

Authority*

1. *Eclipse of the idea of authority and crisis of today's world*

The eclipse of the idea of authority is one of the essential characteristics of today's world; in fact, it is certainly its most immediately observable characteristic. Thus, we should regard as significant not so much the scholarly studies that discuss this topic – which, at any rate, are mostly inadequate – but rather the aspects of the contemporary world itself, taken as an object of reflection. And this to the extent that we are willing to examine these aspects with a mind free from the dogmatic presupposition that the present state of affairs is superior or irreversible or that it should be regarded as the starting point for a process of liberation that will take place in the future.

It is useless to linger on the various metaphors that can be used to express the eclipse of the idea of authority -- which can ultimately be summed up in just one: “the disappearance of the idea of the Father” -- or on the description of its various manifestations (crisis of the family, of education, of the Church). In order to understand the depth of this reversal and to gauge its amplitude, it will be enough to reflect on the opposition between the etymological root of the word “authority” and the meaning that this same word has generally assumed today. Indeed, *Auctoritas* derives from *augere*, “to make grow.” A shared etymological origin ties it to the words *Augustus* (he who makes grow), *auxilium* (help provided by a higher power), *augurium* (also a word of religious origin: a vow made to obtain divine cooperation in growth). If other languages are considered, one finds a common ideal structure. Thus, the German *auch* (also) is the imperative of the Gothic *aukan* (to make grow). Therefore, the etymology of authority includes the idea that *humanitas* is fulfilled in man when a principle of non-empirical nature frees him from a state of subjection and leads him to his proper end, as a rational and moral being. Indeed, man's freedom, as power of “attention” and not of “creation,” consists in his capacity to subordinate himself to this higher principle of liberation. Conversely, today the common mentality by and large associates the idea of authority with that of “repression,” and identifies it with what stops “growth,” what opposes it, reversing completely what the etymology implies. Hence, it is important to realize that the present eclipse of the idea of authority represents the greatest reversal that has been carried out in history. This statement can be verified by considering the results that have been achieved so far by the destructive aims of the “total revolution.” The questions that arise are: whether this *pars destruens* of the revolution marks the irreversible defeat of the idea of authority, or whether, on the contrary, there are signs that allow us to speak of an eclipse rather than a sunset. And whether, assuming it is irreversible, it represents a process towards nihilism, or whether the negative aspects of the present situation may be rather explained in terms of a crisis of growth.

The traditional substance of authority can be understood most clearly by focusing in particular on the family, because in it physical and moral generation are present together: father and mother are truly authors in a physical sense, through bodily generation, and “auttori” -- in the sense that Vico gives to this word – through education, understood as a process of elevation from the immediate experiences of the spirit to the recognition of the order of values.

* Originally published in Italian as the entry “Autorità” [Authority] in *Enciclopedia del Novecento* [Encyclopedia of the Twentieth Century] (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1975), 1: 416–26. It is an abridged and heavily edited version of a much longer text that has been published as “Authority vs Power” in Augusto Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 189-246. © 2014 Carlo Lancellotti.

By reflecting on the traditional family as a paradigm we deduce, then, that we have authority to the extent that we are “auttori;” but clearly parents can be parents only to the extent that they “hand down” and help. Now, in the modern world the unity of generation and education has been shattered. What parents can “hand down” in moral terms is no longer regarded as a value but rather as a dis-value, and is viewed as an obstacle to what is usually called “self-realization.” Here, we come to a crucial point: the crisis of the idea of authority is connected with the crisis of the idea of tradition. Such crisis cannot be regarded primarily as a sociological phenomenon; in fact, the idea of authority involves all the philosophical categories. Therefore, the only correct procedure is to start from a philosophical analysis, and then move on and consider politico-social and sociological motives. An investigation moving in the opposite direction will not achieve meaningful results and, above all, will be at risk of losing sight of the essence of the problem because of the multiplicity of motives that it will find. An even more serious mistake, on the other hand, is to accept the presupposition that metaphysical ideas are just reflections of certain given historical situations.

The link between crisis of the family and that of education is obvious. Schools no longer present themselves as institutions where teachers help newcomers become aware of the civilization that they must join and that they must continue. In the traditional mindset, across its many manifestations, this awareness – to which the teacher must lead – means both discovering those truths/values that are eternal and from whose recognition (also in a transcendental sense) civilization has drawn its meaning, and also defining the idea of the Word, as inner Teacher and uncreated wisdom, which makes possible (by participating in it) the communion of the spirits in one same truth. Conversely, today we face a kind of self-government of the young, who emancipate themselves from the burden of the past and use the teacher as an instructor in the methods of liberation. The reduction of tradition to “the past,” to what is no longer, explains the widespread criticism of traditional teaching as “rote learning” (as the transmission of “dead” notions). This complaint, too, and the corresponding rebellion in the schools, can only be explained in connection with the eclipse of the idea of authority.

