

Citation Info:

Michael Liccione, "Ratzinger and del Noce on 1968 and Beyond," in *1968: Culture and Counterculture*, edited by Thomas V. Gourlay and Daniel Mathys, (Pickwick Publications, 2020), pp.236-252.

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Ratzinger and Del Noce on 1968 and Beyond

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In a recent article in *Commonweal*, Carlo Lancellotti presents the unusual and prescient perspective of Italian-Catholic philosopher Augusto Del Noce on the social and political trends that manifested themselves across the West in the tumultuous events of 1968. In this paper I shall support Del Noce's thesis in two ways. First, I shall summarize then-Professor Joseph Ratzinger's reactions to 1968 and relate them to the conclusions of Del Noce and others Lancellotti cites. While Lancellotti does not cite Ratzinger, what motivated the latter's shift away from "progressivism" toward a more conservative reception of Vatican II well illustrates Del Noce's thesis. I shall then argue at greater length than Lancellotti, whose purpose is primarily expository, that Del Noce's perspective, while needing qualification and expansion in light of what has happened since his death, is essentially correct.

MOST OF US WHO had at least achieved puberty by 1968 will remember what a tumultuous year it was, particularly for American Catholics. In the US, sometimes-violent protests against the war in Vietnam and the military draft escalated on college campuses, most notably Columbia

University. (When I started attending college there four years later, administrators were still traumatized by the event.) The assassination of black civil-rights activist Dr. Martin Luther King in March sparked race riots in dozens of American cities, including Washington itself. The June assassination of presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy, brother of the previous president (who had also been assassinated) further stoked already considerable turmoil within the Democratic Party. That helped generate an ugly, riotous atmosphere at the party's election-year convention held a few months later in Chicago, where police used massive force to remove kicking-and-screaming protesters. That in turn generated, among American voters, both sympathy for and backlash against the student-led "New Left" that would soon gain such influence in the party. Politically, it was a very polarizing time. And so it was theologically.

For I also recall my parents and their friends, on the eve of said convention, arguing vociferously about the encyclical *Humanae vitae*,¹ which Pope Paul VI had just published in July to the great displeasure of many theologians and rank-and-file laity. People had been led to believe that change was in the offing and were furious when it did not come. That dispute took place in the context not only of the so-called "sexual revolution" but also of the generally vertiginous context of the immediate post-Vatican II years. It seemed to many people then that everything about Catholicism, not just the drastically changing liturgy, was up for grabs. It still seems that way to many Catholics who came of age at that time, and to the relatively few young people today who take progressive Catholicism seriously. By any measure, 1968 was one of the most significant years of the twentieth century, at least in the Western world.

Now to Europe. At that time, Joseph Ratzinger was in his second year as a professor at the University of Tübingen, the home of what had long been the most prestigious theology faculty in Germany. He had been personally recruited to said faculty by Hans Küng as a fellow "progressive." Ironically, when I met Küng in New York fifteen years later, he had recently been stripped of his pontifical license to teach theology by Ratzinger, who was by then head of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—the key Vatican dicastery which, at its founding in the sixteenth century, was called "The Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition." I was quite amused to hear from Küng how well he and Ratzinger had got on during the Council and

1. Paul VI. *Humanae vitae*.

its immediate aftermath, despite their differences in temperament and thought. Before 1968, it was still quite possible for moderate progressives like Ratzinger to sympathize with more radical ones like Küng.

But the events of 1968 in France and Germany, as tumultuous in their own way as those in the US, alarmed and repelled Ratzinger, who experienced some of the tumult among his own students. They so shook him that, even as pope almost forty years later, he characterized “the pause [*caesura*] in 1968” as “the beginning or ‘explosion’—I would dare to call it—of the great cultural crisis of the West.”² He decided back then that there was something seriously wrong not just with the European Left in general, but also with progressive Catholicism in particular. In 1969, he left Tübingen for the University of Regensburg, a new and obscure foundation of the Bavarian state—presumably to find some peace and space to be the quiet, civil, irenic scholar he was.

