

Directives for a Personalist Manifesto

Ellul & Charbonneau

August 19, 2020

Contents

BIRTH OF A REVOLUTIONARY CONSCIOUSNESS	5
OUR DEFINITION OF SOCIETY	8
EVIDENCE	11
CONSEQUENCES	13

In the early 1930's, several somewhat interrelated revolutionary movements, all of which favored some form or other of political decentralization—and all of which deplored the dominant totalitarian ideologies of their time—adopted, as a mark of their more intimate but no less radical concerns, the rather fuzzy but allusive designation “personalism.” These movements seem to have dissolved rather quickly, or dispersed into other channels of anti-authoritarianism (many of which dissolved or dispersed in turn), but perhaps they offer today's political vagabond an alternative to the spiraling lunacy of our contemporary guignol, some relief from its most obvious failures and excesses, or at least a mental perch from which to begin imagining the possibility of other paths—of reform or, as necessity may demand, egress.

One major current of personalist thought was associated with the intellectuals of *L'ordre nouveau*, which included Robert Aron, Denis de Rougemont (1, 2), and Daniel-Rops, whose appeals exuded a predominantly Nietzschean, existentialist flavor. Another coalesced around the work of Emmanuel Mounier, a Catholic thinker under the influence of poet and polemicist Charles Péguy, whom he credited with inspiring his brand of “communitarian personalism.” Mounier founded the eminent journal *Esprit*, which devoted the entirety of Volume 5, no. 49, to his *Manifeste au service du personnelisme*. In his introduction to the English translation, Virgil Michel notes that personalism rejects all the “forms of present civilization, the capitalist, the fascist, national-socialist, and communist,” which

must sooner or later “die the death” because they have either literally or figuratively given up the soul of man, and therewith the spiritual values that are the true soul of any healthy society of mankind. On this score the extremes of individualism and collectivism meet—in their extinction of the spiritual person.

Jacques Ellul would likely have agreed with those basic terms, but his own strain of personalism, developed with his close friend Bernard Charbonneau, placed a stronger emphasis on freedom, ecology, and what might be called the human scale in relation to the natural world. Their manifesto argues against the “complementary perversions” of materialism and idealism, and anticipates the surrender of human forms of reality to digital frameworks that prioritize productivity and measurability. They are perhaps anti-modern, but only, and precisely, to the extent that modernity runs on an engine of false utility, *i.e.* quantification, whose usefulness is deployed as a savior of humanity while at the same time reducing, and degrading, “the fullness of life.” They warn throughout against the abdication of human agency to impersonal systems, which they believe leads inevitably to the domination of human interests by increasingly impersonal and *superhumanly* efficient machines. Indeed, the heart of their thesis is that neither capitalism, nor communism, nor fascism, have control over the politics they espouse and engender, but that all three are children of and, finally, slaves to the technological society whose outline could already be foreseen, and whose *fullness* we inhabit more or less compliantly today.

What follows is the first part of a series of *Directives for a Personalist Manifesto*, which Ellul and Charbonneau formulated in 1935 under the heading “Origins of Our Revolt” (this is the negative preceding the positive vision of the second part, “Directions for the Construction of a Personalist Society”). It is not a manifesto itself so much as an outline for a fuller, more polished declaration that would, however, only come to fruition obliquely, in the mature works of both authors. As far as we are aware, the text appears here in English for the first time.

The following introductory note was provided by Patrick Troude-Chastenot to accompany the re-publication of these “directives” in *Cahiers Jacques Ellul*, no. 1, 2004, p. 63-79:

Jacques Ellul delivered this text to me in the form of fifteen typed pages, just as it was distributed among the Southwest region member groups of the journal *Esprit*. He dated its composition to 1935, specifying that it had been written prior to Mounier’s *Manifeste au service du personnalisme* published in 1936. One may consult the “Programme des réunions d’octobre 1935 à octobre 1936,” reproduced in November 1935 in the *Journal intérieur des groupes d’Esprit*, to confirm that the first “Conference Concerning the Personalist Manifesto” was announced therein. *The Journal of the Personalist Group of Bordeaux* published the text of these conferences in a special undated issue which can be found in an expanded version intended for an oral presentation of the “Directives for a Personalist Manifesto”; it may be supposed therefore that the latter text precedes the one given at these conferences. After Jacques Ellul’s death, his son Jean found the original manuscript of the “Directives for a Personalist Manifesto,” which he permitted me to photocopy. Considering the handwriting of this document—conceived in symbiosis by the two friends—reveals that it was composed entirely by Ellul, with the exception of a few corrections and additions from Charbonneau.¹

¹ Bernard Charbonneau, Jacques Ellul, *Nous sommes des révolutionnaires malgré nous. Textes pionniers de l’écologie politique*, (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, col. « Anthropocène, 2014), pp. 47-48.