Another obvious aspect of the eclipse of authority is the crisis inside the Church. As will become clearer later on, the critique of the authoritarian structures of the Church, as developed for instance by Hans Küng, is rooted in the quest to reformulate Christianity in the context of a philosophical view that has no place for the idea of authority. This is demonstrated, by the way, by the polemical exchange between Küng and Rahner¹, from which it is hard not to get the impression that the former is more consistent: one cannot stop half-way on the road to such reformulation.

Another confirmation of the central place of the theme of authority is provided by the most baffling outcomes of the new religious modernism, in the so-called theology of the “death of God,” the endpoint of the “theological revolution.” It is certainly not a coincidence that Altizer, the most consistent among these theologians, speaks of the death of God the Father in Jesus Christ². The elimination of the idea of the Father had to reach theology as well.

What has been said so far makes clear what is the “ideal” and ultimate adversary of the

1 [TN] For the story of the Rahner-Küng dispute (including detailed bibliographic references) see L. Bruce van Voorst, “Küng and Rahner: Dueling over Infallibility,” *The Christian Century* 88 (1971): 617–22, and John Jay Hughes, “Infallible? An Inquiry Considered,” *Theological Studies* 38 (1971): 183–207.

2 [TN] See Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966).

revolution that wants to erase authority. It is the Greco-Roman-Christian unity that found its expression in the traditional Catholic Church. It was already said of old Modernism that it represented a surrender of Catholicism to Protestantism. This may help us understand the continuity between the two modernisms and, at the same time, show that the second constitutes an invasion of the Catholic sphere by a type of Protestantism that in the course of its historical development has progressively cut every residual tie with Catholicism.

Thus, the study of the idea of authority leads us to the heart of today's crisis. While, on the one hand, we must acknowledge its eclipse, on the other hand studying how it was born can lead us to grasp its very essence, freed of all the possible encrustations and deformations that took place in the course of history.

2. *Authority and power*

First of all, we must distinguish authority from power: “the word ‘power’ almost inevitably evokes the idea of strength or force, and above all the idea of a material force, a force which manifests itself visibly and outwardly and affirms itself by the use of external means, for such means indeed characterize the temporal power by very definition. On the contrary, spiritual authority, interior in essence, is affirmed only by itself, independently of any sensible support ... If we can speak in this context of strength or force, it is only by analogical transposition...”³ What must be highlighted in this definition, which in my judgment is one of the most effective, besides the concept of “interiority” (because sharing the same values prevents the hierarchical relationship that characterizes authority from being identified with that between master and slave), is also the concept of “independence from any material support”. The question of authority is, in fact, the relationship between man and the invisible, the primacy of the invisible: this primacy can be found also in primitive societies⁴, confirming that the metaphysics of being is immanent within “common sense” – which is itself a distinctive assertion of such metaphysics.

The distinction between authority and power is very seldom understood in its authentic and deep meaning, even when it is repeatedly affirmed. Take, for instance, the book by Theodor Eschenburg *Über Autorität*.⁵ We read that *auctoritas* prompts a spontaneous acceptance of another's will out of trust in the other's recognizable superiority, so that authority becomes a particular form of dependence on other men, which is characterized only by the fact of being, originally, “interiorly accepted.” It then “becomes a habit and generates permanent dependence.”⁶ Thus, authority is nothing but one of the forms of power: a thesis that is supported by Weber's (typically sociological) conception of authority and by his distinctions between the authority of the “eternal past,” the authority of the gift of personal grace or “charisma” and the authority of “legality.”⁷ The confusion between authority and power arises whenever the idea of authority is not linked to the metaphysics of the primacy of being

3 René Guénon, *Autorité spirituelle et pouvoir temporel* (Paris: Éditions Vêga, 1964) [TN: *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power*, trans. H.D. Fohr (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), 16–17].

4 Jean Servier, *L'homme et l'invisible* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1964).

5 Theodor Eschenburg, *Über Autorität* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1965).

6 [TN] *Ibid.*, 9 [my translation].

7 [TN] Max Weber, “The Three Types of Legitimate Rule,” *Berkeley Publications in Society and Institutions* 4, no. 1 (1958): 1–11.

over becoming and, as a consequence, the super-human foundation of authority is not taken into account.

The philosophical consequences of the confusion between authority and power are immense. Indeed, only from the standpoint of their radical distinction can we speak of metaphysics as distinct from ideology. Conversely, if they are not distinguished it follows that metaphysics is absorbed into ideology understood as a practical act, designed to legitimate, from the standpoint of being, some specific form of power. Accordingly, criticism takes the form of explaining religions and metaphysics (necessarily understood in the plural⁸) in terms of historical factors. Therefore, the belief that the concept of authority is reducible to that of power coincides with the “Marxian option” which is openly or silently accepted by a large part of contemporary culture. This is why today critical spirit is very often identified with Marxian or post-Marxian thought (in the sense that, having accepted all the negations of Marxism, it goes beyond), even by those who seemingly feel or profess no affinity for it. At the end of this process we find that science extended to the human sphere becomes the only valid form of knowledge.

