# THE CRISIS OF MODERNITY

AUGUSTO DEL NOCE

Edited and translated by Carlo Lancellotti

# THE CRISIS OF MODERNITY

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Carlo Lancellotti

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# *Translator's Introduction*

IN HIS WRITINGS, AUGUSTO DEL NOCE quotes more than once a famous line from the preface to Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right:* "philosophy is its own time apprehended in thought."[1] Del Noce certainly disagreed with what Hegel intended to say – namely, that it is "foolish" to think "that any philosophy can transcend its contemporary world" – since he did not doubt that philosophy can achieve timeless and metahistorical truths. Nonetheless, Hegel's sentence can be used, in a different sense, to describe Del Noce's own reflection: as a form of thought deeply engaged with history. Among thinkers of his generation who shared the same classical-metaphysical orientation, Del Noce stands out for his constant effort to discern the connections between social and political developments, on one side, and philosophical and religious ideas on the other. At a time when Western academic culture was starting to be dominated by schools of thought that favoured *prepolitical* explanations – by which I mean, in a broad sense, approaches based on methods borrowed from the human sciences: economics, sociology, psychology, socio-biology, etc. – Del Noce advocated what Renzo De Felice called a *transpolitical* interpretation of contemporary history, in which people's conceptions of the world and of themselves play a significant role. This preference should not be attributed to any kind of a priori idealistic or spiritualistic bias against economic and sociological explanations of historical phenomena. It did reflect, however, Del Noce's judgment that "there is no minute detail of human life that does not reflect or, to be exact, does not 'symbolize' a general conception of life."[2]

1 Georg W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allan W. Wood, trans. Hugh B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21.

2 Augusto Del Noce, "Revolution, *Risorgimento*, Tradition" in this volume, 49.

Del Noce's keen perception of the interplay between "the history of ideas" and "the history of facts" is one of the reasons why, twenty-five years after his death, he remains an original and engaging intellectual figure. In his native Italy he is widely regarded as one of the pre-eminent political thinkers and philosophers of the second half of last century, precisely because of his ability to reconstruct intellectual genealogies and to expose the deep metaphysical premises of social and political movements. His own lifetime (1910–1989) coincided almost exactly with the period 1914–1991 that Eric Hobsbawm called the "short twentieth century." It was marked by the two world wars and by the rise and fall of the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary dream, and of the totalitarian systems that either shared in it or opposed it. Del Noce maintained that twentieth-century history must be understood as a *philosophical history* in a specific and unique way because during that period Western culture was profoundly affected by the philosophies of history of the previous century (Idealism, Marxism, Positivism). These philosophies had become the secular, neo-gnostic surrogate of Christianity for the European educated classes after the French Revolution, and the next century put them to the practical test, bringing to light their ultimate and necessary consequences.

Del Noce himself came of age in a cultural environment dominated by neo-Idealistic philosophy: the Italian intellectual world of the late 1920s, ruled by the duumvirate of Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile. They had recently fallen out because of their radically different responses to the rise of Fascism. Croce had chosen to become the moral and intellectual leader of the opposition to Mussolini, whereas Gentile had become the official philosopher of the new regime. Still, Idealistic culture was to remain the dominant intellectual force in Italy, on both sides of the political divide, until the catastrophe of the Second World War and the advent of the Marxist cultural hegemony after 1945. To Del Noce such a culture felt "totally foreign," as he had occasion to remark many years later.[3] From his mother's side, he was a descendant of an old aristocratic Catholic family from the ancient Duchy of Savoy, and he grew up in its former capital, Turin. For many centuries, this border region had been a cultural meeting point between Italy and France and had carved for itself a small but distinctive spot in the annals of philosophy. During the period before and immediately after the French Revolution, it had produced an important theologian in Cardinal Hyacinthe-Sigismond Gerdil, as well as a world-famous political thinker in Count Joseph de

3 See the interview by Massimo Borghesi and Lucio Brunelli, "Story of a Solitary Thinker," appendix A in the present volume, 265.

Maistre. In the nineteenth century it had been the home of the two major Italian philosophers of the period of the *Risorgimento*, Vincenzo Gioberti and Antonio Rosmini.

Given his background, it was only natural that, as a university student of philosophy in Turin around 1930, Del Noce would turn his attention toward France and become de facto "a 'private' student of the Sorbonne."[4] He wrote his dissertation on the religious interpretation of Descartes in the philosophy of Malebranche, and became acquainted with leading French scholars such as Étienne Gilson, Jean Laporte, and Henri Gouhier. But above all he came in contact with the works of Jacques Maritain, especially *Three Reformers* and *Integral Humanism*. For Del Noce, Maritain was, more than anything else, an example of a philosopher fully engaged with history who had developed a deep and original *non-reactionary* interpretation of the trajectory of the modern world in the light of the classical and Christian tradition. In fact, what most impressed young Del Noce was that Maritain's neo-Thomism was unafraid to challenge secular philosophy on its home turf: that ability to account for the historical development of modernity which was the major claim of the great philosophers of history of the nineteenth century: Hegel, Marx, Comte.

Del Noce's interest in the philosophical underpinnings of modern history was also a reflection of his life-long sensitivity to social and political developments. In the years immediately after his graduation, while he was working as a high school teacher in Turin, he faced the great European crisis of the 1930s. As he would write fifty years later, "Deeply rooted and … well-founded intellectual habits made us recognize Europe as the final fruit of centuries of civilization. But now this very continent was devastated by unprecedented violence. In those years I suffered such contradiction to an extreme degree …"[5] What was worse, "the various fashionable philosophies of that period seemed to me attempts to accommodate violence." Del Noce's intuition was confirmed "by the outcome of the Second World War and by the advance of revolutionary violence, no longer described as barbaric … a form of thought spread that replaced the type of the philosopher with the one of the revolutionary. It absorbed ethics into politics, or denied … that any values are absolute, since all of them are covers for class interests and the will to power." As a result of the war, large parts of the European intellectual class shifted from Idealism and historicism to Marxism. Also, many Catholics concluded that the defence of civilization against Fascist and Nazi barbarism

4 Ibid.

5 From "Violence and Modern Gnosticism" in this volume, 38.

required a reconciliation (or even a synthesis) between Christianity and Marxism. Del Noce himself was initially tempted by this idea, which seemed consistent with some aspects of the thought of Maritain. However, he felt a deep uneasiness toward Marxism on *moral* grounds because he could not accept the notion that violence is justified for the sake of the revolution.[6] This situation led him to study systematically the writings of Marx, especially Marx's youthful philosophical works, which had been discovered and published for the first time in the late 1920s.

