

Augusto Del Noce on the Societa Opulenta

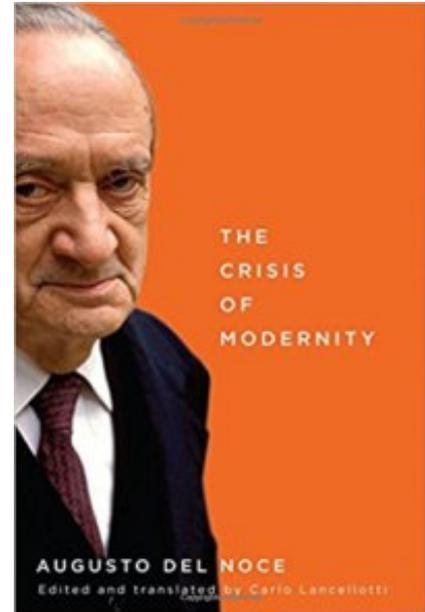
VV voegelinview.com/augusto-del-noce-on-the-societa-opulenta/

Bjorn Thomassen and Rosario Forlenza

July 2,
2015

The Crisis of Modernity. Augusto Del Noce with Carlo Lancellotti, ed. and trans. Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2014.

An important book has been published. Let us use the occasion of this short review to justify this importance and to explain why the book deserves to be widely read by philosophers and political and social theorists – and by anyone trying to come to terms with the question of modernity. We will also indicate why the book has a particular importance for scholars familiar with the work of Eric Voegelin. In this last regard, the book serves to indicate the almost unexplored influence that Voegelin's thought has had on Italian political philosophy via the work of Del Noce – and as we have discussed earlier in [VoegelinView](#),^[1] this is a small but significant parenthesis within the European history of *thought*.



The Crisis of Modernity is divided into three main parts. Part One, “Modernity, Revolution and Secularization” contains five essays in which Del Noce goes straight to the question of “modernity”, linked to the fundamental questions of violence, the appeal to revolution, and the wider secularization process that Del Noce analytically dissects. Part Two, “The Advent of the Technocratic Society,” consists of five essays that together address what Del Noce came to diagnose as the real “crisis” facing Western societies from the 1960, namely, a technocratic, “opulent” society, nurtured by “the death of the sacred” (the title of chapter 8). Part Three, “The Predicament of the West”, consists of only two essays, both of which discuss the relationship between power and authority and offer a penetrating critique of both “left” and “right” politics within which he perceived (here in dialogue with Arendt, among others) a genuine and deep crisis of authority. The appendices consist of three documents, including a late interview with Del Noce and two of his shorter essays, one touching upon secularization, the other – the final pages of the book – dealing explicitly with Voegelin, with the fitting title, “Eric Voegelin and the Critique of the Idea of Modernity”.

The Crisis of Modernity is edited, translated and introduced by Carlo Lancellotti, professor of Mathematics at CUNY. While the editor/translator is, technically speaking, neither a philosopher nor a political theorist, his elegant translation of Del Noce's work is evidence of the fact he has “understood” them. This is no minor issue, as Del Noce's language can be extremely dense, drawing as it does on a Latin-Italian vocabulary and a philosophical

worldview that is not always easily translatable into English. The book is published with two sets of footnotes, the original ones of Del Noce and those inserted by translator. The latter (by far the majority) have the merit of – where possible – providing English speaking readers with the English versions of the texts that Del Noce refers to in his discussion, although it must of course be said that the inserted references may not have been the editions that Del Noce himself had consulted.

This book deserves to be read for what is indeed a very simple reason: this is the first English translation of a series of key essays by an important Italian thinker and theorist, Augusto del Noce, who hitherto has been relatively unknown among English speaking theorists. His position was conservative, but it was not nostalgic: from a reflexive Christian position he engaged a genealogical critique of modernity. And whatever one may think of Del Noce's work and positions, anyone starting to read his essays will immediately realize that we are dealing with a profound, thoughtful and historically reflexive thinker.

The published book does not include any of Del Noce's writings prior to 1969, preferring instead to provide the reader with a range of writings completed by Del Noce when he had already reached the age of 60. The book is therefore not an attempt to cover Del Noce's life work in any exhaustive way: it is an engagement, primarily, with his mature work. Readers of Eric Voegelin will be happy about this, for it was precisely in the late 1960s that Del Noce first encountered the work of Voegelin and began to draw heavily from it for his own inspiration. The drawback to this selection of texts is of course that it is difficult to get an idea from it of Del Noce's formative experiences and the development of his thinking across the six decades in which he was actively working. And on this point, the book would have done new readers of Del Noce a huge service by listing Del Noce's major works, with English translations of the titles, in order to provide them at least with some kind of chronological overview of his writings.