The totalitarian phenomenon, in which the greatest extension of power led to the simultaneous denial of the idea of authority and the idea of freedom, motivated even scholars of a secular bent to formulate the question of the definition of authority in terms that differ from those that are customary in the Enlightened/radical literature. I will start from the essay by Hannah Arendt,⁹ a writer who tackled this problem after having explored the issues raised by totalitarianism. This seems appropriate because, even if Arendt’s thought (she was a disciple of Karl Jaspers) does not coincide completely with mine, neither is it too different, so that a discussion seems to be possible. But what matters most is that she encountered the problem of authority in a new form after the problem of totalitarianism. Indeed, the problem of totalitarianism leads to formulate of the problem of authority in a completely new way, in comparison with the so-called “modern” perspective, which is rooted in the Enlightenment.

According to Arendt, the obedience and the dependence (or even the discipline) required by authority are qualitatively different both from the idea of “persuasion” and from the idea of “forced coercion.” Persuasion is subjective, egalitarian and reached through the process that nowadays is called “dialog.” But after we have distinguished the concept of authority from that of coercive force, or from that of persuasion, we must trace it back to the concept of “evidence,” recognizing that this concept is the great discovery of Greek metaphysics. The submission of the mind to evidence is more radical than submission obtained through force or persuasion;¹⁰ but at the same time it has a liberating nature, as liberation from the pressure of lower or exterior forces. I think I should mention that this is the exact same view that was held by a too little known Italian philosopher, Carlo Mazzantini. Even though he did not discuss directly the concept of authority, he analyzed the concept of evidence along the same lines as Arendt. According to Mazzantini, the great discovery of Greek philosophy and the foundation of its lasting truth is that of “evidence,” understood not as force that constrains but as light that illuminates. It is necessary and does rule out its opposite, but without forcing the intellect.¹¹ He links

8 [TN] In Italian Del Noce uses the plural form “le metafisiche,” which conveys the sense that there is not “one” metaphysics but rather various metaphysical systems.

9 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1961).

10 [TN] *Ibid.*, 107–8.

11 Carlo Mazzantini, *Il problema delle verità necessarie e la sintesi a priori del Kant* [The problem of necessary truths and Kant’s a priori synthesis] (Turin: L’Erma, 1935), 41.

this theme to the critique of both theological rationalism (and of “Christian philosophy”) and voluntarism and arbitrarism (fideism, religious existentialism, empiricism).

Thus, the idea of authority implies: a) that truth has a super-human character, so that dependence on it coincides with liberation from domination by other men; b) that man not obey some arbitrary power; c) on the other hand, that such dependence not be transferred into God Himself; in other words, that his “wisdom” not be understood as a norm to which his will is subordinated. Points b) and c) coincide, respectively, with Rosmini’s criticisms of the systems of Occam and Leibniz and their various consequences.¹² Perhaps Rosmini’s thought could be interpreted as an attempt to purify traditional Christian thought of the elements that lead to the opposite deviations represented by these two systems which, even if they still intend to stay within religious orthodoxy, nevertheless contain the premises for all the heterodox forms of thought that came after them. Although Rosmini rarely uses the word authority, today his thought is exceptionally important in order to build a rigorous foundation for the theory of authority: he is the philosopher of a “Restoration,” which is completely different from a “reaction” in the sense of idolizing a past historical order. Therefore, he regards theologically infused being, immanent in the dialectics of life, as the fundamental element of order, so that order calls out for an authoritative presence of being and is an epiphany of being itself.

Going back to the concept of super-humanity, we note that it leads us to connect the idea of authority with those of tradition and religion. The idea of tradition, on the other hand, must be connected with the idea that truth is meta-historical, which in turn establishes a connection between tradition and the sacred. The idea of authority, together with those of tradition and sacredness, is inseparable from the philosophy of the primacy of being. To summarize in a formula, we will say that in the philosophy of the primacy of being authority is the foundation of power, whereas in the philosophy of the primacy of becoming power absorbs authority within itself, as can be seen in the ultimate outcomes of such a philosophy.

Anyway, the core issue is still the relationship between “authority” and “evidence.” Once we grasp this, we can understand the nature of the current fight against religion, which is even more dangerous because it is indirect. What is being attempted is to detach religion from the philosophy of the primacy of being. After what used to be called *preambula fidei* have been demolished, the “horizontal” overturning of theology into anthropology takes place very naturally. By now the philosophy of the primacy of being seems to have permanently faded away. In fact, the objection it must overcome is that it cannot account for history; the ideas of “progress” and “modernity” are brought up against it. Here we should discuss whether precisely understanding contemporary history – as the outcome of the form of thought opposed to the philosophy of the primacy of being – may not imply its rediscovery. The principle of non-contradiction, which is the foundation of such philosophy, cannot be the object of a direct demonstration, but can only be proved via a negative route.

Thus, the ideal principle of authority must be sought in classical metaphysics. In general, however, historians of political thought focus mainly on Roman political doctrine. In it authority takes the meaning of “faithfulness to the founding,”¹³ which is why the authority of the living depends on the authority of the founders; the hereditary transmission of the authority of the ancestors (the *maiores*) to

12 [TN] Antonio Rosmini, *Storia comparativa e critica de’ sistemi intorno al principio della morale* [Comparative and critical history of the systems on the foundation of morals] (Milan: Pogliani, 1837), 276–8.