Del Noce's study of Marx's philosophy – culminating in his 1946 essay "La 'non-filosofia' di Marx,"[7] later re-published in the book *Il problema dell'ateismo*[8] – marked a turning point in his intellectual journey. The position of the "Catholic Left" was predicated on the notion that atheism is an accessory element of Marxism, and that the core of Marx's thought is a socio-political analysis that can be separated from the "religious" aspect and used in order to fight Fascism and promote social justice. Del Noce realized that, on the contrary, all of Marx's thought is a consistent development of the radical *metaphysical* principle that *freedom requires self-creation*, and thus the rejection of all possible forms of dependence, especially dependence on God. Therefore, Del Noce came to see that in Marx "atheism … is not the *conclusion* but rather the *precondition* of the whole system."[9] For this reason, Marx's philosophy (and not his political or economic theories) is a crucial node of Western cultural history. On one side, it is the fully consistent and irreversible endpoint of the evolution of European rationalism since Descartes. On the other, it is the origin of the idea of "total revolution" that shaped the history of the twentieth century, namely "the promise … of a new situation of mankind in which the problem of God will no longer arise."[10] An important corollary of this idea is that ethics must be subordinated to the progress of the revolution, and not vice versa. This realization led Del Noce to reject for good the possibility of a Catholic-Communist alliance.

6 Regarding the moral starting point of Del Noce's philosophy, see again "Story of a Solitary Thinker," and also the article by Massimo Borghesi, "Augusto Del Noce: Non-Manichean Thinking," *30Days*, no. 10/11 (2009): 50–9.

7 Augusto Del Noce, "La 'non-filosofia' di Marx e il comunismo come realtà politica" [Marx's "non-philosophy" and Communism as a political reality] in *Il materialismo storico. Atti del I congresso internazionale di filosofia* [Historical materialism. Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Philosophy] (Milan: Castellani, 1947), 357–88.

8 Augusto Del Noce, *Il problema dell'ateismo* [The problem of atheism] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1964).

9 Augusto Del Noce, "Authority versus Power," 202, in this volume.

10 Ibid.

In the postwar years, Del Noce actively pursued his scholarly career in non-academic institutions (think-tanks, publishing houses), producing a large number of publications. In 1964, he collected some of them in his first book, *Il problema dell'ateismo,* dedicated to the trajectory of modern rationalism. In it Del Noce argues that historically the core assumption of post-Cartesian rationalism was the rejection of the *status naturae lapsae*, which over time developed into rejection of religious transcendence altogether. However, since this rejection cannot be proven, modern philosophy must justify itself as the outcome of an irreversible process of secularization; its criterion of truth is its own ability to surpass and integrate all previous forms of thought, as exemplified by the Hegelian system. Therefore, periodization of the history of philosophy becomes a crucial *theoretical* question. Neo-Idealistic philosophers downplayed the philosophical significance of atheistic thinkers like Marx and Nietzsche in order to depict the history of modernity as an organic, unitary process toward immanentism, claimed to be the philosophical fulfillment of Christianity. On the contrary, Del Noce regards atheism as a protagonist in the development of modernity, which appears at the end of every major cycle of European thought: Bruno at the end of the Renaissance, the libertines at the end of Cartesianism, de Sade at the end of the Enlightenment, Marx and Nietzsche at the end of classical German philosophy. However, a correct assessment of the role of atheism in the history of modern thought shows that it is not the necessary outcome of modernity but rather a problematic outcome, inasmuch as it does not lead to the promised fulfillment but rather to forms of nihilism. On the other hand, according to Del Noce, modernity includes a second, largely forgotten, line of development, not from Descartes to Nietzsche but from Descartes, through Vico and Pascal, to Rosmini, which does not conclude in nihilism but in the rediscovery and purification of classical metaphysical thought.

Del Noce also included in *Il problema dell'ateismo* some of his essays on Marx, in which he affirms the *philosophical* potency of Marxism, as the ultimate expression of European rationalism and the manifestation of its crisis. On the one hand, with Marxism, modern secular thought made itself a (atheistic) religion and reached the masses, thus shaping modern history as the history of the expansion of atheism. On the other, Marxism's success coincided with its decomposition: instead of producing universal liberation, it opened the way to the affluent society, "the society that succeeds in eliminating the dialectic tension that sustains the revolution by pushing alienation to the highest degree."[11] Decades before the end of

11 Del Noce, *Il problema dell'ateismo*, 314.

the Soviet Union, at a time when large segments of the Western intelligentsia still embraced Marxism as "the philosophy of our time,"[12] Del Noce understood that Marxism had been fundamentally defeated because history had refuted its fundamental metaphysical assumption, namely the revolutionary transition to the "new man." However, by infusing Western culture with historical materialism and an attitude of radical rejection of religious transcendence, Marxism had succeeded in its *pars destruens*. As Del Noce would say years later, "Marxism is the *subject* of contemporary history. More precisely, contemporary history is *at the same time* the story of its success and its failure … Marxism did realize itself, but by realizing itself *at the same time* it negated itself … Marxism succeeded in denying that values are absolute, and the nihilism that dominates the Western world reflects this 'success-failure' of Marxism."[13] Marxism paradoxically was instrumental in the rise of a new secular, relativistic, neobourgeois society that accepted all of Marx's metaphysical negations but rejected his religious/messianic message. Del Noce called this process a "heterogenesis of ends," meaning that Marxism was bound to produce the exact opposite outcome of what Marx intended, due to an intrinsic contradiction in its metaphysical assumptions.

