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# AUTOPSY OF REVOLUTION

Reviewed by THOMAS BAUGHMAN

Traditional theories in the social sciences and philosophy are today being re-examined and re-evaluated for their import in contemporary society. The standard answers are no longer adequate, and all responses must account for the demanding facts of the day. We have come to an awareness of how much we stand to lose if the course of human events is not altered. The debates on the major issues of the day fall into two categories, generally: those calling for reform and those calling for revolution. These are well established positions. For the reform side there are such observers as Durkheim, Spencer, and Parsons; for the revolution, there are such actors as Marx, Lenin, Mao Tse-tung, and Malcolm X. The literature is substantial for both sides of the debate. The revolutionaries want a new society, and the reformers wish to keep the old.

Ellul commits himself to the fray with his *Autopsy of Revolution*. There is no question about Ellul's sympathies, since every page of the book is a condemnation of revolution and revolutionary theory. *Autopsy* is just that: a post-mortem of all revolutions, giving special attention to Marx's works. Ellul asserts that revolution has not helped modern man; even the recent, nominally successful, revolutions of China, Cuba, Algeria, Viet-Nam, Chile, to name the obvious, have led to greater repression and domination, argues Ellul. Revolution is dead.

The main practical feature of Ellul's position is that insofar as he argues against revolution, he sides with the forces of the status quo. That he offers another type of "revolution," a "progressive" revolution, is beside the point, since he offers no outline or method or such an alternative. Ellul identified revolution as a modern phenomenon, developing in response to the centralization of societal authority in the form of the State. Revolt and revolution are a "rejection of a centralizing and remote power." In assuming that political, rather than socio-economic, issues are the basis of modern revolution, Ellul asserts the pre-eminence of a political nature in man.

Consistent with the philosophy of social reform, Ellul sees a teleological feature in the history of human society. Like Spencer and Durkheim, Ellul assumes that the natural course of society is progressive and positive. The centralization of political authority is progressive. It provides a more efficient apparatus for the organization of resources, and for the response to human needs. Indeed, the state exhibits many weaknesses, "but our only wish is to perfect it—that is, to eliminate its failings."

Ellul, it seems, believes a global society will reduce social contradictions by increasing that Durkheim referred to as the "organic

solidarity" of society. The following passage from Ellul could have been written by Durkheim: "As scientific and technical knowledge expands, a drain-off of residues occurs, a tighter ordering of the social organism, and improved co-ordination of the units. . . The nature of a global society is such that no single element of it may be touched, or impaired, or questioned without involving the whole." The "development of history" calls for human society to move away from the nation-state to the global state, thus affirming the "normal flow of history" which has been nothing more than the increase of the centralization of authority over the mass of humanity. If revolution is simply the political action of men defying the centralizing of authority of society, Ellul is correct in saying that revolution is reactionary and anti-progress.

In the second part of the book Ellul dismisses Marx and the Marxists. He does not give any documentation for his references to Marx's work, and appears to assume that the reader will have only the most pedestrian knowledge of Marx. Ellul's scholarship on Marx is incorrect at best, and deliberately deceptive, at worst. For an example of deliberate deception, Ellul says: "Revolutionaries can have but one goal: not to change various elements within society, but to destroy the class that oppresses them. All this is familiar and needs no elaboration." Ellul continues: "Marx...having established the imperative of a violent revolution and the elimination of capitalists, did his utmost to disguise the horror of it." Revolution, Ellul implies, is nothing more than the desire for revenge. Anyone who has read Marx knows that such statements are false. Marx does not call for the elimination of the members of the capitalists class, or of any other group. As a humanist Marx wants men to come together in community, not in bloody fratricide. Marx calls for the elimination of class society, those institutions which stand between men and human society. To this end Marx organized working men's associations that would constitute the political base for revolution.

Another example of Ellul's deceit concerns Marx's call to abolish the State. If Marx calls for the abolition of the State, as Ellul understands Marx, then how do Marxists condone the "nationalism" cropping up in Third World countries. This must be the most disingenuous argument Ellul presents in an already tricky discussion. "Death to nationalism!" used to be a revolutionary slogan. Its revival is urgently called for today, for the world is more nationalistic than ever. In that respect, socialism is a thing of the past, and all the so-called socialist countries are hypernationalist. . . nationalism has destroyed the ideological force and revolutionary impulse of communism. . . The current Marxist movement, whatever its label, has been defeated by nationalism." The way Ellul condemns "na-

tionalism" in, say, the Third World, is by neutralizing Western colonialism and imperialism. "Calling imperialism the major foe today is a distortion of fact." Not only in dealing with current political problems, but also with matters in history and social theory. Ellul does not hesitate to throw out fully developed areas of fact when they do not fit into his defence of the status quo. This misuse of fact is only appropriate for the propagandist.

After cataloging the failures of revolution, Ellul presents the reader with a statement of belief:

"...look at the spectacular progress we have made, the superb and even harmonious development, with science and technology outracing man and promising him ever-increasing security, knowledge, contentment, and mastery; universal equality is around the corner despite residual inequalities, which will disappear gradually as rapid economic expansion overtakes us; order is spreading, and with it; justice; culture reaches out in ever-broadening circles, educating and informing the whole planet, making the pursuit of leisure a reality; the conquest of disease goes on; moral consciousness is taking hold ...

Had this testament appeared in the preface or introduction, the reading of *Autopsy of Revolution* would have been much clearer. As it is, Ellul presents himself as a concerned person, concerned for the human misery in the world, and anxious to do something about it. However, once into the book, the reader realizes that Ellul is not really so much concerned about how to maintain order and stability. Only by stabilizing society so that governments can get on with the cool deliberations that will benefit all mankind, will the peoples of the world find order and tranquility.

All of the material evidence of oppression and exploitation by classes, and governments, is dismissed. If Ellul only confronted the evidence against the modern forms of social organization, especially in the West, he would be forced to admit that Society is not necessarily progressive. He would then be forced to accept the rightness of revolution, especially the great revolutionary movements of the 20th century against a colonialism and imperialism that have systematically exploited and impoverished millions of people. If Ellul confronted the evidence of human misery, he would see that organic solidarity is hardly reflected in the nations of the West.