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AN INTERVIEW WITH JACQUES ELLUL; Socialism yes, but not just any kind will do

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PHILOSOPHER, sociologist and ethnologue Jacques Ellul is a French thinker with a very high reputation abroad, especially in the United States. Yet despite having published 36 books and spending the better part of his professional life in Bordeaux teaching social history at the university, Ellul is comparatively little known in France.

Dismissed by the Vichy government from his post as professor of law at the University of Strasbourg, Ellul joined the Resistance. He is a moralist who defies classification. Keenly interested in contemporary social problems, he has on a number of occasions taken a stand on political issues -- only recently he opposed former Universities Minister Alice Saunier-Seïte's reforms. Nevertheless he has often appeared to be swimming against the mainstream of French intellectual life. Among the works he has written are "The Politics of God & the Politics of Man", "Technological Society", "The Ethics of Freedom", "Betrayal of the West", "False Presence of the Kingdom" and quite recently the still untranslated "La Foi au prix du doute et al Parole humiliée".

You seem to exemplify perfectly the old saw about no man being a prophet in his own country. How do you explain your success in the United States, Japan, Germany, and even East bloc countries, and your belated discovery in France? No salvation without Paris?

The discovery abroad stems mainly from the fact that my book on the technological society appeared at a moment [1964] when the Americans were indeed encountering the problems I was discussing. As for France, the fact of being a provincial still has a determining effect on a literary or philosophical career. A journalist from Paris came to see me in this very place some years back and asked me how on earth one could be an intellectual in the provinces. It was a very typical reaction. But also, I have always been rather on the fringes of all the areas that were mine.

I was an academic, but worked little in my special field. I am in Christianity, but in its Protestant minority and in a minority in this Protestantism. Naturally, I am on the fringes politically for I refuse to join any of the big parties. It's perhaps something to do with my character. I begin by criticising everything I like, which doesn't win me the friendship of those to whom I feel close. So, I don't criticise the Right because I have nothing in common with it, but I do criticise the Left for that's where my interests and friendships lie. Obviously, then, I have always found myself alone and out of step.

You deliberately operate on two planes -- theological and socio-political. Your works correspond to and often convey an identical analysis applied to a different area. It's true, for example, of "The Politics of God & the Politics of

Man" which was published a year after "The Political Illusion". Could just one aspect of your work be taken into account at the expense of the others?

There'll be something missing everytime. If you examine only its theological aspect, you'll miss the incarnation element. If you concentrate solely on the socio-political aspect, you will constantly come up against an absence of answers or openings. The fact is, it is correct to say I haven't written books, but "one" book of which each is a chapter. It's a bit crazy to believe there will be readers patient enough to see how my 36 works fit into one another.

Does your work still make sense without God?

It would make eminently tragic sense without God. It would lead to [Romain] Gary's answer -- suicide. I am describing a world without solution, with the conviction that here God is with man right through his history.

You know you have atheistic readers?

Yes, but I think that what I can say of Christianity is accessible outside a proclaimed faith. That's to say, I feel that the aspect of hope is transmissible, even without reference to the revealed God. Hope is the link between the two parts of what I write which communicate with each other in a sort of dialectical play where hope is the critical point and the outcome.

You distrust spiritualists and religions of the abstract. Your God became man. Because the Son of God died mutilated on the cross, some say that exclusive attachment to his person has turned Christianity into a religion of suffering and death. Has the Roman Church given greater importance to Christ at the expense of the Holy Ghost? Should one go beyond Christ today?

This has always been a temptation in the Church. The rule of the spirit leads only to an awareness of who Jesus Christ is and who God is. They are not successive reigns. The one refers back to the other. Jesus refers to God the Father just as the Holy Ghost refers to Jesus and God the Father in the Trinity. But one of Christianity's tragic mistakes has been to see only the crucified and perpetually crucified Christ. It's true, as Pascal noted, he was crucified to the end of the world, but it shouldn't be forgotten that in the Gospels the crucifixion is understood only through the resurrection. It's the resurrection that gives the crucifixion its dimension and its meaning. Without it, the death of Jesus is nothing more than that of any other rebel. If you stop at the Passion, you plunge into an adoration of suffering totally out of keeping with the Gospels that herald the glad tidings.

Why this intervention of the Holy Ghost?

Precisely to get us to do the journey in reverse. In revelation, it's necessary to start from the end to understand the beginning. It's the reversal touched off by the Holy Ghost: the cross via the resurrection, but in the same way, man's evil through pardon. Condemnation through mercy. It's because God has mercy on us that you realise what a sinner you were. It's completely open and completely liberating. It's heretical to preach sin and condemnation before preaching mercy and freedom.

Does your pessimism concerning the nature of political power arise from a Protestant reading of the Bible or rather from a personal and specific experience at the Liberation?

