

AUGUSTO DEL NOCE ON MARX'S ABOLITION OF HUMAN NATURE

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“God is not denied on the basis of some newly acquired scientific knowledge or metaphysical argument; rather, God *cannot* exist, because if he existed man could not be free.”



A characteristic feature of contemporary culture is that any appeal to “human nature” is typically perceived as a threat to freedom. Consider, for example, today’s debates about gender and sexuality, in which many people embrace what could be described as an intransigent “morality of authenticity.” It holds that our first duty is to *be ourselves*, a rather vague notion that in practice seems to boil down to accepting and obeying our psychological inclinations and instinctual impulses, taken to be the truest measure of our humanity. Accordingly, it understands freedom as pure, arbitrary self-determination. Now, it is interesting to observe that this moral vision is based on the (often unaware and implicit) rejection of the notion of human nature, in two closely related senses.

First, “being oneself” is understood in strictly individualistic terms, not as the realization of a universal human essence, let

alone of a sexually differentiated one as “man” or “woman.” This denial of “essentialism” could be interpreted as a mere instance of nominalism or positivism, except that its motivation is typically not philosophical but moral: a common human essence *must not* exist because its teleological implications would necessarily be oppressive of our free self-determination. Second, today’s dominant moral outlook refuses to submit our desires to any form of rational scrutiny based on the intuition of higher goods. It radically rejects the classical idea, which goes back at least to Plato,¹ that there are “different parts of the soul,” including a “higher” and properly human part that is capable of perceiving and loving beauty, goodness, and truth, and which is tasked to dominate the purely instinctual sphere of the passions (such domination being necessarily part of the definition of freedom). Thereby, it denies that there is anything specific and unique about human nature, which would make us in any way different from highly evolved animals. Also in this second case, the denial seems *prima facie* a mere expression of scientism or materialism, but in fact has a moral import: traditionally, domination over the passions was tied to the idea that individual reason participates in a universal Logos, which is now judged to be intrinsically oppressive.²

In these two senses, we could say that Western culture has taken an aggressive “anti-Platonic turn”³ because this double “postulatory” denial of human nature separates today’s secular morality from the mainstream secular morality of the nineteenth century. Not only did nineteenth-century culture generally preserve—under various “modern” guises, like the Kantian imperative—a specifically human universality, but even when it denied it, the denial was usually scientific rather than postulatory, as is clearly visible in the controversies surrounding Darwinian evolutionism. Even in the heyday of positivism it was broadly accepted that the existence of “God and the soul” was at least desirable

1. See Plato, *Republic* bk. IV.

2. A seminal and influential example of this identification of the Platonic Logos with the “logic of domination” is found in Herbert Marcuse. See, e.g., *Eros and Civilization* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 99–100.

3. For an interesting discussion of “de-Hellenization,” see Michael Hanby, “A False Paradigm,” *First Things* (November 2018), <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/11/a-false-paradigm>.

and socially beneficial as the most effective foundation of morals. This is why in the nineteenth century the denial of human nature did not usually take the political significance it has today.

These observations raise obvious historical questions. When did this anti-Platonic turn begin? What propelled it? How did the denial of human nature come to take moral and political significance? These questions drove much of the reflection of Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce (1910–1989). Following his typical *modus operandi*, he did not tackle human nature as a metaphysical question directly, but rather “discovered” it starting from essentially ethical-political concerns. His intellectual journey started during World War II as an attempt to understand the roots of the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century. In that context, already in 1946 Del Noce identified the postulatory negation of a specifically human nature as a turning point of modern philosophy, and pinpointed its first rigorous theorization in the works of a young Karl Marx.⁴ In the following years he argued that this negation was playing a major role, against the intentions of Marxist thinkers themselves, in the rise of a radically secular neo-capitalist “non-society” that embraced an instrumentalist concept of reason and radically rejected the ideal and religious dimension of reality.⁵

Del Noce’s emphasis on the role of Marxism in what I called the “anti-Platonic turn” in Western culture is original, and opens up an unconventional perspective on recent cultural history. It calls into question the widespread narrative that views bourgeois liberalism, rooted in the empiricist and individualist thought of early modern Europe, as the lone triumphant protagonist of late modernity. While Del Noce fully recognizes the ideological and political defeat of Marxism in the twentieth century, he argues that Marxist thought left a lasting mark on the culture, so much so that we should actually speak of a “simul-

4. Augusto Del Noce, “La ‘non-filosofia’ di Marx e il comunismo come realtà politica” [Marx’s “non-philosophy” and Communism as political reality], in *Il problema dell’ateismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1964), 213–66 (hereafter cited as *IPA*).