In 1965 Del Noce published another major book, *Riforma cattolica e filosofia moderna*, vol. 1, *Cartesio*.[14] It was supposed to be the first in a series of monographs crowning over thirty years of work on early modern French philosophy, but Del Noce was never able to complete the other volumes. In 1964, at the age of fifty-four, he had finally succeeded in negotiating the byzantine mechanisms of the Italian academic hiring process and obtained a permanent academic position at the University of Trieste. A few years later he became a professor at the prestigious La Sapienza University of Rome, where he would spend the rest of his career. In 1966 he also agreed to edit, together with Elémire Zolla, a book series for the Borla publishing house in Turin. This series was called *Documenti di Cultura Moderna* [Documents of modern culture] and gave Del Noce the opportunity to introduce to an Italian readership many prominent contemporary authors who had been more or less ignored by the Italian cultural mainstream, such as Mircea Eliade, Simone Weil, Eric Voegelin, René Guénon, Abraham Heschel, Hans Sedlmayr, and Manuel García Pelayo.

12 A sentence by Jean-Paul Sartre, quoted by Del Noce in "Notes on Secularization and Religious Thought," 273, in this volume.

13 Borghesi and Brunelli, "Story of a Solitary Thinker," 268–9

14 Augusto Del Noce, *Riforma cattolica e filosofia moderna*, vol. 1, *Cartesio* [Catholic reformation and modern philosophy, vol. 1, Descartes] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1965).

In the meanwhile, the 1960s brought new massive cultural and social changes. Just as the old Italian Idealistic culture had been powerless to resist the shift "from Croce to Marx" at the end of the war, Marxism itself proved powerless to stop the advent of the affluent (or "technological") society. Del Noce regarded this shift as philosophically very significant, and wrote several essays on the transformation of Western culture after the Second World War, some of which were collected in the volume *L'epoca della secolarizzazione*[15] in 1970. In his judgment the affluent society is intrinsically totalitarian and anti-traditional because its underlying philosophy is a form of radical positivism that recognizes the empirical sciences as the only valid form of knowledge. Historically, "it is the only possible bourgeois and secular answer to Marxism, and … arises because of an intrinsic contradiction within Marxism itself … [it] defeats Marxism in the sense that it appropriates all its negations of transcendent values, by pushing to the limit … the aspect of Marxism that makes it a form of absolute relativism. This has the result of turning Marxism upside down into an absolute individualism, which serves the purpose of giving the technological civilization the false appearance of being a 'democracy' and the continuation of the spirit of liberalism."[16] *L'epoca della secolarizzazione* also formulates a severe critique of the progressive culture of the 1960s. Precisely because it fails to criticize Marx's metaphysical negations, Del Noce considers progressivism incapable of resisting the growing dehumanization of the technological society. He traces this failure back to an incorrect interpretation of contemporary history. After the Second World War, European intellectuals interpreted Fascism and Nazism as reactionary phenomena and identified them incorrectly with the "European past." But then, in order to exorcise the horrors of totalitarianism, "what had to be rediscovered as a truly modern attitude … was the Enlightenment as a disposition to declare a break with the traditional structures."[17] However, this had to be an "Enlightenment after Marx" and therefore "emancipation from authority and traditions was bound to take place according to the aspect of the Enlightenment that makes negation its dominant character."[18]

The 1970s were a fruitful decade for Del Noce. As a university professor in Rome he had the opportunity to share his ideas with younger people, some of whom became disciples and collaborators. He also participated

15 Augusto Del Noce, *L'epoca della secolarizzazione* [The age of secularization] (Milan: Rusconi 1970).

16 Ibid., 91.

17 Ibid., 48.

18 Ibid., 53.

actively in the Italian cultural and political debate, giving public lectures and publishing numerous articles in various periodicals and on the editorial pages of major newspapers. In 1978 he published one of his best-known books, *Il suicidio della rivoluzione*,[19] in which he argues that the process of "decomposition" of Marxism can already be observed fully at work in the thought of Antonio Gramsci. In a scholarly tour de force Del Noce shows that Gramsci was decisively influenced by Giovanni Gentile's philosophy of the "free act." As a consequence, the Gramscian theory of hegemony, instead of leading to a Marxist revolution, is prone to becoming a tool to establish a radical liberal-bourgeois regime. Del Noce's thesis generated some controversy because in Italy in the 1970s Gramsci and Gentile were considered to be at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum: one a major icon of European Marxism, the other the official ideologue of Fascism. In *Il suicidio della rivoluzione* Del Noce argues that, actually, Gentile's philosophy and Fascism cannot be understood unless one takes into account the decisive formative role of Marxian philosophy for both Gentile and Mussolini.

In 1981 Del Noce published *Il cattolico comunista*,[20] which brought together in a single volume two studies, written several years apart, of the Italian Communist-Catholic movement after the Second World War. Del Noce remained active to the end of his life, and served a term in the Italian Senate for the Christian Democratic Party in the 1980s. Augusto Del Noce died on 30 December 1989, a few weeks after the fall of the Berlin wall had symbolically fulfilled his philosophical prophecy about the inevitable end of the "sacral period of the age of secularization."[21] His last major work was a monograph, *Giovanni Gentile*,[22] published posthumously in 1990. It was only the beginning of a steady stream of posthumous volumes collecting the many articles and essays on various topics that Del Noce had written over the years and never published in book form.[23]

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19 Augusto Del Noce, *Il suicidio della rivoluzione* [The suicide of the revolution] (Milan: Rusconi, 1978).