13 [TN] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 120ff.

the *patres* who are members of the Senate; the ensuing distinction between *auctoritas* and *potestas*; the sacred respect for old age because the elder was closer to the ancestors. Because of the collapse of classical metaphysics, the Roman faithfulness to the founding – which had a religious meaning, because it was understood as strictly linked to the will of the gods and so was destined to converge with such metaphysics (Cicero) – took over time completely irreligious forms, climaxing with the nationalist movements of our century.

3. *Authority and revolution*

Thus, the eclipse of the idea of authority is the defining feature of the contemporary world “as an epoch.” First of all, we have to determine this “epoch” chronologically; that is, we have to identify the decisive event that shaped a historical period that clearly differs from the one before in terms of prevalent categories of value. That decisive event is the World War – I believe that we should speak of two stages of one world war rather than of two world wars. What characterized it was that it was understood from the start as a war-revolution, and that it created the conditions for a revolutionary process that is still unfinished. The stages in the destruction of authority and tradition are strictly correlated with those toward the realization of the total revolution. At this point, I should clarify that the word “revolution” takes a different meaning depending on whether it refers to the philosophy of the primacy of being or to the philosophy of the primacy of becoming, and to the transition in this latter from a speculative philosophy to a philosophy of praxis. According to the former, revolution means “*risorgimento*” of a more authentic tradition and authority; conversely, it is in the context of the second way of thinking that the radical opposition between authority (tradition) and freedom appears.

During the thirty years from the end of the last world war until now, the second perspective has prevailed to the point of shaping the thought of the “new” theologians. This prevalence has coincided with the perception of a *great break* such that the past – together with all its “authorities” and its “commandments,” which claimed to be “eternal” – was supposedly swept away in that immense cosmic tragedy which, to use the gnostic terminology, marked the transition from one “eon” to another, or in the words of “revolutionary gnosis” from the “reign of necessity” to the “reign of freedom.” Since the revolution is understood as a total overturning, supposedly this transition is characterized by the negation of all dependences, i.e. by radical atheism, and also by the negation of any unchanging human essence and any unchanging “common sense.” It follows that the total revolution can only be carried out by history. However, revolutionary thought, in its consistent form achieved in Marxism, preserves the idea of authority in its own way, by attributing it to history. Therefore, the complete crisis of authority follows after the crisis of revolutionary thought, which attempted to restore it after the end of the traditional conception.

Going back to the success of the idea of revolution, in my opinion it is a consequence of the presuppositions of the Enlightened-progressive culture. The identification of modern spirit and anti-traditional spirit has led people to define the whole process of thought and civilization from the sixteenth century to the present in terms of critique of authority, so that its rejection today should be described as the *temporis partus masculus*, to use Bacon’s expression. On the one side there is myth, which is unable to give reasons for itself and therefore generates dogmatism; on the other side there is the critical spirit, which proceeds from the abandonment of theology and speculative metaphysics and comes to discover the worldly genesis of metaphysical and theological delusions. What today are called

human sciences supposedly mark a fundamental step on the road to the fulfillment of this liberation in the spirit of the Enlightenment.

Today, however, the progressive view of history faces serious difficulties, precisely regarding its ability to make sense of history, which seemed to be its strongest argument. As a rule, progress in freedom was identified with the replacement of an authority that was previously regarded as despotic with a non-despotic authority. Thus, the inner authority of conscience was set in opposition to the authority of the Church; the authority of reason to the authority of Revelation; and again, revolutionary thought included the idea of an authority of history, which coincided with moral universality and postulated the end of the domination of man by man. However, the conflict still involved two authorities: the one of faith and the one of reason. Now, on the contrary, today's permissivism replaces "freedom to" with "freedom from." Liberation coincides with the affirmation of instinctual freedom.

Here we realize that the progressive-Enlightened mentality must face insurmountable difficulties as soon as it tries to explain the phenomenon of totalitarianism, in which the negation of authority and the negation of freedom go hand in hand. The difficulty, I believe, is due to the fact that totalitarianism represents the greatest expansion of power in conjunction with the greatest rejection of authority: we can recognize in it the outcome of the revolution in its aspect of being the ideal endpoint of the philosophy of the primacy of becoming, in contradiction with the program of universal liberation. Another characteristic idea of the progressive world view is that time moves in an ascending, irreversible line, even if it is granted that the journey towards freedom can run into obstacles. But whatever the value of this concession may be -- in fact, progressives keep thinking in terms of opposition between the principle of authority, tied to metaphysics and to the religion of transcendence, and the affirmation of freedom, tied to the "modern" principle of immanence -- the irreversible ideal of progress as liberation from dependence remains unchanged. What characterizes the current situation is that the criticism of authority has become radical, and widespread like never before. In the past one can detect premonitions of the eclipse of the idea of authority, but they were always accompanied by resistance which limited the phenomenon to determinate socio-cultural groups, usually minorities of the population. Conversely, today the crisis of authority does not undermine only religious-transcendent thought; it calls into question the aspirations themselves of secular-Enlightened thought, since the question that arises is whether nihilism might have to be regarded as the endpoint of the ascending line of the western process of liberation. It seems hard to think that we face a crisis of growth when we seem unable to envision any ideal, not even in the not-so-near future.