5. See some of the essays in Augusto Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015); see also his *The Age of Secularization* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017) (hereafter cited as *TCM* and *TAS*, respectively).

taneous success and failure" of Marxism.⁶ Whereas it failed to overthrow capitalism and put an end to alienation, its critique of human nature carried the day and catalyzed a radical transformation of liberalism itself. In Del Noce's view, the proclaimed liberalism of the affluent society is radically different from its nineteenth-century antecedent precisely because it fully absorbed the Marxist metaphysical negations and used them to transition from a "Christian bourgeois" (Kantian, typically) worldview to a "pure bourgeois" one.⁷ In the process, it tamed the Marxist revolutionary utopia and turned it into a bourgeois narrative of individualistic liberation (primarily sexual).

In this article I will examine Del Noce's historico-philosophical analysis of the role of Marxism in the modern eclipse of the classical idea of human nature. In the first part, I will review Del Noce's interpretation of young Marx's philosophy as the prototype of the transition from the naturalistic scientism of the eighteenth century to the postulatory and political denial of human nature. In the second part, I will discuss why, in his view, Marxism was instrumental in making such denial dominant in Western culture after World War II. To conclude, I will briefly compare Del Noce's position with interpretations that associate today's moral landscape primarily with the heritage of "liberalism."

MARX'S CRITIQUE OF THE IDEA OF HUMAN NATURE

According to Del Noce, one can truly grasp Marx's rejection of the idea of a common human essence only by understanding precisely the nature of his atheism. Marx was part of a broader effort by nineteenth-century thinkers to "think the French revolution," perceived as a radical and irreversible break with the past, and the core principle of his thought—clearly expressed in his youthful *Manuscripts* and especially in the *Theses on Feuerbach*—is the "rejection of every form of dependence and thus the extinc-

6. TCM, 65.

7. See, e.g., Augusto Del Noce, "Marxism Died in the East Because It Realized Itself in the West," *Church Life Journal* (January 16, 2020), <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/marxism-died-in-the-east-because-it-realized-itself-in-the-west/>.

tion of religion, since God is the archetype of a worldly lord.”⁸ More than lack of belief, his atheism is a conscious and absolute rejection of God, even as a question. This had already been observed by Maritain,⁹ but Del Noce disagrees with his explanation.¹⁰ Whereas Maritain views Marx’s atheism as a moral reaction against the hypocrisy of bourgeois Christianity, epitomized by the philosophy of Hegel, Del Noce interprets it as constitutive of a rigorous process of thought which starts precisely from Hegel, in his capacity as the final and most important representative of metaphysical rationalism.

By rationalism Del Noce intends the general philosophical attitude that *denies the transcendent*¹¹ (the mystery, the supernatural) in order to bring “religion within the boundaries of reason” and free it from superstition. The fundamental postulate of a rationalist philosopher is “the simple assumption that man’s present condition is its *normal* condition,”¹² which in religious terms means rejecting the doctrine of original sin. In Hegel this rejection coincides with affirming the *naturalness of death*, which Alexandre Kojève famously recognized as the existential core of Hegelianism (“only a mortal being can be free”).¹³ According to Del Noce, Marxian atheism

presents itself as the terminal stage of a process of thought which is initially conditioned by a negation *without proof* of the possibility of the supernatural. . . . If we call this initial negation of possibility “rationalism,” we can say that atheism has the function of highlighting its original option, the denial without proofs of the *status naturae lapsae*.¹⁴

8. TCM, 62, and references therein.

9. Jacques Maritain, “The Meaning of Contemporary Atheism,” in *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952).