20 Augusto Del Noce, *Il cattolico comunista* [The Communist Catholic] (Milan: Rusconi, 1981).

21 Del Noce, *L'epoca della secolarizzazione*, 116–17.

22 Augusto Del Noce, *Giovanni Gentile* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990).

23 For bibliographic resources, see the Del Noce Foundation's website, http://www.fondazioneaugustodelnoce.net/.

Producing the first volume ever of works by Del Noce in English requires the translator to answer a very basic question: where to start? The answer, of course, is a matter of priorities. If one were to pick Del Noce's most famous and influential book, the choice would certainly be *Il problema dell'ateismo*. For innovative, in-depth scholarship on cultural history, the choice would probably fall on his studies on Gramsci and Gentile, such as *Il suicidio della rivoluzione*. If one wished to present Del Noce as a political thinker, it would make sense to assemble in a volume his writings on the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century, with a special emphasis on Marxism-Leninism and on the interpretation of Fascism. Of course, an obvious way to introduce Del Noce to the English-speaking world would be by assembling a comprehensive anthology covering all aspects of his work; unfortunately, this is not easy to do, because Del Noce wrote about a great variety of topics and some of his most significant works are either too long or too specialized to be anthologized.

The present book is an attempt at a compromise: it is an anthology, but with a specific thematic focus. In consultation with scholars both in Italy and in the United States, I have assembled a selection of essays and lectures on the cultural history of the twentieth century, with a special emphasis on secularization and the sexual revolution. This strategy has several advantages: these topics are of interest to a broader readership who may not be otherwise interested in the history of Italian (or even European) culture; there is a large choice of texts of reasonable length; these texts are usually not overly specialized; and many of them are still very relevant to our contemporary situation and, in fact, eerily prophetic of the cultural developments of the last few decades. I should also mention that I further restricted myself to works published after 1969. This is an arbitrary dividing line, whose only justification is that in 1970 Del Noce collected his earlier works on these matters in *L'epoca della secolarizzazione*. I initially planned to include some of those essays but soon realized that the resulting book would be too long. Therefore, I decided to start with a collection of post-1969 works, hoping that in the future it would be possible to publish a complete translation of *L'epoca della secolarizzazione* by itself.

The book is divided in three parts plus an appendix. The first part offers a sample of Del Noce's ideas about European cultural history, especially his analysis of the sequence modernity-revolution-secularization and of the role of Marxism in contemporary history. By necessity, the texts in this section are neither fully homogeneous nor exhaustive: they are simply intended to quickly expose the reader to a broad range of ideas that Del Noce discussed at greater length elsewhere.

For example, the first piece, "The Idea of Modernity," is a 1981 lecture in which Del Noce presents concisely some of the theses of his 1963

book *Il problema dell'ateismo*. In particular, he discusses the axiological value of the idea of modernity and the attempt by the "philosophers of divine immanence" to purge atheism from the history of philosophy. He argues that if atheistic thinkers are given their rightful place in the history of European thought, the neo-Hegelian scheme of a unitary process from "transcendent" to "immanent" Christianity falls apart. One is then left with the familiar progression "from Descartes to Nietzsche," which ends in nihilism. Del Noce disagrees, however, with the "anti-modern" stance that regards nihilism as the unavoidable outcome of modernity. To him modernity is an "ambiguous" phenomenon, whose ambiguity can already be observed in Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Descartes's systematic doubt differs from the libertines' doubt because it affirms the reality of freedom, which is necessarily (but problematically) a "religious" element. Del Noce is convinced that this was the origin of a second line of "modern" thought, which led to a rebirth of classical metaphysics in the French-Italian tradition, culminating in the works of Antonio Rosmini.

Nihilism as a possible outcome of modernity is the subject of the second essay, "Violence and Modern Gnosticism," also based on a lecture (from 1979). The choice of topic was probably motivated by the spasms of Marxist-inspired violence that were convulsing Italy in the late 1970s. It is a deeply autobiographical piece in which Del Noce recalls his experiences as a young man in the 1930s. According to Del Noce, the "eclipse of ethics" associated with revolutionary violence reflects "a gnostic structure of thought" that must be traced back to classical German philosophy. Neo-gnosticism played a decisive role in the process of Western secularization, which was originally a *secularization of gnosticism* inasmuch as "the 'totally other' reality … which for a gnostic lay beyond the empirical world, for a modern revolutionary lies instead in the future."[24] However, when the revolutionary dream fades away, secularized gnosticism takes a libertine form, which is accompanied by a different type of violence: the self is "experienced as a commodity" and "we reach the highest degree of reification; the reduction of people to objects becomes universal." "Making reification universal is clearly the same as denying ethics altogether, and elevating the economic dimension to an absolute … total reification … coincides with extreme greed for things (and for other people reduced to things). Therefore, violence is absolutely dominant."[25]

24 "Violence and Modern Gnosticism," 40.
25 Ibid., 45–6.

Because I did not intend Marxism per se to be the topic of the book, I did not include any of Del Noce's longer essays on Marxism (or Fascism). However, I did include the first part of a 1972 essay on "Revolution, *Risorgimento*, Tradition" in which Del Noce explores the notion of "total revolution." Starting with Rousseau and Marx, total revolution "implies the replacement of religion by politics as the source of man's liberation, since evil is a consequence of society … and not of an original sin."[26] Del Noce discusses the "conservative" and "reactionary" responses to this "elevation of politics to religion" and finds both inadequate. Neither the conservative critique of utopia nor the reactionary "return to the past" addresses the metaphysical roots of the crisis brought about by the idea of the total revolution. In fact, "it is completely evident that 'value' is the foundation of tradition and not the other way around," and value requires that reason be able to recognize "an uncreated order, the object of non-sensitive intuition."[27] Therefore, the contemporary struggle between a revolutionary left and a conservative right is ultimately sterile because "nations can rise again only by exploring more deeply their tradition, and by criticizing the historical order from the standpoint of an ideal order."[28]

