

Voegelin's Impact on the Italian Response to Modernity: The Parallel Lives and Works of Augusto del Noce and Eric Voegelin

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In 1968, Eric Voegelin's *The New Science of Politics* was published in Italian by Borla, translated by Renato Pavetto, and with an introduction authored by Catholic philosopher Augusto Del Noce (1910-1989) titled "Eric Voegelin e la critica dell'idea di modernità" ["Eric Voegelin and the Critique of the Idea of Modernity"].^[1] The aim of *The New Science of Politics*, Del Noce explained in his introductory essay, was the 'de-mythization' (*demitizzazione*) of the spirit of modernity:

"De-mythization usually means a critique of tradition based on the 'spirit of modernity'. Voegelin's book overturns this standard interpretation: what must be de-mythified is the mentality out of which this very de-mythification originates, i.e. the very spirit of modernity; or, to be more precise, the 'mystique of the New Man,' the idea of a transfiguration of human nature through a process of self-redemption (Grace replaced by the revolution)." (Del Noce, 1968: 9, our translation).

Endorsing the work of Voegelin, Del Noce argued that at the heart of the "spirit" of modernity rested the idea of progress as the un-remitting march towards a brighter future of wealth and emancipation. In this narrative, what came before modernity was condemned as backward and illiberal; and whoever defended what came before modernity would be stamped as a hopeless nostalgic and a reactionary. In short, the essence of modernity was the "critical spirit" of the Enlightenment and its *philosophes*, aiming at undermining Tradition, cleaning it of anything not coinciding with Rationalism and Rationality. In *The New Science of Politics* Del Noce recognized a radical opposition to this self-representation of the 'modern' and to the dominant narrative of modernity.

As one of the most original and incisive voices of post-World War II Italian culture, Del Noce had himself engaged with and radically confronted the question of modernity and the problem of atheism and its relationship with modern thought since the mid-1940s, and systematically since the mid-1950s. He did so without knowledge of Voegelin's work. In a 1961 conference he said, "I think there are interesting ideas in Voegelin's books, but I admit I haven't read them yet" (quoted in Casadei, 1994: 59). In 1964, in his crucial *Il problema dell'ateismo* ('The problem of atheism') Del Noce referred to Voegelin only once. *The New Science of Politics* and Voegelin's insights made a profound impact on Del Noce. And yet, already in the 1950s some of Del Noce's ideas had come strikingly close to those of Voegelin— only to become still closer after their intellectual encounter.

The aim of this article is to present Del Noce's intellectual trajectory, as well as to trace the parallels to Voegelin's work and the direct influence of Voegelin on Del Noce's diagnostic attempts. This influence has barely received any attention in the literature dealing with these two thinkers, and perhaps for some quite simple reasons: Eric Voegelin is not widely known among Italian political philosophers, who have taken up and discussed the work of Del Noce; and Del Noce's work, which has never been translated into English, is generally not known by Voegelin scholars.

Our more specific focus is on how Del Noce came to elaborate a notion of "Catholic modernity" in a way that Voegelin obviously would or could not do, but that he in many ways might have subscribed to. As we will see, Del Noce refused the tale of a singular, unilineal path to modernity based on the Enlightenment model, and articulated an alternative, different modernity similar to the figuration Voegelin once termed a "Mediterranean modernity." This endeavor did not simply mean to accept and embrace modernity in its current shape: it meant, on the contrary, to develop and re-substantiate the modern call to freedom from within a Christian-Catholic tradition.

This exercise required a philosophical-historical re-conceptualization of modernity; it also required the development of a political platform from where such a vision could come to function, steering Italy and political Catholicism in a meaningful direction after the painful experience of Fascism. The attempt to come to terms with and give direction to modernity within Catholic thought in post-World War II Italy happened precisely when Catholics, through the *Democrazia Cristiana* (Christian Democracy), became the dominant political force of Italy and central actors in the process of building a modern mass democracy and welfare state. Del Noce always wanted to understand how Catholics could participate in politics and act in society and history *as Catholics*, with their own identity, novelty, and specificity, and without feelings of inferiority towards other political-cultural positions. Engaging the work of Del Noce and his encounter with Voegelin therefore also means to engage with the tension between politics (democracy) and religion, between the City of Man and the City of God.

Catholic Thought and the Alternatively Modern

The framework of modern thought to which Del Noce from the 1940s tried to find an alternative was the scheme codified by Hegel and idealism and taken over by Marxism, with tenets shared even by Thomistic neo-Scholasticism. According to this dominant narrative, modernity was a period of secularization in which the emancipation and freedom of the human being move in tandem with the estrangement from God and faith. Between 1954 and 1958 Del Noce turned this perspective on its head by recognizing the modernity is not "single," but rather "double" (Borghesi, 2011; Barone, 1995). Driving thus a wedge into the heart and twilight of the modern project, Del Noce cleared an opening from which the modern could be reconfigured and set back on track.

From Descartes follows the strand of rationalism and atheism culminating through the Enlightenment in Hegel and Marx, and in Italy in the Idealism and Actualism developed by fascist prime philosopher Giovanni Gentile. Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy might be

seen as the alternative to—if not the opposite of—Hegel. Yet, according to Del Noce, Nietzsche rather pushes Hegel's philosophy to the extreme, translating the Hegelian radical immanentism into a professed and explicit atheism. Thus, Hegel's rationalism and Nietzsche's irrationalism expressed the very same "larger rupture represented by modernity," where "the transcendence epitomized as a beyond becomes replaced by an intra-mundane transcendence"; in the end the "removal of the supernatural can lead in various directions,"^[2] but this does not mean that any such direction carries its own positivity, nor that it represents a true alternative.