10. IPA, 335ff.

11. Regarding Del Noce’s interpretation of modern rationalism as negation of transcendence, see Michael Hanby’s perceptive comments in “After the Fall,” *First Things* (October 20, 2016), <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/10/after-the-fall>.

12. IPA, 289–90.

13. Alexandre Kojève, “The Idea of Death in the Philosophy of Hegel,” trans. J. J. Carpino, *Interpretations* 3, no. 3/2 (1973): 114–56.

14. IPA, 355–56.

At the terminal stage, the rationalist postulate of the normality of the human condition, which earlier on had led to deism or idealism, leads to Marx's *postulatory atheism*. God is not denied on the basis of some newly acquired scientific knowledge or metaphysical argument; rather, God *cannot* exist, because if he existed man could not be free.¹⁵ However, Marx operates within a post-Christian framework, and so he inevitably thinks of man as transcending the natural world. Thus, his rejection of God cannot take the form of a reabsorption of humanity into the cosmos, *à la* ancient paganism; instead, it must coincide with a deification of man, or, to be more precise, with a reclaiming by man of the attributes that he previously "alienated" to God. As a result, Marxism is also the first fully developed form of *positive atheism*. Earlier forms of atheism, such as those found in the *libertinage érudit* of the seventeenth century and in the anti-religious thinkers of the Enlightenment, were essentially negative in the sense of being pessimistic and potentially nihilistic. The negation of God coincided with the affirmation of the fundamental meaninglessness of the human condition, and therefore atheism was "a philosophy of human misery." Del Noce claims that negative atheism ultimately "goes through a cycle that leads it to shed progressively its atheistic character, and to reconcile with religious thought."¹⁶ Conversely, Marx aims to show that

misery is not an ineliminable aspect of the human condition, but rather the force that can give rise to a new order which contains "the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man—the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution." . . . The odyssey of history must lead to "total man," meaning man who is pure greatness, divinized man, man now master of his destiny.¹⁷

15. See, e.g., Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, ed. Dirk Struik, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 144.

16. *IPA*, 375. According to Del Noce, this trajectory is exemplified by authors like Giacomo Leopardi and Simone Weil.

17. *IPA*, 374, quoting Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 135.

Now, the positive-atheistic reinterpretation of the rationalist denial of the *status naturae lapsae* is, ironically, what leads in Marx to the abolition of the idea of human nature. Like Hegel, Marx wants to achieve a “reconciliation with reality,” meaning a situation in which the historical human world is entirely self-sufficient, without any need for a separate, transcendent infinity. However, Hegel’s identification of the real and the rational is not acceptable to Marx because its political outcome is inevitably *conservative*. This is the case because the reconciliation with reality takes place at the level of *comprehension* and ends up justifying the existing order as the necessary outcome of the becoming of the Spirit. The only possible political expression of the Hegelian system is the “end of history.” But Marx, as a positive atheist, wants to change the world, not comprehend it, and the only way to do so is by shifting the reconciliation with reality from the level of comprehension to the level of *praxis*. This requires eliminating what Del Noce regards as the Platonic element that still remains in Hegel, namely, the belief in a universal rationality, albeit made completely immanent in the process of history. The existence of a Logos is ultimately incompatible with human political self-creation, and therefore

Marx’s attempt at reaffirming the unity of rational and real cannot take any other route but that of a radical *atheologization of reason*. Consequently, man is no longer measured by reason, by the presence of the universal, of the value, of the idea of God, etc., with all the dependent gnoseological and ethical categories (interiority, and its practical translation into the category of the “private”), but *man is the measure of reason*.¹⁸

Thus, in Marx, rationality is no longer the capacity to perceive universal truths but becomes entirely instrumental, one of many tools that man uses to create a human world.¹⁹ But clearly the atheologization of reason cannot spare human

18. *IPA*, 244.

