



Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

FEATURE ARTICLE

Issue Three / 2020

“Positive” Atheism and the Falsification of Language

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Several authors have discussed the *falsification of language by totalitarian regimes* in their writings—e.g. George Orwell, Czesław Miłosz, Friedrich von Hayek, Victor Klemperer. Their analyses are typically quite perceptive, but descriptive. They generally present the totalitarian manipulation of language as a convenient political tool, as an expression of systematic political malice. Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce (1910–1989) took a different approach, and studied the philosophical origins of this phenomenon. He argues that the world views of twentieth-century totalitarian movements *forced* them to systematically falsify political language. He also contends that the problem has a larger scope and can arise in political situations that are usually not regarded as totalitarian, including our own “technocratic” and “affluent” society. To briefly discuss his analysis, it will be helpful to start from Marxism, which Del Noce regards as the philosophical prototype of much of modern secular politics.

In his first and best known book, *The Problem of Atheism*[1] Del Noce describes Marx’s philosophy as an early example of “positive” or “constructive” atheism. Unlike the atheists of the Enlightenment, Marx does not care to disprove that there is a God. His program is, instead, to erase the very *question* of God through social transformation. Since God is an “alienated image” which humanity creates of itself under oppression, the problem of God will simply vanish when oppression will disappear and humankind will, so to speak, “re-divinize” itself. The core presupposition of Marxian atheism is the affirmation of man’s radical independence and self-sufficiency, and the negation of God is to be achieved *practically*, through the liberation of man. Therefore, politics assumes an absolute, literally “religious” value, and becomes “true philosophy.”

This “elevation of politics to the language of philosophy”[2] goes hand in hand with the rejection of the traditional idea that all people share in a universal rationality. Marx is radically anti-Platonic because the idea of the *Logos* already contains an aspect of *transcendence*. This is a general feature of positive atheism: “the essential adversary of the great atheists of the nineteenth century ... is not Christianity *per se*, but Platonism as the philosophy of Truth in itself and Goodness in itself, understood to be absolutes to which man is subordinate; or more precisely Platonism and Christianity united by an unbreakable bond.”[3]

Thus, the elimination of the question of God by positive atheism coincides with the reduction of reason to purely instrumental reason, to man's tool to achieve domination over nature and political liberation.

However, if politics is the fulfillment of rationality, how can Marxism justify itself—in what sense is it *true*? Moreover, if there is no given, universal moral order—and thus no objective human rights, no idea of “justice”—what principles can direct political action? The criterion that proves the truth of Marxism and directs its political expression can only be the *direction of history*. Since positive atheism rules out *a priori* the possibility of justifying itself on the basis of eternally valid philosophical truths, it must always present itself as the inevitable result of a historical process. Accordingly, “the ultimate criterion of judgment about philosophies can only concern their progressive or reactionary character.”[4] And since positive atheism does not recognize any universal moral order, it must rely on the assumption that the historical process is marching towards *liberation*. Then, the ensuing practical postulate is that whatever promotes the process of liberation is right, and whatever hinders it is wrong.

According to Del Noce, this “ethics of the direction of history” is the reason why Marx's positive atheism is destined to drift toward totalitarianism and the falsification of language. Whereas in the traditional vision right and wrong are revealed to all human beings by their conscience (the *locus* in which the individual participates in the transcendent), the direction of history is not really an object of *persuasion*. Rather, it is typically “discovered” by intellectuals, by “gnostics” who are able to decipher the mechanism of historical development. By denying an ideal common ground recognizable by everybody, the Marxist outlook inevitably separates an intellectual and political elite (the Party, in Leninist terms) from the majority of the population which can only be the subject of propaganda. In order to reach the masses, the ethics of the direction of history must inevitably conceal itself behind a language that evokes traditional moral concepts that make no sense from a rigorous Marxist standpoint. For example, critics of Communism in the 20th century routinely observed that Communist propaganda would use words like “justice,” “peace” and “democracy” that could be interpreted *morally* by the masses, while party leaders and intellectuals upheld a historically materialist vision in which those same words were essentially meaningless (in fact, Marx himself had already mocked them as “Romantic Socialism”). A related feature of the ethics of the direction of history is its “peculiar unity of radical amorality and most radical hyper-moralism.”[5] Amorality because ethical claims are just reflections of social conditions and have no permanent validity; hyper-moralism because everything is justified for the sake of the revolution.