Against the French-German line of thought (Descartes-Hegel-Marx-Nietzsche), Del Noce then retrieves and reconstructs an alternative French-Italian line of interpretation, the line of "ontologism." Del Noce understood this alternative as "the theory which says that the knowing of God, by a vision of an a priori intuition, is the condition that makes possible any knowledge" (Del Noce 2006, 8147)—which alone can guarantee the safeguard of Divine transcendence and the establishment of a Christian philosophy. Such a genealogy begins from the very same point of departure as the French-German narrative: Descartes.

Faced with the enigma of existence and the problem of evil, one is called to a radical option: either one chooses a naturalistic vision, according to which evil is reduced to finitude, or one embraces the religious view, which takes evil back to human choices and sin. Already at the beginning of the history of the West, the myth of Anaximander and that of Genesis present these two alternatives. The issue presents itself again at the beginning of modernity, when Descartes asserts, on the one hand, the subject's centrality and autonomy, and on the other, God's absolute freedom. The first alternative—the philosophy of the subject, whose climax is Hegel, and which finds its actualization in Marx's atheism—denies all transcendence and finds its most consequent formulation in Gentile's absolute idealism. For Del Noce, the failure of Gentile's thought affects this whole line, and opens the way for a retrieval of a religious trend, which is minoritarian but truer—a line that develops on modern grounds the insurmountable legacy of traditional Christian thought.

In this vein, Del Noce sees the possibility of a different "Cartesianism" – an Augustinian, Christian-modern strand – which passes from Pascal, Malebranche and Vico to Vincenzo Gioberti, and culminates in Antonio Rosmini, the thinker in whom Catholicism and freedom found their synthesis and who for Del Noce represents the very zenith of Italian philosophy (Del Noce, 1991). The crucial transition figure here is Malebranche, the focus of Del Noce's doctoral thesis. Malebranche is widely considered the father of modern ontologism, whose influence on Vico and on subsequent Italian philosophy Del Noce considered huge, even if overlooked by philosophical historiography and especially by Gentile. In this way, "the Descartes-Rosmini line has been silenced, and therefore it has been impossible to fully understand the thought of Rosmini" (Del Noce, 1990a: 51).^[3]

The French-Italian Descartes-Malebranche-Rosmini genealogy expresses a personalist interpretation of the modern, which links human freedom to the existence of God, as opposed to the Spinozan-Hegelian line, in which pantheism and atheism culminate in political totalitarianism. Soviet Marxism, Fascism and Nazism are seen as the historical-political consequences of modern rationalism, atheism, and secularization; as such they represent not only the loss of importance of the Sacred in twentieth century culture, but a wider and deeper transformation of the Sacred into the *saeculum*. Hence, totalitarisms are the violent and tragic attempts at a “sacralization of politics,” rising from “cultural climates pregnant with political sacrality and political theology” (Del Noce, 1990b: 297); expressions of a political perfectionism^[4] which considers Evil or the presence of Evil in history, as a “consequence of society” and not as constitutive of human nature, and therefore (allegedly) open to elimination (Del Noce 1973, 49).

Marxism is the final historical-political, pathological fulfillment of modern rationalism, and the final stage of German philosophy: the transition from the Idealistic Hegelian Immanentism to the Historical Materialism and Mass Atheism. Del Noce writes:

“Marxism present itself as the agent that realizes the program of modern philosophy, understood as a combination of rationalism (denial of the supernatural) and a completely secular Christian anthropology that affirms the dominion of man over nature; in short, and coinciding with these two conditions, as a radical humanism.” (Del Noce, 1990b: 238, our translation)

Marxism is the point of arrival of the first modernity, of so-called rationalism, being the most concrete and complete attempt of rationalism, freedom and liberty as a historical experiment that excludes any form of dependency. However, the tradition leading from the Cartesian concept of freedom to atheistic Marxist freedom and rationalistic autonomy of reason is based on a misunderstanding of Descartes’ concept of freedom, deriving mostly from a lack of contextualization of his thought, and to be ascribed to the development taken by seventeenth century philosophical debate. Descartes’ concept of human freedom is not absolute freedom, as in the Marxist perspective. Descartes responded to the cultural crisis of his time, and his polemical target was the skepticism of the libertines.

The kind of certainty that the argument of the *cogito* assures is a polemical certainty against skepticism. Because of the collapse of Aristotelian physics, the skepticism of the libertines was trying to assert the total collapse of any interpretation of the world whatsoever, that is, the dissolution of the idea of truth itself. In this context Descartes should be interpreted in the light of Augustinian thought (*contra academicos*). Descartes constructs a metaphysics of the subject by abandoning the problem of the complex, hierarchical, qualitative Aristotelian structure of the world.

This “Catholic” interpretation of Descartes (Del Noce, 1965) does not go so far as to deny that there are no elements in Descartes’ *cogito* to justify the line of thought of the first modernity. Nevertheless, this interpretation maintains that Descartes is not historiographically reducible to the idea of Cartesianism functional in the first modernity,

and it opens up, philosophically, alternative concepts of modernity, such as a modernity open to transcendence and to Christianity. Modernity, in other words, cannot simply be equated with atheism or with a race towards atheism; it also includes a reaction to this process that deepens the tradition, and the sorting out of two alternative positions: transcendence versus atheism. Atheism is not the destiny of the world, but its problem; and the key to understanding modern man is not Nietzsche's death of God, but Pascal's wager.

