

Understanding Jacques Ellul

by Jeffrey P. Greenman, Read Mercer Schuchardt, & Noah J. Toly

Cascade Books, 2012. 184 pp. pb.

Reviewed by Jacob Van Vleet

Jacob Van Vleet is Professor of Philosophy at Diablo Valley College in northern California. He earned his Ph.D. in Philosophy and Religion from the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco with a dissertation on Jacques Ellul's dialectical thinking (forthcoming in 2014 from Fortress Press). His primary academic interests include Asian and Western comparative philosophy, particularly ethics and the philosophy of technology. He is the author of Informal Logical Fallacies: A Brief Guide, a critical thinking textbook used at various colleges and universities.

* * * *

Three Wheaton College (Illinois) professors, have provided us with the latest contribution to Ellul scholarship, in their book, *Understanding Jacques Ellul*. This work is intended as an introduction to Ellul, written for those first encountering him. In a systematic and clear manner, Greenman, Schuchardt and Toly offer some of the most important themes weaving throughout Ellul's sociological and theological writings. The work is presented in eight chapters, each representing a key concept, theme, or cluster of ideas essential to understanding Ellul.

Chapter one gives a succinct overview of Ellul's life and thought, highlighting his conversion, political and ecclesiological involvement, and his academic career. There are two particular strengths of this chapter. First, the authors correctly present Ellul as one who was equally influenced by both Karl Marx and Karl Barth. This influence cannot be underestimated, and is absolutely vital when approaching Ellul. Second, the authors remind the reader that Ellul was and is considered an "outsider" to academic philosophers, sociologists, and theologians. His work, though scholarly and profoundly insightful, is unorthodox, idiosyncratic, and always challenges the status quo. For these reasons, the authors remind us, Ellul ever remains on the "margins" of institutional academia.

In the second and third chapters, Ellul's understanding of technique, media, and propaganda are introduced, along with their ethical and spiritual entailments. When explaining concepts such as these, it is necessary to provide updated examples and illustrations that clarify Ellul's arguments and worldview. The authors succeed brilliantly in this regard, showing us that Ellul's thought is more relevant now than ever.

Ellul's sociological and theological conclusions regarding the city, politics, and economics are presented in the fourth and fifth chapters. In their discussion of the city, the authors rely primarily on Ellul's *The Meaning of the City*, while utilizing a "miracle and martyrdom rubric" as well as an insightful distinction between "faithfulness and success" as explanatory tools. By employing these tools, Greenman, Schuchardt and Toly provide much needed clarity and insight into Ellul's understanding of the city. The authors also explore Ellul's analyses of political and economic systems, explicating his views on capitalism, socialism, and the relationship between the political and economic spheres. The high point of

this section is found in the discussion of the relationship between money and necessity, a helpful but all too brief consideration.

In the sixth chapter, Ellul's view of scripture is examined. Here Ellul's idiosyncratic and unpredictable hermeneutical methodology is explained in the best of all possible ways: by using various examples from Ellul's own work. This gives the reader an illuminating glimpse into Ellul's understanding of the Word as *living* and *active*; as the spoken and existentially encountered Word, which continues to transgress traditional hermeneutical boundaries.

Ellul's views on morality and ethics are the subjects of the seventh chapter. The strength herein is the discussion of Ellul's distinction between "technological morality" and "Christian ethics." The first is a moral system bound to quantification, instrumental human value, and ultimately, necessity; the latter is guided by faith, intrinsic human worth, and is motivated by an absolute freedom in Christ. The authors explain: "Following Barth's lead, Ellul affirms that genuine freedom is always freedom for God and is always oriented toward service of God" (135).

Understanding Jacques Ellul concludes with a discussion of "exotic involvement" as an explanatory descriptor for Ellul's unique life and work. For the authors, "exotic involvement" is comprised, on the one hand, of Ellul's outsider approach and reception in academia and activism. On the other, it suggests an unconventional posture toward the world, including a radical openness to the voice of God, "...allowing God, and not the world, to set the agenda for reflection and action" (160).

Greenman, Schuchardt, and Toly have provided the reader with a highly useful and insightful presentation of key themes, concepts, and arguments found in Ellul's work. The primary criticism of this engaging book is that it is too brief, often merely scratching the surface. The authors don't interact much if at all with Ellul's many essays and articles and their discussions do not acknowledge or build on the widely available work of Ellul scholars such as David Gill (Ellul views on Scripture, ethics), Carl Mitcham (technology), Cliff Christians and Randal Marlin (communications, propaganda), Darrell Fasching (religion, ethics), Bill Vanderburg (technology), David Lovekin (philosophy, technology, methodology), Daniel Clendenin (methodology), Andrew Goddard (ethics), Patrick Chastenet (politics), et al. Furthermore, the authors do not discuss Ellul's views of universal salvation, non-violence and they only superficially discuss Ellul's concept of dialectic – ideas I believe are fundamental to Ellul's work.

Criticisms notwithstanding, the authors succeed in leaving the reader wanting more discussion and explanation of Ellul's ideas and theories. And this was precisely the authors' intention: to encourage the reader to excitedly delve deeper into Ellul's inspiring activism and prophetic scholarship. Undoubtedly, *Understanding Jacques Ellul* accomplishes this important task.