

The Dialectic of Theology & Sociology in Jacques Ellul by David W. Gill (1988)

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It used to be a common experience for Jacques Ellul's readers to work their way some distance into his thought before discovering that a "second" Ellul existed. It was, for example, easy enough for someone to read *The Technological Society* and then proceed to *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, *The Political Illusion*, and *A Critique of the New Commonplaces* without any inkling of Ellul's theological and biblical passions. In my case the reverse happened: it was only after *The Meaning of the City*, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, and *Presence of the Kingdom* that I discovered *The Political Illusion*, *Autopsy of Revolution* and the rest of Ellul's sociological works.

I then read and accepted Ellul's description of his two-pronged effort to understand the world and the Word of God:

I have sought to confront theological and biblical knowledge and sociological analysis without trying to come to any artificial or philosophical synthesis; instead I try to place the two face to face, in order to shed some light on what is real socially and real spiritually. That is why I can say that the reply to each of my sociological analyses is found implicitly in a corresponding theological book, and inversely my theology is fed on socio-political experience. But I refuse to construct a *system* of thought, or to offer up some Christian or prefabricated socio-political solutions. I want only to provide Christians with the means of thinking out *for themselves* the meaning of their involvement in the modern world.

Such is the essential goal of my work. It ends, necessarily, in a Christian ethics—but *only* therefore an ethics that is indicative. ["From Jacques Ellul," in James Y. Holloway, ed., *Introducing Jacques Ellul* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1970), p.6]

In another statement on his dual career, Ellul said:

The writing I had undertaken in a tentative frame of mind assumed a progressively better structure. The whole of it is a composition in counterpoint. Every sociological analysis of mine is answered (not in the sense of replying, but in that of noting the other dialectical pole) by a biblical or theological analysis. For example, to my book *The Political Illusion*, a study of politics as it is actually practiced in a modern state, corresponds my *Politics of God*, *Politics of Man*, a biblical study of the Second Book of Kings. To my book on technology corresponds my theologically based study of the great city as the supreme achievement of human technology. ("Mirror of these Ten Years," *Christian Century*, 87 (18 Feb 1970): 201).

Jacques Ellul has wanted to develop and utilize a sociological method yielding the truest possible understanding of our world. He has not wanted to "infect" that sociology with theological perspectives. He is very critical of the sloppiness of a social analysis undertaken with a religious agenda in mind, e.g., "Christian sociology."

Ellul has also wanted to develop and utilize a method for hearing and rearticulating the Word of God in Jesus Christ and Scripture as clearly as possible. He does not want that method to be subordinated to political or other cultural influences and he constantly decries the pollution of the revelation by this-worldly agendas and viewpoints.

In short, Ellul has argued for two distinct methods, each specified by their appropriateness to their subject matter: a sociological method to understand the human world; a theological method to understand the divine Word.

But we are not called by Ellul to keep these domains, these methods of illuminating our existence, forever separate (e.g., living by sociological insight Monday through Saturday or whenever we leave home and church—living by theological insight on Sunday or only within the walls of our home and church). No, we live in permanent dialectical tension between the necessity of the world and the freedom of the Wholly Other, in the world but not of the world, committed to the world but unable to accept it as it is, and so on. The two avenues of insight come together like two lights shining on our path and it is in our action, our taking a step in this double-illumination that the synthesis is experienced.

In some of Ellul's recent books, most notably *The Humiliation of the Word*, the sociological and theological perspectives are brought together within the covers of one volume. Ellul's *Ce Que Je Crois* reviews his central perspectives in both domains. *Le Bluff Technologique* is, however, more in the nobody-will-guess-that-this-is-a-Christian-writing category, although not quite so radically as his earlier sociological studies of technique or politics or propaganda or institutions.

The more I have read Ellul over the years, the more I have been struck by what seems to me a broad similarity between the way he proceeds theologically (and I include both his ethical and exegetical studies here) and the way he proceeds sociologically. The dialectical frame of mind, the focus on intermediate levels in both society and scripture, the focus on the individual—seems pretty much the same to me. And I have been suspicious of the notion that these are two radically different methods specified by two radically different subject matters.

And whatever the similarities or differences in these two divisions of Ellul's work, there are two lists of his books, and he has boldly said that they correspond, even answer, each other. We know the obvious example of the political books. I wanted to see if Ellul could show me how the rest of his lists of books match up.

In July of 1988 I spent four sessions with Jacques Ellul and, at our last rendez-vous, taped the following interview on the relationship of his two kinds of studies.

