Jacques Ellul on Living in a Violent World

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The English version of Jacques Ellul's book, *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective,* was first published in 1969 (Seabury). Such was the intense interest in Ellul's thought in that time period that the ET was actually published three years in advance of the French original which was called *Contre les violents* (Paris: Centurion, 1972), literally "against the violent" or "against violence" --- a bit stronger title than "reflections on violence." Forty years later, is it possible to discern any measurable impact of Ellul's essay on the level of violence in our world? I don't think so: it's worse than ever. And is it possible forty years later to discern any significant impact of Ellul's essay on the way Christians in the francophone or anglophone worlds view violence? Again, I don't think so. The militaristic and violent attitudes of many Christians today are shocking, to say the least. Embarrassing . . . dangerous . . . ignorant . . . faithless . . . worldly . . . those are some of the other terms that come to my mind.

Of course, I don't think this is the fault of Jacques Ellul --- except in the sense that he might have written more clearly and persuasively --- but this is a charge that could be leveled at many great thinkers in our field and in many other fields as well. So there is an element of truth in saying the scholars' guild, Ellul included, is partly responsible for the ignorance of the people. But this is not the point of my brief paper.

In this centenary year of Jacques Ellul's birth (January 6, 1912 – May 19, 1994) I am among those suggesting that the 20th century polymath of Bordeaux deserves a renewed and serious hearing in our troubled 21st century. Certainly on topics such as technology, politics, communications, religion, and ethics such attention is warranted. But on the specific problem of violence he has a great deal to say to us as well. Two preliminary remarks and then a brief review of Ellul's contribution to this topic.

The first preliminary has to do with the context in which and from which Ellul wrote about violence. His childhood unfolded in France during the Great War which embroiled France and all of Europe. The Russian Revolution occurred when he was seven years old and loomed over Europe much more intensely than it did a distant USA. From 1936 to 1939 Ellul and many of his friends were close observers and in some cases actual participants in the Spanish Civil War (Bordeaux lies not far north of the Spanish border). During World War II, Nazi Germany occupied France, including Bordeaux in the Southwest. Ellul was fired from his university post for disloyalty to the collaborating Vichy government and spent the next four years of the occupation living and working on a farm outside of Bordeaux and as an active participant/leader in the Resistance. He says he did not personally engage in violence against the German forces but he knew of their activity rounding up the local Jewish population and sending them off to Auschwitz. His own elderly father was arrested and sent to a prison in Besancon near the Swiss border where he became ill and died within a year. Ellul and his friends helped to hide Jewish men and women and provide them with false identity papers. In the Fifties, Ellul was among those urging the early decolonization of Algeria to avoid bloodshed. Their voices were ignored with horrible violent consequences. And in the West itself after WWII, Ellul was often to decry the triumph of the spirit and weapons of war over the victors themselves, not just over the vanquished. Finally, on the local level, Ellul was for many years in the 50s and 60s a leader in a local juvenile gang "prevention club" --- working with street gang members and their families to help them find another way, often also acting as their legal advocate in courtroom settings. During the 1968 French university student strikes and the violence which followed, Ellul was a faculty sympathizer and student advocate. There is no need to review the world

situation from the Sixties to the Nineties since it is so well known. But it is important to understand that when Ellul writes about violence, he is anything but an ivory tower theorist unfamiliar with actual conflict.

The second preliminary note has to do with Ellul's vocation as an intellectual and how this relates to our understanding of his writings on violence or any other topic. In short, Ellul is a prophet, a dialectician, and an existentialist. Expecting him to be anything else will lead to great misunderstanding and disappointment. He is a prophet rather than a teacher in the sense that he brings a specific message, a word, from outside a given topic or situation that can illuminate something that has been missing or overlooked. He upsets and challenges conventions and assumptions and standard ways of thinking and seeing. He is strange and uncomfortable. He is not the systematic, constructive teacher but the troubling critic. He is a dialectician in that he fundamentally believes that we understand reality by grasping the simultaneous truth of what appear to be opposites and contradictions, paradoxes, anomalies. This is for Ellul as fundamental to the Bible and theology as it is to sociology and history. Thus, Jesus is divine and human, God is three and one, the state is Babylon and Jerusalem, violence is necessary and unacceptable. There is no resolution of such dialectic intellectually or rationally --- the resolution, the synthesis happens in life, in being and acting. In other words we can *live* with the contradictions of violence, theology, etc., but we cannot iron them out in our theories and explanations. And this is where the existentialist label comes in. Ellul is an heir of Soren Kierkegaard. He is relentlessly anti-Modern. He cares nothing for comprehensive systems and theories and everything for life at this moment in this context. All of this may be unsatisfying to readers of Ellul who want something other than what he has to give. But what Ellul has to offer if taken for what it is, is a great gift to our thinking and conversation; it is not an adequate final destination, but a valuable part of the journey.