BIRTH OF A REVOLUTIONARY CONSCIOUSNESS

1. A world had taken shape without us. We were born into it just as it was beginning to fall out of balance. It was governed by profound laws with which we were unfamiliar, and which were not analogous to those of previous Societies. No one much troubled himself to figure out what they were, for what characterized this world was its anonymity: no one was responsible for it, and no one sought to control it. Each person kept to the place assigned to him in this world, which came about as it were *all by itself*, in accordance with the interplay of these profound laws.

2. We found that our place, too, was marked out, and we were compelled to obey a kind of social fatalism. All we could do was perform our roles to satisfaction and offer unconscious support to the new laws at play in society—laws before which we were helpless, not only because we were ignorant of them but, again, because of the impossibility of modifying what had been produced in anonymity. Mankind was absolutely powerless before its banks, its stock markets, its contract laws, its insurance policies, its public health initiatives, its communications systems, its production needs, etc. We could no longer have it out “man to man,” as in earlier societies—nor could we have it out *idea to idea*.

3. Meanwhile, despite our powerlessness, we felt it necessary to affirm certain values and embody certain forces. Yet the world we were entering into had been constructed entirely without regard for these values and such that these forces could play no part. Its proportions were determined without regard for what, to us, seemed necessary: human freedoms, each person’s striving toward their own particular truth, each person’s connection to familiar things, each person’s need to join law with justice, each person’s call to fulfill some vocation. Oh, these forces were accorded their place, but a useless one, where they could dwindle away in sterility, without any effect on the present society. Thus was posed a double problem: a general problem and a personal one.

4. The general problem consisted in wondering whether a person’s value is to be measured by the value of a person chosen at random within a given society, or in the value of the society in which the person lives. In short, whether the value of a society (whatever its flaws, abstract or concrete but held in common) derives from the people who make it up, taken individually, or whether a people, by the fact of their adhesion to a given society, acquire *en bloc* the abstract and general qualities for which this society allows.

5. The personal problem consisted in wondering whether we could effectively embody the necessity we harbored within ourselves, whether we could realize our vocation—whether, that is, we could have any real influence on this society, on behalf of those values that compelled us to action and which were for us a kind of internal constraint. Which constraint made this an *actual* problem and not merely an intellectual one.

6. Because we became aware that these values had to be realized, were more necessary than all others, we found ourselves at odds with the current general principle that thought is valuable in and of itself and that the world is a purely material organism. It was no longer a question, anywhere, of living according to one's own thoughts or thinking through one's own actions, but only of thinking—nothing more—and earning a living. Nothing more.

7. It appeared to us likewise that by dividing a person into two separate parts, each sealed off from the other, “one turned toward the heavens, the other toward the Earth,” the individual person's powerlessness within society was being consecrated. Materialism and idealism appeared to us two complementary perversions, through which mankind had given up on *living*.

8. By refusing to admit any doctrine or thought that might precede life and action, materialism condemned humankind to living in the short-term, relinquishing the rest to the gods of chance or to the state.¹ No longer would we understand the evolution of the world in which we were living; never again would we be alone, for material necessity had become every individual's sole—and identical—concern.

9. Through idealism, which denied the role of material conditions and reduced everything to the omnipotence of some all-powerful idea—whichever idea this may be—mankind was condemned not to live anymore at all, to forsake action in pursuit of an entirely fabricated, fictitious ideal, and to settle for a carefully hidden inner life against the fullness of life itself.

10. We were discovering on the one hand the uselessness, and on the other the sort of false utility, that were leading people either to live hand-to-mouth, without concern for anything else, or else to lead a passive existence, because whatever action they might take wouldn't matter and because human nature is immutable.