In this way, Del Noce opened up a different hermeneutic perspective based on the assumption of homogeneity, and even a fundamental discordance, between the great modern philosophies regarding the problem of atheism. In his view, at stake in the clash between the two schools—both generated by Descartes' thought—passing in one case from Leibniz to Marx and, in the other, from Pascal to Rosmini, through Vico, is an issue crucial not only to modern philosophy but also to the meaning and fate of actuality. He expresses this view in this following lexicon: the question of atheism, he writes, is the most important locus "of contemporary politics itself," and basically "the point of intersection, in our time, between philosophy and life." He continues:

"Reflecting today on historical actuality is not at all tantamount to substituting a study of the external with a study of the ephemeral. Rather, it corresponds precisely to a frequently repeated dictum that the task left to the philosopher today is the deciphering of a crisis." (Del Noce, 1964: 11, our translation)

The problematic picture that thus emerges is anything but homogeneous – and indeed, from the outset is pulled (if not torn) between two logically conflicting requirements: on the one hand, to restore the relationship between theology and philosophy that modernity – or, more precisely, its prevailing interpretation – had severed; and on the other, to spell this out in historically useful terms. Certainly, contrary to the conception interpreted most masterfully by Hegel (taken up again in different ways by the various theorists of secularization), according to which the divine is fully realized in historical becoming, for Del Noce the history of humankind is not capable of accounting for itself. Its truth is external, and presupposed, to a process marked by the sinful presence of historicizing it. The clash that began at the onset of the modern era between the two camps we have described focused specifically on the acceptance, or rejection, of the idea of sin, and therefore of grace, as the only means of redemption from a fallen natural state.

Del Noce's Reading of Maritain and Löwith

One of the intellectual reference points of Del Noce's intense reflections on modernity, and for his search for an alternative to secular modernity was Jacques Maritain. The French philosopher rejected "modernity"—defined as Cartesian and post-Cartesian thought—on the grounds that it rejected the metaphysical pursuit to discover the nature of being in favor of epistemological concerns. In particular, Descartes, in Maritain's reading, introduced a fatal flaw into Christian civilisation, namely by asserting that God cannot be known and that the essence of things is unknowable.[5]

Descartes' 'great error' was in assuming that human reason alone produced but one undifferentiated science, rather than recognizing the different but related 'orders of knowledge' (Maritain, 1953: 9-11). This "scientific imperialism" launched a fatal trajectory in modernity, whereby ontology, and objectivity in philosophy, would be sidelined in favor of an attitude that promoted the independence of human reason from objective truth, which for Maritain is ultimately sourced in God. Modernity made 'divine promises' to man, that "science . . . would liberate man and make him master and possessor of all nature," promising "earthly peace" in "the Kingdom of Man . . . in which we would become the supreme rulers of our own history" (Maritain, 1953: 186).

In *The problem of atheism* (1964), Del Noce continued the reflection on modern thought (and Marxism above all else), engaging in particular with Karl Löwith and his *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (1949). Against Löwith, Del Noce refuses to see Marxism as the secular heir of Hebrew-Christianity-Messianism – or also as a Christian heresy (as in Maritain's philosophy). On this point, Del Noce's distance from Löwith is decisive.

In fact, Marxism preserves Messianism in light of its historicism, with a stance that wants to preserve what was valid in the past; however, in the process leading to "atheist religion" there is no *residual* or *ferment* of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Atheism serves as a mediator between two conceptions denying this tradition in its first assertion – the idea of the dialectic, linked to the mortality of the finite and to the Hegelian reversal of the theme of sin, and the idea of Revolution. To interpret Marxism, for its "theological" aspect of its philosophy of history, as a messianic transfiguration of Hegelianism, and not as a logical-rational process that brings Hegelianism to its consequential extreme, represents in my view an extreme misunderstanding. (Del Noce, 1990b: 64, note 57, our translation)

Influenced by Nietzsche, Löwith does not understand—according to Del Noce—the sharp turn between Christian (Augustinian) theology of history and the secularized modern philosophy of history.[6] To Del Noce, Marxism is an "atheistic religion," or a philosophy rooted in atheism and not in Christianity, Hebraism, and/or Messianism. Marxist revolution, he writes:

"is not to be understood as a reminiscence of the Judeo-Christian eschatological idea, but as the end station of the re-habilitation of human nature proposed by the Enlightenment. Therefore the Hegelian completion becomes with Marx the completion of the illuminist need of an active reason, capable of transforming the world." (Del Noce, 1964: 121-22, our translation)

In other words, Del Noce refuses the equivalence posed by Löwith between atheism, modernity and secularization as the immanentization of Christianity. To Del Noce, modern atheism is not the outcome of secularization (the immanentization of Christianity), but the final result of modern rationalism (the French-German line)—not the secular translation of Christianity but the antithesis of Christianity, the denial of the

need for redemption of the human finitude. Atheism is the translation, rendering and re-interpretation of Christianity into a concept of Evil that is completely detached and unrelated to Christianity.

