

AUGUSTO DEL NOCE ON THE “NEW TOTALITARIANISM”

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“Rejection of transcendence implies that all human realities (the state, sexuality, work, the family) lose their symbolic or ideal significance and become ‘dumb.’”



Starting in the mid-1960s, Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce (1910–1989) became an outspoken critic of what he called the “technological” or “affluent” society that had developed in the West after the Second World War. Against the great majority of his contemporaries, Del Noce thought that, in spite of its democratic institutions and its professed liberalism, this new society did not mark a sharp break with the totalitarian tendencies that had emerged in the course of modernity, and that in fact “the widespread notion that the age of totalitarianisms ended with Hitlerism and Stalinism is completely mistaken.”¹

According to Del Noce, the telltale sign of totalitarianism, which he had observed firsthand as a young man in the 1930s and 40s, is the “negation of the universality of reason, so

1. Augusto Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 230.

that any form of opposition to established power . . . supposedly does not express rational concerns but conceals interests of class (according to Communism) or race (according to Nazism).”² In other words, totalitarian systems monopolize power by affirming that rationality itself is political. They claim that their ideological narrative coincides with rational discourse and thereby exclude *a priori* all forms of criticism. In the 1960s, Del Noce recognized a reappearance of this phenomenon in the tendency by the advocates of the sexual revolution to deny the rationality of their opponents by attributing their stances to moral or psychological conditions such as “repressed psychology,” “bigotry,” “hatred,” “prejudice,” “animus,” etc. Del Noce observed that the politicization of reason was now being conducted in the name of the human sciences that had gained new prestige since the end of the war: psychology, anthropology, sociology, and psychoanalysis. This latter, in vulgarized form, underpinned the program of sexual liberation, viewed as a “struggle against repression” and the “breaking of taboos.” Del Noce argued that this trend was just one manifestation of a broader and deeper phenomenon: a new, nameless, “quiet” “totalitarianism of technical activity, [in which] all human activity is interpreted as finalized to transformation and possession.”³ Whereas older totalitarianisms politicized reason on the basis of a philosophy of history (Communism) or a mythical racial narrative (Nazism), the new one does so through the ideological invocation of “science” in a very broad sense. The result is, nonetheless, a “subordination of culture to politics,”⁴ which to Del Noce is precisely the defining characteristic of totalitarian societies, and is also perfectly compatible with the preservation of the formalities of democracy. His argument is interesting and deserves to be elucidated.

1. SCIENTISTIC TOTALITARIANISM

Del Noce claims that the distinctive ideology of the “technological society” is *scientism*, the “view of science as the ‘only’ true

2. Ibid.

3. Augusto Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), 12.

4. Ibid, 30.

knowledge. . . . Now, an advocate of scientism, and a society based on his way of thinking, cannot help being totalitarian inasmuch as his conception of science . . . cannot be the object of any proof . . . [he] does not intend to elevate other forms of thought to a higher level . . ., but he simply ‘denies them.’”⁵ Thus, he rejects appeals to natural law as non-empirical and thus unscientific. Or he discards teleological considerations, because science does not know finality. Since scientism cannot give any proof of the (non-scientific) statement that science exhausts the sphere of rationality, it must simply *banish* all other forms of knowledge to the domain of pure subjectivity. As Del Noce says, it “is, literally, a resolution of the will: the resolution to accept as real only what can be verified empirically by everyone.”⁶

The ideological narrative of scientism is a variation on the old Enlightenment scheme of the conflict between “science” and “religion.” They are the two inseparable mythical agonists of the technological society (comparable to other famous dialectical pairs like the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, or the Aryan and the Jew); it needs *both* of them, because their opposition is essential to its self-definition. In fact, the dichotomy of science and religion conceals the elimination of a third factor: philosophical/metaphysical reason, which is replaced precisely by the human sciences. What is eliminated is not religion, but rather the *religious dimension*,⁷ meaning the natural human attitude to perceive and desire the divine, which expresses itself in philosophical and religious questions, the questions about meaning and purpose that scientism dismisses as non-rational because they lie outside the scope of empirical verification. Generally speaking, the new totalitarianism does not persecute religion directly. It progressively empties it out by denying its cognitive significance, by declaring meaningless the very questions that faith is supposed to answer and pushing it into the private sphere of feelings. Thus, religion becomes a therapeutic, vitalizing practice, what Del Noce describes (quoting Simone Weil) as a “drug.”⁸

5. Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity*, 231.

6. *Ibid.*, 151.

7. Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 104.