11. The above observation prompted us to struggle against this division and, since it is fundamental to our society, against society itself. The fact that it prevented the fulfillment of any vocation (to make a person whole again), made it our enemy—and so

¹ Charbonneau, as one of the editors of the journal *L'Ordre Nouveau*, deliberately used a lowercase e to designate “l'état” (whereas in French the nation would more commonly be referred to as “l'État”), in order to call into question the importance and centrality of the state to social life. Charbonneau's mistrust towards the state is therefore apparent in his orthography, the point being to refuse the state the symbolic prestige of the capital letter, thereby undermining the extent of its power (normative, social, military, etc.). When he uses the accepted form “État,” it is generally to evoke this deification of the “State,” which profits from the same aura as would an idol or a fetish.

the general problem was joined to the particular, forcing us into conflict with society in its present form.

OUR DEFINITION OF SOCIETY

12. This definition is not dogmatic and cannot be summarized. More than a definition it is a kind of knowledge. It is the product of an exegesis of the present society's conventional wisdom,¹ an analysis, that is, of trivial events and of phrases which, though innocent in and of themselves, express ideological currents common to all members of society, recognized by all, and which point thereby to a general condition of the contemporary soul (*e.g.* the ad proclaiming, "A million men can't be wrong": importance of crowds, number, quantity, etc.).

13. In our eyes this society was distinguished by what it would inevitably lead to, and by its sheer gigantism.

14. These inevitable outcomes did not appear to belong to any higher, spiritual order (they were not pre-ordained). They were only the expression of certain material combinations which took effect without the intervention of human will, such that, given absolute knowledge of material facts, all events would have been predictable. Let's consider some examples:

14 (a). There's no point insisting on facts that are the inevitable outcome of war: a country sufficiently large that the reasons for war might be distant and abstract for everyone; a degree of armament so advanced that the act of killing is no longer the most dreadful and concrete of all actions but has become a matter of pushing a button; an economic order based solely on credit; contradiction between the scarcity of land and incentives to increase the birth rate; overproduction in every country with no hope of trading outside one's borders—all of these combine to ensure the inevitability of war.

14 (b). The inevitability of fascism would require lengthier consideration: it is always preceded by liberalism, deification of the State by the intermediary of the common good—social-democracy via the flourishing of the working class—ideal of a comfortable and confident middle class—romanticism of false risk and false heroism—participation in mass culture (news, radio, cinema, work, etc., for the masses), taste for abstract power and for everything that acts through a third party: these few aspects of liberalism are the elements which, through the momentum of technical production, inevitably give rise to fascism, however individual political parties may attempt to counter this effect.

14 (c). Inevitability of imbalance between various types of production. Advances in machine technology, but only in certain branches—the development of large cities—the

¹ See Léon Bloy's *Exegesis of Bourgeois Expressions*, forthcoming in English translation from Wiseblood Books, as well as Ellul's own *Exégèse des nouveaux lieux communs* (Éditions de la Table Ronde).

imbalance of credit availability, the creation of a single mentality across all classes—the necessity of maintaining high prices and the universalization of exchange rates leading inevitably and with no possibility of remediation in the present state of society to a fatal imbalance between agricultural and all other forms of production...

15. Parallel to these inevitable outcomes, of which we have noted only three among many examples, we have instances of concentration, or centralization. These, too, are the product of the aforementioned inevitabilities, and those inevitabilities are themselves the product of concentration. They arise from the fact that, once we've gone past man as the measure of things, there's no longer any reason to stop moving further into the beyond. Once man consents to no longer being the measure of his world, he relinquishes the very possibility of measurement.

15 (a). Concentration of production: the machines (capital), the lowering of the costs of production, etc., necessitate the factory's gigantism, but this entails the concentration of all production: for example journalism or cinema—concentration which leads to a lack of proportion with regard to what is needed and with regard to production itself—no possible limit can be imposed upon production anymore, since further production generates the concentration that makes production possible: no other consideration comes into play.

15 (b). Concentration of the state: extension of the state within limits that are overly broad and which, unconstrained by reality, justify wars of conquest. There is no more human reason to draw the line at such and such limit as opposed to some other when one's homeland does not itself correspond to a clearly determined territory. At the same time, concentration of administrative services which tend to encompass, legally speaking, a person who is construed abstractly and is no longer connected to anything real; the nation to which this person belongs is a bureaucracy.

15 (c). Concentration of population: the necessities of production demand the creation of big cities—cities built around factories, stock exchanges, transportation hubs—the end result of which are “mass” populations. The “masses” only live in big cities; at the same time, they bespeak the general anonymity of our whole society.