4. The West and the sunset of authority

The West is the epicenter of the crisis of authority. One must distinguish the ideas of Europe and of the West, which are completely different. The former refers to the continuity of a process of civilization that takes its first steps in the East. When we speak of West and East, instead, we want to express an opposition -- between the activist, pragmatist spirit and the contemplative one. The present situation is characterized by the replacement of the idea of Europe by the idea of the West. We must remark that the fact that the eclipse of the idea of authority and the eclipse of the idea of Europe coincide is one aspect of this replacement. But, how could the West become the locus of the sunset of authority? We must refer one more time to the revolution, understood as total liberation from the past, elevated to a "sign of the times" as a result, as I said, of the World War.

In front of the problem posed by the Marxist revolution, two paths were open: one was to re-think classical metaphysics in order to free it from the aspects that led to its crisis; the other was to move beyond Marxism, having accepted its negations of metaphysical thought, and free it from the remnants of messianic and millennialist traditions – in response to the reconciliation with the past (of sorts) that had made possible the building of the new Russian state. What defines today's situation is the acknowledgment of oppositions that cannot be mediated: on the one hand, by now the philosophy of the primacy of becoming has reached its ultimate consequences, simply denying the philosophy of the primacy of being and not trying to sublimate¹⁴ it from a higher viewpoint. On the other hand, the representatives of the forms of thought that depend on classical metaphysics or presuppose it (as is the case of religious faith) have generally tried out forms of syncretism with aspects of the opposite position, which have always been quite labile. The fundamental intellectual mistake is, thus, the insistence on the thesis of "*inveramento*." Moving in this direction one can only go towards ultra-Marxist positions, which imply an ever stronger rejection of authority, of tradition, of metaphysics, of religion, to the point of reaching a complete "secularization," the complete elimination of the "religious" aspect.

As a preliminary step for an investigation of ultra-Marxist revolutionary movements, all centered around a radical critique of authority, we must turn our attention, choosing among many possible expressions, to the study of Surrealism -- as an especially significant manifestation of the literary avant-garde -- to the thought of Wilhelm Reich and to the Frankfurt school.

Surrealism should be considered not as an artistic phenomenon, in the sense in which art is distinct from other forms of spiritual life, but above all as a revolutionary phenomenon, characterized by totalizing categories; in fact, it intends to carry out not just a revolution in art, but a revolution through art. Surrealism differs from Marxism in the sense that it does not regard the transformation of man as a byproduct of social and political revolution, but maintains that the society of free men will follow from the "remaking of the human intellect." Surrealism's relationship with communism changed from initial adhesion in 1930 to dissent with Stalinism and to a quest to enter into an agreement with Trotsky; it ended up in a break in 1947 due to the realization of Surrealism's own different revolutionary character. The declaration of the break, contained in the collective manifesto *Rupture inaugurale*¹⁵ published on the occasion of the International Surrealist Exhibit is very interesting. Essentially, it is about the inadequacy of Marxism for a "full-scale offensive against Christian civilization."¹⁶ This latter cannot be overturned by transforming economic relations. The bourgeois revolution has ended up reconciling itself with Christian civilization; Marxism faces the same danger. It is precisely Marxism's extreme lack of moral scruples that undermines its revolutionary power: the lack of scruples expressed by the Leninist thesis that revolutionary action is exempted from all moral constraints, since there is no separation between ends and means, these latter being organically subordinated to the end that is

14 [TN] *Inverare* in the original. This term is not easily translated into English. It means "to make true" in the sense of "preserving the truthful aspect of a theory while developing it into a higher form" and therefore is more or less analogous to Hegel's famous term *aufheben* (noun: *aufhebung*), which is usually translated in English as *to sublimate*. In his works, Del Noce uses often *inverare* (and the noun *inveramento*, i.e. *sublation*) to describe the attempts to "bring out the truth" of Marxism.

15 "Rupture inaugurale" in *Le Surréalisme en 1947* (Paris: Maeght Éditeur, 1947) [TN: "Inaugural Rupture," in Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijałkowski, eds, *Surrealism against the Current: Tracts and Declarations* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 42–9].

16 [TN] "Pour une offensive de grande style contre la civilisation chrétienne" is the title of a preparatory essay by Henri Pastoureau, also published in *Le Surréalisme en 1947* (Paris: Maeght Éditeur, 1947), 78–83.

dictated by the development of history. When this type of Macchiavellianism is pushed to its extreme consequences it allows, in practice, all kinds of “regressive” compromises, through which the revolution becomes captive to traditional morality. A process develops in the name of order, of authority, of the restoration of the family, until nothing stands in the way of the restoration of religion.

