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Cover image: Fragment of a painted linen hanging that depicts the Crossing of the Red Sea. Byzantine, A.D. mid-2nd to mid-4th century. This scene depicts Philistines, astonished by the event. Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, public domain.

The Ellul Forum

About

Jacques Ellul (1912–94) was a French thinker and writer in many fields: communication, ethics, law and political science, sociology, technology, and biblical and theological studies, among others. The aim of the *Ellul Forum* is to promote awareness and understanding of Ellul's life and work and to encourage a community of dialogue on these subjects. The *Forum* publishes content by and about Jacques Ellul and about themes relevant to his work, from historical, contemporary, or creative perspectives. Content is published in English and French.

Subscriptions

The *Forum* is published twice a year. Annual subscriptions are $40 USD for individuals/households and $80 USD for institutions. Individual subscriptions include membership in the International Jacques Ellul Society, and individual subscribers receive regular communications from the Society, discounts on IJES conference fees, and other benefits. To subscribe, please visit www.ellul.org.

Submissions

The *Forum* encourages submissions from scholars, students, and general readers. Submissions must demonstrate a degree of familiarity with Ellul's thought and must engage with it in a critical way. Submissions may be sent to ellulforum@gmail.com.

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Editor's Letter

This issue of the *Forum* serves as a foretaste of our upcoming conference, to be held in July 2020 at the University of Strasbourg, France, on the theme of "Ellul and Charbonneau on Ethics in an Age of Ecological and Technological Change." As many readers of the *Forum* will know, Bernard Charbonneau and Jacques Ellul were lifelong friends whose works focused on similar concerns and who complemented each other's investigations. The conference is being sponsored jointly by IJES and our francophone sister society, the Association Internationale Jacques Ellul. If you have so far been undecided about attending, we hope that this *Forum* issue will tip you in the right direction. Registration is now open: to register, please visit https://ellul2020conference.weebly.com or follow the links on the IJES website at www.ellul.org.

The *Forum* always welcomes your submissions and suggestions. Please write to us at ellulforum@gmail.com.

"Editor's Letter." *Ellul Forum* 64 (Fall 2019): 3.

Nature and Scripture in Bernard Charbonneau's *The Green Light*

Christian Roy

Having translated Jacques Ellul's posthumous book on *Theology and Technique* for Wipf and Stock, I was struck by the way that it makes explicit the intertwining of these two strands of his lifelong investigation: Christian faith and the sociology of the modern world, carried out in the parallel series of books devoted to their respective ramifications, that here come together at last. A crucial issue on which that convergence comes to bear is that of "Limits," to which an important chapter is devoted. It deals among other things with the thesis, fashionable since Lynn White's famous 1967 article about "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,"[1] that locates these in biblical religion's "departure from the origin where there were limits to man's enterprise over nature," when, "surrounded by a sacred universe, man knew himself to be limited in his enterprises. He might have techniques, but he could not use them just anywhere nor anyhow." The Promethean hubris of the "unlimited remained a virtuality, but prohibitions remained more powerful."

> And so it comes about that Christianity intervenes in this equilibrium, by desacralizing the world, deritualizing religion and negating magic. It brings things down to being only things, it refuses the limits of a sacred that it manifests as imaginary, it kills the gods of the forest, the earth and the waters, and as a result puts all things at the disposal of man who can, from now on, use "nature" as he sees fit, without limits imposed from the outside. Why should one respect what is now no more than matter?
>
> And we must here pay heed to B. Charbonneau's call-out: by spiritualizing God too much, by making him radically heavenly and Transcendent, man was necessarily pushed away toward Matter, his action was materialized, man's material instinct was liberated. [...]

Roy, Christian. "Nature and Scripture in Bernard Charbonneau's *The Green Light*." *Ellul Forum* 64 (Fall 2019): 5–16.

> Christianity has separated what the ancient world, and the traditional world, had carefully joined, balanced. From that moment on, man may seek the most efficient means and use everything without limits and without shame. The unlimited is inherent to Christianity itself, perhaps not the Christianity of theologians, but Christianity as experienced by the masses of the faithful, and producing effects that were not so much spiritual (having to do with holiness), but concretely historical ones.[2]

Carl Amery's Ecological Challenge to Christianity: Contrasting Responses of Ellul and Charbonneau

Ellul seems to be referring here, perhaps from an early draft, to the chapter on "Nature and Christianity" of Bernard Charbonneau's 1980 book *Le Feu vert. Autocritique du mouvement écologique* (my English translation of which was published by Bloomsbury in 2018 as *The Green Light: A Self-Critique of the Ecological Movement*), as well as to Bavarian writer and environmentalist Carl Amery's 1972 book *Das Ende der Vorsehung. Die gnadenlosen Folgen des Christentums* (i.e., *The End of Providence: The Merciless Consequences of Christianity*). Both Ellul and Charbonneau engage at length with the latter's 1976 French translation as *La Fin de la Providence*, albeit with different emphases. Charbonneau is much more positive about this critique, whereas Ellul remains rather defensive and apologetic. This is what enables Ellul's just-cited mention of Charbonneau's challenge to Christians to seamlessly segue into an implicit account of what sounds more like Amery's own positions about Christianity's ambiguous "success" in a disenchanted world of its own making.

Ellul feels the challenge of Amery's book so keenly that he devotes to it a whole "Annex to the Fifth Chapter" on "Ethical Mediation." On the one hand, he locates it as part of the trend that traces to Christianity as such "all the evil of modern Western society." "Christianity set out on a quest for the final Kingdom and only ends up in a general conquest of the world," in the guise "of technical expansion, of 'planetary revolution.'"[3] That hardly seems controversial to the world historian that I sometimes purport to be, at least if we are talking about a specifically Western Christianity where, under Charlemagne for the first time, the "mechanical arts" came to be theologically valued as instrumental in the gradual restoration of the full power

over Creation that Adam had enjoyed before the Fall and that made him the image of God on earth. This conflation of the divine image with human power over the world as a totality fuelled the technological revolutions that spread from monasteries to fields and thence from cities to the State, with a Church mandate to gather the ends of the earth as one for the end times of a historicized millennial Kingdom. Far from being the result of the intrusion of non-Christian impulses soon after the Reformation, as Ellul insists, the Western drive to cosmic mastery was always intimately linked to this eschatological pattern, from the Scientific Revolution effected by millenarian evangelical Christians who sought the mind of God in the laws of nature, to the Positivists who took them as scripture of a new religion of industry, and beyond to the current transhumanist endeavor to remake reality as the new creation of omnipotent "spiritual machines" (Howard Rheingold).[4] Whether this really existing historical and cultural Christianity is true to the essence of the faith is of course a different matter, and as a Christian whose loyalty is to the Gospel rather than to Christendom, Ellul is quite ready to take a stand against the latter's dubious holdovers alongside non-Christian critics of technological society, such as Charbonneau and Amery. Ellul's other problem with the latter however is that "what he puts forward as an ethic, to which I readily subscribe, has no chance of being born for lack of a positive motivation" for "post-Christian man who lives without hope, in anguish, in the shadow of death. What could be the use of driving him deeper, of telling him no one will come to his help?" He views *The End of Providence* as "actually just an iteration of Death of God Theology."

> Man must be persuaded that nobody is going to come to his help, that the God on whom he was relying is absent, and that he must manage on his own with the problems he has raised. [...] Now, I say that without hope and without the certainty of a Transcendence, the situation in which we are can only lead to suicide. Amery, with his book, seems to me to hasten the temptation of collective suicide.[5]

Charbonneau has a very different, even sympathetic, assessment of this very stance of Amery's that troubles Ellul so much. In keeping with their common early calls for "an ascetic City so that man may live,"[6] Charbonneau holds that "faith alone will be able to impose the asceticism" required to recognize the material limits of embodied life in all areas. "We may say

with Carl Amery that, since the sacrifices needed to save the earth and man 'can hardly find justifications in our immediate interests, the call to a religious renewal seems well-founded.'"[7] And Charbonneau proceeds to quote at length as its ground the same passage that seemed so dispiriting to Ellul, as though his friend could not entertain the hypothetical bracketing of reliance on a divine breakthrough awaiting us ahead in time to save us. But Ellul appears to misunderstand this as an *a priori* exclusion of that possibility, when it may be a precondition for it in Charbonneau's reading of Amery, who, invoking Job's "lived experience of human and earthly finitude," writes that "we have to treat the future itself 'as though' it could and should be defined in purely human ways," in order to be responsible for our actions.

> And we must not allow any agency, be it divine or human, to leave half-open the least way out, to count on any miraculous intervention whatsoever, to spare us the sufferings we have laid in store and inflicted upon ourselves with our own hands. We must, to speak in theological language, tend towards this final kenosis, this ultimate self-emptying: the renunciation of any guaranteed future. It is only by losing it that we will win it. [...] We have entered a new phase of divine unfathomability.[8]

This could well be read as an illustration of Ellul's crucial contrast of *espoir* and *espérance*: the former has to be lost or renounced for the latter to come into play as an opening to unforeseeable possibilities, with no certainty to fall back on, only *faith*.[9] And this is precisely the point that Charbonneau makes, arguably more Ellulian than Ellul himself here, in support of Amery's insistence on "lowering the growth rate to restore equilibrium," which he sees as a road without end that begins at our own feet, no matter one's situation or the timescale involved, regardless of the odds of success as we take one small step after another.

> Despite a glaring emergency, it is only very gradually that it will be possible to perform such an about turn, after many conflicts and compromises with large interests and the public's habits (let us only think of the car), with mythologies, such as ideological and nationalist passions. To take on such an adversary with our eyes open, hope is but a feeble help; it will take faith in the meaning and necessity of that enterprise. But the choice is between the latter and nothingness.[10]

Charbonneau's words, written forty years ago, neatly capture the predicament we can no longer evade today and the kind of spiritual resolve required to face it. This is what he likes to call a post-Christian situation, assuming a Christian problematic of incarnation, yet independent of continued belief in the objects of faith. In line with Amery's kenotic approach to eschatology, Charbonneau feels that, not speaking as one himself, "a Christian can answer such a challenge only by effecting a Copernican reversal at the level of religion itself; if it puts Christian faith in question, it does seem true to its general direction though."

> The current crisis finds us fundamentally involved in the earth which we had purported to escape. And it is no longer from the heavens or from nature or from History that rescue will come, but from the—paradoxically spiritual—experience of an Earth where man forever more makes a decision against entropy, death and necessity in a struggle that may be crazy, but that is the only meaningful one. Only the freedom that is its conscience will be able to save us: this time in the sense in which we say that we save ourselves from drowning. But it is written somewhere that the spirit became incarnate in a body.[11]

Charbonneau's Ambivalent Reading of Christian Scripture

This last sentence, shorn of its dogmatic content, is at the core of Charbonneau's existential thought as it directly translates into ecological commitment. This is the foundational insight he takes from Christianity and remains ever faithful to, and in light of which he assesses the way it has translated in this religious tradition that has much to answer for in terms of its historical and environmental impact but to which he remains indebted for his moral compass. I will not attempt here to give a panorama of Bernard Charbonneau's thinking on Nature and Christianity, a topic that exercised this reverent agnostic all his life, largely in uneasy but mutually fruitful dialogue with the staunch, if critical, Christian Jacques Ellul. An admirable paper along these lines has already been given by Frédéric Rognon at the Bernard Charbonneau conference in Pau in 2011, which I urge readers of French to download from the online proceedings.[12] But in keeping with the IJES conference theme, I will confine myself in the rest of this paper to skimming Charbonneau's close reading of the Bible over the first half of the "Nature and Christianity" chapter of *The Green Light*, this being

his most sustained published engagement with Christian Scripture itself as a focus, rather than Christian civilization in general, in order to tease out the dynamics and paradoxes of the denial of limits that has largely driven the latter.

From the outset, Charbonneau draws from the Creation story a rebuttal of its simplistic anti-environmental interpretation by non-Christians (and even by some Christians, such as those supporting the Trump administration), since "man received as his property the earth that Providence created for him. But nowhere does it say that he has the right to destroy God's handiwork. This sovereignty given to man has another, even more basic reason. If God gives it to him, it is because God created him in his image: sovereignty over nature belongs to the very being of the God of Jews and Christians," since, unlike "Greek or Oriental 'pagans,'" who divinized nature, "the personal and transcendent God distinguishes himself from it."[13] Likewise, "the Old Testament reminds man that he was drawn from the silt of the earth," and to that extent stands over against it as a distinct and autonomous *human* being, i.e., one that comes from the ground (*humus*) but is not reducible to it, though he returns to it in his fallen historical state.

> The sovereignty he has been granted is not absolute like that of his creator, it is bounded by Adam's finitude, and due to sin, his work is never purely good. If, instead of being the vague sense of a general and abstract evil, the awareness of sin and evil was that of our own limits and of human weakness, it could be the wellspring of a more realistic view of nature, and warier of man and his works.[14]

But the exile from Eden into a nature now fallen along with man and turned into "a jungle ruled by the survival of the fittest"[15] instead launches its former lord on a path of precarious mastery, where he constantly feels the need to defend and consolidate the limits of his uneasy comfort zones. It is thus "the divine curse that condemns him to build the city"[16]—the foundational act of civilization as one of disobedience to God for which Ellul blames man in his theology of the city based on the biblical stories of Cain and Babel.[17] But Charbonneau seems to be suggesting that man's own creation of a social and technological microcosm shielding him from the elements with artificial barriers to unmediated reliance on unpredictable, hostile nature, rather than a declaration of independence from divine Providence as

Ellul sees it, was an inevitable and therefore legitimate response to the new conditions into which God allows man to find a footing in his exile.

> Condemned to till the earth, he is less and less in magical communion with things, brought to mere utility by a will to power that reduces them to dust as soon as he lays hold of them. An ambivalent curse since it was imposed by God, work is both a duty and a blessing that happens to come along with the promise of deliverance from it.[18]

But according to Charbonneau, a perverse interpretation of this "curse-blessing" afflicts many one-sided readers of the Bible, such as the Puritans, who "had a religion of work that they transmitted to capitalist societies":

> As long as we are going to bear suffering and inflict it upon ourselves, we might as well derive delight from it, either by enjoying other people's suffering out of sadism or our own suffering out of masochism: a specifically human and Christian vice, doubtless unknown in nature. But look at all these new pleasures![19]

The this-worldly asceticism of the Protestant work ethic was so successful in its unintended consequence of producing an embarrassment of riches[20] that, transfigured by Fordism's use of mass purchasing power to drive the industrial economy, the guilty pleasures of consumption eventually became hallowed as an unmixed blessing and sign of election in the new dispensation of a consumer society driven by an endless stream of new technological distractions, proof of the bounties of a secular providence that hardly needs explicit religious validation by a prosperity gospel. "For, always for good or ill, the old man lives on in the new: the pagan in the Christian,"[21] just as Christian patterns live on in the ostensibly heathen hedonism of a post-Christian civilization.

"But it would be a mistake to reduce the Old and even the New Testament to a progressive ideology," Charbonneau insists, for "there is hardly a chapter without its own retort":

> At the same time as the condemnation of nature, we find in the Bible its glorification. It is everywhere in the Old Testament, rooted (or mired), far more than the New, in its soil and its people: in the Promised Land that is not in Heaven but smack in the middle of a geographic and historical crossroads.[22]

Still, "the Heavenly Jerusalem is not of this world, and things go awry every time man attempts to build it on earth. […] And the *Psalms* and the *Prophets* constantly renew the condemnation of any human work that wants to equal that of God."

> Although the New Testament continues the spiritualist and universalist tradition of the prophets, it remains nonetheless rooted in a Galilean countryside peopled by shepherds, agriculturalists and fishermen, where nature is omnipresent.[23]

In the guise of the birds and the lilies of the fields, "far from being cursed, nature is held up as an example to men, with their anxiety and greed for power and money."

> But the glorification of nature in the New Testament is not exactly that of the Old. It is no longer its power that is praised, but its humble beauty and its carefreeness. What is put into question by the Gospel and the prophets, more than nature, is the social power that does it violence, as it does to men. It is war, money, the Law.[24]

Oblivious to this serious business of human affairs, Christ thus lives "like an anarchist who ignores the economy and politics, without which men would have little power over nature. If Christians had strictly followed the Gospel's teaching, their power would hardly have gone beyond that of a tribe of gypsies or Indians" and there would have never been such thing as Christian civilization to upset the old ways of all human societies throughout the world, leading it at once to unity and to the brink of collapse. Just as biblical transcendence tends to "bring upheaval to the earth in the attempt to realize an impossible ideal," "Gospel anarchism is condemned to subvert a society that can only realize the conditions of freedom by translating them into laws and sanctions," a process known as civilization. "But if the old law is abolished, it is in favour of another one that belongs to personal conscience and love," as a new way of approaching not only the neighbor as irreplaceable person, regardless of social function or context, but also a nature now stripped of the power once wielded by its divinized features and likewise given over to human care and respect in its vulnerable if daunting otherness.