Specifying just what he thought went wrong brings to the fore certain themes that were also being sounded and developed by the unjustly neglected Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce, who died in 1989, shortly after the Berlin Wall fell. In my view, Del Noce’s incisive, substantively correct account of the origin and significance of those themes shows how they continue to play themselves out today, both culturally and politically. 1968 was indeed, I submit, the key spiritual bellwether for 2018. Ratzinger and Del Noce together enable us to understand why.

In the preface to the 2004 English edition of his *Introduction to Christianity*, a book first published in 1968, then-Cardinal Ratzinger wrote: “The year 1968 is linked to the rise of a new generation, which not only regarded the work of reconstruction after the Second World War as inadequate, full of injustice, egoism and the urge to possess, but conceived the whole evolution of history, beginning with the era of the triumph of Christianity, as an error and a failure.”³ That perception is what led to the “great refusal” of 1968, expressed in the disruption and violence on the Parisian barricades and the campuses of West German universities. The whole exercise had distinctly Marxist overtones, though most of its leaders were not sympathetic to Soviet Communism. Thus “the Revolution” was supposed to sweep away all the error and failure and yield a kind of utopia. The new order, whose outlines were necessarily vague because it would be such a radical break with the past, would

2. Meeting with the clergy of the dioceses of Belluno-Feltre and Treviso, July 2007.

3. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, ix.

indeed be a “classless society.” God, already viewed largely as a mystification of concrete, pre-existing “power relations,” would be completely “immanentized” so that human beings could fully flourish. People would all be mutually supportive coequals having no need of a transcendent God. So if God existed, there would, in Ratzinger’s words, “be nothing for him to do.”

Just as important was the “sexual revolution” then kicking into high gear throughout the West thanks to the contraceptive pill, whose advent had prompted *Humanae vitae*. Rationalized by such thinkers as Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse, and welcomed even by some Catholic theologians, that revolution was supposed to be as complete and necessary a liberation as any strictly economic or political development. Marriage and family—at least as traditionally understood in hierarchical terms that would soon be called “sexist”—were to become obsolete.

At the time, Ratzinger had little to say about such matters. Indeed, in his memoir he confesses his rather tepid initial response to *Humanae vitae*: “It was certainly clear that what it said was essentially valid, but the reasoning, for us at that time, and for me too, was not satisfactory. I was looking for a comprehensive anthropological viewpoint. In fact, it was [Pope] John Paul II who was to complement the natural-law viewpoint of the encyclical with a personalistic vision.”⁴ But by 1989, the end of the decade in which St. John Paul II developed that vision in a long series of public audiences,⁵ Ratzinger could argue, correctly, that the now-standard “progressive” objections to Church teaching on contraception, homosexuality, communion for the divorced-and-civilly-remarried, and women’s ordination arose together from a now-familiar view of conscience and freedom that is fundamentally incompatible with Catholic theological anthropology.

For the sake of exhibiting the connection between his theme and Del Noce’s, it is worth quoting his argument at length:

The concept “norm”—or what is even worse, the moral law itself—takes on negative shades of dark intensity: an external rule may supply models for direction, but it can in no case serve as the ultimate arbiter of one’s obligation. Where such thinking holds sway, the relationship of man to his body necessarily changes too. This change is described as a liberation, when compared to the relationship obtaining until now, like an opening up to a

4. Benedict XVI, *Last Testament*, 157.

5. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*.

