The Ellul Forum

For the Critique of Technological Civilization

Issue 42 **Fall 2008**

Practical Politics

"All life today is in fact oriented to politics. . . politics has gradually invaded everything. . .

"It is a wrong question, then, to ask whether the Christian should take part in politics. He is fully doing so already. . . The only question is to know how to participate in such a way as to bring a certain freedom into this order of necessity . . . "

-Jacques Ellul

The Ethics of Freedom (1976), pp. 374-75.

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From the Editor

This has to be one of the most interesting issues in the twenty year history of the *Ellul Forum*. We invited our readers to submit brief reflective essays on "How Ellul Has Affected My Practical Politics." Twelve of our IJES members responded and we present them here in alphabetical order. Three of our contributions come from France, the Netherlands, and New Zealand. The other nine are from various parts of the USA. Some come at the topic from a Christian perspective, others not.

This fall the USA will hold its presidential election once again. Canada is also the scene of a national political campaign. Certainly there is great sound and fury, strong emotion, and bitter debate about the various candidates and political platforms. Is it all a grand "political illusion"---all of little importance or true consequence? Beneath the surface froth of personalities, current events, and today's "breaking news" is it really the bureaucracy of the state inexorably following Technique that decides and then implements its understanding of the "one best way" in every field it touches? (Would a President Gore have pursued the same foreign relations and domestic antiregulatory actions as a President Bush?). Are candidate differences (e.g., Obama vs. McCain) inconsequential ephemera? Is our best move to reject the nation-state and its political structures and activities? If voting amounts to an illusory "participation" in an illusory "politics," if it is utterly ineffective, does that suggest that we should boycott the electoral process? But then should "effectiveness" be the criterion by which we decide to vote (or do anything else)? Isn't that yielding to the spirit of Technique?

Ellul's insights on the political illusion, the state, propaganda and technique are as brilliantly insightful and challenging as ever. So are his emphases on presence in our neighborhoods, on introducing contradiction, on strategic anarchism, on representing the humanity of the opposition to our own party or movement, on resisting and questioning all powers, on looking at maincurrents beneath the surface instead of sound bites and isolated bits of information, on bringing hope to those around us.

As our readers demonstrate in this issue, there is no Ellulian orthodoxy in politics any more than theology. Remember his famous words: "I want only to provide my readers with the means to think out for themselves, the meaning of their existence."

David W. Gill
Associate Editor

Wild & Untamed
by Andy Alexis-Baker

Andy Alexis-Baker earned an M.A. in theology and ethics at the Associated Mennonite Seminary (Indiana). He has been a prime mover in the Jesus Radicals anarchist movement inspired by Jacques Ellul and other leaders.

As a life-long anarchist who converted to Christianity while bound to a prison cell, I came to a radical, orthodox Christianity in part by the writings of Jacques Ellul. Although I am indebted to Ellul's book *Anarchism and Christianity* for helping me connect my politics to my faith, it is his critique of the technological society that has recently had the biggest impact on my life and politics. In particular, his reading of Genesis 1-9, that has moved me away from an anarcho-syndicalist position towards a green anarchist standpoint.

According to Ellul, Genesis depicts a pre-civilized setting in which society as we know it did not yet exist. In this garden, Adam and Eve lived in communion with their Creator, with one another and with the natural world as they foraged for the plants God provided for food and lived among the creatures for whom they were called to care. However, they were tempted to use green things for more than they had been instructed and sought to change their social environment by transforming themselves and their relationship to God and the untamed world of which they were a part. In *What I Believe* (WB) Ellul expands and applies this Biblical exegesis in his view of human history. Rejecting Thomas Hobbes' view of pre-civilized society as one of poor, solitary individuals living short-lived and violent lives, Ellul emphasizes that before the dawn of agriculture and modern civilization people lived in relative harmony with each other and their environment and were quite well off.

Drawing on Marshall Sahlin's analysis of the "Original Affluent Society" (WB, 107), Ellul argues that it is the dawn of agriculture that created divisions of labor, hierarchy, patriarchy, wars and poverty (WB, 105–106, 118). He then outlines a history in which people who domesticate animals and plant life, eventually domesticate each other (WB, 120, 219) and create cities that extract resources from the surrounding countryside to survive. As their populations grew and strained the resources of the domesticated environment, they had to find new resources to continue, so they waged war on other cities (WB, 220). They also created laws in order to civilize each other and the natural world (WB, 121) because the natural world began to seem so threatening. They were completely alienated from their former life of affluence and leisure once they became civilized.

As I have become convinced of Ellul's assertion that that civilization and violence are interconnected, I have also come to favor deep ecology, radical environmentalism and anarcho-primitivism. This shift to a new form of anarchism has forced me to see that I had more hope and faith in the technological system than I realized and has moved me towards an even more Ellulian view of the technological society. Even a quick read of *The Technological Society* and *Propaganda* readily reveals that Ellul had no hope in technique. Instead, he found hope in Jesus and in faithfulness to his way. This is why his critique of and solutions to the technological society were largely theological and eschatological at their core.

Reading and understanding Ellul during our present ecological crisis has made it possible to see both his work and the civilization in which we live with new eyes. The coming oil peak and the futility of the "green" alternatives to meet the gaping needs oil will leave behind is another sign that technology cannot save us. If anything, it reveals that our entire civilized way of life may well collapse (the politicians never tell us this truth). My initial reaction to this news was despair and hopelessness: surely it is the end of the world and Jesus would return before allowing such a catastrophe. But then I remember, our technological civilization is not "the world" nor is it "hopeful." The collapse of Western civilization would not mean the end of the world, that Jesus is coming back, or the

end of hope. It would only mean the collapse of one way of living—a way of living that much of the world has survived without or has been betrayed by. The fact that I had placed my hope in technology and Western civilization without really knowing it challenged and perhaps even weakened my Christian faith.

One of Ellul's practices in response to the technological society and to Western civilization was to teach urban youth survival skills. From 1930 onwards he and his friend Charbonneau would take a group far from the city and into the wilderness and teach them basic survival skills in an effort to give them a taste of what liberty was really like (*Jacques Ellul on Politics, Technology and Christianity*, 84). What might seem like an eccentric experiment on his part has increasingly become a meaningful act for me to imitate. To that end my wife and I grow most of our own food and I am learning to forage for the plant food that God had given us to eat. This is no attempt to get back to Eden or to attain a level of purity or perfection that cannot be achieved this side of the eschaton. It is however a way to take seriously the Biblical vision for human relationship to the Creator, to the natural world around us and to its inhabitants. It is a way to resist the onslaught of technology and the pressures of a civilized world that has brought itself to the brink through overconsumption. It is a way to put Ellul's thought into practice in my own small corner of the world. It is a "politics" that reveals the true violent nature of the "polis."

Prophets in Politics
by Cliff Christians

Clifford Christians is Editor of the Ellul Forum. *He recently retired from a long career as professor of communication studies at the University of Illinois-Urbana.*

Ellul's *Propaganda* and *The Technological Society* have always been more determinative for me than his *Political Illusion, Politics of God, Politics of Man,* and *Autopsy of Revolution*. I know that his work fits together as an organic whole, but it's not his anarchism that inspires my politics as a citizen or during the relentless presidential campaign this fall in the United States.

The counterpoint to *Propaganda* in Ellul is *The Judgment of Jonah*, covert propaganda the problem in media-rich societies and prophecy the solution. Instead of weaving humans into the technological whole, the prophetic word announces freedom and transformation. Prophets speak the truth—they get it from knowing history or from a keen intelligence and righteous living or by revelation from the Divine being. Jonah demanded that Babylon repent of its evil ways, but as with all prophets it's with a constructive intent—they plead with people to come home, not send them to perdition.

In these terms, Ellul doesn't teach me anarchism, first of all, but to look for prophets in politics and resist propaganda tooth and nail.

For Ellul, the prophet sees beneath the surface to the fundamental issues underneath. Prophets cut through the idolatrous attitudes and desires that drive technology forward. Prophecy demythologizes--in Ellul's case, the Myth of Technique. It severs at its root any blind faith that technological prowess can lead from one achievement to another. Thus, the enemy in the prophet's mind is not technology per se but our sacralizing them. Prophetic resistance is not aimed at various technologies themselves, but intends to restructure the worldview undergirding them.

Over my lifetime, Ellul has been teaching me what being a prophet means. Ellul brought a prophetic critique up from the footnote and out of the epilogue to make it characteristic of one's thinking overall. In the prefaces to several of his books, he is called "prophetic." Dale Brown in a typical statement applauds his "Amos-like ministry to the technological society." True to the prophet's vision, Ellul raised fundamental issues about the technological society already in 1954 when new

technology was largely considered the key to society's progress.

And so I emulate the prophetic Ellul, warts and all. While Rupert Hall's caustic criticism is not representative, it points to a weakness: "Ellul lives on black bread and spring water….The prophet whose cry is only, 'Woe, ye are dammed' walks unheeded." As Abraham Heschel makes clear, prophets bring the wayward home. Ellul overall does so too, but not always with the quality of the Hebrew tradition.