19. Notice that this vision determines a more radical form of *scientism* than that of the Enlightenment, not only because it claims full jurisdiction on the human-social sphere, but also because it totally repudiates the *contemplative* aspect of science (the possibility of *scientific truth*) in favor of pure instrumentalism.

nature itself, because “if the essence ‘man’ is no longer antecedent to existing man . . . we cannot speak of human *nature*, given the process of human self-creation and self-transformation.”²⁰ Indeed,

how can one reconcile the *reality of the rational* with its *radical atheologization*? Evidently, for Marx there is only one obligatory route, the critique of the essence “man,” of *human nature*, the thesis that *being man belonging to a determined historical situation* exhausts *being human*. We can also say that man is thus reduced to a moment in the process of praxis. . . . An immediate consequence of this critique of the essence “man” is the critique of self-consciousness: thought does not *reveal* anything and reduces without residue to *practical* thought, to activity that transforms reality.²¹

This critique coincides with the abandonment of what Del Noce regards as the common thread that runs through classical and European philosophy “from Plato to Hegel,” namely the idea of *participation*, the notion that human individuals think by participating in a common *Logos*. By doing so, Marx “dissolves the concept of ‘human nature’ and resolves man in the complex of its social relations. . . . What does man become if we deny the idea of participation in a higher universal reason? He becomes practical-sensitive activity.”²² Elsewhere he says,

If man thinks not as a participant in reason, or at any rate in a universal essence, but as man belonging to a given historical situation, the figure of the “social man” in the specifically Marxist sense of this term arises. Moreover, with the disappearance of the idea of participation thought loses all revelatory character and becomes activity that transforms reality: “In practice man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the ‘this-sidedness’ of his thinking.”²³

20. IPA, 244.

21. Ibid., 279–80 (emphasis original).

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 245, quoting Marx’s second thesis in *Theses on Feuerbach* (Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* [New York: International Publishers, 1941], 82).

An immediate consequence is that philosophy cannot be distinguished from ideology, that is, from “practical” political thought aimed at social transformation. The Marxist abolition of the Logos “elevates politics to the status of true philosophy; indeed, if rationality is purely instrumental, the highest form of reason is political action,” because “politics does not intervene after philosophy in the sense of posing itself the problem of the practical incarnation of a model which, in turn, has been deduced from a conception of the world.”²⁴ Therefore politics, like atheism, becomes *absolute* in the etymological sense of the word, and “the value of a philosophy is measured by its historical result.”²⁵

“Marxist political practice, too, becomes intelligible only in reference to the fundamental critique of human nature”²⁶ because

the category of persuasion is tightly linked with Platonic-Christian anthropology, with the thesis of the presence in every man of the idea of God as foundation of his transcendence with respect to history, of his freedom; hence, social change will be possible as a consequence of man’s change (of his conversion, of the reawakening in him of the idea of God); the movement must go from man to society. But in the Marxist position there is no essential man prior to the existing man: therefore man’s change will be a consequence of social change.²⁷

Consequently, ethics is absorbed into politics in a very particular way. Instead of being “a recognition of the *ideal* community to which both I and the other belong,” political ethics is the recognition “that the affirmation of my freedom [my *liberation*: it is evident that Marxism implies the replacement of the idea of freedom by that of liberation] necessitates the freedom of all. . . . The liberation of others does not present itself to me as a moral duty; it is one moment of my own liberation, if my nature is social, if, in short, the relationship with society is constitutive of my nature.”²⁸

24. IPA, 249.

25. Ibid., 281.

26. Ibid., 282.

27. Ibid., 252–53.

28. Ibid., 251–52.

In summary, Marxian anthropology is rooted in a theory of knowledge (end of philosophy as comprehension, denial of participation, reduction of reason to pure instrumentality), which in turn is at the service of a moral-theological decision: positive atheism, “the negation of the independent metaphysical origin of spirit and reason, from which follows the reduction of thought to an instrument of production, to technical intelligence.”²⁹ Del Noce describes this anthropological shift (following Max Scheler) “as the replacement of the idea of *homo sapiens*, who is characterized by his participation in the Logos, by the idea of *homo faber*. This replacement leads to the negation of the idea that there is a human nature and to the affirmation that praxis is the measure of truth.”³⁰

I think it would be easy to show that the process described by Del Noce is still operative in today’s post-Marxist denials of human nature, like post-structuralism, postmodernism, critical theory (in its queer-gender-feminist versions), etc. They, too, are generally founded on the postulate of the possibility of human self-emancipation, which forces them into anti-essentialism and praxism, which in turn leads to the absolutization of politics and the triumph of ideology. It is legitimate to ask, however, whether in all these cases the final outcome matches the initial aspiration, or whether, instead, “the eclipse of authority does not coincide at all with the advent of liberation, but rather with that of power.”³¹ That this is the case can be verified, in Del Noce’s view, by observing the historical effects that “old” Marxism already produced, and by realizing that they contradicted its expectation of liberation by an intrinsic philosophical necessity that also dooms its successors. This is the topic of the next section.