The last two pieces in the first part, "The Latent Metaphysics within Contemporary Politics" and "Secularization and Crisis of Modernity," are lectures (respectively, from 1988 and 1989, shortly before Del Noce's death) in which Del Noce summarized his "transpolitical" interpretation of twentieth-century European history. Del Noce regards Marxism as the prototype of what he calls "revolutionary thought." He uses this formula to express the fact that Marxism was not merely a political doctrine but an all-encompassing world view based on "*the rejection of every form of dependence* and thus the extinction of religion, since God is the archetype of a worldly lord. Hence, the revolution represents a transition not just from one social situation to another, but from one stage of mankind to another … *capable of transforming human nature itself*."[29] Revolutionary thought had first surfaced in Jacobinism during the French Revolution, and had been diagnosed as such by Joseph De Maistre. It then reached its fullest form in Marx, and, according to Del Noce, Marxism (in its Leninist reinvention) has been the protagonist of the historical period after the First World War. In fact, he argues that all other major secular political movements of the twentieth century can be understood only in

26 "Revolution, *Risorgimento*, Tradition," 51.
27 Ibid., 57.
28 Ibid., 53.
29 "The Latent Metaphysics within Contemporary Politics," 62.

reference to Marxism, either as a development (Fascism), as an inversion (Nazism), or as its decomposition (the affluent society after the Second World War). Therefore, "the history of our century represents the complete success of Marxism, in the sense that it really changed the world – and not only the part of the world where Communism succeeded … However, this complete success coincides with its complete defeat because the positions, both theoretical and concrete, that have been taken afterwards by rationalistic-secular thought are aspects of Marxism's decomposition."[30]

The second part is chronologically and thematically homogeneous: it is a group of five essays written between 1970 and 1972 on the development of Western culture after the Second World War, leading to the social and cultural transformations of the 1960s. In these pieces Del Noce writes not only as a historian of ideas but also as a cultural critic and a polemicist. In the background, we can glimpse the dramatic developments of those years: the student protests of 1968–69, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the first rumblings of the extreme left-wing movements that would resort to terrorism in the next decade, the turmoil in the Roman Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council. Del Noce also displays a keen awareness of the advance of the sexual revolution, which at that time was colourfully symbolized by shows like *Oh! Calcutta!* and *Hair*. To him, all these phenomena had deep philosophical significance, and already in *L'epoca della secolarizzazione* he had noted that "1968 … has been the richest year in implicit philosophy since 1945."[31] In his view, the cultural changes of the 1960s cannot be explained just in economic or sociological terms because they reflected a philosophical and cultural shift that had started in the 1950s. Del Noce describes it as a return to the mindset of the Enlightenment combined with a rediscovery of Marx, but Marx separated from his messianic-religious aspect in favour of his materialistic-relativistic aspect. Del Noce refers to this new culture in various ways: progressivism, "affluent" or "technological" or "permissive" society, etc. Here, it is the subject of three essays: "Toward a New Totalitarianism," "The Shadow of Tomorrow," and "Death of the Sacred."

I have included only the first half of "Toward a New Totalitarianism" because the second half contains some considerations about international politics that are now outdated. Del Noce identifies three inseparable aspects in the progressivist phenomenon: "scientism, eroticism,

30 "Secularization and Crisis of Modernity," 73–4.
31 Del Noce, *L'epoca della secolarizzazione*, 13.

and theology of secularization."[32] Scientism is "the 'totalitarian' conception of science, in which science is regarded as the 'only' true form of knowledge." It is the ideology of the affluent society and it is intrinsically totalitarian because it cannot rationally prove its "claim that science rules out all other forms of knowledge, and thus certain dimensions of reality which are declared to be either unknowable on non-existent." Although scientism claims to be morally neutral, it actually "includes as essential a form of morality … (the pure increase of vitality [eroticism]) which is 'absolutely contradictory' with traditional ethics."[33] In the religious domain, theological liberalism is an attempt to mimic the "horizontalism" of science, by shifting the focus of Christianity to "worldly realities."

Historically speaking, Del Noce attributes the rise of the ideology of the affluent society to the combination of two factors. First, progressivism was the result of "a crisis of anti-Fascism." This was already a thesis of *L'epoca della secolarizzazione,* and is the topic of "The Shadow of Tomorrow." Because of their bias toward the axiological value of modernity, Western intellectuals misdiagnosed Fascism and Nazism, not as secondary forms of revolutionary thought but as "reactionary phenomena." Therefore, they interpreted the horrors of the war not as a crisis of modernity itself but as a failure of the European tradition. This led them to rediscover the Enlightenment's "break with the past" and to try to reconcile it with a Westernized interpretation of Marxism. Second, secular progressivism constituted an appealing ideological weapon in the confrontation with the Soviet Union. In "The Death of the Sacred" Del Noce discusses at length why in the late 1950s several cultural trends converged on the idea "of a competition [with the USSR] taking place on the ground of a greater secularity."[34]

Del Noce's assessment of the culture of the affluent society is sharply negative: it is a form of "absolute relativism," it rejects every tradition, it reduces the human person to a "social atom," its final outcome is "systematically organized mendacity" and "universal reification." It is important to realize that Del Noce is no *laudator temporis acti.* In fact, he criticizes the new progressive mindset *for being an essentially conservative attitude,* whose goal is to "absorb and neutralize completely the idea of revolution through progressivism," thus reaching "the highest degree of bourgeois mystification."[35] The reason is that "scientism, in this extremely

32 "Toward a New Totalitarianism," 88–9.
33 Ibid., 90.
34 "The Death of the Sacred," 121.
35 Ibid., 109, 129.

expanded form that claims jurisdiction over all human realities, represents the climax of conservatism because it professes a complete relativism about values."[36] Therefore, it leads to a static society, in spite of the constant advancements of technology, ruled by an "aristocracy of industrialists, bankers, scientists, and technicians" whose task is essentially the indefinite preservation of the economic/bureaucratic *status quo ante*.