Even with some ambiguities about its meaning and execution, Ellul's prophecy lights my pathway into politics. And when I see it as the counterpoint to propaganda, prophecy becomes crystal clear. As propaganda, media information floods in from all areas of the globe and evaporates quickly. Underneath the rushing surface are deep currents, but spectacle captures our attention. Correctly gauging center and periphery becomes impossible. The citizen is not informed but inebriated, not enabled but drowned. Ellul's description of people obsessed with current events directly contradicts democracy's image of a public attentive and vitally involved. Citizens riveted to news avoid "the truly fundamental problems" and "lacking landmarks" draw no accurate relationship between events and truth. The information explosion produces not informed, but crystallized humans. Ellul compares that with a frog incessantly stimulated—its muscles turn rigid. Decisions based on sociological propaganda are neither imaginative nor discerning.

Political campaigns are the epitome of propaganda. Schooled by Ellul, I have no interest in the endless news coverage of details and slogans and gaffes. Political advertising—30/60 second spots—I ignore totally. But "Meet the Press" is sometimes satisfactory with its dialogic format. The European model of short campaigns with longer speeches in concentrated blocks of time, provided as a public service and not for commercial gain, has possibilities. The New England town meeting in its various configurations is the opposite of electronic campaigns and an arena in which the prophetic word has a chance.

Ellul also makes it clear to me that politicians advocating the technological fix do not speak with prophetic insight. Exaggerated emphasis on magnitude, control, and uniformity—what Pacey calls the virtuosity values—I avoid like a plague. Technics augmenting itself, Ellul would call it. Moral purpose is sacrificed to technical excellence. Thus the answer to the energy crisis is more efficient engines or more available coal or biofuels. Restructuring bureaucracy will lead to savings that we can use elsewhere. The answer to a military threat is superior weapons.

Prophets focus on the problem, rather than short-term, half-way answers. They are more concerned about getting the issues straight than surrendering to a utilitarian penchant for immediate results. Of course, an unending list of short-term crises demand our attention in a limited sense. But the prophet worries long term about our attenuated philosophy of life, the instrumentalist worldview invading our spirit, the mystique of technique that eats into our being.

Accordingly, in following Ellul, I look for action in the intermediate. For him, the revolutionary axis can only be at the interstices—at the cracks in the instrumentalism where some wiggle room is possible. The prophet's battle with philosophies of life must be nurtured in backyards, close to the ground, among voluntary associations, NGOs, families, churches and neighborhoods. Ellul urges us to promote pluralism. He seeks all kinds of subcultures "which diversify a society's fundamental tendencies" and present themselves "not as negations of the state, but as something else not under its tutelage." Together these subcultures can provide a new infrastructure, a fresh web of interlocking relationships. Depth, responsibility, vision within the intermediate domain—these describe for me how to live prophetically.

In politics, where are the prophets? Martin Luther King, Jr is an obvious example of speaking the truth to set us free. Vaclev Havel is another, president of the Czech Republic for a decade and playwright for his lifetime. Adlai Stevenson II, U.S. presidential candidate, spoke with the intelligence that electrified the public toward citizenship. South Africa's Nelson Mandela was a huge source of strength as the country was established in 1994. And the numerous politicians who live and speak prophetically on the local level are the primary saviors of democratic life. In ancient Greece, when Pericles spoke they admired his great oration; Socrates inspired them to greater achievement. Socrates is Ellul's prophet in ancient terms.

The Political Path & the Road to God
by Daniel Clendenin

Daniel Clendenin wrote and later published his Drew University Ph.D. dissertation on "Theological Methid in Jacques Ellul." He has served as a university professor in Russia and elsewhere and is now producing a highly regarded weekly e-zine on culture called Journey With Jesus, read by some 7000 subscribers on all the continents.

With America's presidential election just around the corner, my mind has turned toward one brave pastor, along with a distant memory of a conversation with Jacques Ellul as we stood at the end of his driveway in Bordeaux.

In April of 2004, pastor and scholar Greg Boyd preached a controversial series of six sermons called "The Cross and the Sword" at his 5,000 member Woodland Hills Church in Saint Paul, Minnesota. As he explained in his book that grew out of those sermons (*The Myth of a Christian Nation; How the Quest for Political Power is Destroying the Church*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), in those months preceding the national elections, Boyd wanted to warn his congregation about "nationalistic and political ideology," of identifying the Christian Gospel with any political point of view, of cherished but badly mistaken convictions like the belief that America is a Christian nation, or that believers should "take back the nation for God."

No, Boyd preached, "the path through politics is not the road to God." No, he would not endorse conservative candidates or announce anti-gay rallies from the pulpit. No, he would not distribute anti-abortion literature, pass out voter guides, or fly a flag in the sanctuary. Many parishioners thanked Boyd for his wisdom and boldness, but others were not so enamored. About a thousand people left the congregation.

Boyd makes a sharp distinction between the kingdom(s) of this world that are characterized by what he calls "power over," and the kingdom of God that Jesus announced which is characterized by "power under" (cf. especially Luke 22:25–27 and Philippians 2:1–11). The former is the realm of domination, exploitation, violence, coercion, and self-interest, the latter one of love and self-sacrifice. Jesus calls his followers to do something the state must never do, which is to place the interests of others ahead of your own.

The kingdom that Jesus announced is a radical and counter-cultural alternative to every sort of worldly power, and not merely an attempt to upgrade government to a better level. Jesus, of course, insisted that his kingdom was "not of this world" (John 18:36). Most Christians until the baptism of Constantine lived this distinction, but in Boyd's view the developments after Constantine's conversion have constituted an unmitigated disaster: "The church of resident aliens became a horde of savage warlords. . . We have become intoxicated with the Constantinian, nationalistic, violent mind set of imperialistic Christendom."

With our national elections just a few weeks away, it seems to me that American Christians have not learned the lesson that Boyd has urged. For thirty years it was easy to criticize conservative Christians like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and James Dobson for pandering to the Republican Right.

Some of their kind saw the light and deconstructed what was really happening. In his book *Tempting Faith; An Inside Story of Political Seduction* (New York: Free Press, 2006), David Kuo, a former Bush staffer, tells how he resigned when he realized that --- surprise!--- the Bush administration had done "less than nothing" to fulfill its promises to evangelicals. It was all "a farce, a brazen deception, smear tactics, a mirage." The grant application for the faith-based initiative process was a sham and probably illegal and unconstitutional. Worst of all, Kuo saw how instead of using politics to further the Gospel, his Bush colleagues played right wing evangelicals like a cheap violin to further their political ends, and in private derided them as dupes, nuts, and crazies. Evangelicals, Kuo discovered, were used and abused

as an incredibly gullible gold mine of voters (over 80% of them voted for Bush), nothing more and nothing less. And like in a very bad marriage, the victim still curries favor from its abuser.

Jim Wallis wrote a fine book called *God's Politics*, then hosted a presidential debate for candidates Obama, Edwards, and Clinton. He posed with the three candidates for the camera, smiling from ear to ear. He even pretended to be a neutral arbiter of a civic conversation. It reminded me of a comment by Will Willimon who once told Jerry Falwell, "Jerry, you conservatives are acting just like we liberals did, only the content of the propaganda is different."

Pastor Rick Warren, apparently as clueless as he was earnest and well-intended, then hosted *both* the Democrat Obama and the Republican McCain in his church (and charged $500 to $2000 a ticket to attend), as if it wasn't enough for Christians to be used and abused by one party at a time. And now we've come full circle with evangelicals thrilled with John McCain's selection of Sarah Palin, a gun-toting beauty queen who speaks in tongues and believes that America's war in Iraq is "God's task" for us.

Just once I'd love to see some sort of contemporary replay of the encounter between emperor Theodosius (347-395) and bishop Ambrose of Milan (340–397). After Theodosius slaughtered 7,000 people in Thessalonika "most unjustly and tyrannically," Ambrose physically prevented him from entering his church. The Syrian bishop Theodoret (c.393–466) recorded the drama in his *Ecclesiastical History* (V.17-18): "You must not be dazzled by the splendor of the purple that you wear," thundered Ambrose to Theodosius. "How could you lift in prayer hands which are stained with the blood of such an unjust massacre? Go away, and do not add to your guilt by committing a second crime." Emperor Theodosius "submitted to the rebuke, and with many tears and groans returned to his palace." Ambrose later restored him after thirty days of public penance.

In 1987 I interviewed Jacques Ellul at his home, and when we finished we walked outside to the end of his driveway. There he recounted how in 1943 he thought that after the war genuine revolution was possible by starting from scratch with a clean slate. All they needed was the right people, he thought. "It was the biggest mistake of my life. After that, I never thought that anything could be changed by politics. I often think of that conversation when I hear Christians of both the left and the right argue for the right person, as if changing the actors will alter the script. Twenty-five years ago Ellul pointed me in the direction that Boyd articulates: "The path of politics is not the road to God."

Beneath the Froth: Witnessing to the Powers
by Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager has been Director of Quaker House www.quakerhouse.org *in Fayetteville NC since late 2001.*

Few if any thinkers have affected my "practical politics" as much as Jacques Ellul. Among the many of his books that could be listed in this connection, let me mention *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, *False Presence of the Kingdom*, *The New Demons*, and *The Meaning of the City*. As these indicate, the influence has come more from his religious works than his sociological writings. From these I've drawn two guiding propositions:

First, the most genuine and important "political" impact the church can have in society is to be the church. By "church" I mean the various bodies that have been somehow called into being by the divine spirit; among these, bringing up the rear, I would include my own Society of Friends, or Quakers. Each of these groups manifests a part of the larger Body, and its primary duty and usefulness is in doing that as authentically as it can.