15 (d). Concentration of capital: not the concentration foreseen by Marx, but a fictitious concentration of capital by credit systems and the actions of an anonymous society. And this fictitious concentration is all the more serious because, on the one hand, it can't be directly fought against in the person of “the wealthy,” while on the other hand it allows more effective control over the totality of capital. In a capitalist society, power resides not with the capitalists but with the administrators.

16. We have seen this tendency to concentrate throughout history. It was an evolution towards order, but had never reached any conclusion. It always lacked the means of making this gigantism a reality. Yet concentration shouldn't be considered just simply because the current has always flowed in that direction. If during certain periods this ideal of unity could be a just and efficient means of combatting certain serious social and individual vices (the dangers of armed robbery, the direct oppression of serfs by the nobles, the destabilization of finances due to waste, etc.), that is no longer the

case today. We should resist concentration, not on account of our tendency towards concentration—a permanent condition—but on account of the means that allow this concentration to become a reality—a condition of the here and now.

17. The means by which concentration is realized are technological: not through industrial processes but general ones. Intellectual technology: obsession of officially sanctioned intelligence with immutable principles, often emanating from Renan. (Departments, Files, Museums.) Economic technology: construction of a financial technology that, due to economic inevitability, has become tyrannical—the economy develops by itself (autonomous science, independent of human will). Political technology: one of the first domains affected by technology: diplomacy, etc., old rules of parliamentary government. Legal technology: through the codification of pernicious laws. Mechanical technology: through the intensive development of machines, without consideration for effective human needs, for no other reason than that the excellence of machines was established, from the beginning, as given.

18. As a consequence, because of technology, creative power has evolved into procedures of implementation. Taken to the extreme, every expert, every artist could be transformed into a mechanism dedicated to the implementation of scientific or artistic technological procedures, to the combination of irrelevant, sterile methods.

19. Concentration, moreover, leads to certain inevitabilities: once man no longer retains control over society—that is to say, once man stops measuring things on a human scale, accepting a world that he cannot control—once man accepts the death of his creative faculties, he gives free reign to Fate. Fate, like the laws of sociology, is born of man's own resignation.

20. Likewise, Fate is at this very moment encouraging concentration—because it's an historical current and we are no longer capable of reversing its flow—because it's an easy path to take: anonymity for all. It's easier to be dead than alive.

EVIDENCE

21. Technology dominates humanity and every human reaction. Politics is powerless against it, man is incapable of governing because he is subject to certain forces—every bit as material as they are unreal—in every contemporary political society.

22. In the capitalist state, man is less oppressed by financial powers (against which one must struggle but which are only the agents of economic inevitabilities) than by a bourgeois ideal—of security, of comfort, of indemnity. That money is the means by which all of these are procured, is what gives financial powers their importance. The capitalist state is characterized by the struggle for profit (and not for life). Apart from this, a permanent hypocrisy envelops the search for profit, under the names of morality, religion, intelligence, etc., using spiritual values as self-justification and as a means of disarming whatever might be dangerous in them (disappearance of the sense of Justice).

23. In the fascist state, man's only and ultimate ideal is the greatness of the State and sacrifice for the State. Everything must contribute to the prosperity of political gods, who lay claim to every sacrifice because they also control all the means of living. This ideal comes to man from the outside, it is imposed upon him by every available form of propaganda: newspapers, radio, cinema, etc.

24. In the communist state, continual economic production and growth is man's only ideal. All individual liberty is subordinated to social productivity. All human happiness is summed up in two terms: on the one hand, increased production; on the other, comfort—and everything should stop there. Here, the mystical is created by statistics, sacrifices demanded in the name of metric tons of coal.

25. While the hypocrisy in these three states diminishes from one to the next, one observes an equivalent perversion in each, which consists in demanding the total sacrifice of a person's life (in death as well as in the hours of day to day life) to an inhuman—and not a superhuman—goal. They may be different as political points of view or even as economic doctrines, but this is no longer of any importance. They are identical relative to humanity. For each of them a person is but an instrument, and from the point of view of daily life, the communist worker's government is the same under Stakhanovism as the American worker's is under Taylorism.¹ The position of the intellectual is identical under fascist and communist regimes. In none of these three systems of government can profit be eliminated, it merely changes hands.

¹ The version of this sentence which appears in the manuscript is even more ambiguous and less well-constructed, so we have retained (and altered slightly) the one published in *Revue française d'histoire des idées politiques*, n^o 9, 1er semestre 1999. —trans.

