

Dialectical Theology and Jacques Ellul: An Introductory Exposition

By Jacob E. Van Vleet, Fortress Press, 2014. 239 pp. pb.

Reviewed by Paul Tyson

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Ellul is a seminal figure in 20th century philosophy of technology scholarship. Two of Ellul's books – “The Technological Society” and “Propaganda” – are recognized classics in the field. Even so, Ellul's work tends to be treated in a rather piecemeal manner and not considered as a whole. To Van Vleet, this tendency to cherry pick a few key ideas from Ellul's work, and only from his recognized philosophy of technology classics, profoundly distorts a fair appreciation of Ellul's work. Most noticeably, those who only read Ellul's above classics readily tend towards the entirely erroneous view that Ellul was a technological determinist.

There is no excuse for failing to notice the centrality of dialectical theology to Ellul's understanding of *technique* and *propagandes*. In his preface to “Propaganda” Ellul notes that whilst he sees propaganda as a necessary feature of modern technological society, he does not “worship facts and power”; indeed, he maintains that because a “phenomenon is *necessary* means, for me, that it denies man: its necessity is proof of its power, not proof of its excellence.” Here, the unstated dialectical partner to determinist material necessity is indeterminate spiritual freedom.

Because he studies necessity from a place ‘above’ necessity, key features of Ellul's conceptual outlook are simply invisible to those who do “worship facts and power”, to those who approach the study of society without any theological appreciation of freedom. Yet it is here, in his dialectical theology, that Ellul is most keenly differentiated from Marx, Durkheim and Weber. Because of his *theology* Ellul's careful analysis of the necessities of modern technological society transcends what it is possible to think of within classical sociology.

Van Vleet has given us an accessible and solid introductory synthesis of the key ideas in the major works in Ellul's expansive corpus using dialectical theology as the hermeneutic key unlocking its unity. If one is already acquainted with Kierkegaardian dialectical theology, this key itself is not

novel. What is still bracing to the conceptual categories of our times, though, is reading Ellul's sociology as grounded in theology. This approach is entirely within the ambit of both Ellul and Kierkegaard, and contemporary scholars such as John Milbank. Indeed, sociology itself, as influenced by 19th century counter-enlightenment thinkers and 20th French theorists, is increasingly open to theology. Van Vleet's text will be particularly valuable to those sociologically interested in Ellul, but not familiar with dialectical theology.

There are, of course, some serious perils involved in seeking to write a clear and systematic synthesis of an inherently dialectical, even paradoxical, thinker's work. Van Vleet performs this tricky dance with real grace and stylistic ease, maintaining a lightness of accessibility undergirded by solid scholarship. This is a beautiful example of what a fine introductory exposition can achieve. But one does not 'master' Ellul by this means, and nor is a mastery of Ellul Van Vleet's intention.

Van Vleet offers us a conceptual entrée gently acquainting the intellectual palate of the non-dialectical and the non-theological with the exotic flavours of Ellul's outlook, and a basic appreciation of how his theological flavours should – and should not – be combined for satisfying intellectual digestion. But the point of the entrée is, of course, the main meal to follow. After reading Van Vleet, I do think that the social scientist, or the thinker interested in contemporary French scholars influenced by Ellul, will far better understand Ellul's classic texts. This sort of appreciation will open up those interested in the philosophy of technology to the importance of dialectical theology in the work of Ellul and in the work of thinkers like Henry, Virilio etc., who also have a profound theological sensitivity grounded in the 'phenomena' of the mystery of humanly experienced reality, at the same time that they see the disturbing necessities of our technological situation.

In sum, Van Vleet's book has everything a good introductory exposition of Ellul needs – solid scholarship of the entire major corpus, clarity and accuracy in presenting a synthesized overview of core insights and ideas, and a clear exposition of the key interpretive dynamics of Ellul's dialectical theology.

Note: This review is a substantially revised version by the author, originally published in *Cultural Politics*, Volume 11, Issue 2, Duke University Press.