Secondly, Ellul's identification of large social forces as "the new demons" helped me understand that much - - maybe most - - of the frothy daily political

scene is just that: froth, with little impact on the deeper currents beneath. I should add here that I may differ from Ellul to some extent in regarding these "powers" as having more autonomy and even personality than he did, at least in later works.

To be more specific, my discernment is that the U.S. is firmly in the grip of several intertwined powers: first that of war, then lies, then greed, and not least a kind of blindness about these facts. These powers have brought us well over the edge of being a police state and a rapacious empire. In this situation, the tasks of serious people are above all those of survival and resistance. Survival is defined here primarily as the mandate to become and stay aware of this condition; resistance can take a myriad of forms, with non-violence being my own commitment.

This discernment was made possible to a large extent by what I learned from Ellul, as is my own response. I'm fortunate in that my day-to-day work largely reflects these two principles: I'm the Director of a Quaker peace project located next door to Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. This is not only one of the largest US military bases; it is also the crossroads for several crucial pieces of the present American war efforts, including that monster I call the "Torture Industrial Complex."

My work here has made only too plain that American militarism is a great "power and principality," moving with great autonomy. It shapes America's more formal politics much more than our politics shapes militarism.

In the face of such power, which is spiritual as much as physical, our response has been to stay as focused on holding up what Quakers call our Peace Testimony. We do this in numerous, mostly mundane ways. It's evident that we've not stopped any wars; yet this feels to me like genuine spiritual combat. Moreover, the work here has been upheld for nearly forty years, and we are set to continue for another forty. Ellul's work helps me have hope that this witness is of value in the divine schema.

My political "strategy" then, is an extension of this experience, and the two principles: I'd like to see more such projects developed, not necessarily all Quaker, but doing parallel work, networked and mutually supportive. By so doing, our little church would be more itself, more a part of the larger Body, and would do its bit to name and unmask the powers. I've written in more detail about this in a piece called "A Quaker Declaration of war," which interested readers can find at our website.

As far as the conventions of "practical politics," I do vote, and have preferences among the available options. But I don't take an active part in partisan political work, and have limited expectations for the outcome; beneath the froth, the deep currents continue to run. Apropos of which, I would note that in the current presidential campaign, both leading candidates are promising Americans more war and a bigger military, though each says it in a distinctive voice.

These are promises that, alas, I expect the winner to keep. And thus with divine assistance, we will continue to be busy here for the foreseeable future.

What Divides Us & What Unites Us
by Joyce Hanks

Joyce Hanks is the author if several outstanding bibliographies of Jacques Ellul. She recently retired from the faculty of the University of Scranton (PA) and will soon be serving with the Peace Corps in Southeast Asia.

Grateful as I feel for a whole series of Jacques Ellul's theological insights, his political ideas may have penetrated my thinking even more deeply. They have significantly affected my choices and my everyday life. It all goes against the grain! We have thought of political stances as absolute, but Ellul shows again and again how, in the end, the right and the left have more in common than we ever suspected, so much so that they often become indistinguishable as ideologies. This observation seems especially relevant during a

hard-fought election campaign, when I note how selectively we tend to judge what we hear, depending on whether it comes from "our side" or the "other side." You would think that only one party or the other had any understanding of present circumstances, any contribution to make, or any intention of serving the public interest rather than selfish goals. Ellul has sharpened my listening and my judgment, but I have never felt inclined to abstain from voting, as he claimed to have done. On the contrary. I have learned through Ellul's recounting of his own experience how little power government officials can usually exercise, since technicians must make most of the decisions. But I still want to participate in choosing who exercises that limited power.

Ellul's relativism went very far indeed. He believed strongly that when we take up the cause of the oppressed, we need to understand that whenever the oppressed triumph (in a revolutionary situation, a war, etc.), they become the oppressors of those who previously oppressed them. If we really side with the oppressed because of their oppression, says Ellul, we will then change sides! Ellul saw this pattern play out when France emerged "on top" after World War II. Occupiers who had failed to escape quickly became scapegoats, regardless of what rôle they had played during the war. Ellul went to bat for simple German soldiers who stood to bear excessive punishment at a time when understandably strong feelings tended to overwhelm sound judgment, immediately after an oppressed people regained freedom and power. On a vastly different plane, I believe this principle can apply to winners and losers in politics, including university politics.

I have struggled most with Ellul's view of politics and the church. He believed that a proper understanding of the bonds that unite us as believers enables us to put our political differences into perspective, rather than to view each other as enemies when we espouse differing political and social views. In this community, the eternal beliefs and the life we have in common must take precedence over lesser beliefs, no matter how strongly held, Ellul maintained. In our present-day polarized society, I have found it nearly impossible to react calmly when believers I associate with use scathing words to put down my point of view and all people who espouse it, on the assumption that no true believer could possibly hold to such a stance. I have usually managed to hold my tongue, but not always! Then, in a few cases, I have found the strength to seek out the person whose words seemed so offensive, in order to try to talk about our differences. Usually this has turned into something extraordinarily difficult, but also, finally, unspeakably rewarding.

I don't know if I would have tried to follow Ellul in this matter if I had not become convinced that he had grasped a biblical teaching I had previously preferred to ignore. In any case, building a relationship on the basis of what we have in common rather than turning our backs on one another because of different points of view on lesser matters has far-reaching possibilities. Ellul pointed to the church as a place where we should find we can discuss important political and social differences without stigmatizing each other, since we can appreciate the relative character of such differences. This type of discussion can help us appreciate each others' points of view, and even occasionally encounter something in the other fellow's stance that strikes us as superior to our own.

Once this happens to us, we become almost useless as party stalwarts, according to Ellul. We will tend to temper strident statements, to take issue with extreme positions, and to point out the value in opposing viewpoints. None of this gets approval in political circles, Ellul says, but, if we speak carefully, we may serve to lower the level of anger and to blunt the spiral of misunderstandings. And politically monolithic folks may prefer to avoid our company!

In his commentary on the book of Exodus in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, vol. 1 [1994], p. 898), Walter Brueggemann comes to the same conclusion as Ellul about the importance of what unites us: "Worship can be an invitation and practice of an 'otherness' *beyond fearful utilitarianism*. Worship can be a place of overriding *belonging at home*, even in the face of our powerful and insistent homelessness. Worship can be a *post-rational embrace of oneness* in a world where we are so deeply and angrily divided."

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Desacralize & Act, Modestly
by Virginia Landgraf

Virginia Landgraf works for the American Theological Library Association in Chicago. She wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on Ellul at Princeton.

I confess a certain temperamental distaste for practical politics. I am more comfortable trying to live my life in a way that will benefit the community than trying to persuade others to choose leaders to enact the right policies. Yet as a teenager, I actively participated in a sacral universe of politics mediated by my family and structured by the Cold War. My family's party and the philosophies and ethos associated with it were "good guys"; the opposition, "bad guys." I covered up my introversion with exaggerated enthusiasm for my family's party and knee-jerk versions of certain philosophies.

After a crisis in my early twenties, for a while I could deal with politics only at a theoretical level. I took comfort in how serious Christian thinkers desacralized politics, neither absolutizing its claims nor denying its function. Political philosophies, when relativized by basic tenets of Christian theology (such as the universality of human beings' creation in the image of God, fallenness, possible redemption, etc.) may be not absolute but complementary, depending on the needs of the political body. Should one put more emphasis on individual or community? Tradition or innovation? Harmony with nature as God created it or repair of fallen creation?

Yet I could not rest content with hypothetical neutrality as a complete expression of what Christians should want in the political realm. I had spent time in developing countries and with people who are marginally employable in a world which values speed and material success. Regardless of my conclusions about the effectiveness of particular political programs at helping the poor, I could see that the God of the Bible is concerned with liberating the oppressed, became incarnate as an ordinary laborer, and was crucified alongside common criminals.

Jacques Ellul's work entered into my deliberations as both support and challenge. He engaged opposing schools of thought as few thinkers dared. He provided more reasons to desacralize politics: the difficulty of finding accurate information about existing conditions or outcomes of policies; the difficulty politicians have in carrying through their programs, given the autonomy of technique; and the call of Christian freedom to go beyond the limited set of choices put forth by society. Although as an anarchist he refused to vote beyond local elections where he could personally know the candidates, in his environmental activities he engaged public policy in ways that went beyond an individualism or neutrality that throws up its hands at things supposedly beyond its control.

I have come to question Ellul's absolute disjunction between power/manipulation and love/freedom, both because of lacunae within Ellul's own work and the belief that the Bible has a more supple view of the nature of divine and human action. I find a refusal to vote in polities above a certain size overly rigid, because it rules out in advance the possibility that there may be significant differences between candidates. Thus I continue to vote and engage from time to time in other low-commitment activities commonly considered political, such as writing letters to representatives, signing petitions against torture, or attending antiwar rallies, more from the conviction that "someone ought to say something" than any belief in the purity or efficacy of either representative or direct democracy.