As the editor himself discusses, making choices and boiling down an extremely rich and long authorship to a dozen shorter essays is practically impossible. But it needs to be said (as indeed Lancellotti does in his Introduction) that some of Del Noce's most famous writings appeared in print before 1969. The editor justifies his selection by referring to the fact that Del Noce himself gathered together a series of his most important writings in a 1970 publication, *L'epoca della secolarizzazione* [*The Epoch of Secularization*]– a work that the editor hopes will soon be translated into English (a hope we share). While we are waiting for that follow-up translation, let us therefore provide a little bit of contextual discussion of Del Noce that further supplements the Introduction by Lancellotti, and that hopefully will inspire potential readers to study this important book.

A brief overview of Del Noce's life and intellectual trajectory is presented in the Introduction. It certainly is a helpful guide to the general reader, although much more could of course be said. In this sense, the Introduction can meaningfully be read together with the first document inserted into the appendix, the late interview with Del Noce in which he describes briefly his own intellectual trajectory.

So who was Augusto del Noce, and wherein lies his importance? Del Noce was born in Pistoia, Tuscany, but grew up and studied in Turin. In 1932 he completed a degree in Philosophy at the University of Turin, with a dissertation on Malebranche. Between 1934 and 1943 Del Noce taught at various high schools and published a series of essays on early modern French philosophy that established his academic reputation, not least in France. His studies of modern rationalism reflected a broader interest in the relationship between Catholic thought and secular culture. Fascism and the painful experiences of World War II were formative events for Del Noce. Aware of the depth of the crisis, Del Noce sensed an acute need to trace and re-establish the distinctive patterns with which Catholics could imagine and institutionally forge an accommodation with democracy and national secular politics.

Constantly appealing to Christian traditions, and greatly inspired by Jacques Maritain, he invited Catholics to come out of medievalism and anti-modernity in order to understand the possible link between Catholicism and liberalism: only in that way could Christian Democrats attune democracy and Christianity. Del Noce's intense reflection happened precisely at a critical juncture of Italian history. As elsewhere in Western Europe, most notably West Germany, Catholics became, via Christian Democracy (DC), the dominant political force of the country, committed to creating a modern mass democracy and implementing a modern and advanced welfare state. From the 1950s onward Del Noce was committed to giving theoretical shape and strength to the Christian Democratic project as formulated by Alcide De Gasperi, the Christian Democratic leader and Italian prime minister between 1945 and 1953. De Gasperi was the man and politician who seemed to embody the perspective advocated by Del Noce: the idea that liberal principles could best come to fruition from within political Catholicism.

However, and even more so after De Gasperi's death, Del Noce became frustrated with what he considered Christian Democracy's cultural weakness. Without its own interpretation of contemporary history, Christian Democracy was being subjugated by other political cultures. While assuming the character of a modern, pragmatic mass party, the DC oscillated between "laicism" and "clericalism". It developed its politics and policies merely in terms of "tactics" and "sociological techniques". Catholics, he believed, could be fully modern and democratic, counting on their *own* ideological and religious roots without the need to rely on inspirations and sources alien to their own traditions. Even as the party was gaining its electoral consensus, it was, according to Del Noce, starting to reveal a terrifying vacuum in terms of ideas and perspectives. It was therefore not equipped to face and counter-act the expansion and electoral gains of the Communist Party during the 1960s and 1970s, and the return of Marxist thought which, in its multiple brands (Maoism, Trotskyism, the Frankfurt School, third world-ism, worker-ism, structuralism à la Althusser), ideological influences that fascinated the Italian cultural world, including significant sectors of Catholicism.

As such, the DC was unable to understand that its ideal mission had to be articulated against its third and perhaps more insidious enemy after Fascism and Communism—the "*società opulenta*", or Western irreligion, which, just as Fascism and Communism,

remained the product if not in fact the culmination of modernity. Del Noce's political engagement is absolutely crucial to bear in mind as one reads his theoretical essays. It was against this "new enemy" that the defense of a religious spirit and the re-discovery of Catholic tradition as a way of interpreting the present would stand its real test. And it was against this enemy that Augusto del Noce's mature work developed.

This is exactly what is at stake in the word "crisis" from the viewpoint of Del Noce. *The Crisis of Modernity*, as the book is entitled, signifies a fundamental disorientation. However, Del Noce realized during the 1960s that the threat of totalitarianism was no longer the main enemy: what had emerged instead was this *societa opulenta*, which became the key diagnostic term in his mature work. The term "*Societa opulenta*" is translated in this edition as "affluent society", and here we permit ourselves a disagreement with the translator. The more direct translation "opulent society" would have been an obvious alternative, rendering much better what Del Noce had in mind. To an Anglo-Saxon and American audience "the affluent society" immediately brings to mind John Kenneth Galbraith's 1958 famous work "The Affluent Society" – a society rich in private resources yet poor in public resources due to the misplaced priority on increasing production in the private sector. It is true that Del Noce himself refers to Galbraith's title. However, the term has completely lost the original ironic meaning given to it by the Harvard economist, and it is employed today to define material prosperity and wealth.