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY AS THE “DECOMPOSITION” OF MARXISM

While the atheologization of reason and the consequent abolition of human nature are the core philosophical doctrines of

29. *TAS*, 206.

30. *TCM*, 12.

31. *Ibid.*, 229.

Marxism, in Del Noce's view they do not exhaust it as a spiritual phenomenon, and do not fully account for its historical impact. In Marx the absolutization of politics is accompanied by faith in the coming of the *revolution*, the self-redeeming action whereby mankind will liberate itself from its alienated image (God). Thus, Marxism marks also the culmination of what Del Noce calls "revolutionary thought," which had its first theoretician in Rousseau. According to this thought, the revolution

is an ideal category which is reached through a philosophical process. It means the liberation of man, via politics, from the "alienation" imposed on him by the social orders that have been realized so far, and rooted only in the structure of these orders. Therefore, it implies the replacement of religion by politics for the sake of man's liberation, since evil is a consequence of society, which has become the subject of culpability, and not of an original sin. As varied as the forms of revolution, understood in this sense, can be, their common feature is *the correlation between the elevation of politics to religion and the negation of the supernatural*.³²

The *religious* significance of the Marxian revolution is manifested by the fact that "revolution represents a transition not just from one social situation to another, but from one stage of mankind to another" and "is aimed at building a new humanity or a totally other reality."³³ In agreement with Eric Voegelin, Del Noce attributes to Marx a gnostic type of religiosity³⁴ in which the "true God" of the gnostics is replaced by "the world to come," where every form of dependence will be eliminated and humanity will be radically transformed, reclaiming for itself all the characteristics that it had "alienated" in God. This religious aspect is essential in order to understand why Marxism, unlike other philosophies of history in the nineteenth century (e.g., Hegel's and Comte's), did not remain confined to cliques of intellectuals but was capable of starting mass political movements. "The unique feature that characterizes Marxism in the history of thought is this: it is modern philosophy in the aspect in

32. IPA, 361–62.

33. TCM, 62–63.

34. See TCM, essays 2, 5, and 12.

which it presents itself as secular (that is, as surpassing transcendent thought), which makes itself a religion.”³⁵ It makes itself a religion, of course, as “rigorous atheism,” but a religion nonetheless in the sense of carrying a “messianic expectation” of a radically new world.

This “religious” aspect reintroduces in Marxism a peculiar type of ethical normativity, which replaces the traditional one based on participation. Namely, in Marx we find, possibly for the first time, the “morality of the direction of history” whereby we achieve our liberation by participating in the irresistible revolutionary flow of the historical process, as interpreted by “the Politician or, if you prefer, the State, the Party, which has not only the right, but the duty to strike at the individuals who oppose it, because by doing so it executes against them the verdict that history has pronounced.”³⁶ Revolutionary religiosity even brings back a form of transcendence, except in the purely “horizontal” and historical sense that the revolution will mark a radical break in human experience and bring about an entirely new world, one that is completely indescribable in terms of the categories of the old world.

It is crucial to understand, however, that there is a profound tension between the “secular” and the “religious” aspects of Marxism. Already in the early 1960s, at a time when political Marxism was again on the ascent in Europe, Del Noce recognized that in Marxist culture the atheologization of reason was by necessity undermining the revolutionary religiosity, and that as a result Marxism was bound to be a *transitional* stage in the trajectory of European secularization. Because the two aspects are ultimately incompatible, Marxism was fated to undergo a *decomposition*. On the one hand, the atheologization of reason and the abolition of human nature would aid the rise of a more radical form of bourgeois culture, which would inherit and purify all the features of the “social man” (relativism, scientism, politicalism), while rejecting Marx’s romantic and Promethean aspirations. On the other hand, revolutionary politics would continue, if at all, as an essentially irrational impulse, an empty “rebellion

35. *TAS*, 237.

