

Political Illusions & Realities

by David W. Gill

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In this year of great anniversaries, a local one that has special meaning for me has been the 40th anniversary of the Free Speech Movement at the University of California. This past month in Berkeley we have had various reunions, reminiscences, panel discussions, speeches, rallies, and even a reenactment of Mario Savio's speech standing on top of a police car surrounded by thousands of seated demonstrators on Sproul Plaza.

I was an 18-year-old freshman student just starting at Berkeley when the student movement started in October 1964. I often joke that it is hard for me to study without the smell of tear gas in the air because the two are so closely associated in my experience! I loved the Free Speech Movement (and, for that matter, I was an enthusiastic participant in most of the movements that followed: demanding multicultural studies options, more diversity in the student body and on the faculty, a more thoughtful university development approach ("People's Park!"), and a rejection of the catastrophic Vietnam war).

The university was dramatically improved by these movements and the forty-year celebration is fully warranted. But there were two aspects to these movements that began to trouble me within a year of the launch of the Free Speech Movement.

Two Weaknesses in the Student Movement

The first problem was the *inconsistency*, even hypocrisy, of some of the movement and leadership. "Free speech for me, but not for thee"---was one way this played out. No, I didn't like Dow Chemical or R.O.T.C., either, but authentic free speech means having debates, not shouting down those we don't agree with. I was then, and am now, an advocate of radically free speech, not a selectively permitted speech (one reason why the IJES is a "big tent," inclusivist group rather than a sectarian elite as some would have it).

Same with violence: the Free Speech Movement, like much of the Civil Rights Movement, was nonviolent, using tactics like administrative office sit-ins, class disruptions, campus work stoppages, and the like. But when these non-violent tactics were replaced by some violence against people (including some innocent bystanders)---and truly idiotic destruction of property---I had to protest against the protesters.

The second problem was *naïveté*. We needed social challenge and change and there was some great thinking that went on in those days. But there was also some truly awesome naivete regarding human nature, communities, tradition, and social and political change.

Enter Ellul

This is where Jacques Ellul stepped into my picture. I had heard about him in the mid-1960s but it was only in 1971 that I finally read *The Meaning of the City* for an article on urbanization I was writing. Then in 1972 I read four of his books in quick succession: *The Political Illusion*, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, *Presence of the Kingdom*, and *False Presence of the Kingdom*. I had seen these titles listed on the fly-leaf to *The Meaning of the City* and now read them to help me prepare to cover the Democratic Convention in Miami Beach in summer 1972 (with a press pass from *Radix Magazine* in Berkeley).

To say that I was "blown away" by the stunning political insight of Ellul is an understatement. With Ellul's help I was able to see much more clearly the political illusion and reality of the McGovern/Nixon contest and the larger society which hosted it. (Almost on a whim I sent some of my book reviews and articles to

Ellul in the fall of 1972; his encouraging letter back to me was the beginning of a 22-year correspondence and what I recently added up as about 24 months of residence in Bordeaux over the years).

Deeper Forces Driving Political Reality

Jacques Ellul's political insight struck me first of all with its *depth*. Most political discussion and thought today is conducted in the world of images, he explained. Ephemeral current events, news sound bites, slogans, and image management---this is where the political passions of the citizens are engaged. Since Ellul's analyses of forty to fifty years ago, all of this has become more blatant than ever, embraced by journalists, politicians, and voters alike.

Meanwhile, underneath this surface froth the actual directions of our society and world are set by the deeper forces of technique, bureaucratization, the globalizing-technological-corporate economic order, the desperate search for survival, social order, and meaning by Islamic societies, and so on. Failing to insist that we explore, understand, and engage these deeper forces---rather than just adding rhetorical fuel to the fires passing for today's political debate---is a betrayal of our calling as thoughtful, reflective people in our world.

Self-criticism and the Search for a Third Way

The second contribution Ellul made to my political thinking was his continual call for self-criticism and an end to hypocrisy. We must help our "side" to understand the other side and to recognize and address our own failures and inconsistencies, not just those of our opponents. Christians, especially, should search for a "third way" beyond the standard options of Left and Right.

Radical, deep, courageous, self-critical, liberating, innovative, humane . . . these are some of the central characteristics of Ellul's political orientation. In the era of Bush, Kerry, Nader & Co. (to speak only of the American context) . . . it is of the highest urgency that some voices be raised for a different political path with these characteristics.