> If Christ finishes the process of disembodying the spirit, he re-embodies it on the other hand as no other religion has done, in a God-

> man who, through his body, lives, experiences death throes and then expires on a cross in his time and place.[25]

Disentangling Christianity and Progress

The kind of behavior that led Jesus to this divine consecration of human life is inseparable from his corporeal assumption of its mortal limits, so that incarnation refers not just to Christ's theological status or his sacramental incorporation of elements of the world but to the consistent translation of ethical principles into action within these limits: "hearing these words and putting them into practice." This demand now has to go deeper than ritual observance and socially sanctioned propriety, since

> no law determines how that is supposed to happen, it is up to freedom to do it. When that happens, nothing is negligible anymore: neither earth nor history; at every moment, a game is being played out in which the stakes are personal and universal salvation.[26]

It will no longer do to view this salvation in mostly otherworldly terms, however, now that "a secularized, rogue Christianity is at work throughout the human species,"[27] exposing it along with most other species to the Sixth Great Extinction in which this spiritual tradition was instrumental, like it or not. For "Progress, the continual development of science and technique, is inseparable from evangelical Christian faith; without it, it would have lacked an engine, nothing would have driven humans, until then steeped in the sacred, to break with the gods, except for the God-Man"[28] who brought a new heaven and a new earth within their reach. This alone could eventually turn the given earth and sky into mere springboards or fuel reserves for the historical journey to a better world as *telos* of all thought and activity. "But if the old chains binding man to the earth and man to man held on their own, the new link can only be tied freely by every man, at the risk of losing himself."[29]

This is why Charbonneau welcomes Carl Amery's call for an end to Providence as the assumption of a divinely ordained happy end to the human adventure on this planet. He agrees that people have to be disenchanted of this sacred history of salvation that remains in the guise of Progress in the wake of the disenchantment of all other forms of the sacred it has enabled. It is a personal leap of faith in meaningful life without ultimate guarantee

that Charbonneau demands of every human, no matter his or her beliefs or lack thereof, to defy the hopeless odds of steering mankind on the narrow path to meaningful collective survival. Where Ellul takes Amery to task for leaving out the transcendent hope that he deems indispensable to keep the future open, Charbonneau finds support in this thinker for both the spiritual and practical value of entertaining as he always has the uncomfortable question of the "only thing we can hold against pure Christianity" of the kind his friend is a reliable witness to: "Is not the challenge it puts to the hominid mammal, that of a new Law embodied in an individual freedom, too far beyond its capacities?"[30]

This question is not a rhetorical one to this agnostic. Yet even in the worst-case scenario of irredeemable environmental doom, Charbonneau maintains that there is no way back to conditions prior to biblical revelation and its possibly fatal world-historical consequences: "the old order is crumbling, and we do not have any other way" beyond the dead end of Progress than that Way of personal freedom opened by the embodied Word as revealed in Christian Scripture —for better or for worse. "If it happens that man is not up to the challenge of his own destiny, then that will have been the mistake of his Creator, whether God or nature."[31]

Notes

1. Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science* n.s. 155.3767 (March 10, 1967): 1203–07.
2. Jacques Ellul, *Théologie et Technique. Pour une éthique de la non-puissance,* ed. Yves Ellul and Frédéric Rognon (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2014): 181–82.
3. Ellul, *Théologie et Technique,* 299.
4. See David F. Noble, *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1999). I am indebted to this book in my own account of "Space, Time, and the Christian Matrix of Faustian Man," a paper given at the conference "100 Years after the Publication of *The Decline of the West*: Oswald Spengler in an Age of Globalisation," October 17–18, 2018, Blankenheimerdorf and Brussels. https://youtu.be/H7O9JUcBRvQ. Downloadable (pending publication of the proceedings) at www.academia.edu/39267384.
5. Ellul, *Théologie et Technique,* 306.

6. This is the title of the last section of their 83 "Directives pour un manifeste personnaliste" (1935). See Bernard Charbonneau and Jacques Ellul, *Nous sommes des révolutionnaires malgré nous. Textes pionniers de l'écologie politique* (Paris: Seuil, 2014), 80.
7. Bernard Charbonneau, *The Green Light: A Self-Critique of the Ecological Movement*, trans. Christian Roy (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 74.
8. Charbonneau, *The Green Light,* 75.
9. See Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (New York: Seabury, 1977).
10. Charbonneau, *The Green Light,* 185–86.
11. Amery as quoted in Charbonneau, *The Green Light*, 75–76.
12. Frédéric Rognon, "Bernard Charbonneau et la critique des racines chrétiennes de la Grande Mue." In Alain Cazenave-Parriot, ed., *Bernard Charbonneau : habiter la terre. Actes du Colloque du 2–4 mai 2011, Université de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour*. DVD accompanied by a booklet, Université de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour, 2011, 108–116. https://lagrandemue.wordpress.com/
13. Charbonneau, *The Green Light*, 66.
14. Charbonneau, *The Green Light*, 70.
15. Charbonneau, *The Green Light*, 67.
16. Charbonneau, *The Green Light,* 70.
17. Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City,* trans. Dennis Pardee (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011).
18. Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, 67.
19. Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, 67.
20. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (London: Penguin, 2002).
21. Charbonneau, *The Green Light*, 68.
22. Charbonneau, *The Green Light*, 69.
23. Charbonneau, *The Green Light*, 70.
24. Charbonneau, *The Green Light*, 70.
25. Charbonneau, *The Green Light*, 71.
26. Charbonneau, *The Green Light*, 71.
27. Charbonneau, *The Green Light*, 72.

28. Charbonneau, *The Green Light*, 72.
29. Charbonneau, *The Green Light*, 72.
30. Charbonneau, *The Green Light*, 72.
31. Charbonneau, *The Green Light*, 72.

Jacques Ellul and Exodus:
A Summary and Review

G. P. Wagenfuhr

This paper summarizes and reviews the place of exodus[1] in the corpus of Jacques Ellul. I argue that Ellul rightly understands the centrality of exodus and God as liberator in the Bible, but that he is bound to a perspective that prevents him from explaining in satisfactory detail what exodus is for. That is, every liberation is from a bondage to a goal. Ellul regularly underemphasizes the place of the people of God, the mission of that people, and the connection of the exodus with the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, his understanding of the centrality of exodus in the Bible makes him a prescient thinker whose theology of freedom remains well worth continued study.

Ellul on Exodus

The theme of exodus occupies an important place in the thought of Jacques Ellul, as it forms the biblical foundation of his theology of freedom. While a fair amount has been written on Ellul and freedom or liberation, I am not aware of a specific investigation into his view on exodus.

Rather than surveying the literature reference by reference, we will proceed thematically. This is somewhat easy to do, because Ellul's use of the concept of exodus is consistent in many of his works. Although I will aim to cite multiple references as they are available, this article should not be understood to be a complete index entry to his vast corpus. Although *The Ethics of Freedom* is his central work on freedom, and thus on exodus, he makes claims unique to other works as well.

Wagenfuhr, G. P. "Jacques Ellul and Exodus: A Summary and Review." *Ellul Forum* 64 (Fall 2019): 17–33.

The Centrality of Exodus in Scripture

Exodus is a Greek word meaning a "way out." Generally, it refers to any major act of leaving. In the Bible it is specifically used to refer to the particular event of the Hebrew people leaving Egypt and going into the wilderness. By extension, it refers to any way out of a type of oppressive situation, like subjection to Rome by the Jewish people of the Second Temple period, or even as a general human condition like that of sin. Ellul argues that exodus is *the* central narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures.[2] It is a major part of Pauline theology, which is not in contrast but is complementary to the rest of the New Testament.[3] Jesus' whole work is seen as an exodus.[4] Interestingly in this regard, Ellul explores the Pauline and Johannine literature and compares them, but he does not make use of key passages of Luke in *The Ethics of Freedom*. In his inaugural address in the synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus claims that he is the fulfilment of the year of the Lord's favor, in which he will proclaim liberty to the captives (4:18–21). This is a surprising omission that would have significantly strengthened Ellul's position on the centrality of exodus and linked exodus with jubilee.

Ellul characteristically does not thoroughly defend the claim that exodus is the central biblical narrative nor cite sources that would support this claim. Such a claim is far less radical-sounding after the thorough work of more-recent biblical scholars such as N. T. Wright.

God as Liberator

Just as exodus can refer to a specific event in the Bible or a generalized theme of leaving oppression, so too is God understood as the one who brings the people of God out of Egypt and the one who frees people from oppression in general.[5] God is known as liberator, for Ellul. He makes the bold claim that God is God only as our liberator.[6] This is not a claim about the nature of God so much as it is about God's relationship to a people bound by necessity and slavery. God is the God of Israel because of his liberating action, as in Exodus 20. Thus, God can be known only in the experience of liberation. This is an important reason why Ellul's thinking shifts on the order of how one comes to know sin. He explains that he began with a strong Calvinistic view of sin and moved later in life to seeing sin less and

less as an important category. Following Barth, Ellul sees that sin can be recognized only through the experience of liberation in Christ. The depth of sin is revealed only after one has been rescued from the sin itself. This means that the message of sin is itself a message predicated on the reality of liberation.[7] Like any situation of normalcy, one requires critical distance to better understand the shape of a situation in which one formerly lived.

Ellul makes the sovereignty of God dependent on God as liberator. In *The Subversion of Christianity,* he writes about Islam's influence on Christianity, which he sees in the doctrine of providence. Islam holds to a very strong version of submission to the will of God. Ellul thinks that providence is

> the very reverse of what we are told about the biblical God, who opens up freedom for us, who lets us make our own history, who goes with us on the more or less unheard-of adventures that we concoct. This God is not "providence" (which is never a biblical word). He is never the determinative cause or an irreducible conductor of events.[8]

God's sovereignty, although not expressed in providence,[9] is still necessary for liberation. "God has to be ours, and sovereign, if we are to be truly free. Israel is free only to the extent that its God is absolutely sovereign."[10] That is, God must be a higher authority than all others, or we fall back into slavery as the Israelites do. If God is not sovereign, he does not have the power to truly liberate. This deduction from the essence of God (sovereign) to his historical action (liberation) does not deeply interest Ellul, who would prefer to refer to God as revealed in Scripture rather than God as he must be based on logical outcomes of his divine essence. He maintains that the two perspectives—God does everything and humans do nothing, or humans do all things—are unbiblical.[11] He believes in a third option, that God has full sovereignty, and thus full potentiality, but does not use his power to override the will of humans. Instead God uses his power and authority to liberate people according to his will.

The Judeo-Christian God is unique in his revelation as the liberator. Ellul contrasts Yahweh with Ancient Near Eastern gods, who are not sovereign, so that human history is really just the "'fallout' of divine misadventures."[12] And he contrasts the God of the Bible with Allah of Islam, whose all-encompassing and unalterable will is his primary attribute.[13] Indeed, so

crucial is God as liberator to the Bible, Ellul thinks, that God's first real self-revelation is in his call to Moses from the burning bush to act on behalf of liberation.[14]

While God is clearly the liberator in the exodus, the great and final exodus comes in Christ, which has become a major theme of recent New Testament scholarship. But whereas current scholarship often points toward the historical aspects in which Christ saw himself, and Paul saw Christ, as liberator (from Rome, from law), Ellul also emphasizes the current aspects of liberation in Christ. Christ frees us from politics, from being *in* politics, for example.[15] Jesus' incarnation and crucifixion is the final exodus, the banishment of death.[16]

Although Ellul consistently points to the necessity of the sovereignty of God for the reality of liberation, he also says that God cannot be understood as the master of the universe,[17] as Christ *Pantocrator*.[18] By this he means that God is better known through exodus than through Genesis, and that God revealed himself as Jesus. Jesus is localized, personal. God's love is expressed in direct, personal ways, not in a universal sense. God is revealed in Christ on the cross, not in universal lordship.[19] This is a major aspect of Ellul's theological and ethical vision. God allows human freedom, but that does not make him any less sovereign.

The Historicity of the Exodus

The exodus is the great historical event in which God liberates Israel from Egypt. But for Ellul the exodus is not the only liberative event in the Bible. He points also to Abraham's call out of Ur as an exodus, and to the whole work of Jesus.[20] These are portrayed as historical acts of liberation. But as he is with many other points in the Old Testament, Ellul is less interested in establishing the historicity of the events than he is in reading the text as a revelation of the character of God. For Ellul, biblical history is not a bare catalogue of events but the revelation of God's meaning for human history. Thus, whether or not the exodus of Moses happened as narrated in the book of Exodus does not interest Ellul, and he does not discuss it.

Although Ellul does not believe in a distinction between a Christ of faith and a Christ of history and has little time for Bultmannian demythologi-

zation,[22] he is nevertheless careful to distinguish the reality of the historical event from its enduring theological implications and spiritual realities. One might argue that exodus is a typological theme for Ellul. That is, the exodus of Moses is a type that gives structure to much of the rest of the biblical revelation. Ellul means this in some specific and some general ways.

Specifically, Ellul links the work of Christ with the Passover lamb. "The Word, the passage, the crossing, is the celebration of liberation. History can be read only in the light of this liberation."[23] For Ellul, humans must be liberated for God to be God, and all history leads to this liberation, which is its final product. We might say that, for Ellul, the crucifixion of Jesus, the paschal lamb, is *the* historic event, the point at which history definitively gains its meaning and purpose. Again, this liberation is possible only by recognition of the sovereignty of God in the Lamb.

From this point, Ellul can move to see exodus as a spiritual or existential reality. Ellul notes on a number of occasions that *mitzraim*, the Hebrew word for *Egypt*, means "twofold anguish" and cites the Talmud for this interpretation.[24] This "twofold anguish" is oppression and death. Egypt is both physical oppression and spiritual finality in meaninglessness. The liberation of God cannot be limited to one or another in isolation. This hints, of course, at Ellul's ethics found in many of his theological works, such as in *Presence in the Modern World*. But this link between historical and existential reality is also clear in his concept of the principalities and powers. Ellul's perspective on the powers has been elaborated at length.[25] He views the powers as having a reality dependent on humans, but this is still a reality that is oppressive. The exodus is liberation from the powers.[26] Pharaoh is not simply Pharaoh but a power of oppression, an embodiment of the prince of the world.

Threefold Exodus

In one of his few hints at the corporate aspect of liberation, Ellul explains that exodus has three aspects: God's self-revelation that brings a people into his mystery, liberation from oppression and idolatry, and the institution of a people by giving a law of liberty.[27] Each of these has a depth to it. God's self-revelation is liberative. This freedom from slavery to the nec-

essary course of events and situations is what gives meaning to history, as written by the liberating God. Liberation from oppression includes both a spiritual and a material element inseparably. Ellul here also notes that liberation is from idolatry. This highlights another major theme in Ellul's work, which is his investigation into false belief. One could easily argue that much of Ellul's sociological work subtly points to the idolatry of various fields: *la technique*, *la politique*, propaganda, power and violence, money and economics, the State, and the city. Each of these represents a field in which humans aim to construct ultimate meaning, solutions, and security, but which are all false sources of meaning.[28] Again, God must be entirely sovereign if he is to be liberator, which means that all other powers must be submitted or dethroned. The problem that lies at the heart of idolatry is the enthronement of anything else, the sacralization of the forces of necessity and determination.[29] Thus, Ellul says, "Spiritually the most destructive and deceptive act is that of making a virtue of necessity."[30] To claim that obeying necessity or adapting to contextual determinations is virtuous is an annihilation of any possible meaning, because it shows that humans are fully and only products of their environment. For Ellul, there is no meaning if there is no freedom. If all things are predetermined or fate, an *amor fati*, like that of Nietzsche, is nothing but capitulation. Exodus thus begins with God's self-revelation, which opens humans up to the possibility of the alternative, to the destruction of the power of necessity. God is outside of contextual determinations or the realm of necessity, so that his self-revelation is a revelation of an alternative and thus the possibility of freedom. Exodus then liberates people from necessity and from the idolization of necessity. This is both a material and an imaginative liberation. Exodus is a liberation from myth, which is the formation of narratives of meaning that integrate people into an environment of determinisms. And liberation in Christ is freedom from alienation,[31] which is Ellul's best attempt at modernizing talk of sin. There is external alienation, in which a person is possessed by another or by a larger category such as a corporation. Self-alienation is the defining of oneself in another. This is slavery, but it focuses on the dehumanizing aspect of redefinition of identity rather than simply on the conditions of subjection.[32]

Finally, exodus leads to the giving of law, which we explore in the next section.

Freedom and Law

In the exodus, God liberates a people to the wilderness wherein he gives them his law. Ellul, a scholar of the history of institutions, is keenly aware of the realities of law. The giving of law is the grounds of freedom, "the charter of the liberty of the people of God."[33] Ethics, for Ellul, is the grounds of freedom, not its inversion. The law of God is a law of liberty. It forms the basis for an expression of freedom by retaining the sovereignty of God. "The deeper meaning is that the law is the word of God. It is thus liberation. The aim of the commandment is to free, not to enslave."[34] Law forms the limits in which freedom is possible.[35] It is a schoolmaster of freedom. It is not the end of freedom but its foundation. There is a necessary tension between obedience and transgression, which is what enables freedom.[36]

Although the law is the basis of Israel's freedom, the history of Israel and that of humanity is to constantly fall into new forms of bondage. Eventually, even the law of God becomes a bondage for Israel.[37] The very grounds of exodus thus can become a new bondage. This happens when the tension between obedience and transgression is resolved on one side or the other. Freedom occurs in a tension between slavish obedience and rebellion. Constant transgression of the law is itself a way that one defines oneself by the law. The purpose of the law of God is to help maintain a tension that enables the law to recede into the background as a foundation of liberty. When Israel elevates the law over the Spirit of God, the law becomes a slave master.[38] Put another way, when the law becomes an independent objective power, rather than an expression of the sovereignty of the liberating God, it enslaves. Thus, the first commandment of the Decalogue is the command to worship and serve Yahweh alone.