One other comment on Ellul's approach: in his classic two-volume *Maincurrents in Sociological Thought,* Raymond Aron summarizes a basic difference between the continental European sociologists like Weber and Durkheim and those of the American tradition. The continental types tend to create descriptive models and invite us to reflect on their explanatory power; the Americans tend to generalize based on statistical, empirical research. This is helpful in understanding Ellul's approach in this and other works. There is a vast research behind his work but it is not statistics so much as history and culture. Readers seeking social scientific research in that quantitative mode will almost always find Ellul frustrating and unpersuasive. With regard to violence, Ellul creates a model to try to explain it; in the old metaphor of shoes and feet, his explanatory model is like a shoe. It is for us to try it on, see if it fits our foot as we live out our own reflection and experience, as we walk in it.

So let me review briefly Ellul's discussion of violence, sticking fairly closely to his 1969 book, *Violence.* Ellul first reviews how he sees the historical traditions in the Christian church --- from the virtual pacifism (partly principled, partly by default) of the first three centuries when Christianity was excluded from power …… to the epoch of Christendom when from Augustine to Luther the theologians approved the just use of force/violence internally and just wars externally ….. to the post-Christendom world which ranges from the advocates of pacifism and non-violent resistance on the one hand to the theology of revolution on the other and everything in between.

Ellul concludes his review of this history by saying those who seek a Christian theory for the appropriate use of violence "try to formulate a compromise between the demands of the Christ and the necessities of the world, to work out a quantitative determination, a balance of factors that will bring in a viable social order. . . . [they] cherish the hope that the various elements involved can be brought into accord. They forget that this is the world that has absolutely rejected Jesus Christ, that there can be no accord between the values, the bases, the *stoikea* of the world and those of the revelation. . . . [T]he attempt to assimilate world and faith to each other is one mistake, and the attempt to separate them radically is another. . . . If

the Incarnation has a meaning it can only be that God came into the most abominable of places (and he did not, by his coming, either validate or change that place). . . So we must stand at a distance from our society, its tendencies and movements, but we must never break with it, for the Incarnation has taken place. We are invited to take part in a dialectic, to be in the world but not of it, and thus to seek out a particular, a specifically Christian position. It is from this point of view that we shall consider this problem of violence, which is so urgent and tragic today." (Violence, pp. 24-26).

Ellul argues that we need much more realism in our understanding of violence. Violence is endemic to human history; it is found everywhere and at all times. In this Ellul agrees with Thomas Hobbes. This is the state of nature. Theologically, biblical revelation shows the same thing: violence is of the order of the fall; from Cain killing Abel to the world crucifying Jesus to the apocalyptic conflict of Armageddon, violence is the condition of humanity. Politically, all states are based on violence and there is no fundamental difference between violence and force. Even as moral and Christian-influenced a nation as the USA, Ellul points out, acquired its territory and wealth by violently stealing the land of Native Americans and the labor and lives of African slaves, taking California and Texas by way of war against Mexico, and so on. Even business is often based on a kind of violence, Ellul argues: free market competition no less than centralized planning can represent a kind of economic violence and coercion. Violence is about coercing and attacking others, forcing their acquiescence, dominating and imposing your will upon them. This can be done physically, of course, but it is still violence if the coercion is psychological, economic, ideological, or otherwise. It is the opposite of inviting or allowing a free choice or response by the other.

Violence, Ellul argues, is the natural condition of humanity; it is part of the order of necessity. Some violent acts may seem like they are the free, reckless striking out against others. But whether premeditated and planned or not, violence in its various forms is not about freedom but about necessity. In other words, violence is a kind of interwoven web that draws us into its expression, that imposes itself on our lives, that pressures us to participate in it and continue it.

But as hopeless and pessimistic as all of that sounds, necessity is not quite the same thing as fatality or destiny. It is possible to resist. It cannot be eliminated from a fallen world but it is important to try to mitigate its impacts, address and ameliorate where possible the conditions that foment it, and heal and comfort those suffering from it. Ellul has sometimes written that he describes a world that will exist if we do nothing about to resist it or refuse its direction. He has said that when God wants someone to do something he first makes him mad. It is only when we feel that a situation is hopeless and completely sealed off that we will sometimes finally act.