36. *IPA*, 518.

against reality”³⁷ that could only help the further dehumanization of a “pure bourgeois” world.

According to Del Noce, this decomposition of Marxism was the philosophical background of the formation of the “affluent society” that emerged in the West after World War II. As he recalled in a talk in 1989,

In the Western world Marxist culture, during its revival after the Second World War, produced nihilism; the nihilism of Western society cannot be explained without referring to this repercussion of Marxism. Perhaps Marxist culture was not alone in promoting it, but it had a primary and decisive role in this phenomenon.³⁸

This was particularly obvious in countries like France and Italy, where political Marxism was strong and the Marxist cultural hegemony among the intellectuals was even stronger. Paradoxically, the years in which Marxist ideas were most influential saw also the great expansion of consumerism, the weakening of traditional morals and the takeoff of the sexual revolution. The Marxist critique of religion, the family, and liberal education, far from bringing about the revolution, greatly facilitated the expansion of capitalism.

However, in Del Noce’s view, the decomposition of Marxism was a broader phenomenon that also affected countries like the United States, whose relationship with Marxism was mostly conflictual. This happened because around 1960 the Western elites made a conscious decision to compete with Communism “on the ground of a greater secularity,”³⁹ by emphasizing individualism, technical progress, material well-being, and sexual freedom. Thus, Marxism as a geopolitical adversary became the catalyst for the birth of what Del Noce calls “Occidentalism,” an “involution of modern immanentistic culture that has taken place ‘after’ and ‘against’ Marxism.”⁴⁰ What defines this after-and-against symbiotic relationship between Occiden-

37. TCM, 258–59.

38. *Ibid.*, 83.

39. *Ibid.*, 121.

40. *Ibid.*, 123.

talism and Marxism is precisely the fact that Occidentalism rejects the religious aspect of Marxism (the revolutionary faith) but fully adopts its core metaphysical doctrines (instrumental reason and the anthropology of the *homo faber*). It is in this sense that near the end of his life Del Noce spoke repeatedly of a “victory of Marxism,”⁴¹ precisely at the time when Communism as a worldwide political movement was collapsing. Earlier on he had already defined the contrast between the traditional worldview centered on the idea of participation in the Logos and the instrumentalist conception by setting in opposition “Europe” (which had developed out of the Platonic tradition) and the “West.”⁴² In his last published writing, a week before his death and a few weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall, he came to the following startling conclusion.

The West is Marxism's full secularization, as well as its perfect realization. It is Capitalism that absorbs Communism, using it to erase religious sacredness and national sacredness, a goal it could not have reached in any other way.⁴³

We might add: using it to erase the idea of human nature as participation in the Logos and openness to transcendence, a goal that would also have been much harder to reach without the aid of the Marxist revolutionary myth and its descendants (especially the myth of sexual liberation from repression, which Del Noce regarded as bourgeoisified Marxism *par excellence*). In Del Noce's view, this unintended outcome of Marxism (which he famously called a “heterogenesis of ends”) is a tragic destiny that must befall the modern political left again and again, to the extent that it ties itself to philosophical presuppositions that play into the hands of its putative enemy.⁴⁴

41. See, e.g., Del Noce, “Marxism Died in the East”; see also *TCM*, 73–74.

42. *TCM*, 208–09.

43. Del Noce, “Marxism Died in the East.”

44. On this phenomenon, see my “The Dead End of the Left? Augusto Del Noce's Critique of Modern Politics,” *Commonweal Magazine* (April 13, 2018), <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/dead-end-left>.