freedom long unknown. The body then comes to be considered as a possession which a person can make use of in whatever way seems to him most helpful in attaining "quality of life." The body is something that one has and that one uses. No longer does man expect to receive a message from his bodiliness as to who he is and what he should do, but definitely, on the basis of his reasonable deliberations and with complete independence, he expects to do with it as he wishes. In consequence, there is indeed no difference whether the body be of the masculine or the feminine sex; the body no longer expresses being at all; on the contrary, it has become a piece of property. It may be that man's temptation has always lain in the direction of such control and the exploitation of goods. At its roots, however, this way of thinking first became an actual possibility through the fundamental separation—not a theoretical but a practical and constantly practiced separation—of sexuality and procreation. This separation was introduced with the Pill and has been brought to its culmination by genetic engineers so that man can now "make" human beings in the laboratory. The material for doing this has to be procured by actions deliberately carried out for the sake of the planned results, which no longer involve interpersonal human bonds and decisions in any way. Indeed, where this kind of thinking has been completely adopted, the difference between homosexuality and heterosexuality as well as that between sexual relations within or outside marriage have become unimportant.⁶

The notion of the human body as property to dispose of via complete self-determination, not as a manifestation of an objective moral order to which we should conform ourselves, had already taken firm hold in the West by the 1970s. Unlike most Catholic intellectuals at the time, Del Noce saw that, calling it part of the "technological society" that is logically equivalent to the "consumer" or "affluent" society. And because said notion is more influential than ever forty years later, Del Noce was also quite prescient.

In his remarkable essay "The Ascendance of Eroticism,"⁷ Del Noce noted that the intellectual stage for the sexual revolution had already been set by Wilhelm Reich, especially in his book *The Sexual Revolution: Toward a Self-Regulating Character*.⁸ Although Reich died half-forgotten in an American prison in 1957, he would soon become a hero of the

6. Ratzinger, "Difficulties Confronting the Faith in Europe Today."

7. Republished in *The Crisis of Modernity* as ch.10, 157–87.

8. Reich, *The Sexual Revolution*.

sexual revolution that was about to occur. As a scientific materialist, he took for granted that there is no given order of values, rooted in a transcendent God and handed on by tradition, to which we ought to conform ourselves. Fascism and all other forms of authoritarianism went hand-in-hand with sexual repression, the elimination of which would release vital energy in the way necessary for freedom and happiness, and thus render militarism obsolete. It is easy to understand the appeal of such a view to the beatniks and hippies who were soon to follow.

Reich believed that the concept and expression of sexuality must be separated from procreation to achieve the kind of liberation he advocated. And that is the point of connection with what I have been quoting from Ratzinger. The “scientific-materialistic level” is exactly what remains—even and especially after the failure of “the Revolution” to create the “new man” of Marxism—and dominates Western culture even more now than it did when Reich was alive and Del Noce was writing. It is only at that level that the sexual revolution makes such sense as it does.

Needless to say, the sexual revolution has not led to what Reich, and much of the generation that came of age in the 1960s and 70s, thought it would. Already, much disorder and disillusionment was setting in.⁹ And in Ratzinger’s estimation, the fall of the Soviet empire had already proved to be a great disillusionment. Thus:

Marxism had been conceived in these terms: a current that augured justice for all, the advent of peace, the abolition of unjustified relations of man’s dominance over man, etc. . . . To reach these noble objectives, it was thought that one had to give up ethical principles and that terror could be used as the instrument of good. When the time came that all could see, if only on the surface, the ruins caused in humanity by this idea, people preferred to take refuge in a pragmatic life and publicly profess contempt of ethics.¹⁰

Yet the failure of the god called “the Revolution” did not occasion a resurgence of the Christian faith and values that had given European civilization its inspiration and shape. Instead, as Del Noce rightly argued, Marxism underwent a “decomposition”¹¹ into two main elements that

9. See Eberstadt, *Adam and Eve after the Pill*, especially ch. 8.

10. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 12.

11. The word and the concept appear at various points in *The Crisis of Modernity*, especially in Chapter 4, “The Latent Metaphysics in Contemporary Politics,” originally published as “La metafisica latente nella realtà politica contemporanea,” 61–76.

can be summarized as “technocracy”—in which scientism undergirds a practical materialism but without the engine of the Marxian dialectic—and “nihilism,” by which he seems to mean a cynical relativism in which ethics is absorbed into politics without any overarching vision of humanity and its place in the scheme of things.