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GILL: *I would like to discuss the subject of method in sociology and theology---both in general and as practiced by you. I am interested in your method of working in the sociological and theological domains. To begin with, I understand your view of modern sociology to be the following: dominated by technique, the sociologist divides, subdivides and categorizes facts and phenomena and carries out statistical studies to the most minute level. From this data base one then deduces various generalizations from which one may elaborate or project possible future developments. Interpretation is done with the assistance of some myth or ideology such as Marxism, structuralism or functionalism. Is this roughly your critique of modern sociology?*

ELLUL: Yes but actually what is now happening in sociology is that interpretations by means of the great mythical ideas such as Marxism have not succeeded and thus sociologists remain at the level of reporting facts. In France, with few exceptions, one no longer sees sociologists who attempt to think in a global fashion, who make a synthesis, who discern the ensemble of facts, who provide something which permits us to comprehend the whole of society.

This situation has come about because the sociologists have too often failed. When one takes the great sociologists of thirty years ago, everything they said or foretold has proven

false. Thus, French sociologists today have limited themselves to reporting statistics on the number of foreign women in the work force, the decline of productivity, etc.. But that's all: one reports some facts. It is interesting to me that when my grandchildren study a little economics or sociology in their schools they are only studying statistics--not a single interpretation, not a single general idea. They are taught only to work with statistics.

In my opinion, the question of method is of critical importance today. Accumulating documentation indefinitely will result in nothing. It is essential to get to the moment of synthesis. But an uncritical adoption of the grand general theories of Marxism, functionalism or structuralism is not useable for an understanding of our society. Another pathway must be created. It is necessary to draw together good research and documentation but beyond this one must find among the facts and documents what is truly significant. Today's error is to consider all documents as equal. Everything is flattened out. All statistics are equal. But one must find among the facts and statistics what is really meaningful and important.

Second, sociological method that results in helpful interpretation is a matter of--I'm not sure how you would say this in English--"sniffing out" the significant.

GILL: Intuition?

ELLUL: Yes, it is a matter of a little intuition. All of the great sociologists, like Max Weber for example, have had intuitions like this, which were not based only on the "facts." Now I would not class myself as a great sociologist but I can illustrate this with a little story. Thirty years ago my wife and I visited Rome. After several days and many walks together in the city I said to my wife, "It is very strange but I have the feeling that the fascist movement is in process of being reborn here in Italy." This feeling was not because of posters on walls, newspaper or magazine articles. It was my "nose." I "smelled" a renaissance of what took place in the following years.

This is very important for me. Thus, when I prepare a critical study of industrialization what counts is that I go see the big factories, I walk in them, I sense a certain atmosphere, a certain climate, and so on.

GILL: OK. We carry out research and we look for those flashes of intuitive insight. How do we draw together our thinking from all the studies, books, conferences, opinion polls, and our personal experiences? Usually we say or write something. Then there is the matter of correcting or verifying our findings both in our personal experience and in some kind of community interaction.

ELLUL: It is important to remember that I was trained as a historian. The historical method is to gather all the documents before forming an idea on the subject. Because of this I believe that all sources--economic, sociological, statistical, etc.--are useful. What I do is begin ten years in advance for my studies. I have an idea and I begin to gather material to read. When I find things that catch my interest I put them aside.

GILL: For example, in preparing Le Bluff Technologique you kept a place in your study for everything you read related to this topic?

ELLUL: Readings, television, film, posters, conversations. People have often asked me why I don't hire a secretary to scrutinize this material. But I don't because it is my own idea; a secretary may not detect the sentence which interests me. For *Le Bluff Technologique* I gathered two big boxes of documents over the years. I didn't try to organize them by subject but simply put a number on each piece. I ended up with 2500 documents. Then I read them and progressively an idea took shape, then several principal ideas for the study as a whole. Then I sorted the documents in relation to the main ideas.

GILL: *That works well for written documents but how do you deal with television, radio, and talk on the street?*

ELLUL: I write down very quickly the sentences and phrases that I hear on television, radio or in the street. I put these notes among the other documents. Little by little an orientation takes form, a general line. I see it taking shape but I still don't know if my idea at the outset is right or not; it simply helps me in gathering the material. At the end I must create a synthesis; at that moment I must find a hypothesis that enables me to explain as precisely as possible this vast number of facts which I have reviewed.

Le Bluff Technologique emerged at the end. At the outset my intention was to prepare a work on meaning in our society: what is the meaning of the development of our society with its various challenges? But I had to abandon this theme because of the banality of the ideas of our politicians. Little by little I began to notice the separation between the *discourse* about technique and the *reality*. Here, the statistical "bluff" was very significant in my view..

GILL: *For you a hypothesis must be one that can be lived, not just thought. During the week, when you walk through the streets, when you speak on the telephone, when you see your friends at church--that is part of the verification? You don't just "make shoes"--you walk in them. . .*

ELLUL: Exactly! When I finish my work I try to give a lecture or two and then listen to the criticisms of my students. Then I use these critiques in order to make my own self-criticism in asking "is this accurate?" "Do they have grounds for criticizing me or not?" I do exactly the same thing in relation to the church.