But let's go back to violence in the order of necessity. Ellul argues that there are five laws of violence:

1. Continuity: once you start using violence you can't get away from it. Using extraordinary violence to overcome Hitler led directly to the permanent militarization of Europe and beyond.
2. Reciprocity: those who live by the sword will die by the sword; using violence against an enemy produces enemies intent on retaliation; the days that Saddam and Osama were killed thousands of baby boys were named Saddam and Osama and dedicated to avenge these acts.
3. Sameness: all violence is the same, of a piece; it is impossible to distinguish justified and unjustified or liberating and enslaving violence; one kind leads to the others, involves the others.
4. Violence begets only violence and violence-corrupted ends: the means affect the character of the end. Violent means do not and cannot produce a peaceful end. At best the result is a kind of "détente-based-on-violence."

5. Justification: all users of violence try to justify it and themselves; but it is always a sign of incapacity, an inability to imagine or follow an alternative path, always from mixed motives that may include hatred, greed, etc.; it leads to hypocrisy

Overstated? Probably. But Ellul has seen too many alleged liberators with clean hands wind up being corrupted by their very process of taking and holding power. Too many idealistic movements turn into violent oppression. Too much high flown rhetoric masking a hidden violence under the surface. Too many wars of liberation end in slavery. Too many "wars to end wars" lead to more and worse wars. So Ellul's bold, overstated, oversimplified descriptions of violence are actually a helpful prophetic challenge: if we get involved in any violence or coercion, we had better do so with our eyes open. If we don't resist, this is all we are left with.

Ellul believes that this violence in the world of necessity is inescapable in any total sense. We are caught in it and there is no total escape from its impact. In practice we will find ourselves in situations where we simply are cornered and cannot find another way out than violence, whether that is killing or maiming an attacker, trying to assassinate a tyrant, joining an army to beat back an invading force, or laying off a band of loyal workers before our company winds up in bankruptcy. We can't find another way. We act in a violent fashion. And for Ellul this is understandable and even "condonable" in some cases. Ellul says that violence can even have its own virtues within this world of necessity: it can bring about disorder, crush the lie, reveal the true situation, and explode the façade. So Ellul condones the violent revolts of at least some oppressed groups. But what he says is that this is not holy or Christian or just violence --- but yielding to necessity in a fallen world. The appropriate rhetoric is not "God led me to kill you" but "I just couldn't find another way so I had to kill him and I'm so sorry it came to that."

But for Christians, Ellul says, we must not assume that what is natural is what is good or that what is necessary is legitimate. Christ came to shatter necessity and introduce freedom. Christ makes us free to struggle against necessity, to resist being defined by necessity. Where death is the final necessity, Christ brought resurrection. Where society was necessarily ordered and stratified along rigid ethnic or gender lines, Christ brought reconciliation and a new order of freedom. So it is the calling of Christians to resist and refuse violence and introduce another alternative, a way of freedom.

If we join a movement, we should not participate in any of its violent acts of arson or murder. We should not support the violent tactics even though we support the group's claims of justice. We should bear witness to the group itself about another way and remind the group of the humanity and value of the enemy oppressor, despite how they have been treating the group. If we are part of such conflicts, Ellul urges Christians to be on the side of the poor and to look for the truly poor – the unpopular poor who have no advocates. Christians should be their advocates and use their own position to plead their case before the powerful. If they do wind up yielding to necessity and being involved in violence they should freely admit that they are doing this out of their own choice, their own fear or desperation. We must never sprinkle our wars and violence with holy water, hoist our Jesus flag, or blame what we do on God. We confess that we are sinners caught up in a sinful world.

Ellul closes by calling for what he terms "Christian radicalism" and the "violence of love." This illustrates Ellul's hard core dialectical thinking. In a world of necessity he calls for freedom. In a world of mass society he focuses on the individual. In the Here and Now God arrives as the Wholly Other. In a material world he calls for a spiritual warfare. In a world of realism he calls for radicalism. In an unloving violent era he calls for the violence of love.