CONCLUSION

The significance that Del Noce attributes to Karl Marx *as a philosopher* is perhaps the most distinctive feature of his interpretation of modern European cultural history, and he was well aware of the originality of his position. In the 1964 introduction to *Il problema dell'ateismo*, he wrote,

A criticism that will certainly be formulated against me will concern the importance I attribute to Marxism, to the point of viewing it not only as *an essential aspect of the insuperable endpoint of the form of thought I have called rationalism*, but also as an endpoint that must be separated from every combination with other philosophies in order to manifest its full significance.⁴⁵

Del Noce's emphasis on the role of Marxist ideas in contemporary history sets him apart from most traditional reconstructions of the trajectory of secular modernity, which focus on various other seminal moments. The list is well-known: it goes as far back as late medieval nominalism, and includes the Reformation, Cartesian subjectivism, the Baconian *hubris* of science and technology, Lockean liberalism, the Enlightenment, and so on. Obviously, they all were enormously influential cultural phenomena that still shape our worldview. The question raised by Del Noce's work is, so to speak, about their "direct impact" on our world; it can be broken down into two questions, one philosophical and one historical.

The philosophical question is, what are the fundamental philosophical options that shape today's dominant mindset and make it different, say, from that of the nineteenth century, or even the inter-war period? The historical question is, what cultural and political movements brought about the current situation, as opposed to being *affected* by it? When discussing the history of ideas one must try and distinguish what is *new* and *essential* to an epoch from what is merely *persistent* or *accessory*, and also *ideal causation* from *ideal ancestry*. For example, there is no question that contemporary Western culture holds a reduced and individualistic vision of freedom, which can be traced back

45. IPA, 108 (emphasis original).

to early expression in the European seventeenth century, and which reflects deep-seated metaphysical and theological assumptions. But are those the assumptions that define us most deeply and separate us, say, from the Victorians? Do they explain *by themselves*, for example, the most extreme expressions of the sexual revolution? Likewise, there is no question that today's culture is marked by forms of scientism and secularism that first emerged at the time of the Enlightenment. But does that mean that our predicament has been *caused* by the Enlightenment? Does such a claim not leave the real question open, namely, why did Enlightenment ideas become so prevalent again in the second half of the twentieth century, after the century-and-a-half long "Romantic reaction"? As I have tried to show, Del Noce's judgment about the crucial role of Marxism in contemporary history is dictated not by contingent historical concerns (e.g., Communism as a political movement), but precisely by his answers to those two questions.

Philosophically, he thinks that our time is marked most deeply by the triumph of the idea of *homo faber*, who manipulates reality by applying a purely instrumental form of rationality, with no room for an ideal or religious dimension. This "instrumentalist" conception of man stands in radical opposition to the "Platonic-Christian idea of man as image of God"⁴⁶ whereby man thinks by participation in a universal, transcendent rationality, a participation that defines our common human nature. Del Noce maintains that the decisive "anti-Platonic turn" in European thought started in earnest only after the French Revolution, and separated the atheist philosophies of the nineteenth century from earlier forms of secularism. Marx certainly was not the only thinker who radically and explicitly denied the Greek/Christian idea of human nature (Nietzsche did too, although very differently), but he was both rigorous and exceptionally influential in the long run.

Historically, Del Noce thinks that twentieth-century history and its final outcome (today's hyper-bourgeois society) cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the enormous political impact of the philosophies of history of the nineteenth century. In particular, after World War II Marxism

46. *TAS*, 173.

played a major cultural role either directly by cultural hegemony (as in Western Europe), or indirectly as an ideological foe that dictated the terms of confrontation to a culture that was already inclined toward praxism and scientism (in the United States).

If Del Noce is correct, we should be careful about identifying “liberalism” as the main protagonist (or antagonist) of the contemporary cultural drama. First of all, this identification runs the risk of viewing our predicament primarily in political terms, as a clash of political theories, thus missing the deeper division at the level of philosophical anthropology. But even if one correctly understands “liberalism” as the political reflection of an image of man (of an incorrect understanding of the nature of freedom, of a reduced picture of the relationship between Creator and creature, etc.⁴⁷) one still has to ask: did the Anglo-American liberal tradition—broadly identified with Locke and his successors—have the “metaphysical firepower” to lead *by itself* to the modern abolition of human nature and to radical anti-Platonism? Or did it just turn out to be *defenseless* against this development?