Perhaps the most high-commitment political thing I do – although some might not call it political – is avoiding car ownership, which I have done for over twenty years as an adult. (I would revise my decision if I were responsible for the care of an invalid or felt called to work in a sparsely populated area.) Although not without self-interest – it saves money and helps ensure that I will get exercise – the basic impetus behind this choice is the conviction that a transportation system based on "one adult, one car" is

unwise, feeding a vicious circle of increasing traffic, consumerist desire, and environmental degradation. Public policy is one factor in this cycle. In that sense, limiting my car use is political. It helps me know whereof I speak when I write my representatives or talk to people about transportation alternatives. It provides a glimpse of what those who can't afford a car face in their daily lives. It is not the only choice a Christian might make (especially given different family and vocational circumstances), nor is it some island of purity (we are all dependent on the transportation of supplies), but I do not regret having lived this portion of my life this way.

Teaching, Thinking, & Friendship
by David Lovekin

David Lovekin has been professor of philosophy at Hastings College in Nebraska for two decades---as well as an exhibited photographer, jazz bassist, and motorcycle guy. His Texas Ph.D. dissertation was revised and published as Technique, Discourse, & Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul *(1991).*

I read Ellul's *The Technological Society* in 1968 and have been occupied by this book ever since, by Ellul's vision and grace and by the disturbing accuracy of his prophecy, which is social criticism, true to the biblical tradition. However, his insights extended much further, concerned as I was (and still am) with a left wing interpretation of Hegel and with his great coconspirator Ernst Cassirer, the founder of a philosophy of culture. Cassirer believed that Hegel's dialectic did not go far enough, did not begin with knowledge grounded in myth and the imagination, and that knowledge seemed to stop with a domineering Absolute. Cassirer interpreted culture as a production of symbolic spirit (*Geist)* coming to know itself in what it made and always attempting a further reach, the philosophy of culture itself. Mind (*Geist)* could not leap over its own shadows, Cassirer concluded, but needed those shadows, nonetheless; Cassirer understood mind as a balance of opposition, necessary to the work of mind itself in its shadow dance.

Wilkinson, the translator of *L'enjeu du siecle,* allowed that the work reminded him of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind (Geist)* and thought that it was indeed a phenomenology of technical mind. Wilkinson also compared it to Plato's *Republic*, at which point I was thoroughly on board. I read Ellul as a philosopher of culture and saw technical consciousness in dialectical drift, pushed and pulled by the various objects it claimed for the real, objects that it had made, concepts made objective. Technology was another shadow show on the cave wall of human experience in its current evolution. Hegel reminded readers of the *Phenomenology* that society was a kind of spiritual zoo in need of transcendental spelunking and Ellul provided the shape of cage that was technique.

I was, in the early seventies, continuing my studies and teaching, playing jazz bass, and learning photography, learning the art of the machine and the lessons of improvisation. I was much against the Vietnam war but was never forced to put my political beliefs on the line. Instead, I came to care for teaching as the activity of leading students out from somewhere, a radical move understanding "radical" as a turn toward origins, to the "radix" of matters. I shunned the doctrinaire, agreeing with Ellul's belief in elementary freedom, in the necessity of keeping necessity at bay. Technique had become the new necessity that needed to be recognized as such, recognized as provisional and as *made*. Few accounts are better than Ellul's in tracing the origins of technique as a radically new phenomenon.

I am still teaching, now at Hastings College, a Liberal Arts college committed to the base of Western tradition, to leading students through whatever we can still make of the *Trivium* and the *Quadrivium.* I argue that the liberal arts are the arts that make us free and interesting; I'm against turning knowledge into a machinelike rational pursuit of a means transformed into a method that scrapes for absolute efficiency in all things. The best things are often the things that are not done well but are done badly; a failed drawing or poem

may lead to a greater success. Certainly, any Cartesian attempt at the clear and distinct--the base for technical consciousness in its turn toward the technical phenomenon--must be made out of the doubtful and ambiguous. This is Descartes' own path which he often conveniently ignores or denies in the detail of his *Discourse on Method*. Where would that method have gone without the over heated room in Germany that contributed to that fateful night of dreams, which took him to his goal of attempting to unite philosophy, religion, and science? When the question of ultimate objective meaning arises at the end of the "Second Meditation," Descartes goes to church and turns scholastic argument into a machine to prove the necessary working of God in his creation and in our understanding of it. He needs to be convinced that reason abides and that the Evil Genius has been defeated, or rather, has become an ally in furthering doubt to justify reason. In the *Discourse on Method*, he remarks of the need for using the *niveau de la raison*, well translated as the plumb line of reason. Descartes uses architectural metaphors throughout the *Discourse II*, although in this instance the metaphor attempts a concept. Technique has gone beyond the plumb line although it has roots there.

Ellul's critique of technical mind I read as a critique of rationality having become a bad infinity. He saw much biblical criticism as the transformation of the Bible into a machine. He reminded that the Bible was couched in an irony that dislodged human pride, hubris, certainly the deadliest of sins. He invoked the power of metaphor in his writing and reading of the past; he noted, for example, that in the technological society morality goes the way of the sunshade on McCormick's first reaper and that often attempts at freedom are but entries in technique's filing cabinet.

In my *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* I contend that Ellul's distinction between the image and the word has great epistemic force that reminds of the importance of tension between concepts and metaphors in a free understanding. The dialectic, the push and pull of consciousness, stops when communication and understanding are reduced to mere images, to a rigid logical necessity. I devote the last chapter on the cliché, the machine in its new suit, in attempt to further Ellul's critique. I noted, for example, that Thomas Kuhn's "paradigm shift" had become a cliché for academicians; the idea comes from *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* , published in 1962 but not much read until 1969 and after, likely because of the power of the word "revolution" at this cultural moment on American college campuses. In an appendix to the 1970 edition Kuhn allowed that he had used the term in twenty-two different ways that many of his readers missed in their attempts to clarify and conceptualize and hence trivialize the notion.

I teach *The Technological Society* nearly every year in my Contemporary Moral Issues class and marvel that it is still in print and that students can be engaged to read it. There may be signs that they are currently more engaged, but I hold my breath. Reality tv only makes sense when television becomes reality; many of my students claim they do not watch television although they admit that in their rooms it is usually on. Television has become just an other person, but a person with no insides.

More important, perhaps, is an increasing "vidiocy" as the "screen" proliferates--cell phone screens, game screens, etc. Also, more important may be the desire for increased visual stimulation with the decreasing signs of lack of judgment and the lack of analytic skills acquired by reading books and writing them or about them. Mark Bauerlein argues convincingly in *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future* that research data proves this decline and hastens the concerns that had been Ellul's from the late 1930's. He concludes that students under 30 lack the knowledge of history and cultural wisdom that make a true civility possible, and, moreover, lack the skills for attaining them. Worse, many do not realize that they are living in the dustbin of history.

One of my students found a copy of Harry G. Frankfurt's *On Bullshit* and found it most interesting. Frankfurt claims that much political discourse had become bullshit, an attitude grounded in utter unconcern for truth. Political claims are often made, he argues, simply to be believed. Thus, bullshit is not a lie; it is worse. It is utter disregard for truth or falsity. Its purpose is to unify belief and action. Ellul, of course, saw this years before in his understanding that *le politique* (ultimate values and concerns) had become *la politique* (technique, means and methods) and that the first illusion was in believing that politics was the supreme activity and then that all had become political. At that point the technical means become the ends and discourse disappears in the blather of sound bytes.

I mostly agree with Plato of the Republic who claimed that there were no just forms of government and that those who did not wish to govern should be the only

ones so allowed. I have always avoided politics directly although each year I vote and make my voice heard on local and national issues. I was the president of our faculty senate for one term, and I believe contributed to some important decisions, but I have never felt the desire to further serve. As a teacher and thinker, both forms of committed action, I find fulfillment.

I agree also with Aristotle of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, who claimed that where there was friendship there was no need of justice but where there was justice there was need of friendship as well. Ellul too distrusted politics although he was engaged on many levels, but throughout his philosophical and political life he valued the friendship of Bernard Charbonneau. Charbonneau, a teacher of geography, introduced him to the importance of technology as the decisive factor. The commitment to friends and loved ones is the force that flies in the face of the political; without that empathy the political is a shallow field. Friendship is the power that politics needs but cannot create or destroy. Ellul often remarked:"Think globally but act locally." This I regard as another affirmation of friendship. My entire academic life was never merely intellectual but dependent on many friends--Donald Phillip Verene, Steven L.Goldman, Max Buller, Carl Mitcham, Dudley Bailey, John O'Banion, W.R. Johnson--to name a few. My students past and present are a crucial part of the mix, and, my wife Terry, is my ground for good and common sense necessary for any intellect.

Plato sometimes referred to the members of his group as the "friends of the Forms", the philosophers. Cicero remarked in the *Tusculan Disputations* that Pythagoras coined the term "philosopher." Pythagoras explained that those who attended the Great Games at Olympia did so for three reasons. Some came for fame, some for money, and some to spectate. The spectators were philosophers. Cicero, further, in the *Disputations* urged that wisdom, the goal of philosophy, was the attempt to see into the divine and human and to discover the causes of each. The notions of the divine and human, the transcendent and the imminent, are two crucial dialectical poles that distinguish speculating and seeing from merely looking. There can be no search for answers if questions do not arise from spectators speculating. And actions issuing from ignorance are to be greatly feared, as Americans of 2008 should clearly understand.

