

Brian Welter

*La critica alla Rivoluzione
nel pensiero di Augusto Del Noce*
by Roberto de Mattei*

In *La critica alla Rivoluzione nel pensiero di Augusto Del Noce*, Italian Catholic historian Roberto Mattei offers a series of articles from his career on the Italian traditional philosopher Augusto Del Noce. Del Noce passed away in the same year that the Berlin Wall came down. De Mattei notes the symbolism of this, as Del Noce spent much of his career identifying the roots and development of modern liberal philosophy that, starting with Descartes, led to the French Revolution, Marxism, and the Russian Revolution. Like many Catholic philosophers, Del Noce discerned spiritual and theological issues where modern philosophy adopts a largely materialist perspective. His great contribution, as de Mattei outlines it, is the insight that the death of Marxist-Leninism does not end the revolutionary process. Communism is only one aspect of this process. At the heart of revolution, which began in 1789, is nihilistic destruction.

La critica alla Rivoluzione nel pensiero di Augusto Del Noce provides a simple though incomplete introduction to the philosopher through his views on modernity. De Mattei helpfully and repeatedly

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* Roberto de Mattei, *La critica alla Rivoluzione nel pensiero di Augusto Del Noce* (Firenze: Le Lettere, 2019), 123 pages. ISBN: 978-88-9366-115-7.

places him within Italian intellectual history. This includes Italian philosophers such as Amedeo Avogadro, Antonio Rosmini, Giovanni Gentile, Norberto Bobbio, and Antonio Gramsci, who represent a wide spectrum of thought over the past two centuries, from anti-Revolutionary to fascist to communist. Readers who are unfamiliar with these men may not fully appreciate de Mattei's discussion. Yet even these readers will gain much from the portrayal of Del Noce's evaluation from this historical perspective.

Del Noce spent much energy interpreting the most significant events of modern political history from a traditional perspective. He evaluated the philosophical underpinnings and significance of the French Revolution, Italian Risorgimento, Mussolini era, and dechristianization of post-1945 Italy. This made him a unique intellectual in post-World War II Italy. At times, de Mattei locates Del Noce within the stream of French anti-Revolutionary thinkers that includes Joseph de Maistre and Louis-Gabriel de Bonald. Del Noce's work is relevant for today's struggles, de Mattei argues, particularly in helping us understand the events of the 1960s and their roots in the thought of Antonio Gramsci and Herbert Marcuse. Readers come to see how the sixties were as revolutionary as 1789 and 1917, though in a far more cultural and less directly political manner than the first two.

As early as 1969, de Mattei wrote that Del Noce's traditional and religious outlook amounted to the real rebellion in its confrontation of anti-traditional nihilism. Del Noce heavily criticized the sweeping away of traditional values after World War II. According to de Mattei, the power in such insights stems from Del Noce's historical analysis when examining the development of western philosophy dating back to nominalism and Descartes. De Mattei provides clarity on the nature and central role of tradition for Del Noce, whose significant and unique voice in Italy filled a void. This void resulted from Italian Catholic conserva-

tives finding themselves leaderless, with Giovanni Gentile rejected as too fascist and Julius Evola as too pagan.

Despite his historical orientation, Del Noce's philosophy also identified persistent themes to modern philosophy. He characterized communism's unchanging core value as praxis. Marxist-Leninism enacted the maxim of nineteenth-century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach: "Philosophy has only interpreted the world in various ways; but now it will change it."¹ Communism's truths are to be seen in its application to everyday life, particularly in its economic, social, and political effects. De Mattei successfully conveys Del Noce's harsh and hopeless judgment on modern philosophy as a whole:

And if the political translation of Marxism is communism in its Leninist-Gramscian version, the political translation of Nietzsche is Hitlerism. Communism and Nazism, according to Del Noce, are the two aspects in the drama in which is consummated, in achieving its practice, classic German philosophy.²

Modern thought in its ultimately destructive nihilism cannot help but create violent political solutions. And these two tendencies, fascist and communist, not only still exist, but are rising today, according to de Mattei, with European identitarian-based neo-paganism and populist Latin American-based Christian movements. Unfortunately, de Mattei gives few details of these current movements and how they fit into modern thought.

De Mattei shows how Descartes plays the central role in Del Noce's historical analysis of modern philosophy while at the same time, perhaps surprisingly, offering a potential alternative to modern philosophy. Del Noce did not believe that philosophy could somehow turn back the philosophical process. Though we are stuck at the moment with

¹ De Mattei, *La critica alla Rivoluzione nel pensiero di Augusto Del Noce*, 76. All translations from Italian are mine.