In his introductory essay for *The Crisis of Modernity*, his collection of some of Del Noce’s key essays, Carlo Lancellotti expounds Del Noce’s thesis of decomposition:

On the one hand, with Marxism, modern secular thought made itself an (atheistic) religion and reached the masses, thus shaping modern history as the history of the expansion of atheism. On the other, Marxism’s success coincided with its decomposition: instead of producing universal liberation, it opened the way to the affluent society, “the society that succeeds in eliminating the dialectic tension that sustains the revolution by pushing alienation to the highest degree” (Del Noce, *Il problema dell’ateismo*, 314). Decades before the end of the Soviet Union, at a time when large segments of the Western intelligentsia still embraced Marxism as “the philosophy of our time,” Del Noce understood that Marxism had been fundamentally defeated because history had refuted its fundamental metaphysical assumption, namely the revolutionary transition to the “new man.” However, by infusing Western culture with historical materialism and an attitude of radical rejection of religious transcendence, Marxism had succeeded in its *pars destruens* (CM, 9).

From one angle, the attitude described above can be understood as a neo-gnostic “rejection of being,” in the sense of a resentful rejection of limits. Del Noce discusses what that means in an essay that Lancellotti includes in his collection.¹² It is how the sexual revolution dovetails with the decomposition of Marxism and its replacement by a technocratic, bourgeois brand of materialism. As evidenced first by widespread contraception and abortion, then by artificial procreation, and now by the transgender movement, treating our bodies as instruments of sexual expressions that need not be bound by their given structure is precisely what the sexual revolution consists in. It is not just that what we do sexually is now a matter of individual predilection limited only by the principle of mutual consent. It is also that what we *are* as sexual beings is primarily a matter of individual self-understanding, which one might

12. Especially “Violence and Modern Gnosticism,” *The Crisis of Modernity*, ch. 2.

or might not experience as freely chosen. But freely chosen or not, it is a form of violence to the human person inasmuch as it signifies a radical rejection of naturally given limits. The technocratic, bourgeois society of the contemporary West, in which "choice" is enshrined in consumerism and libertinism, is as materialistic and neo-gnostic as Marxism and just as destructive of the exigencies of the human person. And it depends on the disappearance of "religious transcendence" already described. Marxism might seem different and worse inasmuch as it relativized ethics in terms of power: Whatever promotes the Revolution is right, whatever inhibits it is wrong. But the "technocratic" society also relativizes ethics in a different way.

As Ratzinger said in his homily to the conclave that was about to elect him pope:

Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labeled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be "tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine," seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires.¹³

Instead of the dictatorship of the proletariat, we have the exaltation of individual choice untrammelled by nature itself. But why is such relativism dictatorial? Is it not instead the raising of individual freedom to the highest moral level possible?

As Del Noce recognized,¹⁴ the kind of society that survives, and in some ways thrives, in the West is totalitarian to the degree that its assumptions are scientistic and its moral norms justified in scientific as well as political terms. Now strictly speaking, scientism is the belief that the only publicly accessible form of knowledge is scientific knowledge. If that belief be taken literally, it is performatively self-refuting, for the truth of scientism cannot be established scientifically. So ordinarily, scientism takes the form of people's *choosing* to privilege scientific knowledge over such other forms of knowledge as they admit. Usually, such reasons arise from resentment of traditional religion—and thus the accompanying morality—as oppressive. That attitude goes hand-in-hand with a grand narrative according to which the only genuine human progress is

13. Ratzinger, Homily at the Mass *Pro Eligendo Pontifice*, 2005.

14. ^{cf.} Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity*, 86–91.

and will be constituted by the progress of science, largely by how such progress contributes to individual freedom understood as complete self-determination. That suggests to many people, without logically entailing, that those aspects of religion and morality which cannot be made cogent in what they recognize as scientific terms are obstacles to such progress.