Bearing God's Revelation

Exodus is the grounds of any human ability to bear the revelation of God to the world. Without living in the freedom of God there is no possibility of revealing God.[39] The brief paragraph in *The Ethics of Freedom* (96) provides a helpful window onto the whole theological framework of Ellul's thought. The role of Israel and of the Christian is to reveal God to the world, and for this to be accomplished there must be evidences of full liberation. That

is, liberation cannot simply be spiritual. It must have concrete implications (as Ellul wrote *Presence in the Modern World* to explain). On the other hand, the liberation cannot be expressed in the ways that the progressive world is already working within. There must simultaneously be a revelation of God and a submission to God's total sovereignty for any material liberation to be real (as Ellul wrote *False Presence* to explain). The Christian life of exodus is therefore a constant interplay between discerning the forces of alienation, calling all to submit to God in Christ with his love, and acting in concrete ways to demonstrate this.

Exodus as the Location of Christian Life

In *Living Faith* (French title: *La foi au prix du doute*), Ellul concludes his reflections on faith, hope, and doubt with a long chapter on Jonah as the model for the Christian life. Jonah had to experience his own exodus, not when he ran from God and found himself in a big fish, but when he had to go to Nineveh. God's call was for him to leave his world behind and enter the world of his enemies, not to pursue his own task but to bring the revelation of God to a people under judgment.[40]

Christian faith is a movement, for Ellul.[41] It is not a static state of being but a constant movement out of the world and to the world. Exodus is not about a condemnation of the world as evil, as with the flood of Noah.[42] It is liberation from the world, so that, free in Christ, one can bring the revelation of God's Kingdom to a world bent on suicide.[43] Moving out of the world is obedience to the call to become a people of God, a holy people. But this people exists for the purpose of being sent into the world with the message of reconciliation. Within this movement comes formation, maturity, freedom. If this movement is schematized or turned into a static Christ and Culture model, like that of Niebuhr, confusion of holiness and mission results.

Thus, the Christian location is exodus, wilderness, or exile. The Kingdom is not yet present enough that the Christian can live within it in a largely material way. But the Kingdom is the call of the Spirit and the imagination. Thus, the actual location of the Christian tends to be in exile, unable to be part of the world, envisioning another, and working as exiles within

the world for its reconciliation. The mere acceptance of Christ is to place oneself in exile. Exile is not a choice of the Christian life; it is the necessary condition. That means that Christian faith is the rejection of our land, our home, our milieu, our professions.[44] This exodus is a "mortal combat with the world."[45] But exodus is not the conclusion of the movement of the Christian life, it is the prerequisite to entry into the world. This reentry is the calling of Jonah, the preaching of God's judgment in love upon human alienation. This call is a total refusal to allow the world to march toward its necessary self-destruction. But Christian faith is built not on rescuing the world but on faithfulness to God.

Exodus and Freedom as Not Happiness

The act of liberation, as with Jonah's rebellion, is utterly devastating to a life integrated into the world. The experience of exodus is not happiness. Indeed, Ellul thinks, if the act of liberating the world from its sacral attitudes toward its contemporary idolatries is not accompanied by a reason for living that can adequately sustain a will-to-life, it would have the tendency to drive the great majority of people to insanity or suicide.[46] Ellul often points to the Israelite desire in the wilderness to return to the perceived good life of slavery in Egypt. Interestingly, as Old Testament scholar and agrarian Ellen Davis points out, this good eating in Egypt was likely an accurate memory. Ancient Egypt had a varied and nutritious diet. She says, "No people would eat so well again for a thousand years."[47] This lends further credence to the reality about which Ellul is speaking. Christian freedom is a lifestyle that is in direct contradiction to the lifestyle of happiness. Humans, like the Israelites, prefer the security of bondage, which is regarded as happiness, to the risks of freedom. Freedom is risk, it is the "non-satisfaction of needs that we see as natural or essential,"[48] such as those of security.

The Exodus Temptation of Jesus and the Self-Limitation of Freedom

One final aspect to point to is Ellul's regular use in his theology of Jesus' temptations. For Ellul, God risked everything by sending Jesus into the exile/exodus of temptation in the wilderness. Jesus was entirely free to choose

to submit to his desires or the temptation of the devil, and it is on this risk that God's plan of reconciliation hinges. The wilderness is a place of dislocation, where there are no grounds of support. Ellul merges exodus, the flood of Noah, and the temptation of Adam all into this one event. It is the success in Christ of overcoming the temptations of materialism, power, and spiritual proof, temptations that led Israel into bondage throughout its history. Jesus resists temptation by accepting his relation to God. True freedom is, again, submission to the sovereign God alone. This alone is the force that can free people from determinations and necessities. Jesus demonstrates freedom by self-limitation. Rather than by an expression of his power, Jesus chooses limits for himself within which he is free.[49]

This concept of self-limitation and refusal of power finds expression throughout Ellul's works, including many of his sociological works in which he is critical of the uncritical implementation of what is possible.

Evaluation of the Exodus Theme in Ellul

I believe that Ellul has identified the heart of living the Christian faith by focusing so intently throughout his writings on the biblical themes of exodus and liberation. His understanding of an intolerable dialectical existence between slavery and freedom, and the careful elaboration of what that freedom truly means, is accurate. This aspect of Ellul's work has received great support from New Testament scholarship in recent decades, with the rise of the "New Perspective on Paul" and study of the genre of apocalyptic. The radical inbreaking of the Kingdom and its total otherness from the kingdoms of this world confirm Ellul's appraisal of New Testament theology. Furthermore, Ellul rightly understands that exodus is central to both the Old and New Testaments and is indeed one of their chief unifying elements. This means that Ellul's understanding of the role of *torah* in the Bible, and its transition from Old to New Testaments, is commendable. He was able to see that *torah* can be both the ground of freedom and the source of slavery, and he does so without creating some Jewish-Christian opposition in which Jews are legalists and Christians are about freedom. This corresponds very well to the more recent reappraisal of the pharisees in Second Temple Judaism,[50] though Ellul would not have known this.

But this leads to one area in which Ellul's thought about exodus is limited. The exodus under Moses was about the formation of a people of God. Ellul recognized this, but he did not develop much of an ecclesiology of freedom or exodus. The work of Christ in liberating people was not simply for individual, personal relationships with God but for the formation of a community in which the Kingdom of God is plausible and tangible. This is a key ecclesial concept that I elaborate in detail elsewhere.[51] Most basically it means that the Kingdom is not intended to be aspirational for individual experience but a shared communal experience that normalizes the values of the Kingdom and thus may be perceived as reasonable. Ellul does not develop much in the way of a communal life of liberty. There are a variety of likely reasons for this. His own ecclesial experiences did not fill him with hope in the institution of the church. Such disappointment has become an increasingly common experience among Christians in the North Atlantic, as evidenced by copious data from major church-research institutions on reasons for church decline, as well as in the necessary shift in the social function of church institutions under a post-Durkheimian late secularism.[52] This is a situation in which Moses figures are desperately needed. There must be the development of bold leaders who can take the risks of freedom in modeling and fostering exodus communities, for the Christian life of liberty to be plausible and tangible. These communities can then form the basis of a prophetic "Yet forty days!" that Ellul recognizes is necessary.

Along with his limited ecclesiology, Ellul significantly underdevelops a portrait of the life of the Kingdom. Perhaps ironically, Ellul focuses so much of his effort on explaining the reality of the Kingdom, the dialectic of its presence/absence, and the Christian's place within it, that he doesn't spend much time explaining his perspective of what characterizes the Kingdom. Put another way, Ellul doesn't say much about what freedom or liberation is for or to. What is that vision of the city of God of Hebrews? Certainly Ellul develops his view of *anakephalaiosis* or recapitulation,[53] in which God takes up the history of humanity and reconciles it with himself. But Ellul's eschatology lacks crucial dimensions that would otherwise round out his ethical call to "freedom to." Put another way, Ellul does not adequately spell out the mission of God's people. Rescue, salvation, liberation is not the

goal but the beginning of God's purposes in the world. Certainly this is a theological weakness that Ellul shares with generations of theologians who have fixated on salvation as the core theme of Christianity.

And although Ellul is himself a major forerunner of the ecological movement, along with his friend Bernard Charbonneau, he also misses bringing the whole of creation into the exodus theme. Although Ellul believes in the salvation of all creation, he does not detail what the reconciliation of all creation means or how that fits into his theory of Christ as the one who gives meaning to history. We might say that he runs the risk of seeing God as liberator of humanity without seeing God as the Creator who is rescuing all creation *from* humanity as well.[54] Exodus and the wilderness is replete with symbolic content to aid ecological thinking of exodus. Again, Ellul makes a significant interpretative error in *The Meaning of the City* that perhaps prevents him from drawing more ecological conclusions. Does the history of creation not have meaning until humanity arrives on the scene? Certainly not. This anthropocentric danger is endemic in Ellul's Barthian Christocentrism that focuses on the salvation of humanity to the neglect of the restoration of creation. This does not mean that Ellul's ethic is anti-ecological, of course, only that it has a conceptual weakness that hinders it from becoming a major source for contemporary ecotheology.

Lacking also is any real connection of liberation with jubilee or the practices of the sabbath year. Certainly, Ellul mentions the sabbath as a sign of liberty in the Old Testament and as a mark of Christian freedom.[55] But as he does so, he consistently fails to speak about the sabbath year and the year of jubilee. This legal framework would significantly bolster his theology of liberation in that it would add some content to a positive ecclesiology or view of Kingdom life as intentionally liberating. It would also go some way to addressing the ecological deficit that his work on liberation has. And it would aid in his theological ethic of self-restraint and exercise of non-power.

Certainly, Ellul's understanding of freedom and exodus is deeply engrained in his existentialism. This is both positive and negative. It is positive in the reminder that the life of Christian faith is not reducible to a formula, a static worldview, or applicable principles. It forces the Christian to meet with

his or her own individual alienations in an encounter with Christ. But his existentialism is also one of his chief weaknesses. As we've seen, it prevents a more mature exploration of the people of God in a robust ecclesiology and eschatology. In the 21st-century post-Durkheimian secular world, the formation of communities of faith will be increasingly a conscious and difficult effort, and sources of inspiration are needed for this task. It is therefore lamentable that Ellul does not provide much help for a time of building new communities and expressions of Christian discipleship.

All that said, Ellul's thinking about exodus is both an excellent microcosm of his theology in general and an accurate explanation of biblical theology in a way unique to himself.

Liberation Theology?

We cannot conclude this review without mention of Thomas Hanks's article "The Original 'Liberation Theologian'?" Hanks compares Ellul's thinking on liberation (as of 1985) with the development of liberation theology in Latin America. He finds, rightly, that Ellul was a precursor to the theologies of liberation that developed later in the 20th century, though Ellul came from a different background and thus had different emphases. Hanks notes how Ellul shares with liberation theology the idea that salvation is liberation. He also quotes Geoffrey Bromiley, the major translator of both Karl Barth and Jacques Ellul, a quotation worth copying here:

> This freedom (unleashed at the cross) is received exclusively in Christ, making the gospel essentially one of liberation. Here again is a theme that recurs constantly in Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, and Ellul takes it up with vigor. Liberation, he thinks, provides the present age with a better figure of salvation than redemption does.[56]

Exodus helps inform Ellul's claim that in our time the concept of redemption is better understood as liberation and de-alienation.[57] This is partly due to the archaic nature of the concept of redemption but also due to the deeper alienations of modern life.

Ellul is not a liberation theologian in the Latin American sense of the term. He remained deeply critical of baptizing political movements and imagining that they represented the Kingdom of God. Thus, Hanks sees Ellul

transcending liberation theology. Ellul perceived the centrality of exodus through Scripture, rather than seeing Scripture as a tool for revolution. In this way, Ellul retains a non-instrumental value for theology unlike other theologies of liberation.

Conclusion

This paper examined the exodus theme in much of the corpus of Jacques Ellul. It was not comprehensive, and only touched on his much wider theme of liberation and freedom. This paper has demonstrated that Ellul saw exodus as the central theme of the Bible and God's chief characteristic as liberator. It also showed that exodus provides a window into his theology as a whole in its major outlines. Ellul was a forerunner, in some ways, of more recent trends in New Testament scholarship concerning the centrality of exodus, even if he missed some key texts and themes that would have supported his view (i.e., Luke). His analysis is not perfectly accurate, nor is it comprehensive. It has weaknesses, but on balance I believe that Ellul's contribution to modern theology is vital to retain the dialectical movement of the life of exodus/exile/wilderness in which freedom is difficult and bondage is attractive. His work on liberation and exodus is not timeless, but it has aged well. It should not stand as the only word on the subject, but it still provides a needed voice of critique and encouragement in theology today.

Notes

1. Throughout this paper, I use *exodus* in lowercase to refer to the biblical theme found in Abraham's call, the liberation under Moses, and the work of Jesus. *The exodus* refers specifically to the liberation of God's people from Egypt. The book of the Bible is always referred to as *the book of Exodus*.
2. Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 39; Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 298.
3. Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 94–98.

4. Jacques Ellul, *Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in a Perilous World*, trans. Peter Heinegg (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 276.
5. Examples of this abound in Scripture. The songs of Moses and Miriam (Ex 15), Hannah (1 Sam 2), and Mary (Lk 1:46–55) should be added to the long list of Psalms that convey this theme of the exaltation of the weak or lowly. Jesus' sermons about the Kingdom of God/heaven likewise include the same kind of power reversals (Mt 5:1–12, Lk 6:20–49).
6. Ellul, *Ethics*, 96.
7. Willem H. Vanderburg, ed. *Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on His Life and Work*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Toronto: Anansi, 2004), 85.
8. Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 107.
9. See also Jacques Ellul, *What I Believe*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), chapter 12.
10. Ellul, *Ethics*, 96–97.
11. Ellul, *Subversion*, 147–48.
12. Jacques Ellul, *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*, trans. George W. Schreiner (New York: Seabury, 1977), 49.
13. Ellul, *Subversion*, 107.
14. Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 58.
15. Jacques Ellul, *False Presence of the Kingdom*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1972), 183. By "in politics," Ellul means that Christians are able to choose to join in the political arena but are not subject to it. Politics is "there to get into as a pure act of will."
16. Ellul, *Living Faith*, 276.
17. Jacques Ellul and Patrick Chastenet, *Jacques Ellul on Politics, Technology, and Christianity*, trans. Joan Mendès France (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 103.
18. Ellul, *False Presence*, 69.
19. Ellul, *Ethics*, 85.
20. Ellul, *Living Faith*, 274.
21. Ellul, *Apocalypse*, 49. This entire book is dedicated to this thesis. See also Ellul, *Subversion*, 147–49.
22. Ellul, *Ethics*, 68–69.

23. Ellul, *Apocalypse*, 119.
24. Ellul, *Reason for Being*, 39; Ellul and Vanderburg, *Perspectives*, 84.
25. Marva Dawn, "The Concept of 'the Principalities and Powers' in the Works of Jacques Ellul" (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 1992).
26. Ellul, *Ethics*, 133.
27. Ellul, *Ethics*, 96.
28. Ellul, *Ethics*, 97–98.
29. Ellul, *Ethics*, 37–50.
30. Ellul, *Ethics*, 45.
31. Ellul, *False Presence*, 206.
32. Ellul, *Ethics*, 24.
33. Ellul, *Ethics*, 96.
34. Ellul, *Ethics*, 122.
35. See also Ellul, *Reason for Being*, 298.
36. Ellul, *Ethics*, 347–49.
37. Ellul, *Ethics*, 97.
38. Ellul, *Ethics*, 147.
39. Ellul, *Ethics*, 96.
40. Ellul, *Living Faith*, 277.
41. See G. P. Wagenfuhr, "Revelation and the Sacred Reconsidered: The Revelation of God in Jesus Christ as Desacralising Reorientation to 'Milieu' in and beyond Jacques Ellul" (PhD diss., University of Bristol, 2013).
42. Ellul, *Living Faith*, 277.
43. Jacques Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World: A New Translation*, trans. Lisa Richmond (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 15.
44. Ellul, *Living Faith*, 274.
45. Ellul, *Living Faith*, 274.
46. Ellul, *The New Demons*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1975), 208.
47. Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 70.
48. Ellul, *Ethics*, 262–63. See also Ellul, *Subversion*, 167.

49. Ellul, *Ethics*, 51–62. See also Jacques Ellul, *Si Tu es le Fils de Dieu*. In *Le Défi et le Nouveau : Œuvres Théologiques 1948–1991* (Paris: Table Ronde, 2007), 937–1016.
50. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God. Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996).
51. G. P. Wagenfuhr, *Plundering Eden: A Subversive Christian Theology of Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, forthcoming).
52. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007) and G. P. Wagenfuhr, "Religion comme jeu : la situation au XXIème siècle." In *Comment peut-on (encore) être ellulien au XXIe siècle ?* (Paris: Table Ronde, 2014).
53. See Ellul, *What I Believe*, chapter 16, and Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, trans. Dennis Pardee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), chapter 6.
54. See Wagenfuhr, *Plundering Eden*.
55. Ellul, *Ethics*, 129–30, 496; Jacques Ellul, *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective*, trans. Cecilia Gaul (London: S.C.M. Press, 1970), 128; Ellul, *What I Believe*, chapter 12.
56. Geoffrey Bromiley, "Barth's Influence on Jacques Ellul." In Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook, eds, *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays*. Quoted in Thomas Hanks, "The Original 'Liberation Theologian'?" *Cross Currents* 35.1 (1985): 21.
57. Ellul, *Ethics*, 67.