It's quite clear, from my own personal experience. From the repeated disappointments that I had experienced even before (the Liberation). We had hopes when the Civil War broke out in Spain. Those who were on the side of the Spanish Republicans saw the collapse of the revolution. In '36, the failure of a revolution. In '44 I was one of those who mistakenly believed one would proceed from resistance to revolution. To see things collapse like that three times is worse than '68. So afterwards, my very brief experience in public life after the Liberation not being a success either, I got the impression that the political path was completely obstructed. It was graft all over again, well all that sort of thing you know . . . So it is not at all a Calvinistic reading of the Bible which has led to my withdrawal, but truly my

experience.

You condemn statolatry. Your whole oeuvre expresses a profound distrust of the state. This anti-statism wins you the sympathy of a section of the Right and the enmity of the statist Left, which is to say roughly the whole of the French Left. What is the origin of this mistrust of the state which you have preserved from your youth?

When you look back on what the French state was in 1930-1933, you find it was easy-going, pleasant. And yet, we were all aware of the dangers. There were some of us who felt the growth of the state's power to be something really fiendish. Obviously this feeling was initially linked to the rise of fascism, the sight of nazism and the changes taking place in the Bolshevik state, which was the state of the Soviets and which was turning into an administrative state . . . We really had the impression that the state was what Nietzsche said it was: "The coldest of all the cold monsters". I have noticed today that the state has become even more abstract through its administrative machinery. When you get down to it, personal power has its sympathetic side: you know with whom you are taking issue.

Is it important to be able to point to the adversary?

In the modern state, the famous decision-making centres are many and so fleeting that you are completely powerless. That's why I have always wanted a struggle against the administrative state, for one, and the restitution of some power to the base, for another.

Is there no conductor in your analysis? Is there a kind of spontaneous coordination?

Even if he exists, the conductor doesn't interest me, because he is fortuitous. What I am interested in is the machinery.

The mistakes, the stalemates and, in some instances, even the crimes of the contemporary Left have resulted in a sort of informal understanding between liberals and libertarians. Do you recognise yourself if what one might call a "libertarian liberal"?

Liberal is certainly what I am not. I don't believe in freedom per se, I don't believe either it's possible to find institutions which would give shape to Freedom with a capital F. I'm very close to being libertarian, but with one big difference: my anarchist friends believe a libertarian society is possible, whereas in my view it definitely isn't. But given the present state of things, it is the only channel through which the authority invading every sector of society can be attacked. In other words, restoring a degree of decision-making power to the level of a multitude of widely varying groups, while avoiding institutionalising and rigidity, seems to me to be the job to be accomplished today, but I am not saying it is the political truth for all time.

So, anarchist society is not of this world?

No, I don't think so. Man must be taken for what he is. Modern man cannot bear responsibility for a society without organisation and authority. He's not going to change magically because society is becoming anarchist. But I do believe in the possibility of experiments with small groups.

In which ways is anarchism more compatible than Marxism with Christianity?

It's a question that is spawning a great many controversies inasmuch as people have drawn from Christianity a theological legitimacy of the state's power. I find a whole current of sustained criticism of political power in the Bible. The people of Israel, for example, wanted a king against God. And God announced through his prophet that this king would take their sons and turn them into soldiers, put their daughters in his harem and raise taxes. The Jews answered they wanted one anyway so as to have a leader like all the other people. Then again, the entire attitude of Jesus seems to be consistently critical of political power. The Apocalypse tells us of a destruction of political power; the end of Rome... was not for nothing.

It is sometimes said that your criticism of the "technological society" amounts to an attempt to give a theoretical justification of a deepseated fear of the modern world: that you are in some ways the archetype of the reactionary rejecting novelty, technology, the liberalisation of morals, the state -- in short, progress.

I'm a historian, so I know very well that you never go back in time. I have absolutely no kind of desire to bring back the life-style of the Middle Ages. I have never been a reactionary, but I should like to see attention paid to today's problems, not the problems of yesterday and the day before yesterday, as the Socialists are doing. I should like people to get out of a sort of myth of progress. Contemporary man, it's clear, doesn't seem to be any more intelligent or advanced or moral than fifth century BC man. The question I have ventured to ask myself is whether technical tools facilitate man's positive development or whether they hamper it. What I see everywhere today is a negation of the individual, of the person. And as a Christian, I say "no". We must go beyond the technical phase we have reached and discover new social forms and technical resources for restoring an order fit to live in. But first, it's necessary to push criticism to the very end.

You were an ecologist before ecology became fashionable. You must be thinking that ecology has gone astray in the "political illusion". Does this "exploitation" have only harmful effects? How do you sum up your own struggle?

I should refer to Bernard Charbonneau's excellent critique of ecology ("Feu vert," 1980). The struggle which has to be fought is on the fringes of the political territory. I find it disastrous that ecologists should be going back to this field. What happened with the unions once upon a time is now being repeated: as soon as there is politicisation, divisions appear and a multitude of rival groups springs up. The main thing for the ecologists was to ask the right questions.

You systematically reject Marxism. In your opinion, was Lenin contained in Marx? Don't you feel some admiration for the latter, a sense of intellectual gratitude?