Del Noce Reads Voegelin

After and thanks to the encounter with Voegelin, Del Noce deepened the analysis of secularization and, crucially, came to embrace the categories of “gnosis” and “Gnosticism.” With the introductory essay to the Italian translation of *The New Science of Politics*, “Eric Voegelin and the Critique of the Idea of Modernity,” Del Noce began his explicit reflection on modernity and secularization as a new Gnosis (Caccamo, 2009; Armellini, 2011; Lami, 2009; Valentini, 2012). His following works and considerations on Marxism and its dissolution, on crisis, on atheism and the process of secularization, on revolution and tradition, on “permissivism” and the “opulent” society will hinge on Gnosis and other ideas of Voegelin.[7]

In fact, it was in the introduction to *The New Science of Politics* that Del Noce provided readers with a clear definition of secularization and its entailing historical periodization:

“Considering ancient and Christian medieval thought as concluded and deprived of meaning, mainstream historical thinking then places a modern thought which retains the Christian transcendence of human being, while expelling the supernatural, becoming thereby intra-mundane.” (Del Noce, 1968: 12, our translation)

Following Voegelin’s analysis (modernity as a derailed form of intra-mundane eschatology), Del Noce held off from uncritically accepting the theory of secularization, for he understood that a “modern” theory of secularization is internal to modernity, an integral part of that spirit of modernity that he (and Voegelin) put under considerable strain. The term “secularization,” Del Noce wrote in the 1980s, “is always to be found in a judgment on contemporary history typically favorable to the Marxist revolution, or to the idea of progress; as a consequence, through the modern age, the mundane character of the world has triumphed” (Del Noce, 1989: 12, our translation).

And yet Del Noce now accepts the concept of “secularization,” which he had refused in his discussion of Löwith. Del Noce will particularly rely on the concept of secularization in the discussion of his new polemical target: the opulent/affluent society, the technological society, which comes after revolutionary Marxism and which he considers the ultimate stage of the loss of the sacred and the race towards atheism—an atheism much *worse* than Marxist atheism. Here Del Noce will speak of secularization as equivalent to a “de-sacralization” of the world,[8] a term which is very similar to Weber’s *Entzauberung* (disenchantment). [9]

The crucial point here is that Del Noce now, in Voegelin’s footsteps, considers modernity as the secularization of the Gnosis, and not, as in Löwith’s philosophy, as the secularization of Christianity. Secularization is equivalent to gnosis, and as such cannot apply to Christianity. Secularization is not the transposition of religious content from

Heaven to Earth but the transformation of Christianity into something different, into Gnosis, into a Gnostic model of Redemption/Salvation completely un-related to Christianity. Del Noce now accepts the concept of secularization but in the connotation given to it by Voegelin (secularization-modernity as Gnosis). It is now clear to Del Noce that Löwith was still prisoner of the spirit of modernity, limiting himself to unraveling the theological remains that lies at the basis of the philosophy of histories. Del Noce now prefers Voegelin's analytical methodology—an analysis of the history of lived (historical) experiences rather than a pure history of ideas. Del Noce writes:

"Having encountered the concept of Gnosis, we now encounter the concept of secularization, and perhaps we are then on the right track trying to pin down its exact meaning. I propose that this term, so diffused today, is meaningful when linked to Gnosis, and not to Christianity." (Del Noce, 1980: 208, our translation)

In other words, inspired by Voegelin, Del Noce realizes that the essential aspect shared by the various philosophies of history (Hegelianism, Marxism, and the like) is not a residual transcendence they keep in a nutshell; it is rather a drive which dates back to Joachim of Flora, a push and a force that animates English Puritanism and fully materializes with the Enlightenment: a Gnostic revolt that entrusts man with the endeavor of redemption and that appeals to the masses in the subversion of traditional order.

The interrelated terms secularization-Gnosis appeared to Del Noce as the best definition of Marxism (even in its Gramscian-Italian variant^[10]) and the Marxist creed of the revolution as a passage to a higher realm. After a few decades of efforts to understand and define Marxism and modern atheism, in *Secolarizzazione e crisi della modernità* ['Secularization and Crisis of Modernity'] Del Noce very confidently claims:

"In this vein, the term secularization is the most adequate in the context of the various discourses on Messianism, Millenarianism, Prophetism of Marxism, or the unconscious presence of Jewish religious archetypes in the soul of Marx—discourses that have in fact hindered a correct understanding of Marxism. This Messianism, this Prophetism, is certainly present in Marx, but only in the context of a novelty that could be defined as secularization of religion. The idea of the convenient priority in Marxism of the term secularization includes also what is right in the interpretation of Marxism as a new Gnosticism." (Del Noce, 1989: 14-5, our translation)

Drawing on Voegelin, Del Noce advanced the idea that atheism is not (or not only) the eventual outcome of modern rationalism (the French-German line), but the consequence of the "gnosis" that is tantamount to secularization; a gnosis that, moreover, is based on the theology of Joachim of Flora. In a 1968 conference, on *Contestazione e valori*, Del Noce said:

"Voegelin has with exemplary efficacy demonstrated the neo-Gnostic character of the idea of modernity, as dependant on that Joachimite vision of history that progressively replaced the opposite Augustinian view; and which during the last centuries has become so undisputed as

to directly permeate religious thought itself – as in modernism, or, turned upside down, in reactionary thought. Voegelin has disclosed the character of a practical choice that grounds the substance of the immanentization of the Christian eschaton.” (Del Noce, 1969: 119, our translation)

Before the encounter with Voegelin, Del Noce had refused the concept of secularization (or the theories of secularization) in both of these two meanings:

1. Secularization as a creative force as the basis and origins of European civilization (following Carl Schmitt and his idea, based also on Donoso Cortes, that all essential concepts of the modern doctrine of State are in fact secularized theological concepts).[11]

2. Secularization as an intellectual weapon for deconstructing and unraveling the myth of modernity with its laicist and materialist pretension (as Löwith does when proposing the idea of Marxian messianism, and therefore aiming at unmasking the alleged scientific aspect of Marxism, revealing the idealist and prophetic drive which lies behind and within the *diamat*).