8. *Ibid.*, 147.

In fact, at the ethical level, scientism implies “the replacement of the idea of a ‘good life’ with that of ‘well-being,’ i.e., the greatest satisfaction of the appetites” and

the collapse of the idea of a normative order of values that had been affirmed by traditional moral thought, and that in some way the secular morality of the nineteenth century wanted to preserve. . . . The only remaining value will be the increment of perceptible life; in short, well-being, and every human activity, and religion itself, will be viewed as a vitalizing tool.⁹

As a result, the technological society is no longer unified by any shared idea of the good, and the only possible common “moral” goal is the expansion of individual well-being, to be achieved by removing all forms of “repression” and by banishing from the public sphere any claim about objective truths and values that might constrain the pursuit of essentially instinctual appetites.

Del Noce points out that, out of consistency with its own scientism, the technological society *cannot* submit its own metaphysics to rational scrutiny, and thus must conceal it. In this sense, this society is necessarily mendacious,¹⁰ but its mendacity is not primarily a moral failure. Its very scientific postulate *forces* it to lie by pretending not to have a philosophy, to be purely pragmatic, so much so that *it does not even give its ideology a new name* but simply claims (falsely, in Del Noce’s opinion) to be the rightful heir of classical liberalism. As a result, Del Noce says, it always advances its agenda by pushing *consequences* without ever discussing their *premises*.¹¹ Philosophical presuppositions are rarely, if ever, stated openly; of course they exist, but they are always expressed in indirect, and thus mystificatory, ways. For example, sociological, pedagogical, or psychological studies are routinely invoked in order to justify various public policies, say, regarding education or family law. What is almost never discussed are the *rubrics* that underpin those studies, namely the criteria used to define *a priori* what constitutes human flourishing, educational

9. *Ibid.*, 167.

10. Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity*, 127, 138.

11. *Ibid.*, 186.

success, mental health, and so on. The human sciences use those criteria but cannot establish them, since they involve fundamental philosophical questions. But if the criteria are taken for granted and insulated from discussion, any political action conducted in the name of those scientific studies will be an imposition of unstated philosophical assumptions.

According to Del Noce this “hubris of the human sciences”¹² is rooted in the unspoken metaphysical decision to reject all forms of *transcendence*, and especially religious transcendence.¹³ Del Noce describes this rejection as *radical anti-Platonism*,¹⁴ in the sense of denying the ideal/symbolic dimension and the possibility of an “other” reality, of a world outside of Plato’s cave. Not only does it postulate that human liberation can be achieved without any intervention from the “outside,” but it demands that there be nothing outside which could interfere with man’s domination of the cave (or the “bunker” as Benedict XVI described it¹⁵); a domination to be achieved, of course, through technology. Ultimately, transcendence must be excluded because it is incompatible with man’s freedom.

2. ABSOLUTIZATION OF POLITICS

Rejection of transcendence has the effect that all human realities (the state, sexuality, work, the family) lose their symbolic or ideal significance and become “dumb,” completely devoid of any finality beyond the satisfaction of the immediate material or psychological needs that can be studied scientifically. It is in this sense that scientism, according to Del Noce, is the philosophical premise of the sexual revolution.¹⁶ At the same time, political

12. Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 44.

13. Regarding the link between scientism and the rejection of transcendence, Del Noce refers to the work of Benjamin Fondane (*The Crisis of Modernity*, 151–52).

14. Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity*, 139–41.

15. Benedict XVI, *A Reason Open to God* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 221.

16. On this topic, see Augusto Del Noce, “The Ascendance of Eroticism,” in *The Crisis of Modernity*, 157–86.

struggles take an absolute value, replacing religion as the focus of social concern and the source of people's identity and meaning. The flip side of the politicization of reason is the *absolutization of politics*, which to Del Noce is another definition of totalitarianism. Every aspect of reality is interpreted in terms of a political narrative, which becomes the interpretative key for all aspects of social life: law, education, medicine, the family. Society at all levels splits along political lines because "culture is entirely subordinate to politics"¹⁷ and "the idea of politics is subsumed within the idea of war."¹⁸ The older totalitarian movements had no desire to find a political accommodation between social classes or races: one side must eliminate the other. Likewise, no compromise is possible with "repression" and "bigotry." They must be simply fought and, ultimately, eliminated.