I don't think I'm negatively critical of Marx, to whom I owe a great part of my intellectual growth. He threw good questions at me. What I admired in him was his ability to integrate new facts. Lenin is indeed the man who carried on Marx's work, but the Lenin who took over power was not the same man who wielded it. This is where the separation took place. He was trapped by his own power.

Is there an anti-authoritarian Marx?

Of course.

But his methods -- as in the First International, for example?

You're right. But he does search thoroughly in order to free man and here he is anti-authoritarian. It's got to be understood how tempting it is in a movement to give primacy to what one believes to be true and sweep all objections aside.

You have written that the Left has betrayed its own values, Western values. Entrenched in the most sterile of conformisms, it sees freedom no more than the draft of its own dictatorship. You also say the Right doesn't exist. In your opinion, it has neither legitimacy nor future.

Look where you like, but there isn't the shadow of a thought or doctrine on the Right. That might seem wicked for the new philosophers, but there has been nobody since Maurras, nothing new, just rehashes.

There is at least some scientific thinking which is finding expression on the right of the political spectrum?

No, there are ideologues who transform scientific discoveries.

It is not scientists who defend the ideological consequences of genetic engineering. But if the official Left has indeed betrayed its initial vocation, the fact is the brightest hopes for progress in mankind surface in this Left. I take the

example of my own experience in the university. Everytime I had students who were outstanding, who delved deep into questions, they were students who came out of a traditional Left. That was obvious for me during the past ten years. This Left is still the reservoir of a potential future. The Right has held and continues to hold powers in a world it is incapable of managing. The Right is heading towards disasters. But that doesn't mean that a left-wing government will work miracles.

Has Mitterrand's victory changed something for you? Is it really true that "nothing important happened" on May 10?

Socialism is the only answer, but not just any socialism. French socialism at the moment seems to be suffering from major weaknesses. I fear it won't be able to meet the dual challenge represented by international constraints on the one hand, and the extension of technique on the pretext of economic development on the other.

Isn't there in you that Confucian idea that man, unable to find happiness, sinks into pleasure?

I'm not very sure I know the real thinking of Confucius. What I see is Western man is obsessed by Happiness and that experiencing well-being does not make will happy. He also thought that happiness lay in a total absence of repression, restraints and rules. He wanted a non-purposive education. Whereas, the fact is man becomes very unhappy when he has no principles, no frames of reference. He is in a desert without a compass. It's only when you have learnt certain behavioural rules that you can assert your freedom from them. In my view, no morality is definitive. There is no Christian morality. There is a revelation from which Christians can, at a given moment of time, draw a certain morality in keeping with the period in which they are living their faith.

Doesn't your severity towards intellectuals and their moral responsibilities arise from a kind of idealism?

Opinion leaders are responsible because of their influence, and if they make mistakes it is the others whom they deceive. I can't stand an intellectual who says: "Yes, I have been a Stalinist, but I have owned up to my mistake." But how many young people has he misled? We don't have the right to speak when we make mistakes.

Does that mean you don't make any mistakes?

Of course I do. I've been mistaken many a time. But not on subjects where I was likely to drag others. I tried to influence others only when I was quite certain and with the aim of freeing my interlocutors.

Isn't your defence of the university a rearguard action? Isn't the university that criticises and innovates doomed for ever?

In the first place, for me it's a rearguard action because I have retired. But I think that the university as it is today will continue being dismantled. It's not a question of someone in the government deciding to do it: it's an imperative of power and technology, but intellectual power will go on existing in a society such as ours. Only a free university independent of the state will really be able to accomplish its critical task. As for the other sort of university, the one that hands out sheepskins, it will split up into a very large number of specialised institutes.

You are accused of being pessimistic and dualistic. You generally like to swim against the tide. Through love of paradox? Or rather, loyal to dialectics, do you believe in the positivity of negativity?

I'm not at all dualistic, I take no pleasure in swimming against the tide. But I firmly believe in the positivity of negativity. I should say like Jean Guehenno that man's first duty is to say "no", or like Descartes to accept nothing as true without first having examined it.

My attitude isn't any more pessimistic than that of a doctor who, after examining a patient, diagnoses a cancer. I have always tried to warn, to put on guard. I have always been convinced that man can still begin something other than

what seems inevitable.

Does non-violence seem to you to be an effective counter-power in this society? Is it desirable to allow the state to have the legitimate monopoly of violence?

I am firmly non-violent and I am for *non-power*. It's surely not an effective technique. Looked at realistically, it is power that wins. In my opinion, it is here that faith comes in. God is on the side of the non-powerful; it is they who are right, but it doesn't mean they are successful. I should say it is bad policy for the state to use violence. Mercy pays off, even politically. But for that, they will have to be real policies, and we don't have them anymore. They only have one thing in mind -- repression.

For you, the ends pursued are not independent of the means used?

You can't fashion a just society using unjust means. You can't create a free society with slavish means. That, to my mind, is the crux of my thinking.

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