Now Del Noce, via Voegelin, accepts the theory of secularization, understood as Gnosis. In the 1968 introduction to *The New Science of Politics*, Del Noce confirms again his endorsement of Voegelin’s line of interpretation:

“The spirit of modernity, as the foundation of evaluations and of modern political movements, is thus the immanentization of the Christian eschaton; and the factor that furthers this evolution is, in his view, gnosticism, and therefore the evolution of the spirit of modernity coincides with the evolution of gnosticism.” (Del Noce, 1968: 18, our translation)

He agrees with Voegelin on the absolute centrality and prominence in modernity of the category of “history.” In this vein, modernity enacts an immanentization of the Christian *eschaton*: the human being, through the discovery and unveiling of the law of history (such as Marx and Engels’s *diamat*) can redeem him/herself in the intra-mundane sphere.

Furthermore, Del Noce agrees with Voegelin on totalitarianism (and Marxism above all) as the “*divieto di fare domande*”[12] (“prohibition to ask questions,” Voegelin’s *frageverbot*), a modern form and expression of gnosis—that is, a political project that proposes a human self-redemption and salvation that is entirely historical and intra-mundane, forgetting the constitutive finitude of humanity.[13] Totalitarianisms are expressions of a “*perfettismo politico*” (“political perfectionism”), to follow Rosmini, that is substantially anti-Christian, for it denies that Evil is constitutive of the human being. Evil is no longer considered intrinsic to the human being, but is now reduced to a “consequence of society” (Del Noce, 1973: 49).

In this vein, Gnosis bestows upon human beings a power of creation, tracing a sort of theology of self-liberation. It will rest with man to create the edifice on Earth of the Third Age, to borrow from Joachim of Flora, without the sacramental mediation of grace. This translates onto the Third Reich willed by Nazism, or the Communist realm of freedom

and social justice after the withering away of the State—with Hitlerism and Marxism considered the most significant types of the contemporary Gnosis. Gnosis has Christianity under check: redemption through the grace of God is replaced by self-redemption through the denial of the original sin. In this vein, the Gnostic tradition is intimately bound with the heresy of Pelagius. And indeed, the two ‘secular’ Gnostic tendencies of the twentieth century, Right and Left, can be seen as heirs of Augustine and Pelagius, respectively.

To Voegelin, this idea of the “superman”—a man who, so full of hubris, pretends to save himself and forces the others to save themselves—was present in Ludwig Feuerbach’s humanism and in Marx’s scientific socialism; and indeed, it was embedded in every manifestation of socialism—which, from medieval heresies, elicited their own historical origins as well as their symbolism. God, to this current of thought, is only a projection of human spirit; and man could re-find his essence and escape the yoke of religious superstition re-appropriating what has been alienated from him. A rather perplexed Del Noce writes: “God would not exist because His existence is the product of human demands. This argument implies that God *could exist only if Man would not need Him.*” (Del Noce, 1968: 25, our translation)

It is an untenable argument, yet basically unquestionable within the categories of the neo-Gnostic thought. To assign to man the creation of God as well as the task of building on Earth the Ideal City that Christianity placed in Heaven means basically to divinize man—to turn man into God. The conception of Sin is turned upside down too: it is not God who is to redeem and liberate man, but man who is to redeem himself from the sin of having created God. It is what the Enlightenment and its philosophers have defined the emancipation of man from God and religion. In the end, the very category of a “modern age,” Del Noce noted, has a Gnostic matrix:

“The Medieval Age would be succeeded by a modern age characterized by freedom from authority and by a truth to be sought within human reason (a formulation in which the most significant idea of human self-redemption is expressed).” (Del Noce, 1968: 18, our translation)

Once the usual periodization (pre-modern: Christianity and religion; modern: liberation from Christianity and religion) has been denied via reference to Voegelin’s line of analysis, it was possible to articulate a different historical path. To Del Noce, the origin of modernity is not in the rinascimental discovery of man and nature (which would see its intellectual force sink into the quagmire of seventeenth century libertinism), but in the counter-rinascimental and spiritualist line of thought of Descartes and Malebranche. Again Del Noce insists that Descartes is the philosopher of transcendence: he does not want to “liberate science from the yoke of religion . . . but [to] defend religion from the obtrusion of philosophy, from the temptation to subjugate the mystery of the Divine to the control of our clear and distinct ideas” (Del Noce, 1992a: 136, our translation).