But since, in fact, politics lacks any *ideal* (as opposed to *ideological*) point of reference, it must necessarily degenerate into "a management technique at the service of the strongest"¹⁹ by a technocratic elite which is not united to the rest of the population by any real ideal bond. The stated goals of politics can only be a constant expansion of production and consumption and the advancement of individual autonomy, expressed in the language of "rights." Paradoxically, the individualism of the technological society covers "the extinction of the individual, by which I mean the individual inasmuch as he enters into relationship with the absolute, and through this relationship can become critical in the present."²⁰ An individual cut off from transcendence becomes "completely dependent on society,"²¹ "a social atom."²² Incidentally, this is perfectly compatible with recurrent spasms of ideological extremism, which claim to fight the "system" but in reality are just expressions of alienation, since they generally fail to call into question the metaphysical presuppositions of the technological society.

17. Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 23.

18. Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity*, 87.

19. Jean-Marie Domenach, cited in Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity*, 251.

20. Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity*, 232.

21. *Ibid.*, 245.

22. *Ibid.*, 127.

Like Communism, the new ideology has a utopian aspect, which is a hybridization of Marxist and Freudian themes. Supposedly, wars are caused by religious fanaticism, lack of economic development, and sexual repression; once those disappear the world will be at peace. It is a dream of bourgeois happiness, of individual self-realization in a worldly sense. Not coincidentally, according to Del Noce, the new totalitarianism was incubated in the 1950s in the context of the Cold War, as a Western response to Communism, as a "bourgeois revolution" based on technical progress and sexual liberation.²³ It opposed Communism in its revolutionary aspect, which to Del Noce is also its *religious* aspect. He goes as far as saying that "the affluent society is the only one in world history that does not originate from a religion, but rises essentially against a religion, even if paradoxically this religion is Marxism."²⁴ However, the new society develops what he calls the "profane" aspect of Marxism, namely historical materialism, the reduction of ideas to instruments of production, the replacement of metaphysics by the human sciences and, at root, radical atheism in the sense that religious questions are pronounced to be *irrelevant* to the life of society. Having assimilated these Marxist ideas makes today's scientism more radical than nineteenth-century positivism, which largely failed to claim jurisdiction over *human* realities. In fact, according to Del Noce, the new culture could not have prevailed if Marxism had not somehow succeeded *at the cultural level*, effectively carrying out the *pars destruens* of the revolution even in countries where Communism did not come to political power.²⁵

23. See Augusto Del Noce, "The Death of the Sacred," in *The Crisis of Modernity*, 118ff.

24. Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 23.

25. An interesting question is to what extent Del Noce's emphasis on the role of Marxism in the formation of "Western totalitarianism" applies to the American context. I can only make a few brief comments. When Del Noce speaks of a worldwide "victory" of Marxism, he does not have in mind Marx's revolutionary doctrine, or his economic theories. Rather, he refers to what he called Marx's "non-philosophy," the radical replacement of the contemplation of the true and the good with political action, *with human self-creation through technology*. Del Noce regards Marxism as the logical point of arrival of Western rationalism, when "it becomes a religion" and reaches the masses by promising salvation through politics. In this broad sense, the question of the *direct* influence of Marx on American culture is somewhat intellectualistic. Given

3. A TOTALITARIANISM OF DISINTEGRATION

Reading Del Noce today it is hard to escape the impression that the philosophical premises of today's situation were firmly in place by the early sixties, and that at a fundamental level not much has happened since, except for a slow process of decomposition, as befalls an organism that is no longer living. A society that consistently embraces scientism and instrumentalism must literally *stop thinking* in the properly philosophical sense, and become incapable of generating new ideals and new forms of life. It can only live by slowly consuming the "reserves of meaning" it received from the past, until they run out and its contradictions explode.

At the time, Del Noce's remarks about the totalitarian aspects of modern Western society did not receive much attention. Today, he is remembered as a distinguished historian of ideas—especially of Italian political thought in the twentieth century, of Gramsci and Gentile—but his views about the contemporary world are often considered excessive, or even reactionary. After all, the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century seem firmly confined to the dustbin of history. We do not live in fear of being arrested by the secret police and sent to a concentration camp. How can anybody seriously think that we live in a totalitarian situation?