Now, Del Noce thinks that this “unfolding” of positive atheism—into instrumental reason, an ethics of the direction of history and the totalitarian falsification of language—is a general modern philosophical pattern, which found its first expression in Marxism but has a broader significance. It does not need to be tied to Marx's socio-economic analysis, nor to his particular interpretation of the direction of history (as a dialectical process driven by the struggle among classes, which will culminate in a total revolution that will usher in a completely new world, etc). In fact, Del Noce thinks that the technocratic and progressive secular culture that gradually became dominant among the Western *intelligentsia* after World War II is also a form of positive atheism. It is not Marxist, but is tied to Marxism by a complex relationship, because it developed during the Cold War as a response to Communism. It understood itself as a return to the world view of the Enlightenment, because it exalted scientific progress, individual autonomy, globalization, secularization, etc. However, it was an Enlightenment *after Marx* because it broadly accepted the Marxian critiques of metaphysics, of religion, of the family, of natural law and so on. It separated out the materialistic and relativistic side of Marxism and used it to undermine the dialectic and revolutionary side.[6]

The result was a sort of hybrid culture,[7] which combined Enlightenment and Marxist elements in a radically positivist and secular world view, in which the social sciences took a dominant role replacing philosophy and religion. Del Noce variously calls it “Occidentalism” or “sociologism” or “progressivism.” But he maintains that this new culture is still a form of positive atheism, still embraces the ethics of the direction of history, and still is essentially totalitarian, although in a “softer” and subtler way. As a result, it is also bound to falsify language, but in a different way than earlier forms of totalitarianism.

Because this new positive atheism interprets the direction of history in terms of technological progress, material well-being, and individual autonomy, its falsification of language takes a *philanthropic flavor*: “today’s sociologism repeats the philanthropic language of its predecessors—freedom, justice, welfare, tolerance—in the form of ‘declarations of rights.’ But, on the other hand, how could we not notice that these declarations of rights accompany a constant process of dehumanization?”[8] The dehumanization is due to the materialistic scientism of the affluent society, which leads to “absolute reification, complete falsification of both inter-personal relationships and language, complete falsification of education and culture, at the service of a ruling elite which looks exactly like the one Saint-Simon theorized.”[9] The effective negation of any ideal dimension,

of the True in itself and the Good in itself ... moves, ultimately, toward complete falsification of language, toward the rule of systematically organized mendacity. For instance, people never talked so much about altruism, universal love, and so on. However, can one really love a “thing”? Is not love always directed toward another subject with his personal individuality? Does it not aim at grasping his irreducible reality? But what if such personal individuality is dissolved?[10]

This is clearly manifested, Del Noce says, by the way in which contemporary “culture industry” manipulates the masses into accepting moral evaluations (about sexuality, work, society) whose metaphysical premises (materialism, positivism, individualism) are left unspoken.

As a consequence of these unspoken metaphysical presuppositions, economic value becomes absolutely dominant in the modern affluent society. Everything becomes “an object of trade” so that “paradoxically, the total rejection of tradition coincides with the appearance of the bourgeois spirit in its purest form, in the sense that never before the extension of the *homo oeconomicus* and the abolition of ethics for economics had gone so far.”[11] At the same time, the Marxist idea of liberation becomes completely individualistic. The emphasis shifts from liberation from poverty to liberation from traditional authoritarian structures, and in particular from sexual repression. In this process, the revolutionary rhetoric is put to the service of a “liberal” mindset. However, the full benefits of the technological and sexual revolution are enjoyed by a relatively small elite:

these enormous technical instruments are controlled by a very small number of powerful people, in whom after the collapse of the traditional ideals ... what remains is the libido dominandi Despite the fiction of democracy ... for the great majority of men there is no other option than being reduced to parts of the productive process, without any common values shared by the leaders and the subordinates.[12]