The last two essays of the second part, "The Roots of the Crisis" and "The Ascendance of Eroticism," focus on the *permissive* aspect of the "technological civilization." Consistently with his general analysis, Del Noce makes the case that the sexual revolution was not primarily a change in *moral* outlook, because the question of eroticism is first of all *metaphysical*. The idea of indissoluble monogamous marriage "was linked to the idea of *tradition,* which in turn presupposes (since *tradere* means to hand down) the idea of an objective order of unchangeable and permanent truths (the Platonic True in itself and Good in itself)."[37] Therefore, in a scientistic society "*the abolition of every meta-empirical order of truth requires that the family be dissolved.* No *merely sociological* consideration can justify keeping it."[38] Del Noce traces back the history of the permissive mindset to authors who wrote outside the academic establishment, in particular the works of Wilhelm Reich in the 1930s and the Surrealist literature immediately after the Second World War. The reason for his interest in Reich is precisely that, unlike most propagandists of the sexual revolution, he "is a thinker who understands exactly all the implications of the advancement of sexual freedom, and defines precisely all the negations that such freedom implies in the metaphysical-religious domain."[39]

The third part of the volume consists almost entirely of "Authority versus Power," a long essay from 1975 (almost a short monographic book) in which all the threads of Del Noce's reflection in the 1960s and '70s come to an organic synthesis and acquire new philosophical depth. After identifying the crisis of the idea of authority as the defining characteristic of the contemporary Western world, he traces its development across twentieth-century philosophy and culture. Whereas in the classic and humanistic tradition authority was associated with liberation from the power of sub-human instincts and arbitrary social forces, today authority is associated with repression. As a result, Western culture confuses authority and power, with disastrous consequences. On the contrary, according to Del Noce, freedom can be defended only by rediscovering the genuine meaning of authority, which is tightly linked to what he calls

36 "The Shadow of Tomorrow," 107.
37 "The Ascendance of Eroticism," 161.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 165.

the "metaphysics of the primacy of being." The starting point of such metaphysics was the discovery by Greek philosophy of the idea of evidence. Evidence is the foundation and the paradigm of authority because it asks of the mind a more radical submission than could be obtained by force, but in this submission the mind finds its ultimate liberation. Vice versa, "the rejection of authority, understood in its metaphysical-religious foundation, leads instead to the fullness of 'power.' In other words, the opposition authority vs freedom … must be replaced by the opposition authority vs power, where the former has a liberating character and the latter an oppressive one. In fact, it is hard to deny … that the *real* endpoint … of the process of revolutionary liberation leads to the complete dependence of man on society."[40] In order to highlight Del Noce's diagnosis of the political aspect of the crisis of authority, I have also included in the third part the essay "A 'New' Perspective on Right and Left," written in 1970 as an introduction to the Italian translation of a debate between Jean-Marie Domenach and Thomas Molnar, which had appeared the year before in the French journal *Esprit*. Del Noce's contends that after the 1960s the Left was doomed to surrender to a conception of politics as "management technique at the service of the strongest," precisely because it accepted an incorrect metaphysical understanding of the relationship between freedom and Being.

Finally, since Del Noce is not well known to English-speaking readers, I thought it would be useful to include in an appendix a 1983 interview in which the philosopher speaks about his life and work in the context of twentieth-century history. The appendix also contains two additional essays ("Notes on Secularization and Religious Thought" and "Eric Voegelin and the Critique of the Idea of Modernity") that I had originally planned to include in the first part of the book. During the editorial process, I realized that these essays slowed down the "flow" of the volume, by being rather narrowly focused and also somewhat repetitious. Therefore, I decided to remove them from the main body of the book but to make them available in the appendix to readers who may be specifically interested in Del Noce's take on secularization theology or on the thought of Eric Voegelin.

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40 "Authority versus Power," 245.

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# PART ONE

# Modernity, Revolution, Secularization

# 1

# *The Idea of Modernity*

## PART ONE

I will try to summarize as briefly as possible the questions posed by the idea of modernity.

1 Modern comes from *hodiernus*: first of all, the word has a chronological meaning.

2 However, when it is joined to the word "philosophy" or is turned into a substantive by introducing the idea of "modernity," it generally takes an *axiological* meaning. It indicates a "point of no return," that "today it is no longer possible."

3 This raises various questions. (a) What "is no longer possible today?" (b) By what process did the transition from the chronological to the axiological meaning take place? (c) The idea of modernity belongs in the context of a certain historical periodization. What is the role of such periodization in shaping theoretical choices? (d) Does the "critical problem" of today's philosophy – at least regarding its starting point – boil down to casting "doubt" on the usual interpretation of the "idea of modernity?"

4 The answer to (a) is simple: what is excluded is the "supernatural," religious transcendence. Why? I am inclined to define the "modernist" sense of modern philosophy as follows: "A philosophy is modern

This two-part essay was originally published as "L'idea di modernità" in the book of proceedings of the 36th Symposium of the Gallarate Center for Philosophical Studies, *Modernità: Storia e valore di un'idea* [Modernity: History and value of an idea] (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1982), 26–43. Part 1 was Del Noce's introductory remarks to the symposium, Part 2 the final lecture.

whenever it claims not to be a mere actualization of some 'virtuality' of ancient thought, or of the medieval unity of ancient and Christian thought. And when, therefore, in order to place itself within history it must affirm that we have entered a period of philosophical research marked by a sharp break with respect to the Greek and medieval periods, which are thought to have ended." That means: there was a cosmological period which corresponded to ancient philosophy, and Christian philosophy must be interpreted in opposition to it as essentially anthropological. The Middle Ages were characterized by a quest, in vain, to harmonize the Greek and Christian philosophical traditions. In order to satisfy this quest while accepting the categories of ancient thought, the Christian anthropological theme must lead to the idea of the supernatural (spirituality is fully realized only in the beyond, and the present world has meaning only in reference to a world "beyond" which transcends it). Then, the break from which "modernity" begins is the rejection of this compromise.