Del Noce would reply that these objections are reasonable but superficial, because what really defines totalitarianism is, once again, the subordination of both ethics and culture to politics. Coercion by force is not necessarily the best method to that effect. A better way is to remove the "equipment" that makes it possible to *transcend* politics: philosophical reason, non-utilitarian liberal education, national tradition, the family as a

certain premises, different people will reach the same conclusions independently. Marxism certainly influenced American culture *indirectly*, especially through Freud-Maxism and the human sciences. Del Noce was struck by Wilhelm Reich's idea that the US was the country where the sexual revolution had the best chance of success. We can surmise that Del Noce would say that paradoxically America needed Marxism less than Europe in order to rid itself of what he calls the "Platonic tradition," because of its pre-existing inclinations to pragmatism and scientism. But in any case America had to "rid itself of Europe," and this was hard to do until Europe committed its own peculiar cultural suicide, in which Marxism certainly played a decisive role.

vehicle of ideal values. What is true is that the new totalitarianism is very different from older forms because it is a totalitarianism of *disintegration*, even before being a totalitarianism of *domination*.²⁶ It dominates by disintegrating. Del Noce describes it also as "negative millennialism"²⁷ because it radically rejects the past but cannot propose new values. Ironically, it is extremely "conservative" in the narrow sense of protecting the economic and political status quo, while it slowly dissolves its host society into what Del Noce calls a "non-society," because no shared ideals bind together its members.

In such a situation, resistance is in constant danger of becoming a sequence of reactive responses to every new turn in the process of decomposition. Del Noce considers it a mistake to think that the Western "crisis" can be overcome by purely political means, especially because totalitarian cultures prevent real debate precisely by politicizing everything. The technological society does it by framing every discussion in terms of the opposition of "progressive" and "conservative." Ultimately, these categories are *internal* to its ideology, since they evoke the opposition of the "future" and the "past," which in turn echoes the mythical opposition of "science" and "religion" I mentioned earlier. Therefore, they are inadequate to describe the real conflict. Del Noce maintains that the real clash is between the two ideas of man that Max Scheler had already described as the *homo sapiens* and the *homo faber*.²⁸ In short, whether the religious dimension is recognized or not, whether in man we see the *imago Dei*, an irreducible link with transcendence, or the Marxian *Gattungswesen*, a "generic being" entirely shaped by its social circumstances. He concludes that the crucial cultural task today is precisely to defend and reaffirm the human religious dimension (not "religion") and all its implications, also in the political realm. As he wrote in 1967, "what must matter to Catholics in public life today is certainly not their own power, nor the temporal power of the Church. . . . What matters is rather *the preservation of that re-*

26. Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity*, 87.

27. Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 44.

28. See Max Scheler, "Man in History," in *Philosophical Perspectives* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 65–93.

*ligious dimension connatural to the human spirit which, on the one hand, is the only ground on which the action of Grace can bear fruit and, on the other hand, is the only condition to save the world from catastrophe.”*²⁹

4. CONCLUSION

By being a *totality* that pretends to be “metaphysically neutral” the technological society exerts on its members a distinctive form of oppression: it gives them the illusion of ever-expanding autonomy, while in fact its covert philosophy implies “universal reification” and ultimately “an unprecedented degree of persecution of the spirit.”³⁰ This is why for Del Noce the rediscovery of the religious dimension needs to be “Socratic,” in the sense of being linked with the question of freedom, of the preservation of human personality before the overwhelming power of society, of the Platonic “great beast.” In some ways, our epoch is remarkably similar to that of classical Greek sophistry: it has an instrumentalist concept of reason, a relativist and pragmatist disposition, a tendency to reject philosophy in favor of purely expressive (as opposed to contemplative) thought. Not coincidentally, near the end of *Authority vs. Power* Del Noce quotes a beautiful passage from Kierkegaard’s *Journals*:

Only a wretched and mundane conception of the dialectic of power holds that it increases in proportion to its ability to compel and to make dependent. No, Socrates knew better; the art of power lies precisely in making free. . . . [I]t needs to be emphasized again and again that it is the highest: it is something only omnipotence truly succeeds in; one human being cannot make another wholly free, because the one with power is himself captive in his possession of it and is therefore continually coming into a false relationship with the one whom he wants to make free.³¹

Del Noce comments: “This text is interesting because of the relationship it brings up between the exigencies that move Greek anti-sophistic metaphysics since its origins and its fulfillment in

29. Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 233 (emphasis original).

30. Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity*, 231ff.

31. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, ed. and trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 113.

theological thought.”³² This means: the reaffirmation of philosophical reason and of the religious dimension, and its fulfillment in faith, are inseparable from the question of freedom, including freedom from worldly powers. I mentioned earlier that the rejection of transcendence by scientism is tied to the notion that human liberation requires a “closed” human world. Del Noce’s thesis is *that the exact opposite is true*, and the most potent refutation of totalitarianism is the lived rediscovery that human freedom is founded on the recognition of the transcendent. □

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32. Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity*, 246.