Del Noce clearly inclines toward the second assessment, which does not intend to deny that the liberal heritage is a large part of our cultural makeup, but rather that it is not the *only* or even the *most distinctive* element. Occidentalism is really a “hybrid” worldview that resulted from the insertion of Marxist and post-Marxist features into the older liberal framework. It claims to be liberal because it preserves historically liberal elements such as individualism, the language of rights, the reduction of freedom to *libertas minor*, the conceit of a metaphysically neutral polity, etc. But at the same time it has shed all the elements of liberal thought that still somehow reflected the Platonic/Christian worldview—e.g., references to natural law, secularized Christian ethics, political anti-perfectionism, freedom of religion—and replaced them with opposite elements—the rejection of normative human nature, *ir-*

47. For a lucid critique of the implicit philosophical anthropology of Lockean liberalism and its descendants, see David L. Schindler, “The Repressive Logic of Liberal Rights: Religious Freedom, Contraceptives, and the ‘Phony’ Argument of the New York Times,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 38, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 523–47. On the same topic, see also two recent books: D.C. Schindler, *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), and Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

religious atheism, the absolutization of politics both in revolutionary and technocratic forms, aggressive secularism—which can easily be traced back to Marxism, albeit mediated by post-Marxist and scientistic schools of thought (Freudo-Marxism, structuralism, the human sciences, etc.). This replacement explains why contemporary secular culture displays totalitarian tendencies⁴⁸ that would have deeply shocked older liberal thinkers.

This hybrid worldview, then, should be engaged differently than the secular liberalism of the nineteenth century. For example, there is little point in focusing on the relationship between temporal and spiritual powers, which so often preoccupies certain recent neo-integralist Catholic literature. Occidentalism does not stem from an incorrect understanding of the relationship between the Church and the State, or, more generally, of what we collectively owe to the truth and what we owe to personal freedom (which was, at bottom, the “old liberal question”). Occidentalism holds an incorrect idea of humanity, and its critique cannot be carried out at a merely political level, but involves a reenactment of the Socratic-Platonic discovery of the soul, a sort of *anamnesis* of the human, so to speak.⁴⁹ At root, this is not a merely philosophical task, because it necessarily involves what Del Noce calls a “religious rebirth.”⁵⁰ Nonetheless, at the intellectual level the task of our age is to rediscover “the traditional theses . . . in their authentic meaning, starting from the insuperable contradictions into which the philosophy that claims to have surpassed them must necessarily fall.”⁵¹

48. Regarding Del Noce's ideas about the totalitarian nature of the affluent-technocratic society, see my “Augusto Del Noce on the ‘New Totalitarianism,’” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 323–33.

49. For Del Noce, the exemplary model of this rediscovery was Simone Weil. See *TAS*, 118ff.

50. *TAS*, 152. From the religious standpoint, the atheologization of reason translates into the rejection not just of the religious “answers,” but of the *religious questions* themselves. Whereas eighteenth-century irreligion (both in its atheistic and deistic forms) still operated at the level of comprehension, answering metaphysical and religious questions and thus implicitly granting them rational status, Marxism and its descendants reject them *a priori* and interpret them as alienated images of worldly desires. Hence, today any religious rebirth must involve a rediscovery of the religious sense.

51. *TAS*, 155.

These contradictions are not just theoretical, since arguably we have now reached a stage in which instrumentalism, scientism, and politicism are bringing about (by a deep philosophical necessity) widespread institutional disintegration, which is affecting the very institutions on which secular liberalism pinned its hopes for progress: the law, the press, universities, political parties, civil associations, democracy itself. As Del Noce pointed out prophetically in 1975,

The crisis of authority . . . calls into question also the hopes of secular thought in the tradition of the Enlightenment, by raising a question that encapsulates why Nietzsche is still relevant today: whether nihilism might be the endpoint of the ascending line of the Western process of liberation. Indeed, it seems hard to think that we face a crisis of growth when we seem unable to envision any ideal, not even in the distant future.⁵²

His advice, then, was that the most fruitful stance toward secular culture is neither conformity nor mere rejection, but (when possible) a dialogue in which we challenge long-accepted presuppositions by systematically raising the question “why the final result of the thought at the origins of Occidentalism not only differs from what its founders intended, but is the radical opposite.”⁵³ □

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52. TCM, 207.

53. Del Noce, “Marxism Died in the East.”