Against the accepted meaning of modernity as the end of Christianity (and religion in general), Del Noce reconstructs (also before his encounter with Voegelin) a new trajectory of modernity which does not exclude but in fact insists on the importance of

Christianity (and religion)—a modernity twice born, much similar to how Voegelin would come to see it. Yet—and this is probably the only criticism Del Noce has towards Voegelin—the indiscriminate use of the term “Gnosticism,” without any other specification, can generate perplexity. It is important to distinguish between an old or ancient Gnosis and a new, or “post-Christian” Gnosis, not to be considered variations or moments of development originating from the same essence (Del Noce, 1968: 18). One of the central ideas of Voegelin’s new science of politics is that the old Gnosticism is a demonology, and that political thinking in our time is of a neo-Gnostic type, hence non-scientific, inspired by myths; these myths, transformed in modern times into ideologies, have, however, retained their basically Christian doctrinal structure. And yet, Del Noce explains:

“What Voegelin does not say, although it seems implicit in his argument, is that the ancient Gnosis was a position of truth while the new Gnosis emerges as a way to address a practical need; and therefore it is not possible to talk of a development in the passage from the former to the latter.” (Del Noce, 1968: 22, our translation)

This can lead to “an extremely serious misunderstanding,” that is “the idea of the *unity* of pre-Christian and post-Christian Gnosticism” (Del Noce, 1968: 22). It is instead important to distinguish between ancient Gnosticism and modern (or post-Christian) Gnosticism:

“Ancient Gnosticism atheizes the world (by denying its creation by God) on behalf of divine transcendence, the post-Christian sort atheizes it on behalf of a radical immanentism. One can certainly find a shared characteristic in the quest to escape the evils of existence, but stressing the common element serves to underscore the substantial difference: that of pessimism and optimism . . . The Gnostic search deals with rule for the liberation of the soul from the world; post-Christian immanentism is the search for the rule for building a new world. The former had an aristocratic character. The latter is essentially an appeal to the masses, or better, the very rise of the idea of the mass, in its precise meaning. The allusion to pessimism and optimism shows how these are two opposing a-temporal essences; it can be easily argued that the ancient Gnosis has not disappeared, but its motifs are to be found in the history of modern pessimism.” (Del Noce, 1968: 19)

Hegelian Gnosticism, found at the culmination of a process in which religion is resolved into philosophy, is a *new Gnosticism* – “post-Christian” – that sees in history not the place of evasion, but of the fulfillment of man who, in overcoming the alienated world, accomplishes in Promethean fashion his *godlike* nature. What Marxism, following Hegel, is fighting is the ancient form of Gnosticism, the one that abandons the world and matter to the fate of iniquity. It does so, however, within a model that recreates itself in the framework of modern, post-Christian atheism. “Within the new Gnosticism the activist and revolutionary form is bound to prevail over the contemplative form” (Del Noce, 1968: 21). To define the process generating the (political, scientific and technological) “myth of modernity and Revolution” – or the “historical watershed that opens the way to the new man”– nothing is better than the term “new Gnosis.” “New,”

Del Noce continues, means “post-Christian,” “fallen” or even, with a term that Voegelin could perhaps accept, “degenerate” (Del Noce, 1968: 20-1). In the end the term “new Gnosis” has no rival term.

It cannot be replaced by the term Millenarianism, even though the latter could more appropriately indicate, in the world of today, the presence of an archetype which seems so utterly remote from the scientific mentality. This is because in the form defined, the worldly transfiguration of the human condition happens via divine intervention, while the basic element of the immanentization of the Christian *eschaton* is the idea that man is capable of self-redemption, that man is capable of Salvation through action; it is the conviction that the advent of perfection on Earth will be achieved as the outcome of human initiative. (Del Noce, 1968: 20 our translation)

With that one cannot say that the old Gnosticism disappeared. It survived in pessimistic strands of modern thinking in thinkers such as the Italian Pietro Martinetti and Simone Weil, for example, in whom a rationalistically configured pessimism struggled dramatically with Christianity.[14] This religious anxiety is denied in the optimism of the new Gnosticism for which the evil and the pain of the world are not a problem, a gaping wound, but just an obstacle necessary to the achievement of progress. Ancient gnosis is the cosmic pessimism, the radical dualism between God and the world; the new gnosis turns the negative into the positive through the myth of the new world to be created here on the Earth.

The spiritual attitude of modern pessimism presented analogies with the pessimism of the ancient Gnosticism. The new activism of the modern movement that entailed the legitimization of violence was part of a new version of Gnosticism, the typically modern sort. The *theme of violence* merged every time with that of Gnosticism. Modern violence, the sort that became rife in the twentieth century, is not a “natural” violence. It is the outcome of the post-Christian context in which, *for the first time*, it was justified as “creative” violence, the necessary painful birth of the new world that had to be produced. *Violence and secularization of Gnosticism*, the title of a 1980 Del Noce essay, linked the two terms of the problem. Post-Hegelian paranoia lay in the paradox of a perspective that broadens the sphere of the negative, of evil, of pain, in order to be able to resolve it into an era of pure positivity. Violence is justified by a theodicy that draws, mythically (and Gnostically), the lines of the new world. The encounter with Voegelin and with the categories of Gnostic thought allowed Del Noce to better understand and analyze the new form that violence had taken in the twentieth century.[15]

Del Noce, Voegelin and the Rediscovery of a Mediterranean Modernity

As can be seen, from the 1970s and up through the 1980s, with his reflections on secularization and Gnosticism, Del Noce was drawing explicitly on Voegelin’s conceptual and analytical vocabulary. However, it is equally interesting to return to Del Noce’s analysis of the modernity “twice born,” as this resonates very strongly with other earlier writings of Voegelin from the immediate post-World War II period. The surprising thing is that Del Noce simply could not have known those writings, and for the simple fact that

Voegelin never published them. This only accentuates the importance of the affinities, and perhaps provides some evidence of Voegelin's notion of the "equivalence of experiences," and the manner in which experience becomes linked to thought in moments or periods of crisis (Voegelin, 1990; see also Szokolczai, 2009).