Hence, despite the survival of Judaeo-Christian thought and morality among many in the West—albeit often in deracinated form, as sympathy for victims of every kind—resistance to complete sexual “liberation” has largely and swiftly collapsed. What once seemed like divine commands securely rooted in human nature are now seen as irrational and arbitrary prejudices. For example, abortion and contraception, once thought of as abominations, are now seen as necessary for women’s agency and fulfillment. Artificial procreation is now seen as a right for those who want and can afford it. Same-sex “marriage,” inconceivable until a few generations ago, is now law. And in the Anglosphere, governments now treat gender “transitioning” as a necessary health measure.

Even the concept of human nature becomes suspect, precisely to the degree that it specifies a *telos* with moral significance that would set limits on self-determination. The loss of any teleological view of nature, which began with the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, is now complete. But it has not left a vacuum. It has been replaced by an ideology of indefinite progress toward a society in which people will be equipped by technology to be what they wish and do as they wish with apparently minimal interference from others. The “transhumanist” movement is simply the vanguard of ideas that are already and very much at work in society at large. Though some of the details are dated, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and C. S. Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man* (1943) were prophetic, and their vision of said world totalitarian. That is the world now taking shape in the West.

The totalitarianism that develops apace in the West is enforced by what I call the “normalization of Bulverism,” especially in political discourse. Bulverism is a toxic hybrid of the fallacies of *petitio principii* and *ad hominem*: one assumes one’s opponent is wrong, so obviously wrong that some unflattering explanation must be found for their error in terms other than those they themselves would give. That has always been a tool of polemics. But despite their considerable differences in thought and style, Marx, Freud, and their grandchildren in critical theory and post-modernism have together taught people how to turn it into an instrument for advocating an entire explanation of human behavior—economic in

Marx's case, usually sexual in Freud's, and now a mixture of the two, with race thrown in. Of course, that kind of critique is not fallacious when one's opponent denies obvious facts, such as the truths of arithmetic or the sphericity of the Earth. But certain debatable assumptions of the secular, progressive worldview are now taken by our cultural elites as so obviously true that dissent can only be explained in terms quite unflattering to the dissenters, who are thereby socially discredited and marginalized. That's a tool of totalitarianism.

The totalitarianism Del Noce saw is also nihilistic in two ways. On the front end, and as has already been pointed out, it is a neo-gnostic rejection of "given" limits on human nature and action. Only those enlightened by scientific knowledge, as opposed to religious "obscurantists" and "bigots," can escape those limits as all should. On the back end, it is doomed to ultimate disillusionment just as Marxism was. It has no overarching account of what man is for, which seems *prima facie* to make space for the complete fulfillment of human freedom as science progresses. But as Lewis saw, the power of man over nature inevitably becomes "the power of some men exercised over other men with nature as its instrument."¹⁵ Hence, despite ever-increasing scientific and material progress—good in itself, in many ways—political freedom is not increasing, wars continue to rage, multinational corporations dominate markets, and life becomes increasingly standardized. That has led to a cynicism whose growth is palpable and fed by instant, global, round-the-clock "news," usually negative, via the Internet.

Neither Del Noce nor Ratzinger, however, took enough account of what I see as a third element of the decomposition of Marxism: the morally earnest concern for historically "oppressed" groups that now expresses itself in multiculturalism, political correctness, and leftist identity politics. Those manifest what is sometimes called "cultural Marxism": the extension of classic Marxist critique from economic class alone to race, gender, and sexual orientation too. But they are right about the other two elements described above. The third element I am describing represents the survival of Christian moral passion in secular form: the same passion from which Marxism itself drew much of its energy, as both thinkers recognized. That is why one of Del Noce's favorite themes, the "heterogenesis of ends"¹⁶ that he thought would lead to Marxism's complete self-

15. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 22.

16. Del Noce, *Crisis of Modernity*, 11.

negation, is not entirely on point. The moral passion driving Marxism's original, quasi-messianic utopianism did survive—just not in quite the form that unreconstructed Communists would recognize as such.

