

The Word of Jacques Ellul

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"In the sphere of the intellectual life, the major fact of our day is a sort of refusal, unconscious but widespread, to become aware of reality. Man does not want to see himself in the real situation which the world constitutes for him. He refuses to see what it is that really constitutes our world. This is true especially for intellectuals, but it is also true for all the people of our day, and of our civilization as a whole" (*Presence of the Kingdom* (1948), p. 99).

We live in a world of shadows and myths, Ellul says, oscillating back and forth between the particular and the general, both of which poles are detached from reality. On the one hand, there are particular phenomena, "facts," which come at us like a tsunami. News bites, slogans, bits and pieces of information, survey numbers, a flood of images: this is our normal environment. But it is a world of shadows because these "facts" have no connection to a past or present, and rarely are they verified by our own lived experiences and relationships. In fact, they are a distraction and substitute for lived experiences and relationships.

But people cannot navigate through this flood of images and shadows without seeking some kind of interpretive help. Our psychological survival requires it. And this is where the "explanatory myth" comes in. Ellul mentions the popular post-WWII "bourgeois myth of the Hand of Moscow" (exhibited in the American McCarthy era) and the "Fascist myth of the Jews," among others.

In today's USA, the myth of "the Liberals" (the source of all evil) is embraced by millions; the myth of the "Religious Right" is embraced by others. The myths of technological salvation, of consumer happiness, and of global free market capitalism have great power alongside the myths the advertising and entertainment industries play on. The myth provides a ready-made, simple framework for evaluating all bits of information that one encounters.

One of the most remarkable insights of Ellul's *Propaganda* is that propaganda does not just foist lies and falsehoods on its target audiences. It mobilizes its audiences to embrace and act upon accepted "facts" and the orientation of their mythologies. Propaganda plays on prejudices, it doesn't just create them.

We need to remember Ellul's challenge to the intellectual classes here: this vulnerability to drowning in shadows and being misled by myths is not just a problem of couch potato cable television watchers, Google-happy celebrity gossip addicts, and check-out counter tabloid purchasers. It is not just a problem for dazed worshippers listening to ranting Elmer Gantry's.

Propaganda is everyone's challenge, including IJES members and friends. So Ellul writes that "the first duty of a Christian intellectual today is the duty of awareness: that is to say, the duty of understanding the world and onself . . . in their reality" (*Presence of the Kingdom*, p. 118). And this challenge is certainly not confined to Christians.

Ellul gives us a fivefold strategy to get past the blur of shadowy images and the lure of dehumanizing explanatory myths. *First*, he says, is "a fierce and passionate destruction of myths." "Myth-buster" is our first role. It's about raising critical, uncomfortable questions, questioning authority, leaving the "Amen Corner" of our own enclaves, profaning what has been exalted to sacred status in our society, and fulfilling a more critical/constructive role.

But we must not be satisfied with an exclusively negative stance and strategy. The *second* move is "the will to find objective reality, to discover the facts of the life led by the people who surround me" (p. 119). Not shadows, not abstractions, but reality. The will not just to deconstruct and demythologize but to penetrate past the shadows and myths to reality---that's the second step.

Third, this reality of our civilization must be grasped on the human level. We don't just seek to understand what life is like for a generic "neighbor" but for our actual "neighbor Mario," Ellul writes, a man with flesh and blood, a face and a name. The implications are very clear: let's get out of our ivory towers and spend time with the people. Let's get to know our actual neighbors, the people we work with, our students, even those we may think of as our enemies. Any time any of us prefers to treat a colleague through a stereotype or image, rather than actually get to know that person through two-way conversation and common experiences, we are yielding to the veil of ignorance, which begets fear, which begets conflict . . .

The *fourth* part of Ellul's counsel is to look at "present problems as profoundly as possible . . . to find, behind the facts presented to us, the reality on which they are based . . . the true structure or framework of our civilization" (p. 121). Ellul sometimes used the metaphor of the ocean: the surface waves can be so mesmerizing that we fail to look at the great maincurrents below which are the real drivers in the occurrence of storms and surface events.

Faithfully reading "McNews" or watching the bits or pieces of CNN/HNN, or similar activities, isn't going to take us to the deeper awareness of social reality. Among the strategies are reading more history, seeking longer, deeper analyses of topics, learning other languages and listening to what others outside of our linguistic, cultural, philosophical, vocational enclave have to say. It's about depth, breadth, and comparative perspectives. It takes time and reflection.

This is where Ellul's writings have such a brilliant and unique impact: he takes us toward an understanding of the maincurrents of our civilization (concerning technique, the state, propaganda, the sacred, etc.) and also in biblical studies (dialectic, the city, money, hope, freedom, etc.).

The *fifth* element is an "engagement (or act of resolute commital" (121). We are not done when we write our books or give our speeches. We must act upon the truth in the reality of our neighborhood---or we are still part of the problem.