Le plus dur des devoirs :
La liberté chez Bernard Charbonneau et Jacques Ellul

Daniel Cérézuelle

Dès les années trente Bernard Charbonneau (1910–96) et Jacques Ellul (1912–94) ont voulu susciter un mouvement de critique du développement industriel, du culte de la technique et de l'État, et jeter les bases d'une maîtrise collective du changement scientifique et technique. Dans leurs *Directives pour un manifeste personnaliste*[1], texte rédigé en 1935, Charbonneau et Ellul se révoltent contre la dépersonnalisation de l'action et l'anonymat qui résultent du fonctionnement normal des structures économiques, institutionnelles, administratives et techniques qui organisent la vie sociale de leur temps et déterminent son évolution. Il en résulte un monde caractérisé par l'anonymat, l'absence de responsabilité personnelle. Comme l'écrit Charbonneau dans un texte de 1939 : « La société actuelle, par ses principes et son fonctionnement ne peut avoir qu'un résultat : la dépersonnalisation de ses membres.[2] ». En 1937 dans *Le sentiment de la nature, force révolutionnaire*[3], Charbonneau montrait comment le développement industriel prive les hommes de la possibilité d'établir un rapport équilibré et épanouissant avec la nature. Cette montée en puissance et cette autonomisation des *structures* s'impose comme un phénomène social total, et détermine aussi nos manières de penser et de sentir. Convaincus qu'une pensée qui n'est pas mise en pratique est dérisoire, Charbonneau et Ellul se sont associés pour agir afin de contribuer à une nécessaire réorientation de la vie sociale, remettre à leur place la technique et l'État et promouvoir « une cité ascétique afin que l'homme vive ». À ce titre on peut considérer ces deux jeunes Bordelais comme des précurseurs de l'écologie politique et du mouvement décroissant.

Charbonneau et Ellul étaient convaincus que les formes conventionnelles d'action politique qui visent l'accès au contrôle de l'État pour réformer la

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société de haut en bas sont inadaptées pour susciter un changement qu'ils envisagent en termes de *civilisation*[4]. Fidèles à leurs intuitions de jeunesse, tout au long de leur vie ils resteront, « unis par une pensée commune[5] » comme l'écrira Charbonneau au lendemain de la mort d'Ellul. Ils agiront, parfois séparément, parfois ensemble, dans deux directions complémentaires : d'une part tenter de diverses manières de susciter un mouvement collectif visant une réorientation non productiviste, non techniciste et non étatiste des pratiques sociales ; d'autre part mener un travail « théorique » d'approfondissement de leur critique sociale et des raisons d'être de leur engagement, travail qui donnera lieu à la publications de nombreux ouvrages qui, souvent mal reçus ou ignorés lors de leur parution, s'avèrent prémonitoires et nous donnent des repères précieux pour penser notre situation présente et tenter d'agir. Si ce travail de critique sociale s'avère aujourd'hui si pertinent c'est qu'il a été conduit à partir d'un point de vue très particulier qui est celui de la liberté.

Une valeur commune : la liberté

Pour Charbonneau et Ellul, tout ce qui réduit la maîtrise des individus sur leur vie quotidienne est un mal. Face à une civilisation qui institutionnalise et porte à l'extrême la scission du matériel (puissance et efficacité) et du spirituel (autonomie, égalité, justice …), Ellul et Charbonneau se soucient d'instaurer des conditions de vie qui soient concrètement compatibles avec l'exigence de responsabilité personnelle de chacun dans tous les domaines de sa vie. Ce point de vue éthique a inspiré une œuvre écrite abondante qui, chez l'un comme chez l'autre, s'organise autour de deux pôles étroitement complémentaires. D'un côté un volet de leur œuvre est consacré à l'analyse des contradictions du monde moderne, qu'il s'agisse de la croissance de l'État et du phénomène totalitaire, de la dégradation des conditions de vie quotidienne et de la nature, du rôle social de la science (Charbonneau), ou qu'il s'agisse de la technique, de la propagande, des idéologies etc. (Ellul). D'un autre côté chacun a consacré un second volet de son œuvre à une explicitation des raisons éthiques et spirituelles qui les ont incités à s'opposer aux évolutions sociales qu'ils observaient et à promouvoir une réorientation de la civilisation. C'est au nom de la liberté qu'ils s'obstinent à évaluer les institutions et les techniques non seulement en termes d'efficacité mais aussi

(et surtout) en fonction des conséquences qui en résultent pour la maîtrise de chacun sur ses conditions de vie concrètes. Inlassablement ils posent la même question : quelle place la civilisation industrielle et technicienne laisse-t-elle au pouvoir de décision de l'individu dans sa vie quotidienne ? C'est au nom de la liberté qu'ils critiquent non pas tout ce qui est moderne (ils ne sont pas réactionnaires) mais principalement l'autonomisation du pouvoir de l'argent, de l'État et de la technique. Comme le disait Jacques Ellul : « Rien de ce que j'ai fait, vécu, pensé ne se comprend si on ne le réfère pas à la liberté.[6] ». L'exigence de liberté est à l'arrière-plan de sa critique sociale ; et dans ses nombreux ouvrages théologiques il a tenté d'en expliciter les fondements et de préciser pourquoi l'appel à vivre la liberté s'enracine dans sa foi chrétienne.

De même Bernard Charbonneau, lui aussi, parle de la liberté dans tous ses ouvrages. Le texte fondamental autour duquel s'organise toute son œuvre s'intitule *Je fus, Essai sur la liberté*. Et si Charbonneau se fait dès les années trente l'avocat de la défense de la nature, c'est surtout parce que pour lui la société industrielle prive l'individu moderne non seulement de beauté mais aussi de liberté. Il ne s'agit donc pas tant de sauver la nature pour elle-même que de préserver les conditions d'existence d'une humanité libre dans une nature terrestre vivante. Charbonneau ne croit pas qu'il y ait pour l'homme une manière « naturelle » de vivre, qui définirait une fois pour toute la bonne vie et ce n'est pas la nature « en soi » qu'il convient de protéger : sa puissance cosmique dépasse infiniment l'homme et les galaxies n'ont nullement besoin de son respect. La nature est invincible, c'est l'homme, capable de liberté, qui est fragile. Charbonneau redoute que l'imprudence et l'inconséquence humaines favorisent une réorganisation de la nature, qui de toute façon, produira de nouveaux équilibres, mais dans lesquels l'homme libre n'aura peut-être plus sa place. C'est aussi au nom de la liberté qu'il procède dans *L'État* à une critique approfondie des logiques qui favorisent la sur-organisation sociale. Dans un texte écrit vers la fin de sa vie, il écrit

> La liberté ... c'est le dernier mot ; en dehors d'elle bientôt il n'y aura plus que des chiffres. Mais est-ce un rêve ou un mensonge ? En tout cas, dans ce livre, fragment de l'œuvre d'une vie, l'auteur s'est efforcé d'en faire autre chose qu'un mot. Ce qu'il a pu dire en dépit de la censure, du silence et de l'indifférence, de sa jeunesse à sa vieillesse n'a eu que ce motif. La description, qu'il a tenté dans d'autres

> livres, de la mutation radicale de l'espèce humaine provoquée par le développement de la science et des techniques, peut se résumer par la menace qu'il fait peser sur la liberté, plus encore que sur la terre[7].

C'est donc à partir de l'exigence de liberté que nos deux personnalistes gascons ont élaboré leurs œuvres respectives. Je me bornerai dans la suite de cet article à signaler quelques points forts de cette convergence.

La liberté est dans l'acte

On ne trouvera pas dans les œuvres de Charbonneau et d'Ellul une philosophie de la liberté au sens traditionnel du terme. En effet, l'un et l'autre répugnent à donner une définition de la liberté et de ses conditions métaphysiques. Bien qu'ils l'abordent chacun de manière très différente, tous les deux ont en commun une approche existentielle de la liberté, basée sur l'approfondissement de l'expérience que l'individu peut faire de sa liberté. Ainsi dans *Je fus* Charbonneau se refuse à donner une définition conceptuelle de la liberté et d'en préciser les conditions transcendantales ou métaphysiques. Pour lui, la liberté ne se prouve pas, elle ne se démontre pas par des raisonnements, mais quand je parle à un homme ou quand j'attends qu'il me réponde, je postule qu'il est capable de liberté—sinon je ne lui parlerai pas ! Ce constat suffit car, au fond, Charbonneau est convaincu qu'une démonstration logique de la possibilité de la liberté ne rendra pas les hommes plus libres, c'est-à-dire plus aptes à vivre leur liberté.

> Si la liberté est disponibilité devant les possibles, l'acte libre est le choix qui les sacrifie : la liberté réelle est toujours négation de la liberté théorique […] La réalité de la liberté n'est pas dans les preuves de la science ou de la philosophie—elles te l'assureraient que tu l'aurais perdue, mais dans la personne vivante. Ce qui départage la fatalité de la liberté ce n'est pas ta métaphysique mais ton acte, celui qui les réunit tous : ta vie. Le déterminisme n'est vrai que dans la mesure où quelqu'un refuse la décision qui manifesterait son inanité. Prends-la, et tout change. Mais cette preuve à la différence des autres n'est pas donnée une fois pour toutes. Si l'effort se relâche le monde se remet à crouler. Atlas n'a pas fini de porter le faix de la terre. […] Si la liberté était fatale elle ne mériterait plus son nom. […] Il n'y a pas de liberté mais une libération, et surtout un libérateur[8].

Et ce qui intéresse surtout Charbonneau c'est de comprendre pourquoi et comment la liberté peut se perdre. En effet alors que la pensée libérale, tout

comme ses héritières socialistes et marxiste s'intéresse surtout aux forces naturelles, politique ou sociales qui menacent la liberté de l'extérieur, Charbonneau s'intéresse aux dimensions autodestructrices de la liberté car les tentatives modernes de libération de l'homme ont trop souvent débouché sur son asservissement à de nouvelles formes de contraintes sociales.

La démarche d'Ellul est très proche. C'est ainsi qu'en introduction d'un texte resté longtemps inédit en France et intitulé « Les structures de la liberté », Ellul écrit « Je ne poserai pas la question métaphysique de la liberté humaine, à laquelle je serais bien incapable de répondre.[9] ». « Dieu seul sait si nous sommes libres ou non. […] Il a bien fallu que l'homme vive en faisant comme s'il était libre, en jouant le jeu de la liberté, c'est-à-dire en faisant son histoire. Cela seul m'importe[10]. » ; « il convient donc de démythifier la liberté pour savoir non pas ce qu'elle est mais qui je suis appelé à être en tant qu'homme libre.[11] ».

Ellul poursuit :

> La première certitude que nous pouvons avoir, c'est que la liberté ne peut être que mouvement, changement, volonté de passage, de transformation. […] La liberté ne peut être potentielle car, nous l'avons vu, on ne sait qu'elle n'existe ni par un raisonnement métaphysique ni par un examen psychologique mais seulement par l'expérience du vécu. Prétendre être potentiellement libre c'est entrer dans l'illusoire et la justification qui est la négation même de la liberté. Ou celle-ci est vécue, mise en action, et par conséquent mouvement, ou elle n'est rien[12].

Ainsi, ajoute Ellul, la liberté ne peut être un état, une situation acquise, un être figé, ou encore un résultat *obtenu* ; elle est dans l'acte qui cherche à faire reculer les contraintes : « s'il n'y a pas de liberté instituée, s'il n'y a pas de liberté donnée, s'il n'y a pas de liberté en soi, si elle est toujours en mouvement, alors cela implique l'obstacle et le refus qu'il faut vaincre. La liberté n'est jamais autre qu'un refus à un ordre de contrainte[13]» ; ou encore :

> L'homme déterminé qui conquiert sa liberté ne le fait que parce qu'il est déterminé ; c'est pendant sa conquête qu'il est libre, et la liberté n'existe que par rapport et en fonction des déterminations. Nous atteignons ici le cœur des structures de la liberté. Car il n'y a pas d'autre mouvement de la liberté que celui-là.[14]

Ainsi, pour Charbonneau et Ellul, on n'est pas libre parce que l'on vivrait dans un contexte politique, économique, technique ou culturel qui nous garantit la possibilité de faire des choix. Nous croyons que plus les possibilités de choix sont nombreuses et plus nous sommes libres, sans prendre conscience que ces choix qui nous sont proposés peuvent être complètement aliénés ou insignifiants. La liberté est bien autre chose qu'un choix offert ; elle est action, effort de libération. La liberté est présente lorsque nous faisons le difficile effort d'incarner par des actes nos valeurs spirituelles à rebours des déterminismes naturels et sociaux.

Il n'y a de liberté que par l'acte de l'individu

Dans les quelques ouvrages « spéculatifs » qui jalonnent son œuvre, Charbonneau s'interroge sur la liberté, cette force d'arrachement qui n'existe que dans et par l'individu et qui le pousse à dire *non* à ce qui semble fatal. Dans *Je fus*, il ne cesse d'affirmer que « la liberté c'est le *je* quand il n'est pas un faux semblant[15] » et qu'il n'y a de liberté que par l'acte d'un individu qui s'efforce de s'arracher aux déterminismes naturels, sociaux et psychologiques. Cette conviction qu'il ne saurait y avoir de liberté que par l'individu soutient également tout son livre *Une seconde nature* qui explique combien il est difficile à un individu de prendre ses distances à l'égard de sa société. Enfin, vers la fin de sa vie, dans son livre *Quatre témoins de la liberté*[16], il lui a paru nécessaire de reprendre cette question dans le chapitre "Nicolas Berdiaev. Le Chrétien, individu ou personne ?". Là aussi il reprend le débat de sa jeunesse avec le personnalisme communautaire de Mounier et s'engage dans une discussion serrée pour défendre la primauté de la source individuelle de la liberté. Bien entendu, Charbonneau reconnait que la société offre à l'individu des médiations institutionnelles, techniques et culturelles qui le protègent et rendent *possible* le développement de son individualité, mais en même temps, comme une mère abusive, elle réprime l'individualité et ses prétentions à la liberté, ce qui nous arrange bien et à quoi nous consentons volontiers tout en prétendant le contraire, car le plus facile c'est de jouer la comédie de la liberté tout en restant bien sagement installé dans le sein maternel, d'où l'essai ironique intitulé *Bien aimer sa maman*[17]. Charbonneau sait ce qu'il doit à la société. Par exemple il reconnaît que pour un Occidental, et pour lui en particulier, le sens de la liberté et de l'individualité est un

des legs du Christianisme[18] ; mais il n'écarte pas la possibilité que d'autres individus, tel Socrate, en d'autres temps et dans d'autres civilisations aient été à même d'incarner ces valeurs sans avoir été touchés par l'appel du dieu des Juifs et des Chrétiens.

Pour Ellul aussi il n'y a de liberté que par l'individu. Ce thème est repris dans plusieurs de ses ouvrages. Il explicite cette conception dans « Les Structures de la liberté » où il affirme qu' « il n'y a et ne peut y avoir de liberté qu'individuelle.[19] ». Ellul revendique sur ce point l'héritage de Marx :

> L'homme pour Marx est avant toute chose appelé à être libre, sujet, et cette liberté s'exprime dans une domination des conditions qui le déterminent, dans une possibilité de s'exprimer dans son œuvre (son travail) sans en être dépossédé, ce qui revient au même que la possibilité de faire lui-même son histoire… par conséquent l'orientation finale de la pensée de Marx n'est ni la justice ni l'égalité, ni même l'établissement du socialisme, mais bien la liberté. […] Comme corolaire, pour Marx, il n'y a ni une liberté de nature, ni une liberté d'origine, ni une liberté historique : il faut la faire[20].

Bien entendu, Ellul n'ignore pas qu'il y a des prises de conscience collectives : mais il ne s'agit jamais que d'accumulation de prises de conscience individuelles. Il n'y a pas de mouvement d'une collectivité en soi. « Quelle que soit la forme de la tendance à la liberté dans une collectivité, on peut affirmer absolument que l'initiative en revient toujours à un individu, qui veut la liberté.[21] ». Mais Ellul affirme en même temps qu'il n'y a pas de liberté hors du social : « Il va de soi que l'individu n'est pas sans une société, sans un groupe pour lui. Il va de soi que la liberté ne peut jamais être une propriété individuelle[22] ». L'insertion dans le collectif est donc une condition de la liberté. Mais le collectif est forcément répressif et la liberté individuelle suppose donc un affrontement, une capacité de résistance à la contrainte sociale. Ainsi le rapport entre liberté personnelle et société est éminemment paradoxal.

> Le collectif est le lien nécessaire, indispensable, où s'inscrire dans la liberté […] Il devient la condition objective de la liberté parce que c'est sa présence qui exige l'objectivation de la liberté, l'affrontement qui conduit à savoir si cette liberté n'est que prétexte, illusion, ou attestation. Le collectif est alors à la fois l'occasion de la liberté (sans lui, elle ne pourrait jamais s'attester, elle serait toujours supposée) et la possibilité de la liberté (sans lui la liberté n'aurait jamais au-

> cun moyen d'expression). Ainsi la société, le groupe, la collectivité ne peuvent jamais être libérales ou permissives, ce n'est jamais par fusion en eux que l'on trouve la liberté, mais sans eux cette liberté n'est que problème. On peut en débattre indéfiniment, il n'y a aucune solution. On ne saura jamais que l'homme est libre, sinon par son affrontement avec l'en deçà de la liberté, avec cette réalité très exacte qui la nie. Ainsi le collectif est le lieu où la volonté individuelle, que l'on pourrait appeler, à la limite, la métaphysique de la liberté, est sommée de se découvrir dans sa réalité en même temps que dans sa vérité, c'est-à-dire de devenir historique[24].

