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Why the Sexual Revolution is the Greatest Revolution

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Augusto Del Noce (1910–1989) was one of the most significant Italian Catholic intellectual figures after World War II. He came to prominence in the 1960s as a distinguished historian of ideas and as a political philosopher, and he is still widely remembered for his penetrating scholarship on Marxism, on Fascism and in general on secular cultural trends in the 20th century, including the sexual revolution. Del Noce regarded Austrian psycho-analyst Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957) as the most representative figure of the Freudo-Marxist school (a merging of Marxist ideas and psycho-analysis) which first advanced the ideas about sexuality that have become common in Western culture since the 1960s.

*The following is an excerpt from a recent translation of Del Noce's *The Crisis of Modernity* (ed. and trans. Carlo Lancellotti [McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014], 144-45, 160-61). It is reprinted here with permission.*

Shortly we shall see how the permissivist proposal of freedom is tied to anti-traditionalism pushed to its most radical consequences,[1] and that this is precisely why it presents itself as revolutionary. Perhaps we could describe it as the spirit of libertinism taking over the revolutionary spirit.[2]

Moving now to totalitarianism, we must say that it is explicitly endorsed and proposed in the last chapter of the book by Wilhelm Reich, the theoretician of the struggle against repression, which I am tempted to call the *Mein Kampf* of permissivism: *The Sexual Revolution*. The two books were chronologically close (*Mein Kampf* is from 1924, *The Sexual Revolution* from 1930) and they share the common feature of promising what they really intend to deliver.

Reich writes that the only ideas that should be tolerated are those that do not undermine “sexual happiness”[3] and the process of disintegration of the traditional form of a family. Here we touch an important point about liberation from tradition as a crucial aspect of this type of revolution. If one reads carefully this book by Reich, one realizes that sexual liberation is not desired *per se* but rather as a tool to break down the family. In turn, the family is fought against as the organ through which certain values—regarded as meta-historical—are communicated.

But there is more. Consider what he says about Christianity (these movements never fail to offer an outstretched hand): “Primitive Christianity was basically a communist movement. Its life-affirmative power became converted, by simultaneous sex-negation, into the ascetic and supernatural. By taking the form of the church, Christianity, which was striving for the delivery of humanity, denied its own origin. The church owes its power to the life-negating human structure which results from a metaphysical interpretation of life: it thrives on the life which it kills.”[4] Without much effort, Reich can be definitely viewed as a precursor of the fight against post-Constantinian Christianity. I do not know if any new theologian has already pointed this out.

Thus we see how fraudulent is the idea, which is often proposed, that the permissive society is religiously neutral. Let us observe, first, in what way the agnosticism it professes is very different from the agnosticism of the old type of secularism.

Old-style secularism wished to preserve the traditional tablet of moral values, being convinced that they do not require any metaphysical and/or religious foundation. Therefore, it confined religion to the private sphere. The new secularism affirms a radical inversion of values.

One of the necessary features of totalitarianism is the persecution of all transcendent religions, because they propose an ideal of life that cannot be reconciled with ethical immanentism. And totalitarians know that it is difficult for a global persecution to be fully successful, especially if it is violent, and that the best type of support for their policies is a persecution of the traditional faithful organized and carried out by religious reformers. Therefore, the best line of action is to be intransigent about lifestyles, and to support progressive and modernist trends whenever possible.

...

The book's rigorous consistency shows that no compromise is possible between traditional morality, taken in its entirety and without modifications, that is, fully recognizing its first premises, and thus without emphasizing unilaterally any particular aspect, and sexual liberation. Hence, we have to say that Reich is completely correct—apart from his form of expression and his judgment of value, which of course is the opposite of mine—when he writes that the “concept of the sexual urge as being in the service of procreation is a method of repression on the part of conservative sexology. It is a finalistic, i.e., idealistic concept. It presupposes a goal which of necessity must be of a supernatural origin. It reintroduces a metaphysical principle and thus betrays a religious or mystical prejudice.”[5] We can translate this into slightly different words: in history we find, as constants, two typical structures in permanent conflict: the *moral* structure, which in the final analysis presupposes a metaphysical-transcendent, or actually supernatural, foundation, and the *libertine* structure, which, having denied this foundation, must identify the full realization of life with “sexual happiness,” taken as an end in itself and thus freed from the idea of reproduction. If Reich deserves any credit, it is for having pushed the practical judgment of the libertine type to its ultimate consequences.