The Surrealists advocate a moral intransigence in “immoralism.” Moral law must always be violated, “but only in order to progress it.”¹⁷ I speak of moral intransigence in immoralism: they refuse to envision the defeat of the Christian order as the automatic outcome of economic revolution; this statement would simply replace dependence on an idol with dependence on another idol – dependence on the transcendent God with dependence on history made into a god. Hence the conclusion of the Manifesto: “Let us return to morality, the most constant object of our preoccupations: it would be absurd to count on the political revolution alone to change them ... These theoreticians [Marx’s successors] have never denounced the current morality except when they saw an immediate political advantage in it. Sade and Freud, on the other hand, opened the breach. Whatever the doctrine that must succeed Christianity, we see Sade and Freud as the assigned precursors of its ethic.”¹⁸

Also interesting are the statements in which the greatest theoretician of Surrealism, André Breton, summarized his program shortly before his death: “To bring forever to ruin the abominable Christian notion of sin, of original fall, of redeeming love, to replace them without hesitation with the idea of the divine union of man and woman ... Morality based on the exaltation of pleasure will, sooner or later, wipe away the vile morality of suffering and resignation, preserved by forms of social imperialism and by the Church ...”¹⁹ This passage is important, first, because it mentions the initial fall. In this writer’s judgment²⁰ the dialectics of rationalism, understood as negation of the supernatural, starts from an original choice to deny without proof the initial fall. Therefore, when it reaches its final conclusion in revolutionary thought, it must make historical outcome its criterion of truth. Second, an absolute antithesis is affirmed between Christianity and the new revolutionary morality. This latter does not “preserve” (“surpass,” “sublate,” etc.) but simply “denies,” so that the break with historical continuity is affirmed as decisive. Third, the sexual revolution comes up, viewed not just as a modification, as radical as it may be, of a particular aspect of morality, but rather as a “revolution through the transformation of the meaning of sexual relationships.”

At the time, the Surrealist Manifesto of 1947 did not have much resonance, neither among politicians nor among intellectuals. Today, we may well say that over the last few decades history has moved exactly in the direction desired by “progressive” culture, and that the defeat or containment in the West of political Marxism has been the precondition for the success of what I have already called “ultra-Marxism.” Cultural Marxism led the assault, but it would never have been able to maintain the breakthrough without the aid of these revolutionary forces that it regards as heretical. Conversely, these latter would never have been able to establish themselves without the break created by Marxism. In a sense we can say that Marxism and ultra-Marxism support each other, even though they cannot be reconciled.

17 [TN] *Inaugural Rupture*, 44.

18 [TN] *Ibid.*, 45.

19 [TN] Del Noce’s attribution of this passage to Breton and the statement about when it was written are incorrect. It comes from Jean-Louis Bédouin’s introduction to the anthology *André Breton* (Paris: Seghers, 1950), 63–4; my translation.

20 See my book *Il problema dell’ateismo* [The problem of atheism] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1964).

Thus, what Surrealism envisioned was a synthesis of Marxism and left-wing psychoanalysis. That there would be attempts to develop this type of synthesis was only too natural. The first systematic attempt in this direction was made by Wilhelm Reich, an Austrian, in *Die Sexualität im Kulturkampf*²¹ (in 1930²²; the prefaces to the subsequent editions of 1936, 1945 and 1949 are also important). This book already contains everything essential on the subject, and can well spare us the trouble of reading the countless novels or essays that the culture industry produces, which are nothing but illustrations of the theses of this scholar, who was heterodox with respect to mainstream psychoanalysis.

Given that it is a feature of every modern science to be accompanied by some kind of utopia, Reich can be viewed as the utopian of psychoanalysis; and, as is the case of all of utopias, his opus is formally consistent. His thought is based on the premise that there is no order of ends, no meta-empirical authority of values. Thus every trace is erased not just of Christianity but of idealism in the broadest sense of the word, or of any foundation of values in some objective reality, such as history for Marx. What is man then reduced to, if not a bundle of physical needs? When they are satisfied, when every repression is removed, he will be happy. Vital energy is identified with sexuality. Through absolute, unlimited sexual freedom man will free himself of neurosis and become fully capable of work and initiative. His psychological structure will be changed and he will be freed from aggressive tendencies and sadist fantasies, which are typical of repressed people. Now, according to Reich the repressive institution *par excellence* is the traditional monogamous family. Indeed, the idea of family is inseparable from the idea of tradition, from a deposit of truths that we have to *tradere*, to “hand down.”

