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Autopsy of Revolution: Re-reviewed by Andy Alexis-Baker

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Ellul thinks that unity in a political system means that life has gone out of it. Tension and conflict form personality, “not only on the loftiest, most personal plane, but also on the collective plane.” I see a resemblance to Emmanuel Levinas and the latter’s perception that the goal of ataraxy conflicts with the obligation to respect the otherness of the other. To avoid disturbances to our tranquillity we would like to make others the same as ourselves. But one only has to look at Canadian history and the effect of Lord Durham’s goal of assimilating the French Canadians to see what enduring resentments this attitude can cause.

Ellul is conscious of writing largely from the experience of France since Louis XIV, but he need not apologize for thinking his ideas might have larger application. Centralizing forces exist the world over, and they need to be kept in check. He thinks it important to permit the emergence of social, political, intellectual, artistic, religious and other groups, totally independent of the state, “yet capable of opposing it, able to reject its pressures as well as its controls and even its gifts.” (222)

He thinks these organizations and associations should be able to deny that “the nation is the supreme value and that the state is the incarnation of the nation.” He allows that there is a risk in reducing the central power but sees this as “the condition of life.”

Ellul wrote before the arrival of the Internet. We have seen that the ability of the centralized powers in the United States to shape opinion by false imagery failed spectacularly in the attempts to make war heroes out of Jessica Lynch and Pat Tillman - the latter former professional football star having been in fact a victim of “friendly fire.” Contrary credible evidence circulating through Web sites such as Truthout, Common Dreams, PRWatch and the like was sufficient to force the image-makers to backtrack.

But there is no guarantee that the freedom exercised by those Web site operators will continue indefinitely, and we can expect battles in this area as well as on other fronts, such as the attempts to force television stations that show government video news releases to acknowledge their provenance in a way that will minimize their deceptive propensities.

The trouble with illusions is that they are comforting, and if our vision of life is to maximize comfort, why bother attacking them? One reason is that illusions can lead to political mistakes which can have most uncomfortable outcomes. Another reason, though, is that other goals and conditions of a good life include such things as such as honesty, freedom, integrity, and respect for the Other, and these are incompatible with the pertinent illusions.

We have to be willing to engage in political life and work for our desired goals, but always in such a way as to preserve our respect for the freedom and dignity of others, even when our goals collide. “We should forever be concerned with the means used by the state, the politicians, our group, ourselves.” (238) We also have to track down those stereotypes and myths in our own thinking so as to free ourselves from them, for as long as they exist “no freedom or democratic creativity is possible.” (240) Coming from Ellul, the message is not new, but time and events (including dire environmental forecasts) have merely reinforced its urgency.

Jacques Ellul

Autopsy of Revolution

New York: Knopf, 1971

Original edition *Autopsie de la Révolution* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1969)

Re-viewed by Andy Alexis-Baker

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In this book Ellul delves into history arguing that until the 18th century revolt had been conservative and opposed to political and social change. These upheavals revolted against unbearable situations resulting from increased state functions. As such, revolution (or revolt) reacted *against* the expected course of history and usually wanted to restore a previous situation.

Then came the French Revolution which changed traditional revolt in two ways: a future oriented outlook and belief in the state as the bearer of freedom. The aristocratic leaders envisioned a utopian society which a scientific outlook would bring about. Inspired by the French Revolution, Karl Marx made revolution part of history’s evolution. Thus revolution became normalized and predictable. All that was needed were the right techniques to predict the conditions under which the masses would explode and to direct the explosions into seizing control of the state, which under the direction of new management would take on a totally new character: communist.

Ellul argues that in reality the state has its own internal logic and structure so that those who think they can control the state are under an illusion, instead that logic and structure controls the revolutionary. Revolution, rather than decreasing state power, has increased the state’s reach. The dehumanizing, rationalized gaze of the state has penetrated into every area of life. It is state power, more than colonialism or

class conflict, that truly threatens human freedom. Here Ellul becomes relentless in his attack on every aspect of the nation-state.