Indeed, Reich's thought is based on the premise, which of course is taken as unquestionably true without even a hint of a proof, that there is no order of ends, no meta-empirical authority of values. Any trace not just of Christianity but of “idealism” in the broadest sense, or of a foundation of values in some objective reality, like history according to Marx, is eliminated. What is man reduced to, then, if not to a bundle of physical needs? When these needs are satisfied—when, in short, every repression is removed—he will be happy. Nietzsche's sentence about socialists comes to mind: “they wink because they have invented happiness.”[6] Few writers typify the character of the “inventor of happiness” as well as Reich does.

Having taken away every order of ends and eliminated every authority of values, all that is left is vital energy, which can be identified with sexuality, as was already claimed in ancient times and is actually difficult to refute. Hence, the core element of life will be sexual happiness. And since full sexual satisfaction is possible, happiness is within reach. Man will free himself from neuroses and will become fully capable of work and initiative through absolute, unbounded sexual freedom. His psychic struggle will be transformed and he will also be freed from militaristic and aggressive tendencies and from sadistic fantasies, which are typical of repressed people—as the example of de Sade supposedly demonstrates.

But, what is the repressive social institution *par excellence*? To Reich it is the traditional monogamous family; and, from his standpoint, certainly he cannot be said to be wrong. Indeed, the idea of family is inseparable from the idea of *tradition*, from a heritage of truth that we must *tradere*, *hand on*. Thus the abolition of every meta-empirical order of truth requires that the family must be dissolved. No merely sociological consideration can justify keeping it.

At the cost of repeating myself, I should insist on some truths that have been almost completely forgotten. The idea of indissoluble monogamous marriage and other ideas related to it (modesty, purity, continence) are 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). On top of everything else, the affirmation of these themes is one of the glories of Italian thought, because what else is Dante's *Comedy* if not the poem of order viewed as the immanent form of the universe? And who else was the great defender of the objective Order of Being, during the modern centuries, if not Rosmini?

But if we separate the idea of tradition from that of an objective order, it must necessarily appear to be "the past," what has been "surpassed," "the dead trying to suffocate the living," what must be negated in order to find psychological balance. The idea of indissoluble marriage must be replaced by that of free union, renewable or breakable at any time. It does not make sense to speak of sexual perversions; on the contrary, homosexual expressions, either masculine or feminine, should be regarded as the purest forms of love. Therefore, at the scientific-materialistic level, on which Freud also operated, Reich is undoubtedly correct.

[1] The appropriate name of this radical break with the past, or even with yesterday, is *Futurism*. In fact, what we have today is a generalization of the theses of the Italian literary movement that bore that name, which fulfills today what was its original aspiration, by shaping practical life. Observe that the emancipation of women as understood by the various feminist movements conforms exactly to the model of the "futurist woman," which had already been proposed before the First World War. Keeping in mind the relationship between Futurism and Fascism, we can speak of a "futurist continuity" in our history, which achieves its final stage in today's permissivism. It is very peculiar that this fulfillment of Futurism is the outcome of a cultural attitude that until today has advanced under the banner of the most intransigent form of anti-Fascism.

[2] The rise of a form of true philosophical atheism can be observed starting with the *libertinage érudit* of the early seventeenth century. It was a negative and corrosive form of atheism, which must be distinguished from the later positive and revolutionary form, aimed at creating a new reality. Two opposite moral attitudes are associated with these two types of atheism: with the former, what used to be called libertine licentiousness, and is now called permissiveness; with the latter, austerity and the severity of the revolutionary, which is literally a secularization of Puritanism. It seems that the historical development of atheism goes through a cycle, going through the revolutionary stage and coming back today to a radically expanded libertine form. And that the revolutionary stage plays the role of mediating the transition from what used to be aristocratic libertine atheism to what is today libertine atheism for the masses.

[3] Wilhelm Reich, *The Sexual Revolution*, trans. Theodore P. Wolfe (New York: Noonday, 1963), 265.

[4] *Ibid.*, 266.

[5] *Ibid.*, 51.

[6] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 17.

Augusto Del Noce (1910-1989) was a distinguished philosopher, political thinker, and public intellectual.

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