

## Christian soldier of revolution: Obituary

Ellul, Jacques

*The Guardian* (1959-2003); Jun 9, 1994; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Guardian and The Observer

pg. A13

# Christian soldier of revolution

## Obituary

### Jacques Ellul

**T**HE Technological Society, written in the late 1940s by Jacques Ellul, who has died aged 82, went largely unnoticed in France when published. But it became a classic when it was brought out in the US in English in 1964. Its French title, *La Technique*, was no doubt an intended echo of *Das Kapital*, for it was shortly after discovering Marx in the early 1930s that Ellul, together with Bernard Charbonneau, decided capital was

no longer the central driving force of Western society and that its place had been taken by technique. As the rational quest for the most efficient means, technique was no longer restricted to machines and technology but, now applied to economics, the state, law and man himself.

In his later study, *Propaganda*, Ellul examined technique at work in the world of the mass media, while in *The Political Illusion* he laid bare the other determining phenomenon of the modern world — the bureaucratic, technical state — and attacked the political world as one of illusions, unable to address the problems of contemporary society.

Ellul's disenchantment with mainstream politics stemmed from the failure of his personal quest for revolutionary social change. His first

disappointment was the failure of the personalist movement in the 1930s, in which he and Charbonneau played a leading role in south-west France. Then, as deputy mayor of Bordeaux at the time of the Liberation, he found it impossible to secure the advance from Resistance To Revolution. From then on, Ellul was on the political fringe. In the late 1960s, his *Autopsy Of Revolution* argued that although revolution was necessary in the modern world it now appeared impossible.

Throughout his life Ellul remained a great admirer of Marx and, as Professor at the Institute of Political Studies in Bordeaux, he gave an annual series of lectures on Marx and Marxism from 1947 until his retirement in 1980. His political stance was, however, increasingly

influenced by other elements of the socialist tradition — in particular, the anarchistic, federalistic socialism of Proudhon, which Ellul believed to be necessary in order to challenge to the dominance of the modern state. His awareness of the dangers of technique also made him an early environmentalist and he and Charbonneau created environmentalist groups to defend the Aquitaine Coast in the late 1960s.

The driving force of Ellul's life was unquestionably his Christian faith. He was "brutally" converted through reading the Bible while studying law at Bordeaux University in the 1930s and joined the Protestant Reformed Church. In his *Presence Of The Kingdom* (1948), he argued that Christians have a revolutionary faith that should make

them agents of change in the world. Despite his sympathies with Marx, he criticised Christians who sought to marry Jesus and Marx, but was just as strong in his attacks on the historic Christian church and much traditional Christianity, writing of *The Subversion Of Christianity* and arguing that freedom was the heart of the Christian life.

A polymath and prolific writer, by the time of his death last month Ellul had published nearly 50 volumes and a number of manuscripts, including an autobiography awaiting publication. In both his theology and sociology he was a prophet who constantly surprised and defied classification; even when you agreed with him, he unsettled and challenged you. He was a man who, in his relations with his students, his church activities and his work with young delinquents, lived what he wrote and so brought hope and freedom to those whose lives he touched.

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#### Andrew Goddard

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Jacques Cesar Ellul, born January 6, 1912; died May 19, 1994.