That element of moral passion fits in with the other elements of “decomposition” insofar as invidious distinctions among groups according to income, race, gender, and sexual orientation are seen to have no scientific basis. From that standpoint, and just as in old-fashioned Marxism, members of less-privileged groups are necessarily seen as oppressed by their evil overlords even now, and thus in need of liberation. But it too is plagued by the lack of any notion of a distinctively human *telos* beyond self-fulfillment conceived in primarily material terms.

The specifically theological aspect of the aforesaid developments is where the concerns of Ratzinger and Del Noce mostly directly intersect. It began in part with the fact that during the generation following the Second World War, progressive theologians in both the Catholic and the Protestant communities persisted in the illusion that “true” Marxism could not only be reconciled with Christianity but also be reconceived as an authentic expression thereof. That was a primary manifestation of “secularization theology” about which both thinkers had much to say.

Some of Ratzinger's students at Tübingen in 1968, for example, decided to take their inspiration not from him but from the aged Ernst Bloch, the gravamen of whose work was the illusion I have just described. All one had to do was strip out the mythical elements of Christianity and emphasize the biblical theme of casting down the mighty and lifting up the lowly—the primary theme of Bloch's books *The Principle of Hope* (1954) and *Atheism in Christianity* (1968). The former book strongly influenced Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*, first published in 1964. In turn, and also to Ratzinger's chagrin, Moltmann's book strongly influenced German Catholic graduate students and teaching assistants in theology soon after it was published. And in 1968, in Latin America, Gustavo Gutierrez organized and held a major conference called “Toward a Theology of Liberation,” which formed the basis of his seminal 1971 book *A Theology of Liberation*.¹⁷

All these closely related ideas formed the intellectual climate of the Catholic *avant garde* from the mid-1960s through the mid-1980s. Among older Jesuits and Franciscans, and the dwindling number of students they influence, it still does, mostly—just without the *avant-garde* cachet.

17. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*.

Indeed, thanks to the martyrdom (and now canonization) of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the remnants of the climate persist in Latin American Catholicism and among left-wing Catholics elsewhere. And that despite Ratzinger's largely negative assessment of liberation theology in the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) *Instruction* on the topic.¹⁸ The whole thing constitutes a dream that refuses to die.

In his magnum opus *Il problema dell'ateismo*, published in 1964,¹⁹ Del Noce explained why it can remain only a dream. For one thing, and as recent history has verified, the notion that Marxism and Christianity are in any way mutually compatible was always illusory. There is no need to rehash tired old debates about the relation of actual Communist regimes to "true" Marxism; on Marx's own premises, there is no essence of Marxism other than its concrete historical embodiments. By general agreement, it was essential to Marx's thought that allegedly objective, transcendent ideas and values are always mystifications of—masks for—underlying power relations based on people's concrete economic roles, in which some classes necessarily exploit others. If that is the case, then there is nothing of permanent value for something called "tradition" to hand on, so that there is no religious or moral tradition worth preserving and defending anymore. For the revolution to occur, ethics had to be subsumed into politics. From all that, it follows that atheism is essential to Marxism. Man no longer *discovers* a transcendental order of being and value, with a creator God at its apex, to which he must learn to conform himself; rather, he makes and remakes himself, thus overcoming his own alienation. *Homo faber* replaces *homo sapiens*, and thus has no need of God, whom Marx's progenitor Feuerbach saw as the supreme expression of man's old alienation.

That is why, when the fall of the Soviet empire unmasked the failure of the revolution, so many Europeans turned not to their ancestral Christian faith but to a corrosive relativism that can culminate only in nihilism. Having accepted the "hermeneutic of suspicion"—a methodology that Marx and Freud had largely introduced (without calling it that) and which critical theory and postmodernism went on to extend to race, gender, and even language as well as to class—such Europeans had nothing solid with which to replace Marxism as a font of inspiration. In my

18. Ratzinger, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation*.

19. Del Noce, *Il problema dell'ateismo*.

observation, that is increasingly true of secular-minded American and Australian academics as well.