26. Yet each of these three types of society also fail, because they are each afflicted to the same degree by the vices described above. Concentration ends up disrupting production, because of the complications it entails; credit makes financial problems abstract and therefore unreal; and people everywhere, having only small and well-defined tasks to accomplish, see their self-determination replaced with foregone conclusions. That is, they are proletarianized.

CONSEQUENCES

27. In such a society, the type of person who acts consciously disappears. People resign themselves to being nothing but machines, with no power to change the nature of the labor they perform—whether this labor is manual or intellectual. They act either according to the open directives of the government or the hidden ones of capital, but always under the command of an abstraction—a dictator is as imprisoned by the technologies of marketing and politics as a capitalist is by the technologies of finance. They, too, are but the tools of destiny.

28. By surrendering himself this way, a person commits the sin of socialization: the sin, that is, of refusing to be an individual conscious of his duties, his strengths, his vocation, and instead accepting external influences (whether voluntarily or not, by (for example) obeying orders or watching movies). From here on the individual disappears into the crowd. The sin of socialization is a sin against the spirit, because the individual committing it has renounced what makes him different from his fellows (his vocation) in order to assimilate himself to them and become another indistinguishable bee in the hive, performing identical gestures, reading the same words, thinking the same thoughts. Refusing to live.

29. Having once committed the sin of socialization, all other sins become impossible, for this is no longer a *person* sinning by his or her actions or thoughts, but an individual defined as a fragment of the established social order, and who has therefore given up his or her personhood. The gravest sin having already been perpetrated, there is no room left for any others.

30. For a Christian, this sin obviously does not prevent God from having an effect on the sinner, and atonement through Christ plays an even more substantial role, but we are not concerned here with those who have committed this sin and whom no Christian has the power to save. We are concerned, rather, with the Christian who has become conscious of this sin, and who from now on can have no other goal, no other human vocation, than to prevent the realization of the conditions which have made such a sin possible.

31. For a non-Christian, the fact that a person is totally detached from the reality of life and made subject to abstract forces—forces upon which he can have no influence—is emblematic of the fact that man is becoming proletarian in every way. Along with the proletariat produced by capital (because, thanks to monstrous amounts of capital, the worker is never able to become the boss himself), there is a proletariat produced by abstraction (because, thanks to technological advances that impose certain forms of thought upon him, the intellectual becomes incapable of creating anything), and a

proletariat produced by the State (because man will never have dominance over the state but will forever be its functionary).

31 *bis*. We have all become proletarians because none of us is capable of collecting the just remainder of our work, our capital, our freedom, our power, and it is impossible for us to have certain connections, one person to another. The impossibility for Christians of fulfilling certain missions.

32. One way or another we see that the necessity for revolution precedes us. Catholics, Protestants, atheists who believe in the necessity of spiritual power, must make this revolution—which alone justifies all others—our primary concern. It is not something we have thought up on our own, it is the brutal manifestation of a reality that has been imposed upon us. We are revolutionaries in spite of ourselves.

33. Not a revolution against men but against institutions. Too bad for police who protect the banks.

Not a revolution against big bosses but against big factories.

Not a revolution against the bourgeoisie but against big cities.

Not a revolution against fascism or communism but against the Totalitarian State, whatever form it takes.

Not a revolution against Monsieur Guimier¹ but against the ad agency Havas. Not a revolution against 200 families but against profit.

Not a revolution against arms dealers but against arms. Not a revolution against foreign nations but against our own.

Revolution not as class struggle but as struggle for the freedom of mankind.

The reason we reject the first term in each of the preceding cases is because such terms permit every sort of hypocrisy and are just as well-suited to fascist revolutions as to communist ones—the second term, however, allows no compromise.

Translated from the French by Louis Cancelmi

¹ Pierre Guimier was head of marketing at the Havas Agency in the 1930s. He was forced out in 1936, in a backlash over a press campaign that led to the suicide of Roger Salengro, then Minister of the Interior of the government under the Front populaire.

The Ted K Archive

A critique of his ideas & actions



Ellul & Charbonneau
Directives for a Personalist Manifesto
August 19, 2020

<signals-noise.com/2020/08/19/ellul-charbonneau-directives-for-a-personalist-manifesto-%E2%91%A0>

www.thetedkarchive.com