Here is how he describes it: "What Christ does for us is above all to make us free. . . But to have true freedom is to escape necessity or rather to be free to struggle against necessity. Therefore I say that only one line of action is open to the Christian who is free in Christ. He must struggle against violence precisely because apart from Christ violence is the form that human relations normally and necessarily take" (127). "Either we accept the order of necessity, acquiesce in and obey it …… or else we accept the order of Christ but then we must reject violence root and branch" (129) "And mind this means *all* kinds ad ways of violence: psychological manipulation, doctrinal terrorism, economic imperialism, the venomous warfare of free competition, as well as torture, guerilla movements, police action. The capitalist who, operating from his headquarters, exploits the mass of workers or colonial peoples is just as violent as the guerilla; he must absolutely not assume the mantle of Christianity. What he does is of the order of necessity, of estrangement from God, and even if he is a faithful churchgoer and a highly educated man there is no freedom in him" (130-131).

We need a renewed "Christian radicalism": "If the Christian is to contend against violence (whatever its source) he will have to be absolutely intransigent, he will have to refuse to be conciliated. . . . Christian faith is radical, decisive like the very word of God, or else it is nothing" (145-46). This does not mean withdrawal from the world or inaction or passivity but rather full, living presence in a violent world but with something specific and unique to offer. "Because Christianity is the revelation of the Wholly Other" that action must be different, specific, singular, incommensurable with political or corporate methods of action" (148). It does not mean counseling the poor and oppressed to be submissive and accepting but to be their advocate, to urge their cause and call for justice.

One of Ellul's recurring themes in his other books is the importance of the "watchman on the wall" who foresees distant, approaching events and warns the city. In an era absorbed in a blizzard of "breaking news" and current events and celebrity tweets, who will play that role and foresee with greater depth and understanding coming conflicts and challenges that could well lead to violence in our streets or between nations? All too often it is when we are in the middle of a hot war or conflict that people demand insight, answers, and solutions. But by that time situations are much less fluid and amenable to change. Necessity and the laws of violence have taken over completely. So one of the ways Christians can fulfill their role on society is to try to serve as the watchman on the wall to speak and act while situations are still fluid. Where is the next Iraq or Libya or Afghanistan? What can be done or said <u>now</u> to find another way than the violence that will inevitably arrive if we do nothing and allow things to develop as they are?

Radical Christian presence should provide an inexhaustible source of creative ideas and actions for nonviolent resolution of grievances, misunderstandings, ignorance, fear, and injury. Rather than just providing analyses and justification for violent acts, followers of the Wholly Other should provide creative, constructive alternatives including diplomacy and redress of grievances.

Radical Christians should be present in the movements and groups of our world but always playing the role of ambassador to the group from Christ's kingdom with its distinctive values. Helping our group to understand and see the humanity of the rival and the enemy, even becoming the enemy's advocate and protector if our side somehow wins.

In the end, what can we make of Ellul's approach to violence? In general I think that his perspectives are very insightful, important, and helpful. They certainly challenge us to think again, more deeply and carefully, about our world and its violence and coercion. All of his points are important considerations.

But as I said earlier, this is a prophet not a teacher. I think the prophet is inadequate on a couple of points in particular. While I am generally in agreement about the centrality of freedom in Christian and human existence, I don't think that it can stand alone. Love and justice, for example deserve to be at the heart of our thinking as well. Necessity cannot be all bad. There is a necessity to eat, to love, to sleep, and to work. Theologically these are part of creation, not just part of the fall. That eating or working, for example, can become obsessive and toxic is part of the fallenness and brokenness of human life. So fasting and Sabbath-keeping are important acts of freedom from necessity but they don't stand alone and suggest that we stop eating or working entirely. So too coercion is part of raising children, teaching students, and managing traffic flows. That coercion needs to be evaluated and limited. The coercers need to be held accountable. But failing to exercise discipline or resist the erring child, the failing student, or the speeding driver is not an choice that serves their humanity --- or their freedom. So Ellul's descriptions of freedom and necessity are interesting and illuminating and challenging but insufficient.

A second problem is that by defining violence so broadly and rejecting it so completely, we are left with no criteria or method to do less damage rather than more (to say nothing of greater good, should that be possible). The just war criteria are helpful, even if they are ultimately not something that justifies raising the Jesus flag over the result.

Resources

Mark Baker, "Re-view: *Violence*" in *The Ellul Forum,* Issue 32 (Fall 2003): 20-21.
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Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom* (Eerdmans, 1976)
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Martin Marty, "Shattered Necessities" (review of Jacques Ellul, *Violence*), *Christian Century* (Sept 24, 1969), pp. 1223-1224
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