I hope that Americans will take back their country from technical corporate interests, realize that corporations are not persons, and lean toward a true eloquence--the speech of the whole (*le pollitique*) and that politicians in their detest and inability with language come to be seen for what they are: clichés themselves, machines in not very new suits. I intend to support Obama and hope there is more there than "Yes, we can." Hopefully, to echo Gertrude Stein, there is much there there.

As the great Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico noted, providence enters history upside down giving moments their shape, their story, and the focus for speculation that is more than passive viewing. Philosophy, as Hegel's owl of Minerva, contributes to the business of the day by witnessing it and by reminding us all of the importance of both the dayside and the night side. All is not merely a stage but is also a topos for those making the stage, writing the discourse, selling and taking tickets. Ellul's vision of technique as a mentality and mode of being has been the proscenium arch from which I have framed my vision and understanding, which, in turn, supports my life in all directions, both in terms of what it is and what it is not. God does not speak to me but that is no reason not to listen and to know that God is not technique, although it is often so taken. Politicians still couch their visions of the good life in terms of technical development--alternative energy, green technology, and support of an infrastructure, and that is good as it goes. But none of these developments mean much without the friendship and love that move us beyond our Cartesian solipsism buttressed by the adherence to method and to concepts made into objects which then become concepts.

Love and friendship involve the embrace of the other that is the nemesis of technique and the Cartesian clear and distinct. I attempt to live on the notion that philosophy is the love of the wisdom we desire but do not have and so struggle not to confuse love or friendship with desire or its objects. Ellul has been and is a guide in this struggle, a fulfilling labor with the negative that requires speculation and self development, the true goal of leisure, which is not simply the absence of work. My work stemming from that leisure is hunting and trapping in the spiritual zoo and attempting to clean the spiritual cage of technique, our current incarnation of the Augean stables. Unlike Hercules I expect no reward and know in the end that no king would give it. Speculation is its own reward, a seeing of the self seeing and witnessing the community of seers and doers in further witness.

Politics as Power Over Others
by Didier Nordon

Didier Nordon (www.didiernordon.org) served as professor of mathematics at the University of Bordeaux. A rich exchange of twelve letters between Nordon and Ellul during 1990-91 was published as L'homme á lui-même *(Paris:Éditions du Félin, 1992)*

I came to Bordeaux in 1970. A mathematician, I intended to specialize in Number Theory and Bordeaux was a good place for that. By that time, I had never heard about Ellul. As soon as I settled in Bordeaux, I did hear about him. But I saw no reason why I should read his books. He was a Christian, I am not. He was a sociologist and a philosopher, I am not.

However, my activity as a mathematician went bad. I did not succeed in proving any interesting theorem. Moreover, I started wondering about the meaning and the value of such an attempt. Frantic specialization led my fellow mathematicians towards achievements. But each of them only mastered a tiny field. Specialization appeared to me as a poor way of thinking. I saw no meaning in writing papers which only a handful of specialists scattered all over the world would understand.

That was a time of dejection. And I started reading books which could enable me to consider the role scientists play in the shaping of our society. One of these books happened to be Jacques Ellul's *Le Système technicien*. The book does not deal with mathematics but it induced me to see scientific research as part of the more general technician system. And that was fantastic! I stopped feeling dominated by successful mathematicians. I started seeing them as mere cogs within the technician system. I was and still am very grateful to that book. It helped me to overcome my inferiority complex (not make it disappear, though!). My mathematical failure was no longer my own personal failure. It involved a political meaning. I could view it as a refusal to take part in the technician system. Using Ellul's book, I then published papers to scrutinize the role of scientific research and to criticize it.

As Ellul's sociological work is based upon his religious faith, I was led to another question. How is it that I agree with most of Ellul's views on sociology though I don't share his faith? I started exchanging letters with Ellul dealing with that matter. Our letters eventually resulted in a book which was published in 1992 under the title *L'Homme à lui-même.*

Ellul helped me to choose the way I acted as a researcher. I stopped thinking about mathematical tricks and started thinking about social issues. Ellul thus shaped my professional behavior. In that respect, he has had a political influence on me.

He has had another one. His writings point out that one has to be very cautious when one reads a paper or listens to the radio, because propaganda lies everywhere, even in democratic countries. Ellul made me aware of that fact.

As for the question "To vote or not to vote", I feel uneasy. Like Ellul, I view elections as deceits. Still, I do vote quite often - 2 times out of 3, say. When a candidate seems too dangerous, I vote for the other one! But voting is an abdication. Whoever the elected candidate is, he/she will fail to keep his/her promises. I know that. I should not find myself constrained to express myself within the distorted frame of elections. I should be involved in some political or social action. But I am not! In my opinion, political action always amounts to an attempt to take some sort of power over other individuals. And I condemn any kind of power. As a result, I remain passive most of the time. That is why I vote, which I am not proud of.

Let me add a last remark. Not to vote is a necessary condition to be an anarchist, but it is not a sufficient one. All anarchists regard state as their worst enemy. So no one can be simultaneously an anarchist and a state servant. Ellul was a state servant (as I am). Thus he could not be a "real anarchist". Neither can I!

Affecting Culture, or Not
by T. Daniel Schotanus

Tjalling Daniel Schotanus is former senior university lecturer in water and geo-information management, now high school mathematics teacher and amateur theologian in Ede, the Netherlands

Recently, I thought I would be able to thwart a midlife crisis through the study of evangelical theology at the *Vrije Universiteit*, Amsterdam. It originally seemed less dangerous to me than taking up motorcycle riding, less tiring than spending my evenings at the local fitness center, less cumbersome than exchanging my wife for a younger (and possibly blonder) version, and more pragmatic than starting out on a potentially more fulfilling career.

Little did I suspect that ploughing through neatly organized rows of theological conventions, dogmas and other subtleties could be as exhilarating as riding a dirt bike through the bush. Thorny issues in abundance, treacherous heresies lurking as potholes beneath still waters, torrents of diverging opinions as a dry riverbed suddenly inundated by a theological storm. And clearly white elephants are nowhere near the brink of extinction. My evenings with the family were soon to be exchanged for long evenings with the books, occasionally boring, often tiring, but also surprisingly engaging. Evenings turned into nights with the wife being exchanged for Abraham Kuyper, Jacques Ellul and their subsequent stand-ins. Not very blond (mostly rather bald in fact), but otherwise quite colorful people who, as I might have expected, turned out to be not just unlikely, but rather contrary bedfellows. And yes, as a result in the end my career did suffer a significant change as well.

In the resulting thesis, I set out to demonstrate that as evangelical Christians we are unashamedly opportunistic about culture. Hardly anyone is able to distinguish our life and work from our non-Christian contemporaries. Our exuberant faith is often patently otherworldly. Our political involvement naïve and self-serving under a cloak of sacrificial public service. For example, currently in the Netherlands we see that evangelicals, when they are politically active, tend to support a small party called the Christian Union (CU), a recent union of two earlier orthodox reformed/evangelical parties. (Recently, far removed from the daily political bustle, I was in fact invited to become a member of one of its advisory bodies on environmental sustainability). It has a somewhat green, left of center orientation, but also a demonstrably neo-calvinist agenda. Given the intricacies of Dutch coalition politics, it is since 2006 member of the Dutch government, together with the larger (and more nominal) Christian Democrat Alliance (CDA) and the secular Labor party (PvdA). As an interesting sideline, the realization that all three coalition leaders studied at the *Vrije Universiteit* inspired somewhat of a media-hype concerning a possible return of neo-calvinist (Kuyperian) politics.

Unfortunately Dutch evangelicals are rather naïve about the neo-calvinist concept of culture. The so-called 'cultural mandate' can be traced back to the former Dutch statesman and theologian Abraham Kuyper. A century and a half ago he appreciated the modern pursuit and promise of progress by his liberal and secular contemporaries and bemoaned their rejection of the relevance of traditional biblical truths for contemporary culture. At the same time he struggled to overcome the unwillingness of the majority of orthodox Christians to participate in the political process.

Kuyper, Bavinck, Schilder, as reformed theologians, and Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven and Schuurman, as reformed philosophers, consider cultural development through the sciences, technology and politics a clear mandate based on the Genesis record. Comparably in the USA, the reformed Al Wolters (*Creation Regained*) insists that the cultural mandate is no less than the divinely instituted human complement to creation, while the evangelical Chuck Colson speaks of the cultural commission as the inseparable twin of the great commission.

In a few lesser known publications, Jacques Ellul attacks this interpretation (which he considers theologically liberal rather than orthodox) head on. See for example, "The Relationship Between Man and Creation in the Bible" (*Foi et Vie* 73, 1974, nos. 5-6) and "Technique and the Opening Chapters of Genesis" (*Foi et Vie* 59, 1960, no. 2), both reprinted in Mitcham, Carl and Jim Grote, eds., *Theology and Technology: Essays in Christian Analysis and Exegesis* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984). See also Ellul's *La Genèse Aujourd'hui* (Toulouse: AREFPPI, 1987).