In short, the notion of an "affluent" society has far too positive connotations in the English language today, and its semantics suggests exclusively the domain of material growth and prospering economy. The society that Del Noce was trying to diagnose was indeed a society where "wealth" and consumerism were reaching ever-new limits. However, this materialistic expansionism was happening at the expense of a radical loss, a concomitant moral decay in which human beings as well as political institutions were no longer able to justify or direct their existence with reference to ethics or morality.

Much of what Del Noce had to argue on this salient point incorporated the work of Voegelin. This is apparent in the title of Chapter 2 – "Violence and Modern Gnosticism" – and the final piece in the Appendix – "Eric Voegelin and the Critique of the Idea of Modernity." As we have discussed earlier, Del Noce encountered the work of Voegelin during the 1960s, and it exerted a significant influence on him. Del Noce agreed with Voegelin that 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 agreed with Voegelin that totalitarianism is 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 and therefore that forgets or obliterates the constitutive finitude of humanity.

What will interest Voegelin's readers is the extent to which Del Noce linked this understanding to a direct critique of contemporary attitudes (including the "sexual revolution") and political tendencies, in a much more direct political engagement than that of Voegelin. Del Noce is very direct and straightforward here: Nazism is gone, and Communism will eventually collapse (not an easy prediction to make in the 1960s for an Italian intellectual). However, Europe was moving "Toward a New Totalitarianism", as the short Chapter 6 is entitled. This significant claim is followed by Chapter 7, "The Shadow of Tomorrow", which is a discussion of the 1935 book of the same name by Johannes Huizinga. Here Del Noce continues the discussion of the new forms of "totalitarianism". Such forms include what Del Noce refers to as a "trinity" of scientism, eroticism and secularization theology" (p. 94). This new totalitarianism "represents the most complete negation of the spiritual forces that sustained the resistance [against Fascism] during the 1930s: the Christian tradition, liberalism and humanitarian socialism" (p. 95). Such forms are difficult to counter, precisely because they claim to represent the highest degree of democracy and anti-fascism and to speak the language of "freedoms" from all that is connected to "tradition". While Del Noce's discussions of the hippie movement or the free love ideology may appear quite outdated, the grounding analytical dissection of the ideological forces at play in these movements (scientism, technocracy and cultural relativism) could well have been written today.

Within Italian culture (including Catholic culture), a label has long weighed heavily on Del Noce: though considered a brilliant thinker, he has been interpreted as somebody looking to the past – a conservative or even a reactionary, a mere critic of the present – with nothing realistic to offer the contemporary world. However, Del Noce expressly did not want to reject the modern and return to the anti- or pre-modern world. Similar to Voegelin in this respect, he sought to reconceptualize the modern through a return to its "multiple beginnings". According to Del Noce, philosophers and historians had responded to modernity in three different theoretical ways: 1) the "anti-modern" approach/attitude or the "restoration", which he also defined as the "archeological utopia" of the past (for example, De Maistre); 2) the "ultramodern" attitude (the "utopia of the future"), which eagerly embraces all modernist developments, including the process of secularization and its attempt at the "novum"; 3) the compromising attitude, which "de-ideologizes the political" and reduces politics to "pragmatic choices". Del Noce placed Christian Democracy in the third category. Christian Democrats were losing the "Christian", the religious élan.

All three ideological/philosophical positions were unacceptable to Del Noce, as they were based on the principle of spiritual separation between Faith and Reason, Faith and History, Nature and Grace. Del Noce's work was a careful attempt to reconstruct a trajectory of the modern that was not epistemologically or institutionally built upon such separations; it was a work of recovery, as Voegelin would have liked to say, a constructive employment of classical literature for the purpose of understanding the present.

The selection of essays collected in *The Crisis of Modernity* now offers to an English speaking audience a glimpse of the richness and fecundity of Del Noce's thought and its relevance in this global society of the third millennium. How is it possible to preserve human liberty and fulfillment in a world that appears more and more as the realm of force and domination? Which path should we take if we refuse to reduce ourselves to instruments of force fighting against other human beings, also conceived merely as instruments of force? Which path should we take if we want to avoid submission to the abundance of material goods? The recovery of transcendence and the rediscovery of spiritual values is an answer; yet, it is not an easy answer, as Del Noce would say, because it requires a strenuous and risky "response to a challenge".

Notes

[1] Bjørn Thomassen and Rosario Forlenza, "[Voegelin's Impact On The Italian Response To Modernity: The Parallel Life-Works Of Augusto Del Noce And Eric Voegelin](#)", Voegelinview.com, November 26, 2014.

Copyright [VoegelinView](#) 2020 - All Rights Reserved