5 Regarding (b), consider the huge philosophical implications of the standard periodization of the history of philosophy. As Cotta[1] correctly pointed out, relocating the great "breaking point" to the beginning of modern thought, understood as a transition from childhood to maturity, from myth to criticism, implies that "the religious event of the Incarnation stops being regarded as the decisive turning point of historical existence."[2] We often hear that periodization schemes are of a "conventional" and "pedagogical" nature. *It is not true.*

6 The elimination of the supernatural can take various forms. Here I will just mention Hegelianism, which regards modern philosophy as "Christian philosophy," as Christianity expressing itself in philosophical form. It is followed by the transition "from Hegel to Nietzsche," to post- or anti-Christianity, in which atheism (understood in the strong sense that the very question of God disappears) replaces the theory of immanent divinity (in Italy this was the transition from the culture of Croce and Gentile to the secularism that followed it). The next stage highlights the irreversibility of this process and interprets it as the "crisis of the idea of modernity."

1 [TN] Sergio Cotta (1920–2007), Italian philosopher and legal scholar.

2 [TN] Sergio Cotta, "L'idea di modernità" [The idea of modernity], *Studi Cattolici* 235 (1980): 525.

7 The above definition of "modern philosophy" implies a double break with respect to classical and medieval thought. In light of this break we understand the "anti-modern" position, which does not criticize the idea of "modernity" but inverts its axiological meaning, interpreting the development of modernity as a process not toward fullness but toward nihilism. This position can take the form of Catholic medievalism (in which the process of disintegration began with medieval nominalism) or affirm the idea that the error of Western thought already started in Greek antiquity with Plato, and affects the Jewish-Christian tradition. Because these positions lack a critique of the "modernist" interpretation of the development of history, they end up being affected by the same nihilism which they correctly bring into focus.

8 Regarding (c) we must observe that today philosophers practise their trade from within this periodization scheme, which is taken as a fact. For rationalists, certainty about an irreversible historical process toward radical immanentism has replaced what for medieval thinkers was faith in revelation. Notice that for rationalists this is the only reliable certainty after historicism and the critique of evidences.

9 But is this scheme really so reliable? The history of philosophical historiography highlights the stages of development of the idea of modernity (Bayle, D'Alembert, Lessing, and so on). Above all, we must observe that the conception of historical periodization in which the idea of modernity is essential includes a few obligatory steps: (a) the Cartesian beginning of modern philosophy; (b) the idea that "nothing has been lost in the history of thought," formulated by Hegel and by various forms of Hegelianism (all the way to Gentile). What does such preservation mean? It means that the transition from divine transcendence to divine immanence does not deny the idea of God but purifies it, and is verified by this preservation.

Now, I will try to show that precisely the consideration of atheism as the ultimate outcome of rationalism, which goes hand in hand with the consideration of its optional and postulatory nature (it cannot be proved), leads us to drop the idea of a unitary process. It leads us, instead, to recognize two irreducible lines of development within the philosophy of the centuries of the so-called modern age. One goes from Descartes to Nietzsche, the other from Descartes to Rosmini, and this second line is destined to arrive at traditional metaphysical thought and refine it. Therefore, from the standpoint of the general periodization of the history of philosophy we must abandon the notion that the idea of modernity possesses an axiological character. Instead, it must be

regarded as the period in which the phenomenon of atheism manifested itself and burned itself out.

PART TWO

10 I will offer just a few comments about the apparent paradox contained in the final words of the outline I proposed. I said that the consideration of atheism as the final outcome of rationalism, when rationalism is understood as negation of the possibility of the supernatural, leads to the denial of the *axiological* value attributed to the idea of modernity. From the usual perspective, modernity is regarded as the proof, provided by history, of the assertion that thought and civilization develop irreversibly from transcendence to immanence.

11 This makes clear what general conclusion I think must be reached starting from the analysis of the idea of modernity. The verdict will be that after the collapse of what I will show is the last argument that sustains his certainty, namely the ability to understand and explain history, an immanentist thinker is forced to confess that his position cannot be supported by any proof. Thus, the rationalist thinker faces Pascal's wager. Precisely when he pushes his rationalism to the limit he finds himself unable to escape the process of thought which in Pascal begins from the *pari*, the thesis that plays in the economy of Pascal's philosophy the same role that doubt plays in Descartes's thought. Of course, he may well reaffirm his position, but he will have to admit that it is a choice, that he is not obeying an irrefutable rational argument. More generally, I would say the following: at this time in the history of philosophy, the central question to which the critique of the idea of modernity leads us is a deeper understanding of Pascal's wager.

12 Please allow me to try to clarify my statements by citing myself. In my 1964 book *The Problem of Atheism,*[3] which was subtitled *The Concept of Atheism and the History of Philosophy as a Problem,* I discussed the analogy between the *modus operandi* of a medieval Christian thinker and the one of a contemporary secular thinker. The former started from sacred history, which he considered unquestionable. The latter starts from profane history and from the assertion that since the time when the new science was born – with humanism and the Renaissance as precursors – a world has come into being which rises to the dignity of a philosophical event

3 [TN] Augusto Del Noce, *Il problema dell'ateismo* [The problem of atheism] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1964).

