellul writes that "Marxist thought spread so tremendously precisely because it gave a true account of the situation of the people to whom it was addressed, and because it relied heavily on a way of living, imposed by economic and social

⁶ Jacques Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season: an Introduction to the Thought of Jacques Ellul*, trans. Madeleine Garrigou-Lagrange (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 11.

conditions.”⁷ It can also be seen especially in Ellul’s 1947 essay, “Needed: A New Karl Marx! (Problems of Civilization II)”. In this essay, Ellul argues against the technocratic aims of the radical utopianists of his day, saying that they lack the breadth and depth of analysis that was offered by Marx in the nineteenth century. According to Ellul, Marx “was the only man of his time who grasped the totality of the social, political, and economic problems in their reality and posed correctly the questions (facing) the civilization of the nineteenth century.” He was “truly the man who mastered his epoch and was able to make the synthesis of the enormous amount of material that had been provided him.”⁸ Marx’s influence upon Ellul was so powerful that the latter taught a course on the former for many years at the University of Bourdeaux.

But, as we all know, Ellul found Marxian analysis to be lacking, specifically in its historical datedness and its dogmatic political applications. We must also take into account Ellul’s second event: his ‘somewhat brutal’ encounter with Christ. Again, much can be said, but with an eye to time we can say that whatever happened in this truth event, its impacts were so powerful, so shattering, that it completely reoriented Ellul’s life.

Now, regarding these two founding events: Ellul calls them two “totalitarian truths”; neither of them can be “eliminated” or dismissed outright, nor can they be “merged into a synthesis.”⁹ The two truths make universal demands of its subjects and cannot be melded into some sort of Hegelian sublation wherein one is incorporated into the other in the name of some higher synthesis. This is where we see much of Ellul’s contempt and warning against the mistake of adopting a political ideology and baptizing it in the name of Christ, for instance a “Christian

⁷ Jacques Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World: a New Translation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 96.

⁸ Jacques Ellul, *Sources and Trajectories: Eight Early Articles That Set the Stage*, trans. Marva J. Dawn (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997), 39.

⁹ Jacques Ellul, *Jesus and Marx: from Gospel to Ideology*, The Jacques Ellul Legacy Series (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 63.

Socialism". Instead, the two events must be held in some sort of constantly shifting asymmetrical tension because, for Ellul, both rose to the level the eventual truth. Marx and Christ are two traumatic intrusions of something New that proposes a new form of life. To pledge fidelity to these two eventual truth means that the two must in some way dialogue, act, and reconfigure around each other precisely because of their eventual truth. Note that he does not merely convert from Marx to Christ but attempts a thought and praxis that holds the two in an irreducible tension.

This thought and praxis might best be called 'anarchic', first, because of the subjective exceptionality of the events themselves and, second, because of the non-totalized, reconfiguring, open, and indeterminate relation between the two. It's almost as if the agonism prescribed by both truths challenge one other without negating or eliminating either, like iron shaping iron, so that each does not atrophy into its own form of totalitarianism.

ANARCHIC HERMENEUTICS

Recalling James C. Scott's quip about the 'anarchist squint', let's look at Ellul's hermeneutics and his embodied semiotics. First, a caveat: I am calling this irreducible relation Ellul's 'anarchic semiotics' and/or 'hermeneutics' because it relates both to his mode of interpretation as well as his desire to embody a form of life (i.e 'being a sign'). If there is one thing upon which all of us might agree, it's that Ellul's electrifying thought was almost always paired with radical action in the world. In his texts and in his life, Ellul displayed a form of life that deploys methods of interpretation and analysis, but that also insists that hermeneutics always extend to a life well lived. With this in mind, I want to use these terms not interchangeably but as

a way of showing how they allow us to see how various texts and actions are interrelated in such a way that the general condition of Ellul's anarchic approach can be better illuminated.

Now, there are many texts I could draw our attention to (whereupon an 'anarchist squint' could reveal new insights into Ellul's interpretive methodology. If I had more time I would draw out the anarchist implications of various texts such as *The Ethics of Freedom*, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, and *Subversion of Christianity*.)

If we look at *Presence in the Modern World*, especially the second chapter, "Revolutionary Christianity", we see this reconfiguring praxis put into action. For instance, consider Ellul's statement that, despite changes on the surface, the world we inhabit is "static, because its structures remain absolutely fixed and its development unfolds along a completely expected rather than revolutionary path."¹⁰ He writes that a 'revolutionary spirit' in this sort of context must look more like the anarchist Proudhon rather than the pseudo-revolutionary Marx because "Proudhon...affirmed the supremacy of the human will over the human condition and called people to struggle against their situation."¹¹ This struggle that is Christian presence in the world must progress along three interrelated vectors: contextual discernment; the way of preservation within that particular context, including work among and within a context's institutions; and the proclamation of salvation within those institutions that remain "open"¹² and indeterminate. Here, Christians find themselves in what Ellul calls "a permanent revolutionary position", wherein the Christian is under an obligation to "renew God's demand, (or) to bring (God's) order repeatedly into confrontation with an order that is constantly moving toward disorder."¹³ It is interesting, then, to think about this: in *Presence in the Modern World*, Ellul

¹⁰ Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹² *Ibid.*, 30.

¹³ *Ibid.*

calls for a position that is always reconfiguring in the name of renewal, and that this sort of ‘moving-position’ preserves a disordered order. With the anarchist squint, we can see how this form of life is itself an *alternative organizational form* taking place within a general state of things. The “revolutionary position”, as Ellul calls it, is a creative act of contextualized agonist order against the disorder of the static powers and the principalities. Moreover it is always an intermediate position between worldly capitulation and theocratic idealism, both being their own result of some movement turned static.

CONCLUSION

I’ve only had time to examine one text, but I hope I’ve persuaded you to apply an ‘anarchist squint’ to Ellul’s various texts. Thank you.