According to Reich, the need for a Freudian reform of revolutionary thought is demonstrated by the success of the Fascist movements, which refute the standard interpretation of historical materialism, because it was precisely the impoverished masses who helped Fascism come to power, thus demonstrating that what is decisive at the practical-political level what is not economic stratification but rather the ideological aspect (hence the idea of a correlation between Fascist domination and idealistic culture). Scientific psychology completes historical materialism by analyzing the subjective factor of history. But a close examination reveals that for Reich the classical Marxian categories lose their meaning: the fight takes place between those who defend and affirm life and those who intend to repress and destroy it. The Reichian attempt to secularize Marxism through psychoanalysis leads, instead, to the recognition of a veritable abyss between the two world views. According to Marxism there is an end, which is deduced from the development of history. Marx, being a Hegelian, thought that the absolute is not found at the beginning of history, but is its outcome. According to Reich, on the contrary, there is a primitive state from which we became removed through sexophobic morality and to which we must return by re-inserting civilization into nature. Over the last decade his theses have become enormously widespread, which we could explain by recalling Sorel’s sentence about the use of anti-clericalism by the radical bourgeoisie at the turn of the nineteenth century as a diversion from the revolution; this diversion has been replaced today by the erotic diversion.

The Frankfurt School’s theses rank at a much higher critical level. It is named after the Institut für Sozialforschung which, having been founded in Frankfurt in 1924, achieved relevance after 1931 under Horkheimer’s direction. After Nazism came to power, his collaborators kept up its activity, at first in France and later in the United States until 1950 when they were able to reopen the institute.

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

22 [TN] The title of the first edition was actually *Geschlechtsreife, Enthaltensamkeit, Ehemoral: Eine Kritik der bürgerlichen Sexualreform* [Sexual Maturity, Abstinence and Marital Fidelity: A Criticism of Civil Sexual Reform], (Vienna: Muensterverlag, 1930).

What makes the theses of the Frankfurt School interesting is the search for an interpretation of contemporary history, after Marxism had showed itself inadequate to offer a valid and acceptable one. The prevalent mindset when the Frankfurt School was born was the revolutionary-libertarian attitude after the First World War in Germany. It led to set up an opposition between materialism, understood first of all as a philosophy of “happiness,” and the various forms of idealism, spiritualism, mysticism and so on, which were all filed under the same label as philosophies aimed at defending of the existing order. The opposition between progressive/ revolutionary thought and conservative/reactionary thought absorbs the one between true and false, and is justified because, from the point of view of replacing “metaphysical” being with “social” being, liberation becomes the criterion of truth. This was the presupposition and, I would say, the original flaw of the Frankfurt School, which however found its critique in the development of the thought of Horkheimer himself (and, at least partially, also in Adorno's).

The thought of Horkheimer and of the Frankfurt school has a few key features. One is the affirmation that the disappearance of authority must be viewed as the end point of progressive thought which, in fact, presents itself as a process of liberation from authority, theological or human, transcendent or empirical. Another is the criticism of Soviet communism, which supposedly ended up reconciling itself with tradition, because of its dictatorial aspects. Social-democracy is also criticized because it is based on a conception that deals only with rules for coexistence, whereas true life takes place outside of such rules. More criticism yet is applied to dialectical materialism – a mere materialistic mirror image of dialectics, -- to neo-positivism, to pragmatism, to sociologism. It is here that the characteristic problem of the school emerges, namely the, the inability to hold together as one the critique of the metaphysical tradition and the critique of positivism, in its ancient and, above all, in its new forms. The thought of this school can be viewed as a sort of irrationalization of Marxism in the form of a negative conception which formulates a set of critiques, a sort of syncretism of negations, all meant to prevent any form of thought from becoming absolute.

Marcuse was the originator of the affirmation of the primacy of freedom understood as instinctual freedom. If the λόγος is regarded as “the origin of the logic of domination” it follows that “nature (its own as well as the external world) was given to the ego as something that had to be fought, conquered and even violated ... The struggle begins with the perpetual inner conquest of the 'lower' faculties of the individual: his sensuous and appetitive faculties. Their subjugation is, at least since Plato, regarded as a constitutive element of human reason, which is thus in its very function repressive. The struggle culminates in the conquest of external nature, which must be perpetually attacked, curbed and exploited, to yield to human needs.”²³ This passage seems to me the most suitable to clarify the meaning taken by the words repression and permissiveness in Marcuse's work, which is still the most rigorous they have been given. At the same time, it reveals how the Frankfurt school regards Platonic purification and the modern idea of scientific-technical domination of nature as stages of the same process – without making any distinction.

Eros and civilization has become the foundational text of the students' movement and shows very clearly its misunderstanding: it is a rebellion against two opposites, merged in one without making any distinction: the technological society and the traditional spirit. This rebellion ends in the disintegration of the existing order, through an anarchic-individualistic negation of every order; equivalently (if we now consider the heterogenesis of the ends), it ends up accepting existing reality,

23 Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 99–100.