Ellul specifically argues, based on the Genesis record, and very much in line with his more commonly known publications, against the possibility of such a positive interpretation of culture. Culture is, of necessity, a consequence of the fall, which Ellul does not like to call *le chute* (the fall), but *la rupture*, the break with God. Culture is a mandate yes, for survival as a consequence of the rupture, but not to be confused with the divine purpose for liberation and reunion. (See also Andrew Goddard's book/PhD thesis on Ellul *Living the Word, Resisting the World*). As we know, Ellul posits his alternative with a typically dialectical approach to the unfortunate necessity of being immersed in culture, complementing it with liberation by prophetic and paradoxical engagement with and disengagement from culture.

So where does this leave me?

The three *Vrije Universiteit* theologians who assessed my thesis considered Ellul's Genesis exegesis far too speculative for reformed comfort and proceeded to bash me on my evangelical reading of Kuyper and consorts. This was probably to be expected (it was Kuyper who founded the *Vrije Universiteit*, while Bavinck, Vollenhoven, Dooyeweerd and Schuurman were all professors there; Wolters did his PhD there), but what struck me dumb was that they willfully ignored my proposed naïve–radical–theological–political–pacifist–non-withdrawing–evangelical alternative to the cultural mandate based on Yoder, Hauerwas, and a bit of Milbank. Consequently, I am now struggling with the question whether it is too much of a cultural compromise to accept the Master of Theology degree they want to award me with (but then again, Ellul did accept an honorary doctorate from the *Vrije Universiteit*).

At least I am back in bed with my wife at night.

Libertarian with Soul & Conscience
by Lawrence Terlizzese

Lawrence Terlizzese's recent book Hope in the Thought of Jacques Ellul (2005) *was reviewed in the Spring 2008 issue of the* Ellul Forum.

Ellul has revolutionized my approach to politics. Prior to studying Ellul I voted Republican like most of my conservative and Christian friends. I thought this party best embodied a Christian view of politics on the basis of its cultural conservatism such as pro-life, lower taxes and individual responsibility as opposed to the welfare state of the Democratic Party.

But since my encounter with Ellul I have come to realize that Republicans largely only differ in rhetoric from Democrats. When they talk about freedom it is only economic freedom they mean and this means freedom only for the rich and freedom for the corporations, not personal freedoms for the individual. Therefore it is an elitist freedom. There is absolutely nothing Christian about their beliefs or political agendas. It is the love of money that drives the so-called "conservatives."

This is no glib interpretation from a disillusioned theologian. One needs only talk with conservatives, listen to their radio talk shows, spend time with them and watch them in church, especially in church, to realize that conservatives are about pursuing the American Dream rooted in avarice and greed. This hypocrisy seriously disaffected me from the political process since I could not possibly vote for a Democrat.

But Ellul has helped me to understand that Christians can have a profound influence on the world through by passing the political process altogether. In fact, this may be the only way we can impact the world. Even to get involved in the mechanism of the state necessarily causes us to compromise our convictions. I still hold to all my conservative beliefs but try to realize them differently through caring for the individual, valuing his or her individuality, avoiding political solutions, steering students to prayer and opposition to state control and involvement regardless of what party is in power. I stress the importance of rights and freedoms.

Ellul has made me more a Libertarian than a Republican. But not an American Libertarian such as is found in the Libertarian Party or in Ayn Rand's Objectivism since this type of libertarian has no soul, no social conscience. It cares only for itself. In stead I am a Christian Libertarian or Anarchist. Christian Anarchism that Ellul advocated embraced the Libertarian value for the individual but did not neglect social conscientiousness. It is individualism, but not selfishness, care for the greater whole, for others and the ecology are just as important as individual freedom. I attribute my newfound political philosophy directly to Jacques Ellul.

Moderation Amidst Polarization
by Daryl Wennemann

Daryl Wennemann is professor of philosophy at Fontbonne University in St. Louis. He has written extensively on business and professional ethics.

As I reflect on the political culture in America at the beginning of the 21st century, what I find to be its most striking feature is the astounding irrationality that pervades the entire process. We have seen appeals to racism, xenophobia, homophobia, jingoism, and simple character assassination. A striking example of this is the way the Bush team attacked John McCain in the 2000 election by pointing to the fact that he has a non-white daughter. Of course, he and his wife adopted a little girl from Bangladesh. But republican operatives used a very ugly attack in South Carolina playing the race card against George Bush's republican rival by suggesting that *McCain* had fathered a black child out of wedlock. Practical politics seems to me to be a very dirty business indeed.

Of course, the power of these tactics is magnified by the use of mass media. One thing we have seen clearly during the administration of George W. Bush is how the public can be manipulated, especially in a time of crisis. There is so much disinformation in the electronic environment that it is difficult to know what the reality is. But the electronic medium is itself a highly rationalized method of communication. So, there is a contradiction between the media that are highly rationalized and the content of the messages conveyed through the media which tend to be highly irrational.

It is also true, in my view, that irrational factors are not always problematic simply as irrational. Charisma is still an important element of our political culture and is not necessarily a bad thing. Although, I am a little disturbed that the charisma of Barack Obama has been translated into a sort of rock star fame.

With all of this, and much more, that suggests Jacques Ellul certainly gave an accurate account of modern politics as being thoroughly illusory, I find it difficult to ignore political developments. With me it almost rises to the point of being an obsession. Perhaps that is part of the political illusion.

Still, it seems to me it does make a concrete difference in peoples' lives as to who governs. Molly Ivins pointed out that some people would die during a Bush administration that otherwise would not. At a minimum, it seems to me that despite the grave reservations I have about mass movements and mass media, without touching on the general cultural problem of technique, I have the sense that there is a demand that we try to carry out a sort of rear guard action in our political efforts to prevent the extremes on the political spectrum taking power. To borrow a

phrase, Je maintiendrai, I will maintain. The point of my meager political involvement in voting and some small efforts at supporting various candidates is to try to maintain a certain balance in the political culture. I would like to know where the moderates are in our political culture. It seems that the media tend to polarize the electorate, emphasizing the differences between the extremes and moving people with hot button issues when what is needed is moderation in the application of state power.

While I do not share Ellul's penchant for anarchism, which seems to have been a strategic alliance, my own communitarian outlook is quite compatible with the concern Ellul had to develop a counterweight to the modern state in what Robert Nisbet thought of as intermediate social groups that could stand as a buffer between the individual and the state (See Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1977). That is why I am trying to promote an old idea in my business ethics course that Peter Drucker developed many years ago, the plant community. I think that it is now possible to bring about a democratization of the workplace along the lines of the plant community, whereas Drucker could not, because now we have an information economy which requires such a community setting to promote the innovation possible in an information economy (I have developed this idea in *Free-Market Capitalism with a Soul: Capitalism and* Community in the Information Age, St. Louis, Parma House, 2006).

The American democratic political process has become technicized. The money of special interests has inordinate influence. Ideologues have recently thrown the country off course. And yet, the country tends to right itself slowly over time. The Supreme Court opposed Lincoln's suspension of habeas corpus. The Japanese Americans that were detained during the Second World War received an apology and some compensation from the government. The Bush administration's policies regarding the right to legal representation of illegal combatants was rebuffed in the courts. Matters that would be buried in many other countries often come to light in time, like the truth about friendly fire killings in Iraq (See 'Friendly Fire' Cover-up, by Marjorie Cohn, Alternet.Posted June 22, 2006, at http://www.alternet.org/waroniraq/37989/).

And there are times when we see political courage as when Hubert Humphrey convinced the Democratic Party to promote civil rights in the 1948 platform. Now we have the first black presidential candidate of a major party and a woman running in the vice president's slot of the opposing party. I see slow uneven progress in the country. I suppose that is why I cannot just give up on the political process.

Live, Talk, Work, Play
by Bryan Winters

Bryan Winters is one of a dozen or so IJES members "down under" in Australia and New Zealand

This is an interesting exercise for me. I look forward to the *Ellul Forum* when it appears, at the same time knowing I am the sole subscriber in these far flung islands of New Zealand, in the balmy Pacific Ocean, far away from anything of political importance. I live in a sport mad country, littered with beautiful beaches, a minority displaced native people who are being given their land back, and where the major TV channel runs stories on pets for lack of other news.

Do I live in an unusual country? Out of the 238 available, I guess at least 180 are similar. Small populations, small businesses, a handful of universities at most (don't be tempted to add "small minds"). So perhaps the bigger news creating nations are actually the oddity. How can the works of a Professor grappling with emerging social trends affect my practical politics? Especially one that wrote

The Political Illusion. To put it into a perspective that would gel with my countrymen, that's something to ponder on as I paddle out to my surf break.

But it is my country. Despite its appearing to be a gigantic movie set to the rest of the world, (oh yes, it was the Lord of the Rings films that doubled our tourist trade), I am familiar with it. I know its roads, its lakes, its humour and its lack of history. My friends, in the main, are not writers, or academics. They are business people, sporting enthusiasts and church or non church going Christians. I talk about how the writings of this obscure French writer have influenced my thinking – but not my practical politics.

