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Jeffrey P. Greenman, Read Mercer Schuchardt, and Noah J. Toly, *Understanding Jacques Ellul* (James Clarke & Co: Cambridge, UK, 2013). 174 pages.

As the authors of this very accessible introduction to the life and work of 20th century French historian, sociologist, and Christian thinker Jacques Ellul point out, the study of Ellul's vast oeuvre (of over 50 books and 1000 articles on an impressive array of topics) can be quite daunting. In their "Ellul Understanding Curve" – a graph depicting the relation of a typical reader's level of understanding of Ellul's arguments to the number of pages of his writing read (p. 146) – the authors claim that one's understanding of Ellul rises first slowly before it dips considerably into misunderstanding, and then starts to rise again, more quickly, after, they suggest, about 1000 pages. The reason for this curve, they explain, is due largely to the fact that Ellul's works can basically be divided into two main categories: his theological works and his works of social theory and criticism. Readers will generally begin their excursion into Ellul's thought in one or the other of these categories – and, indeed, usually the latter category, since it is his writings on technology, especially on account of his best-selling book of 1954, *The Technological Society*, for which he is most widely recognized. Nevertheless (and it is here that the reader's dip into misunderstanding begins), Ellul's social thought and criticism cannot be made fully intelligible without an appreciation of its deep rootedness in his theology. It is only after, then, his theological works are studied as well that the reader can truly appreciate his many works in their unity. For "Ellul was a Christian scholar who never left his faith behind, no matter what he was working on, even if it was a topic in social theory . . . he always allowed his Christian faith to permeate his work" (149). The authors, in fact, seem to have even mirrored, more or less, the same path for their reader in choosing the organization of their book, considering first Ellul's social thought, while pointing out its implicit theological underpinnings, then moving on in the last three chapters to his more explicit Christian writings where those previously implicit underpinnings are given finally their full exposition.

The book begins with a very helpful chapter on Ellul's life, locating the development of his thought in the context of his general upbringing, major societal trends, and personal turning points, including a deep Christian conversionary experience at about the age of seventeen, after which Ellul read the gospel in a radically new light. Prior to this conversion, Ellul had discovered and embraced the economic analyses of Marx, which, along with scripture and with the neo-orthodox inspirations of Karl Barth, would remain a profound influence on his social thought all his days. The first chapter sets the stage for this

interweaving of influences, ending with a discussion of Ellul's book of 1948, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, which he himself saw as a short introduction to his work.

Chapters two to five, then, engage the reader in the realm of Ellul's social thought proper, with focuses on technology and technique (chapter one), media and propaganda (chapter two), the city and urbanism (chapter three), and politics and economics (chapter four). In each of these four chapters, the authors examine the basic contours and insights of Ellul's social thought in relation to its grounding in his theology, pointing out that without a consideration of this grounding, it is difficult to appreciate the heart of Ellul's diagnosis and critique of modern society. The persistent core of this critique is that modern society is a culture of depersonalizing enslavement to technological efficiency, a culture in which God's Word (and thus words) is "humiliated" and given second place to images which, through forms of communication such as advertising and propaganda, secure the domination of "technique" over persons, especially in urban contexts. Nor does Ellul offer—and this is part of the difficulty of reading of his social writings apart from their theological underpinnings—a positive social or political alternative. All political systems for Ellul, socialism, fascism, capitalism, are equally wicked for their commitment to the totalitarian rule of "technique" under which the "person" disappears. Ellul, rather like a prophet with strongly pre-millennialist, indeed, apocalyptic, overtones, promotes instead a stance of Christian anarchy. Christians are enjoined by Ellul to take Paul's advice and to "not be conformed to this world" (Romans 12:2), but to witness to the truth of God's Word through faithful resistance to society's standards. As a keen proponent of Barthian neo-orthodoxy, moreover, Ellul stresses that *no* standards of this world, which is sinful and fallen, could *ever* provide a solution to society's ills. Here we see Barth's own stress on God's absolute freedom above human doings declaring itself. And yet, for both Barth and Ellul, God both negates as fallen and sinful, and affirms as elected in love, his creatures and their work in the world, a dialectic which preserves, in the creature's election in love, the creature's own value and freedom (indeed, Ellul critiques Barth for not stressing human freedom *enough*). Thus it is that Ellul does not call for Christian anarchists' withdrawal from the world, from cities, from politics, from public life, but for their witness, in the freedom of God's love, of the coming Kingdom of God in the midst of a fallen society, and for relentless critique of and resistance to depersonalizing "technique" which precisely annihilates human value and freedom.

The last three chapters of the book, then, focus closely on Ellul's explicitly Christian thought, with chapters on scripture (chapter six) and ethics (chapter seven), and finishing with a full portrait of Ellul's Christian vision as providing the foundation for not only his social thought, but his own Christian resistance and life-long witness within the world. As in other chapters, here, too, the authors provide close and poignant readings of Ellul's works, often excerpting long passages for the reader which impart the flavour and urgency of Ellul's own writing. These final chapters serve, indeed, to make fuller the keen

sense of Christian hope underlying his critique of modern society as discussed in chapters two to five. One is tempted even to reread these earlier chapters so that one might consider Ellul's critiques more deeply in the latter chapters' fuller light. To that extent, as mentioned above, the authors make the reader truly appreciate their "Ellul Understanding Curve" through the very organization of their book. This feature, in addition to the fact that this is the first single volume to bring together both categories of Ellul's thought in their complex interrelations, makes it a valuable introduction to the man's work.

One final feature of the book which is commendable, and which reflects the cross-disciplinary nature of Ellul's own writings, is that its three authors themselves represent a range of disciplines—biblical and theological studies, Christian ethics, communications, urban studies, politics, and international relations—and bring the unique perspectives of their disciplines to bear on the range of topics yet forming a unity within Ellul's thought. The book is to that extent a wonderful collaboration, not only in content, but in style too, for it is seamlessly written (albeit not particularly beautifully or grippingly so) with no real break or change in the rhythm of the writing from chapter to chapter. They write with a single voice, so that their book is truly as good a (shortish) introduction as one could find to the work of Ellul.

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