GILL: *After your books are published there is always an explosion in the academic domain because there are always those who totally reject the work, others who partially accept it, and so forth. Is it possible to bring about such critical interaction in advance? Is it possible to create an advance "dialectic" like this within the sociological academy?*

ELLUL: It's always possible. In preparing for journal and review articles or for lectures or courses with students, I attempt to get reactions to such questions. But one must say that there are no longer many critics in France. Negative criticism is rare because I have a "very bad disposition." When for several years a critic makes negative critiques of my work, I respond to him. That has been infrequent but today those who are not in agreement with me no longer write or say anything. Almost all of my critics now are positive.

GILL: *Have you ever given your almost-finished but unpublished manuscripts to your friends like Bernard Charbonneau or Jean-Francois Medard and asked them to read your work and give you some critical response?*

ELLUL: No. Never. But, except when they are too intellectual or difficult, I have often given my Christian writings to my wife. My wife's opinion on these things is absolutely essential. There are one or two of my books which never appeared because of my wife's opinion of them.

GILL: *I like the image you gave first in Hope in Time of Abandonment and now again in Le Bluff Technologique of the structure of the ocean: the waves, the maincurrents, and the depths. The purpose of your sociological studies is to discover the maincurrents, the infrastructure of our society, not to describe the surface waves and storms or the still depths.*

ELLUL: That's it exactly. I am not a philosopher for this reason.

GILL: *In reality I think you are a philosopher deeply engaged in life and reality!*

ELLUL: (laughter)

GILL: *Let's move on now to the theological domain. Here the question is how to truly hear and understand the Word of God. Isn't this the goal of theology? In this domain one begins with a question, an idea, a direction, a sense of a question that God has for us. And as in sociological studies, in theology there are very technical biblical studies to review, small nuances of vocabulary, even statistical studies. And here too we have personal experiences and community interaction. Isn't this almost the same situation as in sociology? Aren't there some clear parallels? I'd like you to describe your theological method.*

ELLUL: In reality the two domains are completely different. And I would also distinguish between my biblical expositions and my other theological books, like my ethics. My biblical studies have always been the result of study groups that I led for a year. I begin to study Ecclesiastes or the books of Samuel for the group. Then when I think that my study is done well (because the group tells me that I have grasped certain truths in the text), I begin to write a book. I am moved to write a book especially if it seems to me that there are no other really useful studies on the subject. Our group spent four years on a study of Job and it is clearly ready to edit but it would be a great deal of work! In any case, it is at this point that I research the literature and correct various details of interpretation such as translations or meanings of words. But the basic pattern is preparing the study for a church group, hearing their reaction, then writing it up, and finally, completing the research.

For my other books the pattern is completely different. Here it is my experience in the church that calls me to action. Since I am part of the Reformed Church I ask myself, what do we need at this time to say or do for that church? In my experience in our church I saw that there was no longer hope; one no longer spoke of hope. And I observed that our pastors no longer shared an ethics and that our professors of theology no longer taught ethics, or, if they did, it was the ethics of the 16th century. That was all. So the French Church needed a deeper study of ethics and a study of hope. Thus, I choose a subject because of the life of the church.

GILL: *That is all good but I thought that in the Barthian movement the most important things in our biblical and theological studies are the questions which emerge from the biblical text, from the Word of God. We may think that what is most important are the following four problems; but perhaps God thinks it is not our four but these other three issues that are the decisive and true problems.*

ELLUL: Of course. But at the same time it is usually I who choose the theme for our year of bible study. This choice is not haphazard but arises from my convictions and my own listening to the Word. What I want to say though is that in listening to the Word of God I would not go nearly as deep in understanding this Word if I made the study only for myself, if I didn't prepare it for others. When I must explicate to others what God says in a text, I go deeper. And then I listen to what the others say to me.

GILL: *In my opinion the same image applies to your biblical and theological studies as to your sociology. Thus, you are not very interested in exploring the deep doctrinal issues or remaining at the surface level of little specialized technical studies on one word or another. Rather for you it is the great ideas, the big movements, the larger architecture of books and of Scripture as a whole that gets your attention. The great cities, money---the themes which reappear throughout Scripture are your interest. To me this is very much like your sociological research emphases.*

ELLUL: That is exactly right. I don't work at the level of deep philosophical issues. That is my personality; it doesn't interest me.

GILL: Now let's talk about the relation between the two domains. You have said many times that we live in one world but there are two sets of eyeglasses, two ways of looking at this world, two separate research domains ---and the relation between the two is dialectical. Thus you have said that there is a relation between *The Political Illusion* and *The Politics of God* and the *Politics of Man* . . . and between *The Technological Society* and *The Ethics of Freedom*. But are there other examples of this relationship that you can give us? And isn't *The Meaning of the City* really the counterpart to *The Technological Society*?