Ainsi, paradoxalement, la liberté ne peut exister que pour autant qu'il y a un individu capable d'affronter, d'entrer en tension avec cette même société qui pourtant lui permet d'exister. C'est pourquoi, dans *De la révolution aux révoltes*, il écrit au sujet de la « révolution nécessaire » :

> Nous en revenons toujours au même point : dans notre société, ce n'est plus à partir des structures, des collectivités que l'action révolutionnaire peut se produire, mais elle doit s'effectuer d'abord dans l'individu car c'est l'individu qui est menacé de disparition. […] c'est dans l'individu que doit s'effectuer le travail révolutionnaire et s'établir la tension conflictuelle impliquée par la révolution[25].

Ellul et Charbonneau s'accordent pour penser que, puisqu'elle doit s'incarner dans un donné naturel et social qui la rend possible tout en lui résistant, la liberté ne peut être absolue, elle est toujours relative ; ainsi le rêve d'une liberté totale est littéralement insensé, car la liberté ne peut être un état, elle consiste en un effort de libération qui aboutit plus ou moins. Mais cette victoire, toujours précaire, débouche forcément sur une condition difficile à vivre : la liberté est une ascèse. Elle n'est qu'un possible, et le faire advenir demande un effort constamment renouvelé ; et cela met un fardeau terrible sur les épaules de chacun d'entre nous.

Echapper à l'angoisse de la liberté

Dans *Je fus* puis dans *Une seconde nature*, Charbonneau tente d'élucider le caractère paradoxal de la liberté et de comprendre pourquoi elle est si difficile à vivre. D'un côté elle est puissance d'arrachement, capacité de mise à distance et de prise de conscience par rapport aux évidences du réel. Elle suppose une capacité à enregistrer une contradiction entre une aspiration à

des valeurs (vérité, beauté, paix, justice …) qu'il faut bien appeler spirituelles et la réalité de l'ordre du monde qui résiste à ces valeurs car il est soumis à d'autres logiques, naturelles ou sociales. Cette expérience de distance critique est douloureuse, car elle met l'individu en conflit avec sa société mais aussi avec soi-même en tant qu'il appartient à sa société à laquelle il est uni par un lien intime, de sorte qu'il fait fréquemment demi-tour devant l'effort d'une prise de distance à l'égard de sa société que réclame un acte réellement libre. Si l'homme moderne a tant de mal à prendre conscience des contradictions de sa société, ce n'est pas seulement parce qu'il est soumis à une pression sociale qui s'exercerait sur lui de l'extérieur. C'est aussi parce qu'il est un individu pensant et capable de liberté que tout homme est habité par une tendance spontanée à intérioriser le fait social ; et ce conformisme social se nourrit du tragique de la liberté. Charbonneau réactualise les intuitions des grands fondateurs de la philosophie existentielle : Montaigne, Pascal, Kierkegaard et Nietzsche, en montrant que l'homme est un animal social qui rêve d'une liberté qu'il ne supporte pas. Nous ne cessons de revendiquer le caractère personnel et libre (peut-on distinguer les deux ?) de nos actes, qu'il s'agisse de notre style de vie, de nos goûts esthétiques, de nos loisirs, de nos convictions politiques et religieuses, de nos engagements politiques ou autres. « C'est mon choix », proclamons-nous tous ensemble avec une conviction toujours renouvelée. Mais un examen rétrospectif un peu honnête révèle vite que ces actes étaient surtout conformes à notre milieu, à l'air du temps, à des emballements collectifs et à des modes, à des modèles institutionnels ou professionnels etc. Où est l'individu capable de prendre ses distances et d'agir selon soi ? Charbonneau a cette phrase terrible : « Mais il se peut après tout, que fait pour rêver la liberté, l'homme ne soit pas fait pour la vivre.[26] ». En effet, l'expérience individuelle de la liberté expose tout homme à une contradiction angoissante entre l'exigence d'un sens personnel et le constat de sa finitude, de la contingence et de l'absurde de sa vie sociale. Le philosophe Jean Brun, commentant la conception de la liberté de Bernard Charbonneau écrivait que la liberté est une ascèse car « être libre c'est supporter, et non fuir, cette tension entre l'expérience centrale de la liberté et l'épreuve qu'il est difficile de la vivre.[27] ».

C'est pour fuir cette dimension tragique de la liberté que l'homme se fait doublement social et choisit une « servitude volontaire » rassurante en in-

tériorisant les valeurs et les modèles sociaux et en s'identifiant à la société de son temps. Ainsi, dans *Une seconde nature* Charbonneau montre comment, à peine s'est-il distingué de la nature qui l'environne, l'homme cherche à se fondre dans une « seconde nature », sociale cette fois-ci, qui le protège du sentiment de sa faiblesse et de sa finitude, mais au prix de son individualité. C'est pour éviter d'avoir à vivre cette tension que chaque homme intériorise activement la contrainte sociale et adhère aux valeurs collectives du moment, et ce avec toutes les forces conscientes et inconscientes de son esprit. Plus que d'un consentement passif à une force qui s'impose de l'extérieur il s'agit d'une participation active qui ne veut pas se reconnaître comme telle, qu'il s'agisse, par exemple, de l'adhésion à des idéologies politiques ou à celle du développement. En dépit du mince vernis d'une culture individualiste, dans la société moderne tout comme dans l'ancienne, le fait social s'impose spontanément comme une vérité et comme un ordre juste. Et comme la société d'aujourd'hui est une société du changement, c'est donc tout « naturellement » qu'elle produit l'homme-du-changement, l'individu disposé à accepter et justifier jusqu'aux aspects les plus contestables du développement industriel et technoscientifique.

Jacques Ellul fait un constat analogue :

> J'aurai envie de dire que l'homme recule toujours devant l'aventure véritable de la liberté.[…] L'homme ne se conçoit homme que s'il est libre […] Il semble n'avoir qu'une orientation depuis les origines alors qu'il était un membre indistinct du groupe ; c'était par un mouvement imperceptible, le dégagement de la personne hors du communautaire, comme insensiblement la plante se tourne vers le lieu d'où lui vient la lumière—mais en même temps, chaque fois qu'il a été en mesure de vivre libre ou d'exercer sa liberté, il en fut soit incapable soit terrorisé. Il s'est chaque fois inventé de nouvelles chaînes, une nouvelle fatalité, il s'est inscrit dans une nouvelle dialectique, il s'est donné de nouvelles autorités, il a édifié une nouvelle morale, aussi implacables, déterminantes, contraignantes que celles contre lesquelles il s'était affirmé libre. Devant l'espace béant l'homme ne peut se hasarder à tout risquer. La liberté se révèle comme une mise à l'épreuve si radicale que l'homme n'accepte jamais ce risque[28].

C'est pourquoi,

> Ce n'est pas vrai que l'homme veuille être libre. Ce qu'il voudrait ce sont les avantages de l'indépendance sans avoir aucun des devoirs et

> des duretés de la liberté. Car la liberté est dure à vivre. La liberté est terrible. La liberté est aventure. La liberté est dévorante, exigeante. Un combat de chaque instant, car autour de nous ne cessent de se multiplier les pièges pour nous enlever la liberté ; mais surtout parce que la liberté, en elle-même, ne nous laisse aucun repos. Elle exige de se dépasser, elle exige la remise en question incessante de tout, elle suppose une attention toujours en éveil, jamais d'habitude, jamais d'institution. La liberté me demande d'être toujours neuf, toujours disponible, de ne jamais me cacher derrière les précédents ou les échecs passés. Elle entraine des ruptures et des contestations. La liberté ne cède jamais à aucune contrainte et n'exerce elle-même aucune contrainte ; Car précisément, il n'y a de liberté que dans un contrôle permanent de soi-même et dans l'amour de celui qui m'est proche[29].

Une des raisons pour lesquelles ce contrôle permanent de soi-même est particulièrement difficile c'est qu'il est très difficile de prendre ses distances avec la société à laquelle nous appartenons. Bien souvent nous justifions nos conduites au nom de la liberté, sans nous rendre compte que la plupart du temps notre « choix » est parfaitement déterminé par le contexte social qui est le nôtre. Certes l'automobile individuelle augmente notre puissance de déplacement, mais comme le remarque Ellul

> dès qu'il y a trois jours de vacances, un pont, trois millions d'automobilistes se précipitent sur les routes. Plus merveilleux, chacun est libre, il le fait librement. Combien de fois n'a-t-on pas dit « Quand je prends mon automobile, je suis libre de la prendre ». L'ennui c'est qu'il y a trois millions de Français qui disent en même temps « je suis libre », mais ils le disent ensemble, en bloc, c'est-à-dire qu'en fait il s'agit d'un mouvement auquel on obéit ; c'est une obéissance à la masse[30].

La liberté consiste bien à « pouvoir faire ce que l'on veut » comme dit le sens commun, mais chacun des termes de cette définition est problématique. Rien n'est moins naturel que ce pouvoir et rien n'est moins facile que de vouloir l'exercer. La liberté, écrit Charbonneau « n'existe pas en dehors du combat par lequel l'homme terrasse en lui-même l'être social.[31] ».

Il n'y a donc pas de liberté sans force d'âme. La liberté n'est pas un droit ni une propriété de l'humain, comme le croyaient les libéraux, mais le plus difficile des devoirs.

La tension entre puissance et liberté

Nous nous exonérons de ce fardeau en confiant notre liberté au fonctionnement de dispositifs impersonnels sensés nous libérer des contraintes et des nécessités naturelles et sociales. Certes la liberté a besoin de médiations qui lui permettent de s'affirmer face aux forces naturelles ou sociales sans s'épuiser dans une confrontation qui serait constamment à recommencer. Mais, nous disent Charbonneau et Ellul, qu'il s'agisse de la monnaie, de l'État ou de la technique, ces médiations ne sont pas neutres. Elles tendent à s'autonomiser selon une logique propre ; et leur puissance, qui répond si bien à nos désirs, fait obstacle à cette même exigence de liberté qui leur a donné naissance.

On sait depuis longtemps qu'il en va ainsi avec la monnaie. Elle facilite les échanges et la concentration du capital qui rendent possible la création d'outils qui augmentent la productivité du travail et cette « richesse des nations » que nous voulons toujours voir croître pour augmenter nos possibilités de choix parmi les biens disponibles. Mais la monétarisation toujours croissante des échanges et la multiplication de la monnaie engendrent des effets de puissance, favorisent l'autonomisation des logiques financières qui, laissées à elles-mêmes, tendent à se soumettre l'ensemble de la vie sociale et ont des effets sociaux, environnementaux et culturels désastreux et devant lesquels la fascination productiviste pour l'efficacité économique nous laisse impuissants. C'est pour nous prémunir contre cette fascination asservissante que Charbonneau et Ellul ont chacun écrit un ouvrage sur le rapport à l'argent[32].

De même, nous attendons de l'État impersonnel qu'il nous défende contre les abus du pouvoir personnel et nous lui confions le monopole de la violence pour qu'il soit en mesure d'imposer la loi à tous, de défendre nos « droits » et nos libertés. Ainsi, pour Montesquieu, c'est l'existence d'un mode particulier d'organisation du gouvernement qui permet de déterminer si on est libre ou pas : « La liberté politique, dans un citoyen, est cette tranquillité d'esprit qui provient de l'opinion que chacun a de sa sûreté : et, pour qu'on ait cette liberté, il faut que *le gouvernement* soit tel, qu'un citoyen ne puisse pas craindre un autre citoyen[33] ». Ou encore « Il faut que, *par la disposition des choses*, le pouvoir arrête le pouvoir[34]. ». Charbonneau et Ellul,

qui ont eu une conscience aigüe du péril totalitaire, ne contestent pas la sagesse d'une telle conception, mais ils soulignent qu'elle est trop partielle et oublie l'essentiel.

> La liberté politique—et elle peut prendre bien d'autres formes que celle du parlementarisme à l'anglo-saxonne—plus qu'une cause est l'effet d'une liberté plus profonde. Même les libertés individuelles : habeas corpus, droit de s'exprimer et de se déplacer, inviolabilité du domicile etc. encore plus importantes dans la vie quotidienne que le droit de vote, ne sont que des conséquences. Si elles garantissent aux individus un domaine où exercer leur liberté, à leur tour elles n'existent que parce que des hommes les ont un jour revendiquées et qu'ils songent encore à les défendre : sans eux elles survivront quelque temps encore par inertie, puis disparaîtront d'elles-mêmes […] Ce n'est pas pour rien que le siècle du totalitarisme a succédé à celui du libéralisme, cela seul aurait dû nous alerter sur la relation qui les unit.[35]

Si nous nous ne résistons pas pour remettre l'État à sa place, il finit par intervenir, au nom de l'intérêt général, dans tous les domaines de la vie. Tout étant fait pour le peuple, mais rien par le peuple, la liberté n'est plus que celle d'effectuer des choix qui ne changent rien. Ellul ne dit pas autre chose :

> Autrement dit, je pourrais généraliser en avançant que le corps social accorde finalement les libertés qui n'ont aucune importance et qui ne risquent pas de mettre en cause les principes ou encore le processus d'évolution des sociétés. Tant qu'une liberté revendiquée est dangereuse, elle est toujours refusée. Quand on assiste à une « libéralisation », il ne faut pas se glorifier d'une conquête ; il faut comprendre que l'adversaire a accordé ce qui n'a plus de valeur. Ainsi actuellement, la liberté spirituelle, la liberté de consommation, la liberté des loisirs.[36]

Et dans un texte plus récent :

> Nous constatons sans peine l'existence de deux secteurs dans nos sociétés. Le secteur des « choses sérieuses » où il n'est toléré aucune liberté de choix, qu'il s'agisse de la production, du métier, de l'ordre public, de l'argent, de l'information, de la science etc. et le « secteur de la liberté » c'est-à-dire des choses sans importance, les loisirs, la mode, les choix de consommation… encore que dans ces domaines, un devoir reste impératif : c'est quand même de faire comme tout le monde et d'entrer par exemple dans le cadre des loisirs possibles, organisés, aménagés.[37]

Nous attendons du perfectionnement des techniques une protection contre notre faiblesse naturelle. Et plus nous sommes fascinés par la puissance qu'elles nous procurent, plus notre liberté est éliminée de notre vie quotidienne. Division du travail, perte d'autonomie, manque de sens, sur-organisation bureaucratique de la vie sociale, opacité des logiques qui la conditionnent, organisation des loisirs, gestion urbaine, aménagement du territoire etc. Tout ceci est engendré par des évolutions technico-économiques qui sont subies plutôt que choisies et sur lesquelles nous n'avons guère de prise.

> À partir de 1930 la société industrielle se transforme en société technicienne […] Le fait majeur est celui de l'organisation, du développement des services, de l'universalisation des techniques etc. Or, pendant ce temps, que voyons-nous ? […] On croit faire la révolution de la liberté en luttant contre l'industrialisme, mais celui-ci (qui bien sûr, comme le capitalisme, existe toujours) est largement dépassé. La question de l'aliénation n'est plus celle du capitalisme, mais de l'invasion de l'individu par la multiplication des techniques externes, et internes, comme par exemple la manipulation psychologique (propagande, publicité, création de nouveaux besoins etc.), son insertion dans le système technicien qui laisse de moins en moins d'autonomie d'action, son encerclement par les objets techniques, son adaptation par toutes les voies.[38]

Esprit de puissance ou esprit de liberté ?

Pour Charbonneau il ne peut y a voir de liberté sans l'exercice d'une certaine puissance. Dans un premier temps tout progrès de la puissance peut être considéré comme un progrès de la liberté. La création d'une cité ou d'un minimum d'État ou de techniques efficaces libère de la violence de la nature et des rapports de rivalité et de domination ; mais les médiations et les outils de la puissance sont ambivalents et ne sont pas neutres et, passé un certain seuil de puissance, produisent à la fois de la liberté et de la domination. Ainsi, en permettant à l'homme d'accéder à une certaine maîtrise des forces naturelles, la technique a permis à l'homme de réduire sa vulnérabilité, d'augmenter la productivité du travail. La puissance économique elle aussi est bonne car elle peut libérer du caractère répétitif du labeur et crée les conditions d'une capitalisation des œuvres de l'esprit. Cependant l'augmentation de la puissance qui a accompagné les progrès de la rationalité finit par se retourner contre l'esprit de liberté qui lui a donné son

dynamisme. Mais après s'être appliqué sur la nature hors de l'homme, avec des effets environnementaux et sociaux de plus en plus préoccupants, mu par un esprit de puissance qui n'arrive pas à se donner de limites, l'ordre technique s'intériorise ; un nouveau stade s'ébauche, « caractérisé par l'usage de techniques de plus en plus discrètes, celles de la vie et de l'esprit humain. Après avoir couvert toute l'étendue visible, la technique se prépare à refluer invisiblement dans les profondeurs de l'homme.[39] ». Dans une conférence prononcée en avril 1990[40] Ellul souligne le paradoxe suivant : l'homme occidental est habité par un esprit de puissance qui s'est investi dans l'argent, l'économie, la science et la technique. Or la montée en puissance de ces médiations débouche sur une impuissance de fait, individuelle et collective.

Ainsi, pour Charbonneau comme pour Ellul, l'autonomisation des médiations qui permettent la liberté engendre des fatalités qui menacent la liberté ; mais cette autonomisation, elle, n'est pas une fatalité. Elle est l'effet d'un esprit de puissance matérielle qui aspire à une liberté désincarnée et n'arrive pas à se donner des limites. Et toute l'œuvre de ces deux penseurs est un appel adressé à chacun pour résister à cet esprit de puissance.