² *Ibid.*, 97.

Descartes, modern philosophy will bring about its own undoing. De Mattei sums up this powerful sense of hope and confidence that is found in Del Noce's thought:

Christendom is not one possible expression of Christian philosophy, but the unique form in which Christianity is destined to express itself in history. And the modern world, born in the French Revolution, cannot be "enculturated" in Christianity, nor recuperated, philosophically or politically, because only its decomposition . . . will make possible an authentic renaissance of Christian society on the threshold of the third millennium. That which is irreversible is not modernity, but its dissolution.³

Christianity will outlast modernity.

Del Noce's defense of Christendom thus envisioned its return after the inevitable eclipse of modernity. In many of these articles, de Mattei briefly places this assertion in wider Italian thinking. This includes Pope Leo XVIII and Avogadro (d. 1856). De Mattei cites the latter: "It is not enough to be Catholic as an individual. We must also want to be this as citizens."⁴ For Del Noce, this understanding of Christianity as a public religion means that modernity's relegation of religion to the private sphere will not last. It is not in the nature of Christianity to accept this secondary role. Closely tied to this historical dynamic is the significance of a philosophy of being which, de Mattei notes, "is destined to reveal all of its fruitfulness, the fruitfulness of the *verum*, the *bonum*, and the *pulchrum* which is an eminently political and social fruitfulness and takes the name of the Christian City on the political and social planes."⁵ Del Noce contrasted the generativity of the philosophy of being with the dead end of Cartesian philosophy. He also valued moral issues over intellectual ones. Modern philosophy's failures were moral ones. Modernity's philosophical problems lead to moral failures,

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

as exemplified in the emphasis on sexual experimentation and sex-based rebellion.

Del Noce's analysis of the history of philosophy provided keen insights into the nature of revolution, or the revolutionary process, and how this process shifts to fit the times in order to continue to carry out its own logic. Its main purpose, Del Noce observed, is destruction. That is why, de Mattei argues, the current revolutionary impetus could so easily throw off Marxist-Leninism after 1989 and mutate into its current sex-oriented form that saw its initial praxis in the 1960s with the sexual revolution. 1989 was no victory against the western revolutionary spirit, in other words, but simply an event that brought a change to the outer shell of revolution. Yet de Mattei identifies a lack. Del Noce failed to develop "concepts such as metaphysics, contemplation, grace, the supernatural" based on Thomist thought⁶ as remedies to these philosophical ills. Though Del Noce aligned more closely with St. Augustine, the Italian philosopher likewise failed to fully develop an "Augustinian theology of history."⁷ Del Noce excelled at identifying the shortcomings of modern philosophy, but avoided offering clear and practical solutions.

La critica alla Rivoluzione nel pensiero di Augusto Del Noce acquaints readers with some of the most notable currents of the philosopher's ideas. Del Noce's concern for the historical development of the revolutionary spirit means that his insights remain relevant for today's post-Christian, revolutionary era. While many Americans seem caught off-guard by recent political and social events, de Mattei reveals Del Noce's prophetic feel for the times. These articles on Del Noce speak to the current year. One reason America's conservatives seem to go from loss to loss in the social and political arenas may be their lack of a-

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8

⁷ *Ibid.*

wareness of the crucial role of a robust philosophy of being. A nominalist, Cartesian position does not give us the tools to rebuild the family, vocations, society, and our relationship with the environment—not to mention re-establish beautiful art and architecture. Only a philosophy of being, as Del Noce saw, can help bring all that about. His philosophy can support conservative or traditional thinkers in establishing a more assertive and confident identity. This identity can renew the imagination and language of conservatives which will help them avoid slipping into the language and ground rules that have been established by the advocates of nihilistic destruction.



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SUMMARY

This paper is a review of Roberto de Mattei's book, *La critica alla Rivoluzione nel pensiero di Augusto Del Noce* [*The Criticism of the Revolution in the Thought of Augusto Del Noce*]. According to the author, de Mattei's book acquaints the reader with Del Noce's criticism of the destructive nature of revolution as that which stems from the ideas of modern philosophy and culminates in current politics and culture.

KEYWORDS

Roberto de Mattei, Augusto Del Noce, revolution, modern philosophy, destruction, nihilism, Christianity.

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De Mattei, Roberto. *La critica alla Rivoluzione nel pensiero di Augusto Del Noce*. Firenze: Le Lettere, 2019.