because it can find its justification and its self-awareness only in philosophies that break radically away from the supernatural, even if they understand the novelty of Christianity with respect to ancient thought. I added that whereas history of philosophy was born in its first great model as the historical verification of Hegelian philosophy, today, after historicism and the positivist critique of evidences, i.e., after these philosophical trends have led, consistently, to rejection of meta-historical truths, its task has become the opposite. Today, for an immanentist thinker, the criterion of historical validity of a philosophy reduces to its ability to surpass and integrate previous philosophical positions by explaining why they were born. In this sense, today's secularist philosopher not only starts, but is forced to start, from the proposition that "today it is no longer possible." This assertion is obligatory if meta-historical truths are excluded and if this exclusion is viewed as the breaking point between the present and the past of philosophy. For this reason, at that time I had already concluded that the critical problem of contemporary philosophy, at least concerning its starting point, boils down to casting doubt on the standard interpretation of the idea of modernity; or that history of philosophy as a problem must be today's formulation of the critical doubt. In other words, the first theoretical step of today's philosophy must consist in calling into question the common view of the history of philosophy, the one that says that this history, at least after Descartes, can be understood only as a process toward radical immanence. If one looks carefully, what is called into question is not only the modernist view of the history of philosophy – the view that envisions a process toward complete liberation from the mythical mentality – but also the position that is usually called anti-modernistic, which views the developments of the centuries of the modern age as a process toward catastrophe. On this matter, it is easy to point out that these two interpretations disagree only about the judgment of value, and the latter is the mirror image of the former, as Sergio Cotta nicely stated in a recent essay.[4] One should add that the anti-modern line cannot be identified without qualifications with traditionalist Catholic historiography. The Catholic philosophy of history of the nineteenth century did often regard the history of modern philosophy as a unitary process toward catastrophe, which started from medieval nominalism and continued in the three reformers – Luther, Descartes, and Rousseau – as the three originators of pantheism, atheism, and nihilism. Today, however, the anti-modern position has taken a different meaning and has become the history of a

4 [TN] Cotta, "L'idea di modernità," 524.

process of forgetfulness of being, which began with Plato and involves Christianity itself. The current anti-modern stance draws its inspiration from Nietzsche, not as the theorizer of the superman but rather as the thinker who unveiled the will to power as the soul of Western philosophy. As we shall see, the view I propose today intends to go beyond both the modern and the anti-modern position. In some way modern and anti-modern are actually twins, so that sometimes it is hard to distinguish the extreme expressions of modernity from anti-modernity. This is the case of Heidegger.

13 The philosophy of history of the nineteenth century left us as its inheritance the idea of the anthropological turning point,[5] i.e., the interpretation of the historical development of philosophy as oriented toward the radical negation of supra-historical truths or, equivalently, the idea that the general process of history can be understood only through categories developed by immanentist philosophies. According to this form of thought, acknowledging such a state of affairs means being in step with history. Secularist philosophy has shrunk and consumed itself to the point that the apparent irreversibility of such a turning point has become a starting point: today historical periodization has become decisive for theoretical thought itself. Certainly, what I will loosely call a modernist, somebody who thinks that "today it is no longer possible," does not intend to deny the factual reality that other scholars still embrace ideas from the past. Likewise, he does not intend to deny the continued existence of a great historical institution, the Catholic Church. In his view, however, the Church exhausted her civilizing task in the Middle Ages, and this is why those who have fallen behind the progress of history generally look at her, and appeal to her and to the philosophies that she uses in her own defence. But the proof of their present inadequacy lies, supposedly, in the fact that to modernity they can only oppose fruitless negations, or propose eclectic combinations with forms of thought that are not yet perfectly immanentist. Supposedly, the philosophies that present themselves, in the name of values, as modern forms of spiritualism are just instances of eclecticism. In both cases, these thinkers are said to be divided between life, which must conform to the spirit of the new age regardless of their efforts and delusions, and an outdated philosophy. Let this brief comment suffice; this view is too well known to deserve further discussion.

5 [TN] This idea is also discussed by Cotta in "L'idea di modernità," 528.

14 However, even if it may appear that today the secularist spirit has reached its broadest diffusion – to the point that we might think that a new era has begun – and even if it is a fact that many theologians have reformed their doctrines to conform to what is often called the "secular city," from the philosophical standpoint it is reasonable to ask whether we are not witnessing a reversal, so that the idea of modernity is showing its dogmatic side, and critical thinking can only be exercised against such rationalist dogmatism. Thus, we may ask whether today dogmatism does not coincide with rationalist thought. This seems to me the question that philosophical reflection now poses. In fact, this question corresponds to what I said earlier about Pascal's wager rising again.

15 Indeed, let us observe that in our century the rationalist perspective has been formulated in two very different ways. The first position, which was common when I was young, understood the process toward immanence and the essence of secularism in terms of the "death of the transcendent God," of the purification of the idea of God in divine immanence. At the time of Croce and Gentile people reasoned as follows: in the history of philosophy there was a cosmological period which corresponded to ancient thought. Christian thought must be interpreted in opposition to it as essentially anthropological. The Middle Ages were characterized by a quest, in vain, to harmonize the Greek and Christian lines of thought. In order to satisfy this quest while accepting the categories of ancient thought, the Christian anthropological theme must lead to the idea of the supernatural (spirituality is fully realized only in the beyond, and the present world has meaning only in reference to a world "beyond," which transcends it). Modernity marks a major break by fully developing the anthropological theme, so that transcendence pictured as "beyond" is replaced by transcendence within the world. Christianity continues to exist, no longer as a religion but as a philosophy. Here in Italy, Gentile never tired of repeating that the whole history of modern philosophy is a slow, gradual process toward critical awareness of this new position that the human spirit reached with Christianity, precisely as a rational development of the new truth. In fact, what else could be the meaning of the idea of the unity of philosophy and history of philosophy, on which Gentile insisted so much? Those times are far gone, you will say. But the perspective about the idea of modernity remains the same.

16 The second form of rationalism, which became prevalent after the Second World War and has been spreading ever since, speaks of the "death of God." It shifts from divine immanence to radical atheism. It