I started reading Ellul when I was 22. Mixed with our propensity to travel, and a love of surfing, at an early age I wanted to experience the world, the world as it was available to me. I loved Ellul's opportunity to be involved in the resistance movement, and his start at rebuilding Bordeaux, but those weren't my chances. Mine were getting beyond our idyllic shores, and mixing with mankind elsewhere, in what we, from our seemingly benign islands, term the real world. So my life became quite existential, seeking the experience, not the wealth, or the career, or the power.

In my thirties, I read *Reason for Being,* quickly followed by Milan Kunderas's *The unbearable lightness of being,* that Ellul refers to. This crystallized, intellectually, for me, the reality of the lived life, rather than the purpose driven one. After living through various overseas and local conditions of poverty e.g. missionary West Africa, then wealth e.g. expatriate Singapore, we returned to New Zealand. My life thereafter was taken apart, and most of the power, wealth and influence removed. This crystallized, internally this time for me, the reality of the lived life, of having and losing, of starting to look at Kiplings success and failure, and treating those two imposters just the same.

So on the one hand, I could say there has been little affect on my politics, living in a basically two party state that celebrates in small differences. The same billboard humour, affectation with native and green causes, promises to look after the increasing aged, and attendance at football games, is practiced by both.

But that is not the question. The question was practical politics, and this is where Ellul gels with me. I realize I love being both a participant, yet an observer of life. To catch a glimmer of what is coming, to see around the corner without embracing cynicism. To accept that life is uncertain, and strong men will rule over us with the agenda they must have, while living now, today, experiencing the trials of family, work, and finance.

My practical politics in this country, in the life I have been given, is the freedom to engage in what we term D & Ms (deep and meaningful conversations) in church, non church, and coffee shop settings. It is the choice to live outside the three boxes of life, to give up careers and show my children Europe even though we couldn't really afford it. Practical politics for me is how I will live, and talk, and work, and play in the environment I have been placed in. A young friend talks about success, and I tell him for me it will still be riding a short board when I turn 60. Yet strangely, or perhaps not so strangely, despite being the least wealthy of my peer group, and I admit this realizing it could be misunderstood, people reflect that I lead an interesting enviable life.

My practical politics has little to do with debate in the political arena. Indeed I am sure I will vote in this election year, but I don't yet know who for. Instead my practical politics has been my welcoming of who I am, a relationship that in my opinion must parallel any claim to knowing the Almighty.

I like to think this hard to read Frenchman would appreciate that an ordinary westerner can live, seemingly carelessly, observing, but not heeding the illusory calls to power, wealth and influence that surround us all.

After all, he did live near some of the best surfing beaches in the world.

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Book Notes & Reviews

Vincent Pecora
Secularization & Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, & Modernity
University of Chicago Press, 2006. 208 pp.

Reviewed by Don Surrency
University of South Florida, Tampa

Vincent Pecora's *Secularization and Cultural Criticism* is the latest work published in the University of Chicago Press' *Religion and Postmodernism* series. It provides readers with an insightful analysis of how the "paradoxes and ambivalences" of secularization should be treated as an "intractable problem for culture and cultural criticism." It is not imperative for readers to be well-versed in the available literature because Pecora offers a satisfactory review of literature on secularization and postmodern theory—although it leans towards philosophical literature and away from sociological work. However, the text is certainly intended for scholars because it is permeated with jargon that would leave the average reader mystified.

Pecora clearly states that his objective is to trace out the dialectic character of secularization, its "overcoming but also [its] distortion and reemergence of received religious concepts and patterns of thought," in the introduction. Pecora argues that there is a deeper, more substantial link between Western intellectuals who value the "semantic resonances" of religious thought, such as Jürgen Habermas, and the oppositional perspectives of various other intellectuals, such as Talal Asad. To support this argument, Pecora reviews many thinkers including, but not limited to: Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Alasdair MacIntyre, Matthew Arnold, Siegried Kracauer, and Emile Durkheim to demonstrate that, despite the vast differences in theories, all of these theorists have a "semantic resonance" of religion in their writings, despite their commitment to secular ideals.

It should come as no surprise, being that Pecora is a Professor of British Literature and Culture, that he chose the illustrious Virginia Woolf as the prime example of this *verwindung*, the term Pecora borrowed from Heidegger to describe the dialectic character of secularization. Pecora illustrates that while Woolf's literature was often hostile and satirical in its presentation of religion, many ideals reminiscent of those found in the Evangelical Christianity in Woolf's family heritage were present, albeit in secular versions, throughout her work. Pecora finds it compelling that despite Woolf's well-known membership in the Bloomsbury Set, an overtly secular group of intellectual humanists, she still could not shake the religious resonance that shaped both her family history and Britain on the whole. He writes that Woolf's novels are an example of how "religious thought and practice are inextricably embedded in the secular social and literary forms that would transcend them."

While Pecora's line of reasoning is certainly provocative, one could argue that this *verwindung* that is indicative of secularization could be interpreted in another way. In fact, it appears Jacques Ellul may have postulated this himself. Rather than there being a mere "semantic resonance" of religion, as Pecora asserts, perhaps, as Ellul writes in *New Demons*, the sacred "is proliferating around us." Because of this understanding, Ellul does not view society as secular, as Pecora does; rather, he finds it to be profoundly sacred. Furthermore, by providing specific forms and functions of the sacred, Ellul establishes an important groundwork for analyzing seemingly secular phenomena using religious categories.

If one understands the postmodern culture as being cosmological, and not transcendental, as it was since the 4th century CE when Christianity became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire, one could deduce that rather than the secular containing religious resonance, what is being labeled secular, actually is religious. Just as there was no institutional differentiation of religion from the rest of society in cosmological cultures, if postmodern society is viewed as cosmological, what Pecora terms "religious resonance" actually may not be resonance at all; it may be indeed be religious. Thus, rather than redefining secularization to accommodate for the apparent resonance of religion in postmodernity,

one could conclude that the secularization thesis may not accurately apply to postmodern culture as it did to modernity.

Despite Pecora's failure to address interpretations of the secularization thesis that employ understandings of 'implicit' religion, this work is still a tremendous addition to the field of religious studies and cultural criticism. It provides a remarkable review of literature, and offers an astute argument. Pecora's observations of the relationship between secularization, religion, culture, and cultural criticism are clever and beneficial for anyone interested in socio-cultural analysis, especially those interested in Ellul's scholarship. Ellul's understanding of the sacred provides the necessary groundwork for studying cultural phenomena as functional equivalents to religion; however, his work on secularization may not be quite as helpful as Pecora's. While Ellul is another example of a dismissive critic of secularization, Pecora provides a middle ground between the proponents and critics.

Ted Lewis, editor
Electing Not to Vote: Christian Reflections on Reasons for Not Voting
Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008.

Reviewed by David W. Gill
St. Mary's College, Moraga CA

Ted Lewis is acquisitions editor for Wipf & Stock Publishers in Eugene, Oregon (and incidentally, the main driver of our IJES dream project to bring Ellul's books back into print). He is also an attorney and the leader of a conciliation service. Lewis argues that Christians (and for that matter, all citizens) ought to reflect on the nature, meaning, and impact of participating in voting and electoral politics (the focus is on the USA).

Lewis acknowledges that there are no simple or easy answers to the questions about voting. And he acknowledges that many have fought, suffered, and even died for the right to vote --- so it is not something to be rejected or neglected out of laziness, irresponsibility, or for light reasons.

Lewis and his other eight contributors all urge a faithful political presence --- it's just that voting may not be the best way of such presence, for a Christian at any rate. Of course the authors must want to convince their readers. But editor Lewis is surely right in saying that these perspectives ought at least to be seriously discussed by a much broader audience.

Goshen College history professor, John Roth, offers five possible reasons for Mennonite Christians not to vote: (1) as pacifists, how can they support any military commander in chief, (2) political party platforms and leaders comflict with core Christian values---party differences are illusory, (3) Christians are called to a prophetic and servant stance, not to reinforce the apparatus of the state (cf. the Constantinian fall of the church), (4) the individualism of voting violates the communal orientation of the faith, and (5) not voting can have a symbolic value – especially when accompanied by vigorous action to help the poor, suffering, et al.

Like Roth, Andy Alexis-Baker is most certainly not calling for passivity. He and his Ellul-inspired "Jesus Radicals" anarchists put most others to shame with their sacrificial efforts to help the hurting, illuminate the darkness, etc.. But Alexis-Baker asks "what is there to vote for?" Drawing on the work of John Howard Yoder, Alexis-Baker argues that voting is often enough a ritual confession of the state-as-savior that substitutes for real authentic protest and activism. Getting people involved in campaigns and voting deflects people from more effective activism and simply chooses which elite will rule over the people.

Nekeisha Alexis-Baker acknowledges that as a black, immigrant, woman her choice not to vote may puzzle or offend other blacks, immigrants, and women to whom the franchise was long denied. But she argues that ballots confine the expression of conviction, values, and choices. She provides a great argument that the civil rights movement outside of electoral politics had a much greater impact on American life than what was achieved through voting and elections.

G. Scott Becker's chapter on Karl Barth explores some rather esoteric theological terrain for those interested. Michael Degan reflects on how the electoral process brought out the worst in him, violates basic biblical teaching about citizenship in the kingdom of God, and is corrupted by money and power. His discussion of how political districting serves those in power is insightful.