Notes

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12. *op. cit.* p. 91.
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14. *op. cit.* p. 101.
15. CHARBONNEAU (Bernard), *Je fus, op. cit.* p. 31.
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18. Cf. ELLUL (Jacques), « La liberté fondatrice de l'Europe », in *op. cit.*, p. 143.
19. ELLUL (Jacques), in *op. cit.,* p. 63.
20. ELLUL (Jacques), « Les structures de la liberté », in *op. cit.*, p. 62.
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23. Ici Ellul s'oppose aux conceptions de Sartre sur le groupe en fusion.
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The Hardest Duty:
Freedom in the Thought of Bernard Charbonneau and Jacques Ellul

Daniel Cérézuelle

Beginning in the 1930s, Bernard Charbonneau (1910–96) and Jacques Ellul (1912–94) sought to instigate a movement that would criticize industrial development and the worship of technique and the State and that would lay the foundations for communal control over scientific and technical change. In their "Steps toward a Personalist Manifesto,"[1] which they drew up in 1935, Charbonneau and Ellul turned against the depersonalization of action that results from the normal functioning of the economic, institutional, administrative, and technical structures that organized the social life of their day and determined its development. What results is a world characterized by anonymity, by the absence of personal initiative and responsibility. As Charbonneau wrote in 1939, "There can be only one outcome for present-day society, based on its principles and functioning: the depersonalization of its members."[2] In 1937, in *The Feeling of Nature as a Revolutionary Power*,[3] Charbonneau showed how industrial development keeps men from the possibility of establishing a balanced and fulfilling relationship with nature. This increasing power and autonomization of *structures* is imposed as a total social phenomenon and also determines the way that we think and feel. Convinced that a thought that is not put into practice is ridiculous, Charbonneau and Ellul joined forces to contribute to a necessary reorientation of social life, putting the economy, technique, and the State back in their proper places, and to promote "an ascetic city, so that man might live."In this way, these two young men from Bordeaux may be viewed as progenitors of political ecology and the degrowth movement.

Charbonneau and Ellul believed that conventional forms of political action, which are directed at accessing State control in order to reform society from

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the top down, are poorly suited to initiating a change that they thought of in terms of *civilization*.[4] Faithful to the intuitions of their youth, throughout their lives they remained "united by a common thought,"[5] as Charbonneau would write shortly after Ellul's death. They acted sometimes apart, sometimes together, in two complementary directions: on the one hand, they attempted in various ways to raise up a collective movement aiming for a reorientation of social practices that would be neither productivist nor technicist nor statist; on the other, they engaged in a "theorical" work of deepening their social critique and the reasons for their commitment. This work would result in the publication of many books that were often poorly received or ignored at first but proved to be prescient and to offer us invaluable bearings for thinking through our present situation and attempting to act. If this work of social criticism seems to be so relevant today, it is because it was carried out from a very specific initial point of view, that of freedom.

Freedom: A Value in Common

For Charbonneau and Ellul, everything that reduces individuals' responsibility and autonomy in their daily life is harmful. Faced with a civilization that institutionalizes and carries to the extreme the split between the material (power and efficacity) and the spiritual (autonomy, equality, justice . . .), Ellul and Charbonneau were concerned with establishing conditions of life that might be compatible in concrete terms with the need for each person to have responsibility for all areas of his life. This ethical point of view gave rise to a wealth of written work that, for each of them, is arranged around two closely complementary poles. The one part of their work was devoted to analyzing the contradictions of the modern world, such as the growth of the State and the totalitarian phenomenon, the degradation of the conditions of daily life and of nature, and the social role of science (Charbonneau), or technique, propaganda, ideologies, and so forth (Ellul). For each of them, the second part of their work was devoted to clarifying the ethical and spiritual reasons leading them to oppose the social developments that they were observing and to advocate for civilization to be reoriented. In the name of freedom, they insisted on evaluating institutions and techniques not only in terms of efficacy but also (and above all) in relation to the consequences that result for each person's control over the concrete conditions

of his life. They relentlessly kept asking the same question: What place does industrial and technicist civilization leave to the individual person's power of decision in his daily life? It was for freedom that they critiqued not all that was modern (they were not reactionaries) but primarily the autonomization of the power of money, the State, and technique. As Jacques Ellul said, "Nothing that I have done, lived, or thought can be understood apart from its relationship to freedom."[6] The necessity of freedom forms the backdrop to his social criticism, and his many theological works attempt to set forth freedom's foundations and clarify why the call to live in freedom found its root in his Christian faith.

Bernard Charbonneau also spoke of freedom in all of his books. The fundamental text that his whole work is organized around is titled *I Was: An Essay on Freedom.* And if Charbonneau from the 1930s onward became an advocate for the defense of nature, it was particularly because he believed that industrial society deprives the modern individual not only of beauty but also of freedom. Thus it was not a matter so much of saving nature for itself as of preserving the conditions in which a free humanity could exist within a living, earthly nature. Charbonneau did not believe that man had a "natural" way of life, one that defined the good life once and for all. Nor did he believe that it was nature "as such" that should be protected: its cosmic power infinitely exceeds man, and the galaxies have no need of man's respect. Nature is invincible. It is man, capable of freedom, who is fragile. Charbonneau feared that human imprudence and recklessness would increase the reorganization of nature, but whereas nature would re-stabilize itself anew, the free man would perhaps find that he no longer had a place within it. In *The State*, freedom also motivated his in-depth critique of the processes that promote social over-organization. Late in his life he wrote,

> Freedom . . . that is the final word; after it there will soon be nothing but numbers. But is freedom a dream or a lie? In any case, in this book that is the fragment of one life's work, the author has done his best to make of it something other than a word. What he could say, despite censorship, silence, and indifference, from his youth to his old age, has had only this one theme. His attempt in other books to describe the radical mutation of the human species that is being brought on by the development of science and techniques can be summed up in the threat that it places upon freedom, more than upon the earth.[7]

Thus it was that, starting with the necessity of freedom, our two Gascon personalists developed their respective bodies of work. I will limit myself in what follows to pointing out a few main points of this convergence.

Freedom Lies in the Act

We will search in vain in Charbonneau's and Ellul's works for a philosophy of freedom in the traditional sense of the term. In fact, each of them resisted offering a definition of freedom and of its metaphysical conditions. Although it was quite different for each one, what they held in common was an existential approach to freedom that was grounded in a deepening of the individual's experience. In *I Was*, Charbonneau refused to provide a conceptual definition of freedom and to specify its transcendental or metaphysical conditions. For him, freedom cannot be proven, it cannot be demonstrated rationally, but when I speak to a man or when I expect that he will respond to me, I posit that he is capable of freedom—if not, I would not be talking to him! This observation is enough, because Charbonneau was ultimately convinced that a logical demonstration of the possibility of freedom would not make men freer, that is, more capable of living out their freedom.

> If freedom means the availability of possibilities, then the free act is the choice that sacrifices them. Real freedom is always the negation of theoretical freedom. […] The reality of freedom does not lie in the proofs of science or philosophy—these would ensure that you lose it—it lies within the living person. What divides fate from freedom is not your metaphysics but your act, and what brings them together is your life. Determinism is true only to the extent to which someone refuses the decision that would make its futility plain. Grasp that, and everything changes. But this proof, unlike others, is not given once for all. If the effort flags, the world starts to disintegrate again. Atlas has not ceased to bear the weight of the earth. […] If freedom were fated, it would no longer be worthy of its name. […] There is no freedom, but a freeing, and above all, one who frees.[8]

Charbonneau was primarily interested in understanding why and how freedom can be lost. Liberal thought, just like its socialist and Marxist inheritors, was interested primarily in freedom's theoretical *conditions*, the natural, political, or social powers that threaten it from the outside. But Charbonneau was interested in the *personal exercise* of freedom, and in particular in

its self-destructive dimension, because modern attempts to liberate man have too often resulted in his enslavement to new forms of social constraints.

Ellul's approach was quite similar. In his introduction to a text that remained unpublished for many years, called "The Structures of Freedom," Ellul wrote, "I will not put the metaphysical question of human freedom; I would be quite incapable of answering it."[9] "God alone knows if we are free or not. […] Man had to live as though he were free, acting out this freedom, that is, working out his history. This alone is what concerns me."[10] The important thing is not to establish a freedom from the outside, but to live it: "What matters then is to demythicize freedom, in order that I might know not what it is but who I am called to be, as a free man."[11]

Ellul continued,

> The first thing that we can be sure of is that freedom can only be movement, change, the will to change, to transform. […] Freedom cannot be potential, because, as we have seen, we know that it exists neither by metaphysical reasoning nor by psychological examination but only by lived experience. To claim to be potentially free is to enter into the illusion and justification that is the very negation of freedom. Either it is lived, put into action, and as a result into movement, or else it is nothing.[12]

Thus, Ellul added, freedom cannot be a state, an established situation, a set way of being, or yet an outcome that *has been reached*; freedom lies in the act, which seeks to push back constraints: "If there is no freedom that is established, no freedom that is given, if there is no freedom as such, if it is always in motion, then this entails the obstacle and the refusal that must be overcome. Freedom is never anything other than a refusal of an order of constraint."[13] Or again:

> The determined man who conquers his freedom does so only because he is determined; it is while he conquers that he is free, and freedom exists only in relation to, and in terms of, what determines. Here we arrive at the heart of the structures of freedom. For freedom has no other movement than this.[14]

Thus, for Charbonneau and for Ellul, freedom does not come from living in a political, economic, technical, or cultural context that guarantees us the possibility of making choices. We believe that the greater the possibilities

of choice, the freer we are, without realizing that these choices that are being *suggested* to us may be completely alienating or meaningless. Freedom is something very different than a choice being offered; it is an action, the effort of liberation. Freedom is present when we make the difficult effort of embodying our spiritual values through our actions, counter to natural, psychological, and social deterministic processes.

There Is No Freedom but through an Individual's Act

In several "speculative" works that are key to his oeuvre, Charbonneau investigated freedom, this power of uprooting that exists only in and through the individual and that propels him to say *no* to what seems to be fated. In *I Was*, he continually asserted that "freedom is the *I* when it is not a pretense,"[15] and that there is no freedom except by the action of an individual striving to uproot himself from natural, social, and psychological deterministic processes. This conviction that there can be no freedom except through the individual also underpins his whole book *A Second Nature*, which explains how difficult it is for an individual to stand apart from his society. Finally, toward the end of his life, in his book *Four Witnesses to Freedom*,[16] he thought it necessary to take up this question again, in the chapter "Nicholas Berdyaev: The Christian, an Individual or a Person?" Here also he goes back to the debate of his youth with the communitarian personalism of Mounier and engages in a close argument to defend the primacy of the individual source of freedom. Of course, Charbonneau recognized that society offers institutional, technical, and cultural intermediaries to the individual, which protect him and make the development of his individuality *possible*, but at the same time, like an abusive mother, society punishes this individuality and its claim to freedom. And this suits us well; we willingly agree to this while claiming the opposite, because the easiest thing is to playact freedom while quite sensibly staying at our mother's breast, whence the ironic essay that is titled *Loving One's Mother Well*.[17] Charbonneau knew what he owed to society. For example, he recognized that for a Westerner, and for him in particular, the sense of freedom and individuality is part of the Christian heritage,[18] but he did not reject the possibility that other individuals, such as Socrates, in other times and other civilizations, might also have embod-

ied these values without being touched by the call of the god of Jews and Christians.

For Ellul also there is no freedom except through the individual. This theme is reprised in several of his works. He elaborated on this idea in "The Structures of Freedom," where he states that "freedom is and can only be individual."[19] On this point, Ellul laid claim to the heritage of Marx:

> For Marx, man is above all called to be free, to be a subject, and this freedom is expressed in a mastery over his determining conditions, in a possibility of self-expression in his work (his labor) without its being taken from him, which comes down to the possibility of making his own history. […] Thus, the final orientation of Marx's thought is neither justice nor equality, nor even the establishment of socialism, but indeed freedom. […] As a corollary, for Marx there is neither a freedom of nature, nor an original freedom, nor an historical freedom: it must be made.[20]

Of course, Ellul understood that realization can be communal; but this is always the accumulation of individual realizations. A community has no motion in itself. "Whatever form the tendency to freedom takes in a community, we can affirm absolutely that the initiative always comes down to one individual, who wants freedom."[21] Yet Ellul also maintained that there is no freedom apart from the social: "It is clear that the individual does not exist without a society, without a group. It is clear that freedom can never be an individual possession."[22] To be part of the community is thus a condition of freedom. But what is communal is necessarily repressive, and so individual freedom involves a confrontation, a capacity for resistance against social constraint. The relationship between personal freedom and society, then, is eminently paradoxical.

> The community is the necessary and indispensable link where we can inscribe ourselves in freedom. […] It becomes freedom's objective condition, because it is its presence that turns freedom into an objective reality, in a confrontation that enables us to know whether this freedom is only pretext, illusion, or witness. The community is thus both the opportunity for freedom (without it, freedom could never be demonstrated, it would always be putative) and the possibility for freedom (without it, freedom could never have any means of expression). Society, the group, the community can never be liberal or permissive, freedom is never found by merging with them,

> but without them this freedom is just a problem. It can be debated endlessly, but there is no solution. We will never know if man is free except through his confrontation with freedom, with this very precise reality that denies it. The community is the place in which the individual's will, what we can almost call the metaphysics of freedom, is summoned to reveal itself in its reality and truth, that is, to become historical.[24]

Paradoxically, then, freedom can exist only insofar as there is an individual capable of confronting, of entering into tension with, this very society that is what also enables him to exist. This is why, in *From Revolution to Rebellions*, he wrote, in reference to the "necessary revolution":

> We always come back to the same point. In our society, it is no longer from structures, from communities, that revolutionary action may arise; it must happen first in the individual, because it is the individual who is threatened with extinction. […] It is in the individual that the revolutionary work must take place, and it is in the individual that the conflictual tension that revolution involves must be developed.[25]

Ellul and Charbonneau agreed that freedom cannot be absolute. It is always relative, because it must be realized within a natural and social setting that both makes it possible and also resists it. To dream of complete freedom is literally absurd, then, because freedom cannot be a state. It is an effort of freeing, and it succeeds to a greater or lesser degree. But this ever-precarious victory leads necessarily to a condition that is hard to live out. Freedom is an ascesis. It is only a possibility, and to make it happen requires a continually repeated effort. And this places an awesome burden on the shoulders of each one of us.

Escaping the Dread of Freedom

In *I Was*, then in *A Second Nature*, Charbonneau attempted to set out the paradoxical character of freedom and understand why it is so difficult to live out. On the one hand, it is the power of uprooting, the ability to stand apart and become aware of the evident facts about the real. It assumes an ability to register a contradiction between an aspiration to values (truth, beauty, peace, justice . . .) that are properly speaking spiritual, and the reality that the order of the world resists these values because it is obedient to other

laws, both natural and social. This experience of critical distance is painful, because it places the individual in conflict with his society and also with himself as a member of his society and tied closely to it. As a result, he often turns back from this effort to take a distance from his society that a truly free act requires. If modern man has so much difficulty becoming aware of the contradictions of his society, it is not only because he is obedient to a social pressure that is being exercised over him from the outside. It is also because he is a thinking individual and capable of freedom. Within every man one finds a spontaneous tendency to internalize the social fact, and this social conformism draws its strength from the tragic side of freedom. Charbonneau brought back into focus the intuitions of existential philosophy's great founders, Montaigne, Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, in showing that man is a social animal who dreams of a freedom that he cannot bear. We never stop claiming the free and personal (can these two be distinguished?) character of our actions, in our lifestyle, aesthetic tastes, leisure activities, political and religious convictions, political involvements, or any other. "The choice is mine," we declare in unison, with a conviction that is continually rekindled. But when we look back with any honesty, we quickly see that these actions were mostly in tune with our milieu, the spirit of the times, the community's sudden enthusiasms and what was in style, institutional or professional patterns, and so forth. Where is the individual who is able to stand apart and act for himself? Charbonneau could make this grim statement: "It is possible, after all, that man is made for dreaming of freedom but not made for living it."[26] The individual experience of freedom exposes every human being to a dreadful contradiction between the demand for personal meaning and the recognition of his finitude, of the contingency and absurdity of his social life. The philosopher Jean Brun, commenting on Bernard Charbonneau's understanding of freedom, wrote that freedom is an ascesis because "to be free is to bear, and not to flee from, this tension between the central experience of freedom and the trial that shows how difficult it is to live out."[27]

In order to flee from this tragic aspect of freedom, man becomes all the more social and chooses a reassuring "voluntary servitude" by internalizing the values and models of his society and by identifying with the society of his day. Thus, in *A Second Nature*, Charbonneau demonstrated how man, as

soon as he distinguishes himself from the nature that surrounds him, seeks to merge with a "second nature," a social one this time, that protects him from feeling his frailty and finitude but does so at the cost of his individuality. Each man actively internalizes social constraint and adheres to the communal values of the moment, so as to avoid having to live out this tension. And he does so with all the conscious and unconscious powers of his mind. This is not a passive consent to a power imposed from the outside but an active participation—one that does not want to be recognized as such, whether it concerns one's adherence to political ideologies, for example, or to that of development. Despite a thin veneer of individualistic culture, in modern society as in pre-modern ones, the social fact is spontaneously enforced as a truth and a just order. And since the society of today is one of change, it is entirely "natural" that it produces "the man of change," the individual prepared to accept and justify even the most debatable aspects of industrial and technoscientific development.