This situation leads to a new and more radical linguistic mystification, because the elite calls itself *progressive* but is actually deeply *conservative*, in the sense of preserving at all costs the

economic, academic and political institutions that support the *status quo*. “The contradiction between conservatism and revolution within the progressive position leads to a process of falsification of language, which is the foundation of every aspect of today’s situation, both of the crisis of democracy and of moral disintegration.”[13] In fact, the verbal exaltation of democracy conceals the fact that, in the absence of any common ideal ground real political debate is impossible, and effective political power shifts to bureaucracies and to the judiciary.

It should be noted that whereas the technocratic society adopts the scientific and relativistic side of Marxism, the dialectic and revolutionary side does not disappear, but continues as pure political activism, as an irrational rebellion against existing reality. The affluent society periodically generates protest movements which generally fail to call into question its deeper philosophical assumptions, and thus remain politically ineffective. In fact, they end up strengthening technocratic progressivism, which co-opts them and uses them to further destroy the traditional structures that resist it. Real social powers (large corporations, the culture industry, the administrative state) welcome and embrace these forms of activism precisely because they pose no threat to the “system,” even though they constantly claim to be fighting it. The powers-that-be understand well the usefulness of redirecting the unhappiness of the masses against “Fascism” or other (for now) largely fictional enemies.

To conclude, I would like to emphasize Del Noce’s crucial claim that these contradictions and falsifications are aspects of the unfolding of positive atheism. His analysis points also to the Achilles’ heel of this type of atheism: it can only sustain itself through what Eric Voegelin called the “prohibition of questions,”[14] namely questions about the nature of humanity, and more generally philosophical and religious questions. These questions must be excluded *a priori* from public discourse, because they are incompatible with the fundamental assumption of human self-sufficiency.

At its final stage, atheism becomes aware of being a “revolt against God” which cannot present itself “in terms of truth” ... and therefore must make recourse to the “prohibition of questions.” It must then go on and destroy the experience that shows man’s dependence, and finally attempt to build “another reality” as a secular projection of the religious “other reality.” Allegedly, in this new reality the problems linked to man’s “dependence” will disappear. [15]

In this situation, one cannot fight the falsification of language with generic moral appeals to “sincerity.” One needs to criticize the “original” lie, which is the negation of the experience of dependence, of humanity’s “fallen state,” of religious questions. The goal should be to help unaware positive atheists (who are many) realize that the ideological affirmation of human self-sufficiency—and the consequent denials of the ideal/religious dimension, and of the “limits” of politics—is the source of a process of de-humanization and social disintegration which is taking place in front of their own eyes.

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[1] Augusto Del Noce, *Il problema dell’ateismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1964). An English translation is expected to be published by McGill-Queen’s University Press as early as 2021.

[2] Ibid., 249.

[3] Augusto Del Noce, *Tramonto o eclissi dei valori tradizionali?* (Milan: Rusconi, 1971), 162.

[4] Ibid., 161.

[5] Ibid., 163.

[6] On the affluent society as a form of “objectivized Marxism,” see Del Noce’s essay “Note sull’irreligione occidentale” [Notes on Western irreligion] in *Il Problema dell’ateismo*, 293–333.

[7] On this topic I take the liberty to cite my own essay “Augusto Del Noce on Marx’s Abolition of Human Nature” in *Communio* 46.3–4 (Fall-Winter 2019): 566–584.

[8] Augusto Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), 149.

[9] Augusto Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 129–30. Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825) was a French political and social thinker who first theorized an industrial society ruled by technicians, managers and businesspeople.

[10] Ibid., 126–27.

[11] Del Noce, *Tramonto o eclissi*, 232.

[12] Ibid., 171.

[13] Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity*, 104.

[14] Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1997).

[15] Del Noce, *Tramonto o eclissi*, 175.