ELLUL: Of course. I could say that another example is the relationship between *Propaganda* and *Hope in Time of Abandonment*. When one understands the influence and power of propaganda and advertising one loses the hope of being free and being oneself. My book on hope intends to affirm precisely that despite the influence of television, advertising and the like, despite all of this, hope remains.

GILL: OK I can see that but I would have thought that *The Humiliation of the Word* was your counterpart to *Propaganda*. It also seems to me that *The Betrayal of the West* and *The Subversion of Christianity* are related studies in your work.

ELLUL: I agree but there are many different correspondences and relationships. There is no basic level of word for word correspondence in my work.

GILL: Looking back at your immense writing output, how do you evaluate it? Is some of it stronger or weaker in your opinion? You have sometimes said in your books that you stand by what you wrote earlier, that time has proven you correct and so on. But are there parts of your work which in retrospect you would do differently or which you think are not as strong as they could be?

ELLUL: There are things among my works which I don't like much. For example, *False Presence of the Kingdom* and *A Critique of the New Commonplaces*. I wouldn't say that they are wrong but I like them less because they are polemical and works of combat. My books on revolution were good enough at the time and I believed it was necessary to write them but they are not something essential. What I like best, what I hold on to most closely are my biblical studies like *Apocalypse*, *Ecclesiastes*, and *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man (II Kings)*. These are the books in which I have expressed myself the best. My books on ethics I have prepared because it was necessary to do so. It was an imperative, an obligation. You ask me to finish the ethics of holiness; I probably will do so but it will be as an obligation.

GILL: How would you describe the way your work has been evaluated by others?

ELLUL: In the Reformed Church of France there is for political reasons a general rejection of what I have written. The leadership is above all else politically of the Left without questioning it theologically. One must be with the poor and, consequently, with the Left. But they do not understand me when I explain that the Left, as represented by the Communist Party, is no longer poor. I say that it is not essential to take a political position in order to be for the poor. But they reject this totally. My proposals on the subject of the church or on ethics are also unacceptable because they have an organization as institutional as the Catholic church. Since I criticize that organization, they naturally find me unacceptable.

And then I am poorly accepted in the university because I do not work uniquely within my area of specialty. I remember well complaining once to one of the most prominent professors of the history of institutions in France who had a great deal of authority. He had just promoted another professor over me on the "tableau d'avancement"—a professor who had been

my own student and who had never done anything in our field. The old professor replied with many words: "But my dear friend, you are not being reproached for failing to work. You have worked very much but you have produced other things!" That is to say, I did things that failed to conform; it was unacceptable to move outside one's discipline. I wrote theological books but I was not a professor on a theological faculty; I wrote sociological books but I was not on a faculty of sociology. I did things other than my specialty of the history of institutions and, thus, I was not well-accepted in the university.

In the same way, I have not been well-accepted in Parisian intellectual circles because I am not Parisian. Just today I received a letter from a man I like and respect very much. He was interned in a German concentration camp during the war and he has written a remarkable book on this experience. I have read this manuscript and it is excellent, different from other books on the subject. Now he wrote to tell me that he had sent his manuscript to five big Parisian intellectuals but not one of them ever responded. In France if you are not Parisian, if you don't have cocktail parties and receptions you are unknown. I do not exist in Paris. Thus, I am happy to be recognized in the United States, Italy and Spain—much more than in France.

GILL: But you write for Sud-Ouest, your newspaper in this region?

ELLUL: Yes. I receive many letters from readers and that gives me a lot of pleasure. My wife said to me "You began to exist here once you started writing for *Sud-Ouest*." One of my old students is the editor and I have other friends there who have given me absolute freedom to write whatever I want once a month. It is true—I have a great deal of freedom in this.

GILL: Would you call this an "obligation"?

ELLUL: Not at all! What interests me about it is that while I try to write in a simple style, I am raising very difficult questions. In reality these articles are often difficult but they are well understood by the people who are not intellectuals. They understand well as evidenced by their letters and conversations when I meet them. For this reason I am angry at the television when it is said that viewers will not be able to listen to anything longer than three minutes! It is just not true. For example there is a Pentecostal television program in our region which broadcasts serious interviews a half-hour long—and they have a huge audience for these programs.

GILL: Some people decide that it is not worth it to have a television around .

ELLUL: For me it is part of my experience, valuable from a sociological point of view. I don't have a television because it interests me personally but because I want to experience what millions of other French experience. I want to see what they see before forming my opinions. I learn some things from television that I couldn't get merely from publications. I told Bernard Charbonneau that I couldn't write about communications in the modern world if (like him) I had no television.