Of course, some theologians did not see the essential role of atheism in Marxism as a problem because they did not see atheism *tout court* as a problem. In the mid-twentieth century, it was a passing fashion to hold that atheism can be understood as a development or expression of Christianity if treated as a kind of iconoclastic precondition for spiritual maturity and earthly progress. Hence "death-of-God" theology. But that idea is dying the death it deserves—ironically enough, partly under the cruel knife of the hermeneutic of suspicion. As Del Noce suggested, the efforts of progressive-Catholic thinkers to secularize and demythologize Catholicism can only produce a new and more virulent form of clericalism, in which the enlightened few, preferably but not necessarily ordained, ridicule and marginalize believers who cling stubbornly to the old-fashioned religion. That mirrors what happened under Communism, in which the putative subject and beneficiary of the revolution, the proletariat, is too *lumpen* to serve as the engine thereof, and so must yield that role to a more enlightened party of intellectuals. Both lead eventually and at best to an oppressive hypocrisy that inevitably undermines its own theoretical and practical supports.

What remains of the dream is the idea of the equal and inherent dignity of every human person, which of course is a fundamentally Judaeo-Christian idea. Leaving aside the Left's negativity toward tradition in general, long evoked by the hermeneutic of suspicion, the idea of equal dignity is what now sustains the moral passion driving much of the contemporary Left in the West, both secular and religious. But secular progressivism detaches said idea from its metaphysical and theological foundations. And it is at precisely at that point that Del Noce's explicit reaction to 1968 becomes most informative.

In a recent article,²⁰ Lancellotti presents and expands on Del Noce's reaction to a very revealing debate that took place in 1969 between two well-known Catholic intellectuals at the time: Jean-Marie Domenach, who in 1957 had succeeded Emmanuel Mounier as editor of *Esprit* and *de facto* flag-bearer of "progressive" French Catholicism, and Thomas Molnar, the distinguished Hungarian-American philosopher and historian (and a regular *Commonweal* contributor for years before his death). According to Lancellotti, who translated it, Del Noce in 1970 turned the

20. Lancellotti, "The Dead End of the Left."

Domenach–Molnar debate into a short book whose Italian title was a phrase Domenach had used in French: in English, “The Dead End of the Left.”²¹ Del Noce started the book with his own substantial, introductory essay “A New Perspective on Right and Left.” We should begin with what all three men agreed was the meaning of the book’s title.

Already apparent by 1968, the “crisis of the Left,” in Del Noce’s words: “takes the form of a split into two opposite developments. One is adaptation to reality, which ultimately leads to submission to the ‘reality principle.’ Reality, however, is no longer ordered toward values but rather coincides with pure power. The other is pure unrealism, which, however, objectively becomes an accomplice of the first attitude in the global rejection of all values.”²²

The “pure unrealism” to which he refers has several aspects deriving, ultimately, from the neo-gnostic “rejection of Being” already discussed. The inevitable limitations of human life, which make perfect justice and complete individual freedom impossible, cause a resentment that, for a certain sort of temperament, makes working toward some ill-defined future utopia seem like a moral imperative. That utopia would consist in liberation from all “repressive” constraints, sexual and cultural as well as economic, since the traditional norms and values allegedly justifying such constraints are merely instruments of oppression.

According to Domenach, Molnar, and Del Noce, that manifested itself in the “great refusal” of May 1968 in France and elsewhere. But its justified rejection of Soviet-style communism, coupled with its extension of the hermeneutic of suspicion to all allegedly objective values, deprives contemporary leftism of any firm philosophical basis for upholding any values other than those which now characterize our “technocratic” society: namely, scientism, eroticism, and for religious progressives, the theology of secularization. Hence the “adaptation to reality” that coexists with the pure unrealism.