Jacques Ellul made a similar observation:

> It feels like man always draws back before the true experience of freedom. […] Man understands himself as man only if he is free. […] He seems to have been oriented like this right from the start, when he was one indistinct member of the group. The person's disengagement from what is held in common occurs by an imperceptible movement, just like a plant that turns imperceptibly toward the place that the light is coming from—but also, each time that he was in a position to live freely or exercise his freedom, he was either unable or terrified to do so. Each time, he invented new chains for himself, a new fatalism, he adopted a new dialectic, he gave himself new authorities, he constructed a new morality, just as implacable, determining, and constraining as those that he had declared himself to be free of. As he stands before the gulf, man cannot venture to risk everything. Freedom is revealed to be such a radical test that man never accepts this risk.[28]

This is why

> it is not true that man wants to be free. What he wants is the advantages of independence without any of freedom's duties and difficulties. For freedom is hard to live out. Freedom is dreadful. Freedom is a venture. Freedom is all-consuming and exacting. It is a fight at every instant, because the traps that lie around us to take away our

> freedom do not cease to proliferate. But supremely because freedom itself leaves us no rest. It demands that we go beyond, it demands that everything be constantly questioned, it requires that our attention be always on the alert, never routinized, never institutionalized. Freedom demands that I be always fresh, always ready, never hiding behind past precedents or failures. It involves rifts and controversies. Freedom never gives in to any constraint and never imposes any. Because, precisely, there is no freedom except in permanent control over oneself and in loving the person next to me.[29]

One of the reasons that this permanent control over the self is particularly hard is that it is not natural to stand apart from the society that we belong to. Very often we justify our conduct in the name of freedom, without realizing that most of the time our "choice" is completely determined by our social context. Certainly, each individual automobile increases our power to go from one place to another, but, as Ellul noted,

> As soon as we have three days of vacation, a long weekend, three million drivers rush to the highways. More astonishingly, each one is free, they do so freely. How many times has it been said, "When I take the car, I am free to do so." The problem is that there are three million Frenchmen who are saying "I am free" at the same time, and they are saying it together, *en bloc*. That is, it is actually a movement that they are obeying; it is an obedience to the mass.[30]

Freedom does consist in "being able to do what you want," as common sense has it, yet each term in this definition is problematic. Nothing is less natural that this ability, and nothing is less easy than wanting to exercise it. Freedom, Charbonneau wrote, "does not exist apart from the fight in which man slays the social being within himself."[31]

There is no freedom without strength of soul. Freedom is not a right or a natural property of the human person, as liberals have believed, but the most dreadful of duties.

The Tension between Power and Freedom

We release ourselves from this burden by trusting our freedom to the functioning of impersonal arrangements that are supposed to liberate us from natural and social constraints and necessities. Certainly, freedom needs mediations to enable it to assert itself against natural or social forces without

being exhausted by this ongoing confrontation. But, Charbonneau and Ellul told us, whether it has to do with money, the State, or technique, these mediations are not neutral. They tend to become autonomous following their own logic, and their power, which responds to our desires so well, impedes the very demand for freedom that gave rise to them.

We have known for a long time that this is the case with money. It enables the exchange and concentration of capital that enables new tools to be created that increase the productivity of work and this "wealth of nations" that we always desire to see grow so that we can increase our possibilities for choice among the goods available. But the ever-increasing monetarization of the exchanges and the multiplication of money engenders powerful effects and favors the autonomization of financial processes, which, left to themselves, tend to subjugate the whole of social life and have disastrous social, environmental, and cultural effects that render us powerless before the productivist fascination for economic efficiency. To warn us against this enslaving fascination, Charbonneau and Ellul each wrote a work about the relation to money.[32]

Likewise, we expect that the impersonal state will defend us against the abuses of personal power, and we entrust it with the monopoly of violence so that it might be in a position to impose the law on everyone and defend our "rights" and freedoms. Thus, for Montesquieu, the existence of a particular mode of governmental organization is what enables us to determine if we are free or not: "Political liberty, in a citizen, is the tranquility of mind that comes from the opinion that each one has of his security; and, in order to have this liberty, *the government* must be such that no citizen can fear another citizen."[33] Or again, "It is necessary, *by the way things are arranged*, for power to check power."[34] Charbonneau and Ellul, who had a keen awareness of the totalitarian peril, did not question the wisdom of such a conception, but they emphasized that it is too partial and forgets what is essential:

> Political liberty—and it can take many other forms than that of Anglo-Saxon–style parliamentarianism—is the effect, not a cause, of a deeper liberty. Even individual freedoms, *habeas corpus*, the right to self-expression and freedom of movement, the inviolability of the home, and so forth, which are more important to daily life than is the right to vote, are only results. If they guarantee individuals a sphere in which to exercise their freedom, they in turn exist only

> because some men one day laid claim to them and still remember to defend them. These freedoms will survive with them for some time yet, by inertia, and then will disappear on their own. […] It is no coincidence that the century of totalitarianism followed that of liberalism. This alone should have alerted us to the relationship between them.[35]

If we do not resist and put the State in its place, it will end up infiltrating every sphere of our lives, in the name of the common good. When all is done for the people but nothing by the people, freedom is only the freedom to make choices that change nothing. Ellul did not say otherwise:

> In other words, I could generalize by suggesting that in the end, the social body extends the freedoms that have no importance and that are unlikely to call into question a society's principles or even the process of its development. When a freedom that is demanded is dangerous, it is always refused. When we witness a "liberalization," we should not boast of having conquered. We should understand that the adversary has granted what no longer has value. These are, at the present time, spiritual freedom, freedom of consumption, freedom of leisure.[36]

And in a later work:

> We easily observe the existence of two sectors in our societies. The "sector of serious business," where no freedom of choice is permitted, in production, trades, public order, money, information, science, etc., and the "sector of freedom," which is to say, things without importance, leisure activities, fashion, consumer choices. . . . Yet even in these spheres an imperative duty remains: to act like everyone else, and, for example, join in with the available pastimes that have been organized and laid out for us.[37]

By perfecting techniques, we expect protection against our natural frailty. And the more fascinated we are by the power that they bring us, the more our freedom is eliminated from our daily lives. The division of labor, the loss of autonomy, the lack of meaning, the bureaucratic over-organization of social life, opaque processes that condition us, the organization of leisure activities, urban management, land management, and so on: all these are generated by technico-economic developments, which we undergo and do not choose, and over which we have almost no control.

> Beginning in 1930, industrial society was transformed into technicist society. […] The primary fact is one of organization, the devel-

> opment of services, the universalization of techniques, etc. During this time, what do we see? […] As we struggle against industrialism, we think we are engaging in a revolution of freedom, but industrialism (which still exists, of course, just like capitalism) is largely out of date. The question of alienation is no longer that of capitalism but of the invasion of the individual by the multiplication of external and internal techniques such as psychological manipulation (propaganda, advertising, the creation of new needs, etc.) and its insertion into the technical system that leaves less and less autonomy of action, its encompassing by technical objects, and its adaption by all means.[38]

Spirit of Power or Spirit of Freedom?

For Charbonneau, there can be no freedom without the exercise of a certain power. At first, each advance of power can be viewed as an advance of freedom. The creation of a city, or the creation of a minimum of state or effective techniques, frees us from nature's violence and from relationships of competition and domination. But power's mediations and tools are ambivalent and not neutral, and once they go beyond a certain threshold of power they produce freedom and domination both. Thus, by allowing man to attain to a certain mastery over natural forces, technique has enabled him to reduce his vulnerability and increase the productivity of labor. Economic power is also good, because it can free us from the repetitive nature of labor and create the conditions for a capitalization of the works of the mind. The growth of power, however, that has accompanied the advance of rationality ends up turning against the spirit of freedom that gave it its dynamism. But after having been applied to nature apart from man, with environmental and social effects that are ever more worrisome, moved by a spirit of power that never succeeds in limiting itself, the technical order turns inward. A new stage emerges, "characterized by the use of techniques that are ever more discrete, those of the life and spirit of man. After having covered every visible surface, technique gets ready to flow invisibly into the depths of man."[39] In a lecture given in April 1990,[40] Ellul stressed the following paradox: Western man is inhabited by a spirit of power that threw itself into money, the economy, science, and technique. Now the increasing power of these mediations is in effect leading to both individual and collective powerlessness.

Thus, for Charbonneau as for Ellul, the autonomization of the mediations that enable freedom spawns fated patterns that threaten freedom. But this autonomization is not itself a fate. It is the effect of a spirit of material power that aspires to a discarnate freedom and is incapable of giving itself limits. The whole work of these two thinkers is a call to each one of us to resist this spirit of power.

Translated by Lisa Richmond with the assistance of Christian Roy.

Notes

1. Bernard Charbonneau and Jacques Ellul, "Directives pour un manifeste personnaliste." In *Nous sommes révolutionnaires malgré nous: Textes pionniers de l'écologie politique* (Paris: Seuil, 2014).
2. Bernard Charbonneau, "Réformisme et révolution." *Esprit* 77 (1939).
3. Bernard Charbonneau, "Le sentiment de la nature, force révolutionnaire." In *Nous sommes révolutionnaires malgré nous*. https://lagrandemue.wordpress.com/
4. Jean Louis Loubet del Bayle, "Bernard Charbonneau, le contexte personnaliste des années trente et sa postérité." In Jacques Prades, ed., *Bernard Charbonneau, une vie entière à dénoncer la grande imposture* (Toulouse: Eres, 1997).
5. Bernard Charbonneau, "Unis par une pensée commune." *Foi et vie* 93.5–6 (1994). https://lagrandemue.wordpress.com/
6. Patrick Chastenet, *Lire Ellul: Introduction à l'œuvre sociologique de Jacques Ellul* (Talence: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1992).
7. Bernard Charbonneau, *Quatre témoins de la liberté: Rousseau, Montaigne, Berdiaev, Dostoïevski* (Paris: R & N, 2019).
8. Charbonneau, *Je fus: Essai sur la liberté* (Bordeaux, Opales, 1980), 130–31.
9. Jacques Ellul, "Les structures de la liberté," in *Vivre et penser la liberté* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2919), 55.
10. *op. cit.*, 95.
11. *op. cit.*, 90.
12. *op. cit.*, 91.
13. *op. cit.*, 103.
14. *op. cit.*, 101.

15. Charbonneau, *Je fus*, *op. cit.,* 31.
16. Bernard Charbonneau, *Quatre témoins de la liberté*, *op. cit.*
17. Bernard Charbonneau, *Bien aimer sa maman* (Bordeaux: Opales, 2006).
18. Cf. Ellul, Jacques, "La liberté fondatrice de l'Europe." In *op. cit.,* 143.
19. Ellul, *op. cit.,* 63.
20. Ellul, "Les structures de la liberté," 62.
21. Ellul, *Vivre et penser la liberté*, 64.
22. Ellul, *Vivre et penser la liberté*, 70.
23. Here Ellul is opposing Sartre's conceptions about the group merged together.
24. Ellul, *Vivre et penser la liberté*, 71.
25. Jacques Ellul, *De la révolution aux révoltes* (Paris, Table ronde, [1972] 2011), 85–86.
26. Charbonneau, *Le système et le chaos, op. cit.,* 257.
27. Jean Brun, "Une ascèse de la liberté, à propos de Je fus." *Réforme* (1980). https://lagrandemue.wordpress.com/
28. Ellul, "Les structures de la liberté," 55.
29. Jacques Ellul, *La subversion du christianisme* (Paris, Table ronde, [1984] 2001), 257.
30. Jacques Ellul, "L'esprit de puissance et l'impuissance de fait." Unpublished lecture, Mérignac, 2 April 1990.
31. Charbonneau, *Je fus*, 162.
32. Bernard Charbonneau, *Il court, il court, le fric* (Bordeaux: Opales, 1996); Jacques Ellul, *L'homme et l'argent* (Lausanne, Presses bibliques universitaires, [1954] 1979).
33. Montesquieu, "De la Constitution d'Angleterre." In *De l'Esprit des lois*, book 11, chapter 6.
34. Montesquieu, book 11, chapter 4.
35. Charbonneau, *Je fus*, 28–29.
36. Ellul, "Les structures de la liberté," 53.
37. Jacques Ellul, *Déviances et déviants dans notre société intolérante* (Toulouse: ERES, 2013), 96.
38. Ellul, "Les structures de la liberté," 44.
39. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Système et le Chaos* (Paris: Economica, 1990), 27.
40. Ellul, "L'esprit de puissance et l'impuissance de fait," *op. cit.*

Anarchie et christianisme par Jacques Ellul

Patrick Chastenet

ELLUL (Jacques), *Anarchie et christianisme*, Lyon, Atelier de création libertaire, 1988; nouvelle édition, Paris, La Table Ronde, 2018, « La petite vermillon », 160 pp.

J'imagine volontiers un logicien ayant à examiner la question suivante : sachant d'une part que les anarchistes rejettent toute forme de religion et d'autorité, et que d'autre part les chrétiens prônent l'obéissance au pouvoir politique, comment peut-on être à la fois anarchiste et chrétien ? Mais dans ce domaine comme dans l'ensemble de son œuvre, Jacques Ellul n'a que faire des pures questions abstraites, logiques ou spéculatives. Il ne s'exprime pas en qualité de spécialiste de philosophie politique ou d'histoire des idées, pas plus qu'en tant que théologien. Ce qui le préoccupe est de donner un sens à sa propre histoire personnelle, et à travers elle d'aider les chrétiens et les anarchistes qui auront eu, comme lui, à concilier douloureusement, ce double engagement, cette double fidélité.

La tâche n'est pas facile si l'on s'en tient au sens commun. D'un côté, les anarchistes regroupés sous la bannière noire du « Ni Dieu, Ni maître », portée haut par le Russe Michel Bakounine et son ami aquitain Elisée Reclus. De l'autre, les chrétiens rivés sur quelques versets de l'épitre de Paul aux Romains :

> Que chacun se soumette aux autorités en charge. Car il n'y a point d'autorité qui ne vienne de Dieu, et celles qui existent sont constituées par Dieu. Si bien que celui qui résiste à l'autorité se rebelle contre l'ordre établi par Dieu.

Pourtant, au prix d'une réflexion exigeante et d'un art de la dialectique dont seul Ellul a le secret, il est possible d'aller bien au-delà de cette incompatibilité fondamentale. Dans *Anarchie et christianisme* Ellul reconnait avoir lu

Chastenet, Patrick. Compte rendu de *Anarchie et christianisme*, par Jacques Ellul. *Ellul Forum* 64 (Fall 2019): 69–73.

Proudhon en contrepoint de Marx mais il s'était empressé de lire également Celse, Feuerbach, d'Holbach, La Mettrie, et autre penseurs matérialistes pour éprouver la solidité de sa foi. Après l'apologète chrétien Lactance qui attribuait ce raisonnement à Epicure, Bakounine avait cru trouver l'argument dirimant face au Dieu chrétien. Compte tenu de l'existence du mal dont nous pouvons observer les manifestations tous les jours, soit Dieu est tout puissant mais alors il n'est pas bon, soit il est bon mais alors il est impuissant. L'objection semble en effet imparable. Soit Dieu est bonté, amour, mais alors il ne peut rien contre le mal sur terre. Soit il est le Tout-Puissant, mais alors c'est un Dieu malfaisant. Lorsque l'on observe le monde comme il va, un Dieu à la fois amour et puissance semble en effet une contradiction dans les termes. Mais Ellul a beau jeu de montrer que ce n'est pas Dieu mais l'homme qui fait le mal. Un Dieu qui forcerait l'homme à faire le bien supposerait un homme robot, précisément le contraire de la conception ellulienne de la liberté tout droit inspirée de Karl Barth. Le grand théologien protestant l'a en effet aidé à penser dialectiquement l'obéissance de l'homme libre à l'égard du Dieu libre, autrement dit l'idée centrale du message biblique : la libre détermination de la créature dans la libre décision du Créateur.

Ellul considère du reste que c'est Bakounine dans son livre *Dieu et l'État* qui a le mieux résumé l'ensemble de la critique anarchiste à l'égard de la religion en général et du christianisme en particulier. Depuis, rien de décisif n'a été écrit sur le sujet du côté des anarchistes. Au-delà des thèses exposées dans *Anarchie et christianisme*, il n'est pas inutile de reconstituer en parallèle les itinéraires ayant conduit Ellul à la foi chrétienne au plan éthique et à la position anarchiste au plan politique. Dans les deux cas rien de nécessaire, rien de prévisible, rien d'inéluctable, rien de déterminé mécaniquement par son milieu social, rien d'inscrit dans une quelconque idiosyncrasie.

Son père était grec orthodoxe d'éducation mais voltairien de conviction, quant à sa mère elle était résolument protestante mais n'affichait pas ses croyances religieuses pour ne pas contrarier son mari athée. La conversion d'Ellul au christianisme a pris la forme d'une sorte de révélation brutale le 10 aout 1930, où il a senti la présence de Dieu, puis d'un long processus de plusieurs années durant lequel il s'est efforcé d'échapper en vain à ce qui allait provoquer un bouleversement total de sa pensée et de sa vie[1].

Quant à son ralliement à la cause anarchiste, il s'est effectué lui aussi par étapes successives. Ellul a d'abord été un fervent lecteur et admirateur de Marx. S'il a également lu avec beaucoup de profit Proudhon, Kropotkine et Bakounine, ces auteurs lui ont toujours semblé plus faibles au plan théorique que l'auteur de *L'idéologie allemande*. Dès le début des années 1930, la lecture de Marx n'avait rien pour lui d'un pur exercice intellectuel. Son père étant alors privé d'emploi, il ressentait

> comme une injustice terrible qu'un homme de sa qualité se trouve dans cette situation. Par son analyse du capitalisme et de ses crises, Marx me fournissait une explication au drame vécu par mon père[2].