Voegelin had indeed argued, much like Del Noce, that modernity was "twice born." In his writings of the 1940s, Voegelin talked of two spatio-temporal specific modernities. He respectively named them "Mediterranean" and "Atlantic" modernities, where the latter succeeded and *replaced* the former. Significantly, Voegelin introduced the notion of a "Mediterranean modernity" in his discussion of yet another French political thinker, namely Jean Bodin (1530-1596).^[16] Bodin was a sixteenth century transition figure trying to articulate a modern political theory after the waning of the Middle ages and before the triumph of the seventeenth century rational-scientific worldview. Voegelin analysed Bodin as a "modern" who had not broken definitively with the Medieval Christian worldview.

In his political writings, Bodin provided the constitutional tradition of governments and institutions established from a rationally defined platform. He theorized the national state and used a juristic method to arrange governmental forms. At the same time, Bodin's cosmology was still inspired by the richness of the Platonic and Hellenistic traditions, contemplating the order of the soul and its place in the *polis*. It was exactly this idea that a well-ordered soul could serve as the source of order in the polity that was very categorically slaughtered from Hobbes onwards, installing what Voegelin called a new "materialistic metaphysics," based on the idea of political order as rooted in the negativity of the person or in the mechanical body, as would happen in the "Atlantic modernity." In his discussion of Mediterranean modernity, Voegelin made the very general point that the actual time structure of the Western world is more complicated than we are used to think: the Western world "does not move in an even flow."

Modernity is a historical process, extending over centuries, in which the medieval, spiritual-temporal order of Western mankind gradually dissolves – earlier in some regions, more slowly in others (Voegelin, 1998: 182). Substantially, therefore, Voegelin diagnosed modernity as a dissolution of order. Voegelin argued that historians and political theorists mistakenly had taken for granted what is in fact a late and geographic-specific phase of modernity as *the* modernity. Voegelin wanted to reconsider the French-Dutch-English modernity of the seventeenth and eighteenth century as one "branch" of a development, incidentally the one that was institutionalized (which is why we are blindfolded by it), absorbing as it did both scientism and secularism.

For Voegelin this Atlantic modernity is a specific "figuration" (using Norbert Elias' term) that should not be mistaken for "modernity" but should instead be seen as one specific (and highly problematic) development of it. It has largely gone unnoticed, but Voegelin was indeed the first political theorist to pluralize modernity. It is not too much to say that

it was exactly this “Atlantic modernity” that Del Noce was trying to pose an alternative to, and engaging exactly that genealogy which Voegelin also found in the possibility of a “Mediterranean modernity.”

After Gnostic Modernity: The Triumph of the Opulent-Consumer Society

By the mid-to-late 1960s, when he was reading Voegelin, Del Noce realized that a new society was gaining momentum: a post-Marxist and/or post-Gnostic that was petering out the “sacral” period of secularization (the period in which politics had become the Sacred and absorbed the ideal of otherworldly Redemption). This post-Marxist era would entail the relativization of every possible ideal and blend with a technocratic vision of the world. In other words, the twentieth century had entered into a new “profane” period of secularization, marked by “*irreligiosità naturale*” (“natural irreligiosity”), a new form of totalitarianism: the “*società opulenta*” (“affluent/opulent society”),^[17] technocratic, nihilist, scientist, relativist, individualist, marked by the primacy of instrumental reason, more irreligious than Communist atheism, victorious on the very battleground of Communism itself, that of materialism.

The “opulent/affluent society” is the triumph of western irreligion – or a society that accepts every Marxist negation (the denial of religion, metaphysics, and contemplative thought), and refuses the only, small religious remains of the revolutionary idea, i.e. the messianic revolutionary aspects (“*aspetti rivoluzionari messianici*”). In this vein, the opulent society is the “the Bourgeois spirit in its pure state, the Bourgeois spirit that has triumphed over its traditional opponents, transcendent religion and revolutionary thought” (Del Noce, 1970: 14). In the end, as a kind of “heterogenesis of ends,” Marxism had served nihilism and the bourgeois spirit. It had broken with Tradition, without replacing Tradition, as it had no alternative (or principle of reality, as Voegelin would say) reality to offer. The outcome of Marxism was the bourgeois, opulent, rich society, marked by the “prohibition to ask questions.”

From the point of view of the “opulent/affluent society,” democracy now becomes another form of relativism; being a democrat means not believing in the existence or cognoscibility of truth. Democracy in this sense counters Marxist Gnosticism with its own agnosticism; it still equals a frightening loss of standards and an existential loss of meaning, a negation not only of the human person in his integrity but also of the very Socratic-Platonic idea of *politics* as that glue which ties together human beings in a meaningful order. The agnostic form of democracy, by fearing and excluding the force of truth and right, ends up recognizing only the truth and the right of force. In this way, Western irreligion goes beyond Gnostic Marxism because it is more radically irreligious and supersedes the incomplete materialism of Marxism by denying any idea of salvation.

This leads to a new form of totalitarianism, of the domination of opinion and the whims of the strong, which needs no form of legitimization, no cover up of power with ideology, because the only difference among opinions is owing to the strength of their holders. The reference to a future truth or to a desire for liberation is eradicated. An agnostic conservative defense of freedom, or the free world, is important with regard to this

tyrannical outcome and the dissolution of truth and right. The ideas of person and rights, presuppositions of the right to private property, assume a metaphysics: a beyond of the acts of person, of his/her expression and work, an interiority. The relativity of Western irreligion, which by untying freedom from truth prepares the way for a totalitarianism more powerful and consistent than Communism; a Marxism without any promise of future revolution—the suicide of democracy.