Secular progressives are strongly motivated to be scientific because for them, the social sciences in particular “demystify” traditional values as masks for will-to-power. Since Del Noce’s death, the group whose will-to-power is thus masked has come to be seen not merely as an economic

21. I am unable to locate the original pamphlet.

22. Del Noce, “A New Perspective on Left and Right” in *The Crisis of Modernity*, 229. Del Noce’s essay was first published as “Un discorso ‘nuovo’ su destra e sinistra,” *L’Europa* 4, no. 10 (1970), 24–28, republished in *Rivoluzione Risorgimento Tradizione*, 171–86.

class—the capitalists—but more broadly as the hegemonic white, Christian, “heteronormative” patriarchy, which largely invented capitalism. That stance had already begun to take shape with the “New Left” of the late 1960s, which came to wield an ever-stronger influence within left-wing parties in Europe and America.

For the contemporary Left, complete sexual autonomy is also necessary, albeit not itself sufficient, for “liberation” and “justice.” Del Noce saw that coming in 1968. It did not take more than a generation thereafter for consent to become the sole moral criterion for sexual activity, and individual experience the sole criterion for sexual identity. Hence the rejection of heteronormativity and the proliferation of “genders” that are really sexual preferences taken as constitutive of personal identity. But because of the prestige of science, and the success of regular technological progress that contributes to such prestige, the Left lacks a critique of the globalist elites who aim to rule technocratically, through enlightened “experts.” Those elites aim to rule in the name of science and progress while fully supporting the new dogma of sexual autonomy. Not many on the Left today question that—or if they do, they don’t seriously propose giving up the arrangements that make affluence possible. Thus does the revolutionary spirit of the Left become the opposite of revolutionary. We have reached “the dead end of the Left.”

With the effective and mostly unquestioned rule of scientism and sexual autonomy (which latter Del Noce called “eroticism”) in today’s Western-globalist technocracy, the only outlets for moral passion on what del Noce called “the Left” are the drive for the *equality* of the sexes, of different cultures, and of racial and ethnic groups. Thus the insistence on women participating in every sphere of life on the same terms as men, and the charge of “racism” leveled against those who oppose open borders and favor the equal enforcement of laws on all within a given jurisdiction. The problem for the Left is that despite its laudable passion for the equal dignity of each and every human person, its overall philosophical anthropology cannot support that idea, and therefore the passion for it, rationally. It is freighted with a purely negative conception of individual freedom as freedom from whatever hinders individual self-definition and the corresponding pursuit of an individualistic, bourgeois sense of wellbeing in terms of that identity. That is now what the “dignity of the human person” is thought to consist in. But it is a formula for the brave new world where “human dignity” will be flattened, instrumentalized, and thus rendered incoherent.

Because they accept secularization, and thus practical atheism, as an inevitable development of modernity and progress, religious progressives lack the resources to resist the sort of secular progressivism I have been describing—hence the collapse of mainline Protestantism and the willingness of most of the Catholic Left to accept the technocratic society and economic globalism while sharing the aforesaid moral passion of the secular Left. The moral capital built up by the religious idea of the dignity of the human person for centuries is being spent and not replaced.

The process that has brought the Left to its dead end, beginning in the 1960s and accelerating even today, hinges on a mistaken anthropology that takes the essence of personhood simply as the capacity for exercising agency in self-determination. That is to mistake the part for the whole: It neglects how human personhood is constituted by relationship, and thus in part by reception of certain “givens” that function as limits. It is why Del Noce was so prescient when he noted that *homo faber* has replaced *homo sapiens* in leftist thought.²³ On that view, we are what we freely make ourselves to be; there is no prior “human nature,” a concept that is only a mystifying mask for will-to-power. And of course, the religious dimension of human life is thereby dissipated. That same mistake underlies what Ratzinger has called the dictatorship of relativism—a phrase that is only superficially paradoxical, since the full force of government coercion is now being brought to bear to enforce the aforesaid anthropology in Western countries. That is the final dead end of freedom as conceived by most of the Left today. We are fortunate to have thinkers who saw it coming.

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23. Del Noce developed that theme in many places. Cf. the essay “Technological Civilization and Christianity” in *The Age of Secularization*, especially 74–75.

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