Soucieux de ne pas en rester à une approche livresque mais de changer radicalement la société, Ellul prit d'abord contact avec des membres de la S.F.I.O. Section française de l'internationale socialiste qui le déçurent par leur carriérisme, puis avec des militants communistes plus préoccupés de la ligne du Parti que d'herméneutique marxiste. Finalement, c'est au sein de la mouvance personnaliste incarnée par les revues *Esprit* et *Ordre Nouveau* qu'il trouva l'occasion de mettre en pratique, dans le sud-ouest de la France, la pensée de Marx et de Proudhon.

Au plan international, les procès de Moscou, les purges staliniennes visant des marxistes qu'il admirait—comme Boukharine par exemple—, mais surtout le comportement des communistes durant la guerre civile en Espagne commencèrent à le rapprocher nettement des anarchistes. Par l'intermédiaire d'un ancien camarade de classe, Ellul et sa femme aidèrent d'ailleurs de jeunes anarchistes espagnols venus en France pour se procurer des armes. Au plan interne, l'arrivée au pouvoir du Front populaire (1936–37) le remplit d'espoir et il crut fermement que l'heure de la révolution venait enfin de sonner. Ce fut du reste la seule fois où il avoue avoir voté. La déception fut proportionnelle aux attentes suscitées.

A la Libération lui qui avait rêvé sous l'Occupation de passer, selon le slogan du mouvement Combat, « De la résistance à la révolution » assista, impuissant, au retour en force des partis traditionnels et des puissances économiques. Dans ces conditions, la France ne méritait pas le qualificatif de démocratie, ou du moins, elle illustrait seulement la formule de Marx : « la démocratie est la faculté pour le peuple de choisir qui l'étranglera ! »

Lorsque en 1947, il évoqua pour la première fois publiquement son inclination libertaire, dans l'hebdomadaire protestant *Réforme*, il prit énormément de précautions :

> Je maintiens qu'actuellement et pour un certain temps, en France, l'anarchie est la seule solution possible. Je ne prétends nullement que c'est le régime de l'avenir, mais celui du moment présent ; ni le régime universel et idéal, mais local et concret[3].

Alors qu'il entretenait déjà des relations d'amitié, et avait mené de nombreux combats aux côtés de militants anarchistes, il fallut attendre 1974 pour qu'il revienne sur le sujet de façon nettement plus audacieuse et argumentée. Dans un article intitulé « Anarchie et christianisme »—publié initialement par la revue *Contrepoint* et réédité en 2008[4]—Ellul posait les premiers jalons du livre éponyme où il confirmait en substance que la position anarchiste était la plus à même de permettre à l'individu de devenir une « personne » capable d'exercer un contrôle sur les décisions prises au nom du peuple, d'introduire des grains de sable dans une mécanique trop bien huilée, de créer des tensions face à un pouvoir politique totalitaire par essence.

Face à ses détracteurs Ellul (2003, p. 259) a souvent dû rappeler qu'il ne s'opposait pas à l'État et à la technique, en soi, mais à leur sacralisation ici et maintenant[5]. C'est leur combinaison, tout à fait inédite dans l'histoire de l'humanité selon lui, que l'on trouve à la source de l'aliénation et de la réification de l'homme. L'État-nation étant devenu la puissance coordinatrice de l'organisation technicienne ; on ne peut toucher à l'un sans atteindre l'autre. Dans ces conditions, l'anarchie constitue une attitude de résistance face à l'oppression techno-étatique.

Le livre *Changer de révolution* (1982) inspiré en partie des thèses de Radovan Richta et d'Ota Sik mais aussi des théories *conseillistes* semble aller dans cette voie[6]. De même que la micro-informatique permettrait de sortir du système technicien, « de même ces granules sporadiques permettraient de construire un socialisme révolutionnaire de la liberté ». Ce socialisme pourra-t-il attribuer une finalité à cette technique, cette technique pourra-t-elle devenir l'instrument de ce socialisme ? La conjonction de ces deux mouvements n'a rien d'automatique, prévenait-il. Et en effet, à la lecture du *Bluff technologique* (1988) on s'aperçoit que le rendez-vous n'a pas eu

lieu. Considérant que son livre *Changer de révolution* avait donné lieu à des contresens, Ellul semble soucieux de justifier la continuité de ses analyses :

> J'ai simplement indiqué qu'il pouvait y avoir une mutation s'il y avait conjonction entre quelques techniques-moyens, et un changement à cent quatre-vingt degrés du politico-économique. J'indiquais aussi que le temps pour ce faire était bref, peut-être quelques mois, au mieux quelques années. Ces années sont écoulées. Il est aujourd'hui trop tard pour espérer changer le cours de la technique[7].

Impression confirmée par *Anarchie et christianisme* (1988) où s'il présente l'anarchisme comme « la forme la plus complète et la plus sérieuse du socialisme[8] », il nous dit aussi que l'homme étant ce qu'il est, la société anarchiste idéale n'est pas de ce monde.

Notes

1. ELLUL (J.) et CHASTENET (P.), *Entretiens avec Jacques Ellul*, Paris, La Table Ronde, 2014 « la petite vermillon », pp. 118–20; ELLUL (J.) et TROUDE-CHASTENET (P.), *Jacques Ellul on Politics, Technology, and Christianity*, Eugene, Oregon, Wipf and Stock,, 2005.
2. ELLUL (J.) et CHASTENET (P.), *op. cit.,* p. 124; ELLUL (J.) et TROUDE-CHASTENET (P.), *op. cit.,* p. 55.
3. ELLUL (J.), « Propositions louches », revue *Réforme*, 28/06/1947.
4. ELLUL (J.), « Anarchie et christianisme », in TROUDE-CHASTENET (P.), Dir., *La Politique, Le Bouscat, L'Esprit du Temps*, Paris, diffusion PUF, 2008 (coll. Cahiers Jacques-Ellul), pp. 95–118.
5. ELLUL (J.), *Les nouveaux possédés*, Paris, Fayard, 1973, p. 259. Réédition Mille et une Nuits, 2003.
6. ELLUL (J.), *Changer de révolution. L'inéluctable prolétariat*, Paris, Seuil, 1982.
7. ELLUL (J.), *Le bluff technologique*, Paris, Hachette, 1988.
8. ELLUL (J.), *Anarchie et christianisme*, Paris, La Table Ronde, 1998 (coll. La petite vermillon), p. 10.

Kierkegaard's Theological Sociology by Paul Tyson

Paul Martens

Tyson, Paul. *Kierkegaard's Theological Sociology*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019, 148pp.

Paul Tyson's *Kierkegaard's Theological Sociology* is as expansive as it is succinct and as provocative as it is explanatory. In this small text, Tyson, a Senior Research Fellow with the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Queensland, presents a constructive argument for theologically informed sociology with a sharp polemical edge directed at intellectual and practical forms of materialist atheism.

Structurally, the text is constituted of two parts: (1) a reading of Søren Kierkegaard's *Two Ages* through an Augustinian lens intended to reconstruct a model of studying society in a theological register, and (2) a loose appropriation of Kierkegaard's model to engage critically the deformed roles that knowledge, money, and religion play in contemporary materialist societies. As such, this theological text is a mix of intellectual history, social history, social analysis, and normative claims.

The issue at the heart of this text is the binary choice that is forced in social theory after the Enlightenment: to adopt or reject methodologically materialist and non-theologically framed social sciences. Tyson argues that, historically, the possibility of real choice between the two options was foreclosed somewhere between 1840 and 1860; during these decades the legacy of David Strauss, Ludwig Feuerbach, and the other young Hegelians was open to either a Marxist or a Kierkegaardian direction. By the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* late in 1859, however, "the study of society by positivistic and pragmatic lights was moving ahead powerfully" (40). Or, in short, the wrong fork was taken, with consequences that have very recently

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been recognized within the field of social theory. Against this background, Tyson's text should be understood as a theological intervention that contributes to the long-awaited rehabilitation of social theory.

So, to the role of Kierkegaard in the text. Against the declension narrative that haunts and motivates the text, Kierkegaard is the champion that performs diagnostic, constructive, and exemplary roles, and it is worth attending to each of these briefly. Nearly half of Kierkegaard's *Two Ages* is a series of concluding reflections on "the present age," or Golden Age Denmark. Ostensibly reviewing Thomasine Gyllembourg's novel titled *Two Ages* (hence Kierkegaard's title), Kierkegaard compares and critiques "The Age of Revolution," the age of passion and immediacy, and "The Present Age," the age of reflection, envy, leveling, superficiality, and abstraction. Kierkegaard's diagnosis of mid-nineteenth century Denmark is prescient and almost wholly embraced in Tyson's critique of contemporary idolatries that yield modes of existence consisting of little more than mass consumption of material meaninglessness. It is also important to note that John Milbank should probably be given some credit for instigating Tyson's diagnostic project, and that Tyson supplements Kierkegaard's diagnosis with Ellul's critique of the twentieth-century obsession with instrumental power and efficiency and, inevitably, propaganda.

Kierkegaard's diagnosis, however, is not merely a negative; it is rooted in a constructive vision that Tyson also utilizes to provide an alternative to the spiritual problem of the present age. That constructive vision is rooted in an expansive understanding of worship, doxology: "It is the right worship of God that enables human flourishing for individuals within human communities" (ix). On this matter, Tyson's appropriation of Kierkegaard is not quite as seamless, because Kierkegaard's theology—including but not limited to *Two Ages*—is a little more wary of the nature of communities and communal practices than Tyson seems to be. What Tyson argues is that the logic of worship plays itself out in various social contexts and that society simply cannot be understood apart from worship. No doubt this is true. Framed this way, however, Tyson's argument betrays a notion of something like a nostalgia for Christendom, where societies are or ought to be understood as uniformly oriented toward the same worship. Kierkegaard

lived in such a context, and his account of worship deliberately attempted to foreclose an automatic communal outcome:

> If the individual is unwilling to learn to be satisfied with himself in the essentiality of the religious life before God, to be satisfied with ruling over himself instead of over the world [...] then he will not escape from reflection.

So, while Kierkegaard and Tyson both agree that one's relationship with God is inseparable from one's social life, Tyson's appropriation of Kierkegaard is self-consciously contextualized within the "Platonist tradition of the West" (49), a tradition that worried Kierkegaard because of its potential alignment with Hegel's theological vision. I raise this point not to be contentious but simply to note that the theological sociology Tyson eventually develops has debts to Kierkegaard, but it also has debts that would make Kierkegaard nervous, especially the implication that Christianity is a tradition in which "divinity, value, thought, and meaning are primary and where contingent matter embedded in the spatio-temporal manifold is a derivative property of ontic reality" (51). No doubt Kierkegaard would rephrase in quite different language, but he too would agree that particular forms of life (e.g., the aesthetic and the ethical) are not accidentally problematic but are problematic precisely because they do not align with the proper role ascribed to humans within the created order.

In the end, however the debts are apportioned, Tyson's critique of contemporary practices in the present age is incredibly pointed and persistent. For many in the developed world, it is hard to imagine any other existence except perhaps revolution. In this context, Kierkegaard's final appearance in Tyson's argument is that of exemplar—a prophet, a Socratic gadfly from the 1840s that gives in to neither idolatry nor dystopian despair. And, at this final moment, Tyson fittingly turns from argument to exhortation: "Let us follow [Kierkegaard's] lead and think about our social context through a doxological lens, and pursue the practice of right worship in all humility" (125).

The Green Light by Bernard Charbonneau

Jacob Marques Rollison

Charbonneau, Bernard. *The Green Light: A Self-Critique of the Ecological Movement*, trans. Christian Roy. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 248pp.

Bernard Charbonneau's *The Green Light* provides a profound and provocative entrance into contemporary ecological dialogue and into Charbonneau's thought (and if I am not mistaken, his debut in English). It explores the ecological movement's intellectual foundations and historical development, probes its political makeup and pitfalls, accounts for the current situation (in 1980 France, though it is still very instructive today), and offers political recommendations for forward movement.

The book opens with two helpful contributions: a foreword by Piers H. G. Stephens, environmental philosopher at the University of Georgia, who helpfully situates *The Green Light* as a prescient forerunner of current ecological debates, and an introduction by Daniel Cérézuelle, philosopher and specialist on Ellul and Charbonneau, who sketches *The Green Light*'s relation to the main lines of Charbonneau's writings. A preface by Charbonneau lays foundational concerns, situating one of the book's foci as retrieving the words *nature* and *freedom* from "the dustbin of history" (xxxiv). Charbonneau writes from his meditations and observation of the effects of technological development on his lived environment, doing so in common language.

The text is structured like a plant whose (part I) "seeds," (II) "roots," (III) "diseases and poisons," and (IV) "fruits" move from the ecological movement's origins to its theoretical foundations, then to its current political

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situation and problems plaguing its growth, before finally offering a proposal for ecological politics. "Seeds" schematizes the movement's historical development, tracing the origins of present-day ecology from events and ideas from the ancient world, the era of Christendom, the thought of Rousseau, and the modern era, after which Charbonneau hears ecology's "great silence." As the benefits of technological progress reached their limits, the integrated, vulgarized, bourgeois discourse that the present incarnation of the ecological movement represents shot up rapidly. Charbonneau explores the current movement's North American origin and Protestant heritage, seeing it not as a revolutionary counterforce but as a reaction to techno-scientific development. He finds a similarly propagandistic pattern in French ecology from the 1960s–80s, with 1970 as a watershed year. He finds the current movement to be a "melting pot" of contradictions, enveloping Marxists and anarchists, the average person and the marginalized, flip-flopping from right to left.

"Roots" (part II) explores a contradiction between nature and freedom as the dialectical foundation of a true ecology. Humans are a constantly negotiated combination of the two, unable to forgo either one. While Charbonneau refuses to give clean-cut definitions of these two terms, nature is knowable in negative contrast to human artifice, and freedom is the "claim of the part against the whole" (48). Seeking a balance between the city and the country, Charbonneau wants dialogue between human creation and the otherness of nature, between freedom and necessity. But our age of maximized growth finds freedom at risk of self-destruction. Charbonneau explores the specific form of this dialectic that Christianity has bequeathed to ecology, allowing him to define ecology's task thus: if "man is not up to the challenge of his own destiny, then that will have been the mistake of his Creator, whether God or nature" (72).

"Diseases and poisons" (III) evaluates the current traps that ecology must avoid yet endlessly falls prey to. Charbonneau wants a relative and realist ecological politics that does not seek heaven on earth but only the avoidance of hell (92). Ecology also tends to be marginalized, or to be co-opted into contemporary mediatized politics, exchanging a clear vision of its goals for more powerful means and reducing itself to just one more political op-

tion; this is how society "recycles" ecology, including it in its own system and blunting its revolutionary edge. Charbonneau hopes for a true ecological politics that would transcend right/left binaries and restore meaning to politics.

Finally, the fourth part, "Fruits," moves toward proposals for what ecological politics might look like. Charbonneau seeks nothing less than a "counter-society" built around a "refusal of absolute power" (141–42). For Charbonneau, the tricky question for establishing a post-Christian, humanist counter-society concerns how to maintain techno-science's relativity in the absence of religious truth. Without claiming to have the answer, he recognizes that ecology does treat "ultimate" questions, though without claiming to seek truth, only to respond to a situation. True ecology is a "revolution for that which exists" (148). True politics should be lived at the individual level, involving simple things such as taking one's time, eating well, and watching one's words, since language links the individual to society. It should involve small meetings, real dialogue, and no media, publicity, or violence. Ecology can play a prophetic role regarding the State. Power must be carefully limited; the goal is no longer unfettered growth but a purposed equilibrium. As sites of the human/nature dialogue, agriculture and leisure are key elements in this battle.

Those familiar with Ellul and Charbonneau's lifelong friendship will enjoy spotting both significant commonality and difference between the two thinkers, gaining a fresh perspective on Ellul as well. Certain themes recall the duo's personalist agenda from the 1930s, including the threat of unlimited development and State centrality, the push for federalist democratic political organization, and common language as the fragile and crucial link between the individual and society. Their different perspectives on religious faith exist in appreciative tension, keeping both respectfully on their toes.

While not always easily accessible, *The Green Light* is a careful call to seek the limits that would allow for true freedom, in relation to both the artificial and the natural world—and, notably, a call that avoids apocalypticism, cheap sloganeering, and propaganda. As such, it is a timely volume, especially in its new translation. It is hard to tell whether the mellifluous, thought-provoking, and at times arresting (if also dense, enigmatic, and

sometimes sarcastic) prose owes more to Charbonneau's meditative and communicative style or to Christian Roy's deft and poetic translation; in any case, both are to be thanked for this splendid volume's existence (at all, and) in English, respectively.

About the Contributors

Daniel Cérézuelle is an independent scholar in Bordeaux, France. He is the executor of the literary estate of Bernard Charbonneau and a board member of the Société pour la philosophie de la technique. He is the author of *Ècologie et liberté : Bernard Charbonneau précurseur de l'écologie politique* (2006).

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About the International Jacques Ellul Society

The International Jacques Ellul Society, founded in 2000 by former students of Ellul, links scholars, students, and others who share an interest in the legacy of Jacques Ellul (1912–94), longtime professor at the University of Bordeaux. Along with promoting new publications related to Ellul and producing the *Ellul Forum*, the Society sponsors a biennial conference. IJES is the anglophone sister society of the francophone Association internationale Jacques Ellul.

The objectives of IJES are threefold:

Preserving a Heritage. The Society seeks to preserve and disseminate Ellul's literary and intellectual heritage through republication, translation, and secondary writings.

Extending a Critique. Ellul is best known for his penetrating critique of *la technique*, of the character and impact of technology on our world. The Society seeks to extend his social critique particularly concerning technology.

Researching a Hope. Ellul was not only a social critic but also a theologian and activist in church and community. The Society seeks to extend his theological, biblical, and ethical research with its special emphases on hope and freedom.

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