This was the dramatic situation faced by European culture. Del Noce glimpsed possibilities without being able to indicate positive outlets. Perhaps, Del Noce argued, the crisis of culture can only be overcome by a renewal, a "*Risorgimento*"^[18] based on a Christian philosophy and a conception of nature and human being open to transcendence. Only such a tradition (which means again that line of ontologism which begins with Descartes and culminates in Rosmini), and only what Voegelin defines as the principle of reality, can respond to the crisis of the present and underpin authentic democracy.

Yet, rather disillusioned, this remained for Del Noce a matter of possibility, not necessarily an actuality. Del Noce, in the end, never philosophically deduced the need for the religious option. The triumph of the affluent society, and hence of western irreligion took the wind out of any possible religious or spiritual revival. These were, thus, conflicting dynamics that Del Noce could not resolve. And perhaps also in this sense, he was brother in arms with Eric Voegelin.

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Notes

[1] Voegelin, 1968. The book, which collected Voegelin's Walgreen Lectures at the University of Chicago, was first published in 1952.

[2] See "L'idea di modernità" (1982), now in Del Noce, 2007: 33-58 (quote at 43 and 35).

[3] One of the most crucial consequences of this is that Gentile wrongly interpreted Gioberti's philosophy as a forerunner for 'actualism' [*Attualism*], and wrongly immanentized the religious thought of the Risorgimento.

[4] Del Noce draws on Rosmini's notion of "political perfectionism," that is, "the system which considers perfection in human affairs possible and which sacrifices the present good to the future imagined perfection"; Rosmini, 1985: 137.

[5] Maritain provides a thorough and detailed critique of Descartes in *The Dream of Descartes* (1944). Here Maritain explores the texts of Descartes in which he finds the deep betrayal of Catholic intelligence made in the name of the modern project. Descartes' efforts, in essence, separated the realm of the sense from the intellect – hence the Cartesian split in consciousness. Maritain wrote: "Cartesian dualism breaks man up into complete substances, joined to one another no one knows how; on the one hand, the body which is only geometric extension; on the other, the soul which is only thought – an angel inhabiting a machine and directing it by means of the pineal gland" (Maritain, 1944: 179).

[6] It comes from Nietzsche, Del Noce writes, the idea of "philosophy of history as contradictory secularized form of theology of history"; Del Noce, 1964: 123 (note 86).

[7] The most important of Del Noce's works in the 1970s and in the 1980s are *L'epoca della secolarizzazione* (1970), *Tramonto o eclissi dei valori tradizionali* (1972), *Il suicidio della rivoluzione* (1978), *Violenza e secolarizzazione della gnosi* (1980), *Secolarizzazione e crisi della modernità* (1989). Less known, yet insightful works, are *L'eroticismo alla conquista della crisi* (1970) and *Alle radici della crisi* (1972). The influence of Voegelin is also significant in *I caratteri generali del pensiero politico contemporaneo, I, Lezioni sul marxismo* (1972). See also Voegelin, 1968b; 1970.

[8] See for instance the essay 'Civiltà tecnologica a cristianesimo' in Del Noce, 1970: 89.

[9] An important parallel to Weber's notion of *entzauberung* can be made also here; for in Weber's historical analysis, rationalization processes depart not from religion as such, but from what he termed the "religious *rejections* of the world" and their "directions." Voegelin's reliance on Weber was on this crucial point arguably stronger and more direct than what is normally assumed.

[10] In fact, to Del Noce, Gramscian Marxism was a form of Gnosis completely and more fully secular, as politics replaced religion, and the eschatological element was completely suppressed to bring its final consequences in the practices, doctrine and thought of the Enlightenment.

[11] "All prägnanten Begriffe der modernen Staatslehre sind säkularisierte theologische Begriffe" (Schimtt, 1934: 49).

[12] On Del Noce's explicit endorsement of Voegelin's analysis of the Marxist *fragenverbot*, and how this prohibition paves the way for a 'total revolution,' i.e. totalitarianism writ large, see Del Noce, 1972: 44-5.

[13] On Del Noce's view on totalitarianism see Ceci 1993; Gnocchini, 2000.

[14] See Del Noce's essay "Simone Weil interprete del mondo di oggi", in Del Noce, 1970: 137-77.

[15] On the little known dialogue between Eric Voegelin and Hans Kelsen on a similar matter, and on how to read the horrors of totalitarianism into a historical trajectory of modernity, see Thomassen, 2014.

[16] Voegelin discusses Bodin in two different places of his *History of Political Ideas* in the section entitled *Religion and the Rise of Modernity*, previously unpublished and now in Voegelin, 1998: 158-68 and 180-251.

[17] The term "società opulenta" appeared first in Del Noce's 1963 "Appunti sull'irreligione occidentale" it was then collected in *Il problema dell'ateismo*.

[18] The Risorgimento [Resurrection, Resurgence] was the nineteenth century process of national unification culminating in the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy (1861). The idea of a 'Risorgimento filosofico' or a Risorgimento as a philosophical category is of the most crucial importance in Del Noce's thought, a kind of creative restoration pitted against both the utopian revolution aiming at destroying traditional values and the reactionary restoration aiming at the sheer return to the past. On this see Del Noce 1983; 1992b.

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