Ellul suggest that the alternative to state fetishism is a revolution invoking “direct personal responsibility” (282). Much contemporary discourse is still based upon the notion that where real “politics” or action occurs is in the impersonal machinery in Paris or Washington D.C. Ellul, however, insists that the only real thing is the person—spiritual, physical and mental. Call it anarchism, personalism or situationism (Ellul uses all these terms while recognizing differences), the idea is the same. Real change happens where people begin to take responsibility. For Ellul modern electoral democracy attempts to tame the inherent anarchy and unruliness contained in democracy.

Ellul does not call for traditional individualism. He makes clear how statism and the technological society *create* individuals who are incapable of making decisions that run against nationalist or technological ends. Yet because of his polemic against a herd mentality, he fails to make clear that rootedness and loyalty to a certain type of community helps individuals become whole persons, without which the lures of the technological society quickly overwhelm. For me—a Mennonite—Ellul’s failure to place individuals in community is inexcusable. The state is primarily about creating individuals without attachment to healthy community and loyalties that make it possible to fight the technological society. At times Ellul seems to forget that while the great Fascist and Communist regimes depended upon massive public support, our own democracies depend upon mass apathy and individualization.

Despite his failure to name types of community that resist state expansion and the technological society, this book is valuable for *Ellul Forum* readers to re-read. The dominant emphasis from the *Ellul Forum* has been the pitfalls of the technological society. Yet Ellul insists, “Any revolution against the perils and the bondage of technological society implies an attempt to disassemble the state” (268).

Ellul’s claim that the state is the object of revolution is also true for advocates of nonviolent techniques. Gene Sharp and others tout the great “nonviolent revolutions,” but using Ellul’s outlines it is best to point out that this is just another vulgarization of the word. No revolution has occurred in any Western nation since Ellul’s book. What happened were in-house regime changes. No Western “revolution” has successfully dismantled the state and the technological apparatus (the Zapatistas in Chiapas,

however, come closer to Ellul’s vision).

Finally, if a future edition of this book were printed, it would benefit from a critical apparatus and an index. Ellul mentions and discusses numerous names, places and movements that North American readers cannot understand without editorial footnotes. Despite these flaws in the apparatus of the book, the content remains relevant for those of us concerned about the expected course of history. Ellul’s call is for revolt against this dark future looming over us. And it remains as dark as Ellul ever predicted it would be.

Jacques Ellul

False Presence of the Kingdom

New York: Seabury, 1972

Original edition, *Fausse présence au monde moderne*
(Paris: Les Bergers et les Mages, 1963)

Re-viewed by Virginia W. Landgraf

American Theological Library Association, Chicago IL

False Presence of the Kingdom is a critique of certain kinds of Christian political activity as failing to live up to Christians' true calling. This failure has theological and sociological dimensions. Ellul goes into both aspects in more depth elsewhere. He admits that the book is best understood in the context of *The Political Illusion* and his work on Christian ethics (later published as *To Will and To Do* and *The Ethics of Freedom*). Also, the distinction between truth and reality, not fully elaborated until *The Humiliation of the Word*, is helpful for understanding this book, as is the image from *Apocalypse* of the Word of God (the white horse) providing counterpoint to the forces of history (the other three horses) in Rev. 6:2-7.

At this period in his thought, as developed in the essay “Rappels et réflexions sur une théologie de l'État,” Ellul allows a legitimate role for political authority (not necessarily the abstract state) as administrator of common patrimony. Thus its responsibilities are within the realm of reality (visible, measurable results, accomplished by power); it goes beyond its bounds if it arrogates to itself the realm of truth (values and ultimate human destiny, communicated by personal words, the precondition for which is freedom). How far one agrees with Ellul's arguments depends largely on how far one agrees with his opposition between freedom and power. Legitimate political authority is in an awkward position: it needs to have a modicum of power over