Notre Dame theology and ethics professor Todd David Whitmore argues that "the lesser evil is not good enough" as he carefully evaluates George Bush and John Kerry on matters of the Iraq war, tax policy,

and abortion. Pentecostal professor and pastor Paul Alexander urges his community to reject the nationalism and militarism of typical politics and behave as a transnational, alternative people of God. House church pastor Tato Sumantri makes a similar case for Christian investment in kingdom of God identity and recalls his disappointment with Jimmy Carter. Ted Lewis closes with a thoughtful argument for the "presidentialdom" of God, discussing his own migration from voter to non-voter, imagining how Jesus might have responded to the opportunity to vote way back then, and challenging Christians to replace voting with active, faithful, sacrificial responses to the social and political challenges so imperfectly and ineffectively addressed by electoral politics.

These are excellent, thought-provoking essays, especially for thoughtful Christians eager to "do something" and prone to electoral hype. Personally, I am sympathetic but not convinced. While I totally agree with the kingdom of God political identity themes (1) I hear our king calling us to "salt" the earth, not remake it or wait for it to be perfect; I see my voting as one aspect of modestly salting my world the best I can, but I have no illusions that this is as important as the alternative community activism I do in my urban neighborhod, etc.; (2) Christians are "ambassadors" from that other kingdom to their earthly nation of residence; if our earthly nation offers us the electoral franchise and invites us to vote---as it has---I think I'll go ahead and try to do some salting; (3) while many of the electoral choices we have are pretty pathetic, and there is no "salvation" from any candidate, and my pathetic little vote may not count for much, I simply don't believe that it was inconsequential for Bush to take the election from Gore in 2000; nor is the choice between McCain/Palin and Obama/Biden inconsequential for the world and the church.

Ellul on Politics

The idea that the citizen should control the state rests on the assumption that, within the state, parliament effectively directs the political body, the administrative organs, and the technicians. But this is pure illusion. . . A modern state is *not* primarily a centralized organ of decision, a set of political organs. It is primarily an enormous machinery of bureaus. It is composed of two contradictory elements---on the one hand, political personnel, assemblies, and councils, and, on the other, administrative personnel in the bureaus---whose distinction, incidentally, is becoming less and less clear.

The Political Illusion (1965; ET 1967), pp. 138-41.

I have long affirmed the anarchist position as the only acceptable stance in the modern world. This in no way means that I believe in the possibility of the realization and existence of an anarchist society. All my position means is that the present center of conflict is the state, so that we must adopt a radical position with respect to this unfeeling monster.

Jesus and Marx (1979; ET 1988), p. 156n.

Christians allow themselves to be taken in by the prevailing vogue. They see everybody expressing their own ideas, so why shouldn't they do the same? That's all right, as far as I am concerned, only let them be less pretentious about it, less authoritative, less inclined to expect everyone to follow in their wake. And let them not claim to be representing Jesus Christ! . . .

[I]ncompetence, evident in writings and proclamations, is even more apparent in encounters with the Christian who is actively involved in a party or union. His beginner's training is usually very deficient, both from the point of view of biblical theology and from the point of view of politics and economics. But once he is involved the situation becomes worse, for participation in politics is very fascinating and absorbing.

False Presence of the Kingdom (1963; ET 1972), pp. 155-7.

Naturally it is better to run a city well than badly. If a Christian has a hand in this and is a good administrator, that is all to the good. But any person can be a good administrator. Being a Christian is no absolute guarantee that one will be a better politician or administrator. Seeking the good of a city is not a specifically Christian thing. . . .

Christians are needed in all parties and movements. All opinions should have Christian representatives. . . If . . . Christians take up different positions knowing that these are only human, and having it as their primary goal to bear witness to Jesus Christ wherever they are, their splitting up into various movements, far from manifesting the incompetence of Christian thought or the inconsistency of faith, will be a striking expression of Christian freedom.

Ethics of Freedom (1973; ET 1976), p. 379.

News & Notes

WALT REINER (1923 – 2006)

On December 6, 2006, one of the greatest Jacques Ellul students and promoters in North America died, just three weeks before what would have been his 83rd birthday. Walt Reiner may be best known for his accomplishments as a courageous member of the US Navy in the Normandy invasion --- or as football coach at Valparaiso University in Indiana --- or as a beloved community activist fighting for health care, housing, education, and building community in Chicago as well as Valparaiso --- or as a faithful, prophetic presence in the Lutheran Church.

Many of us in the IJES, however, knew him as the passionate, enthusiastic guy at our meetings who *loved* the writings and ideas of Jacques Ellul. It was always a joy and inspiration to be around Walt and we mourn his passing as we send our condolences to his wife Lois and the whole Reiner family.

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Paper proposals are invited on: Jacques Ellul – A Retrospective. This will be a major subtheme at the 24th Annual Meeting of IASTS, to be co-chaired by Richard Stivers and Willem Vanderburg.

Paper proposals of no more than 450 words should describe the subject matter in sufficient detail for referees to make an informed decision. Please send these proposals as rich-text files to Prof Pamela Mack: pammack@clemson.edu.

Please indicate IASTS in your subject line. We encourage early submissions, and will provide notice of acceptance, acceptance with suggested modifications, or rejection, within one month. The last date for receiving proposals is December 1, 2008. Papers may also be submitted to the *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society* for possible inclusion in a special conference issue or a regular issue. For instructions to authors, see http://bst.sagepub.com/. For general information about IASTS, see www.iasts.org.

International Jacques Ellul Society

www.ellul.org

P.O. Box 5365, Berkeley CA 94705, USA

The IJES (with its francophone sister-society, L'Association Internationale Jacques Ellul) links together scholars and friends of various specializations, vocations, backgrounds, and nations, who share a common interest in the legacy of Jacques Ellul (1912-94), long time professor at the University of Bordeaux. Our objectives are (1) to preserve and disseminate his literary and intellectual heritage, (2) to extend his social critique, especially concerning technology, and (3) to extend his theological and ethical research with its special emphases on hope and freedom.

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Anyone who supports the objectives of the IJES is invited to join the society for an annual dues payment of US$20.00. Membership includes a subscription to the Ellul Forum.

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Resources for Ellul Studies

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The IJES web site at www.ellul.org contains (1) news about IJES activities and plans, (2) a brief and accurate biography of Jacques Ellul, (3) a complete bibliography of Ellul's books in French and English, (4) a complete index of the contents of all *Ellul Forum* back issues; and (5) links and information on other resources for students of Jacques Ellul. The French AIJE web site at www.jacques-ellul.org is also a superb resource.

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Cahiers Jacques Ellul

Pour Une Critique de la Societe Technicienne

An essential annual journal for students of Ellul is *Cahiers Jacques Ellul*, edited by Patrick Chastenet, published by Editions L'Esprit du Temps, and distributed by Presses Universitaires de France Send orders to Editions L'Esprit du Temps, BP 107, 33491 Le Bouscat Cedex, France. Postage and shipping is 5 euros for the first volume ordered; add 2 euros for each additional volume ordered.
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Jacques Ellul: An Annotated Bibliography of Primary Works

by Joyce Main Hanks. Research in Philosophy and Technology. Supplement 5. Stamford, CT: JAI Press, 2000. xiii., 206 pages. $87. ISBN: 076230619X.

This is the essential guide for anyone doing research in Jacques Ellul's writings. An excellent brief biography is followed by a 140-page annotated bibliography of Ellul's fifty books and thousand-plus articles and a thirty-page subject index. Hank's work is comprehensive, accurate, and invariably helpful. This may be one of the more expensive books you buy for your library; it will surely be one of the most valuable. Visit www.elsevier.com for ordering information.

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The Alibris web site (www.alibris.com) lists thirty titles of used and out-of-print Jacques Ellul books in English translation available to order at reasonable prices.

Used books in French: two web resources

Two web sites that will be of help in finding used books in French by Jacques Ellul (and others) are www.chapitre.com and www.livre-rare-book.com.

Reprints of Nine Ellul Books

By arrangement with Ingram and Spring Arbor, individual reprint copies of several Ellul books originally published by William B. Eerdmans can now be purchased. The books and prices listed at the Eerdmans web site are as follows: *The Ethics of Freedom* ($40), *The Humiliation of the Word* ($26), *The Judgment of Jonah* ($13), *The Meaning of the City* ($20), *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* ($19), *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* ($28), *The Subversion of Christianity* ($20), and *The Technological Bluff* ($35). *Sources and Trajectories: Eight Early Articles by Jacques Ellul* translated by Marva Dawn is also available (price unknown).

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Ellul on Video

French film maker Serge Steyer's film "Jacques Ellul: L'homme entier" (52 minutes) is available for 25 euros at the web site www.meromedia.com. Ellul is himself interviewed as are several commentators on Ellul's ideas.

Another hour-length film/video that is focused entirely on Ellul's commentary on technique in our society, "The Treachery of Technology," was produced by Dutch film maker Jan van Boekel for ReRun Produkties (mail to: Postbox 93021, 1090 BA Amsterdam).

If you try to purchase either of these excellent films, be sure to check on compatibility with your video system and on whether English subtitles are provided, if that is desired.