but separated from any reference to an ideal order. We find the confirmation and the recognition of Marcuse's failure in the long process of self-criticism carried out by the very founder of the school, Horkheimer. To understand this process we must keep in mind the historical circumstances: at the time of the polemic against authority his thought was focused on Nazism, in which he was inclined to recognize the incarnation of absolute evil; later he came to see that it was one aspect of a much more complex crisis. Therefore he had to move on, toward a critique of the interpretation of negative thought as "revolution" and "utopia," and the necessary endpoint became negative theology. When pessimism is thought in negative terms it turns into a religious philosophy, in the form of a negative theology. The Horkheimerian outcome of the Frankfurt School is a religious development of Schopenhauer's thought that moves towards Kant and a form of Platonism: the very opposite of Marcuse's Marxist-Freudian Hegelianism. It is also a religious form that stands in sharp contrast to the neo-modernist trends, Protestant as well as Catholic, even if it is not tied to any orthodoxy. This religious evolution does not contradict the original assumption that the task of philosophy is to criticize the ideological legitimization of the existing order. What presented itself as hope for a total revolution became realized, and today revolutionary and progressive philosophy has the function of legitimizing a more oppressive and, in fact, totalitarian order, regardless of how it disguises itself. But the revolutionary idea started from the negation of the doctrine of original sin, inasmuch as it claimed that it could substitute politics for religion in the liberation of man. Therefore, it is easy to understand why Horkheimer encounters religious thought first of all in the doctrine of original sin.

After considering the Frankfurt school, I think it is interesting to shift our attention to the analysis of contemporary reality by a thinker, René Guénon, whose philosophical presuppositions are as far as they could be from those of the Frankfurt group. Nevertheless, it is interesting how the outcome of that school, in the form taken by Horkheimer's thought, can serve as an introduction to his world view and his reaffirmation of authority.

Three books by Guénon are especially interesting: *La crise du monde moderne* (1927), *Autorité spirituelle et pouvoir temporel* (1930) and above all *Le règne de la quantité et les signes des temps* (1945).²⁴ According to Guénon the crisis of the modern world is essentially a metaphysical crisis. The negation of authority is not a stage or a consequence of rationalism; it is rather one of its preconditions, as rejection of a super-human order and of a cognitive faculty higher than individual reason.

Because most of Guénon's work aims at describing the logic of the "plan" that guides the modern world's progressive deviation, it cannot be summarized. I can only mention some intuitions that derive from reading his books. According to Guénon, the process that originated from the rejection of authority leads in its final stages to "solidification" and then to "dissolution". Solidification is the stability associated with materialism, but is not a stage at which one can stop. It leads to a sort of impregnability similar to that of a mollusk, which remains shut inside its shell. But when "an opening is made in this shell from below ... subtle influences will at once make their way in, and they will do so all the more easily because, thanks to the negative work accomplished in the preceding phase, no element of a superior order will be able to intervene in such a way as to counteract them."²⁵ By way of this penetration and the unleashing of the subtle lower domain's destructive forces, the transition to

24 [TN] René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, trans. Arthur Osborne (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004); *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power*, trans. H.D. Fohr (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001); *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, trans. Lord Northbourne (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001)

25 [TN] Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, 170-1.

dissolution really takes place: the deviation ends in “inversion,” a state diametrically opposed to the normal order.

Guénon’s thought was elaborated outside of any political experience. This would make even more interesting a comparison with the ideas of Simone Weil, whose starting point was instead political and whose reflection took place initially in a context which was the opposite of Guénon’s. The analogies – on the ideas of force, progress, modern science, on Marxism, on psychoanalysis, etc. – are especially disconcerting precisely because we cannot speak of any direct influence between them.

5. *Totalitarianisms and the negation of authority*

The consideration of the most important phenomena of contemporary history – world war, revolution, totalitarianism, disintegration – leads us to re-think the concepts of authority and freedom outside the schemes developed by the Enlightenment or by nineteenth-century philosophy, both in the direction of opposition and in that of reconciliation. Today’s reality shows us that the eclipse of authority does not coincide at all with the advent of liberation, but rather with that of power, and totalitarian systems are the tangible expression of this fact. However, we keep thinking of totalitarianism as the greatest degree of authority. As a consequence, in non-totalitarian countries, freedom is interpreted as divesting the state of every ethical dimension, and ethical principles are replaced by mere rules of coexistence. People also think that the “wind of freedom” will push the countries still ruled by authoritarian and totalitarian regimes towards a democratic evolution, which may well be slow but is necessary and unavoidable. This position defines “contemporary democraticism,” committed to indulgence, to permissivism, because of the already mentioned absorption of the critique of authority within the critique of power.

Totalitarian systems are founded on the negation of the universality of reason, so that any form of opposition supposedly does not express rational concerns, but conceals interests of class or race. If one reflects about the relationship between authority and evidence, it becomes clear that negating these two notions must necessarily lead to the persecution of all dissenters. Hence, totalitarianism results from the negation of authority even before resulting from the negation of freedom. It is also characterized by the negation of the individual, and by the refusal to recognize the difference between “brute reality” and “human reality.” It is also interesting to observe that there is a totalitarian conception of science, according to which science claims to be the “only” true knowledge, whereas every other form of knowledge expresses, in this view, only “subjective reactions” which science, extended to the human world through psychological and sociological disciplines, is able or will be able to explain. Such scientific totalitarianism can be called scientism, but in a different sense, mind you, from the naturalistic scientism of the last century, because it pretends to account for the human world.

Among the arguments put forward by some of the most acute interpreters of today’s crisis of values – in particular, among those meant to show that scientism must necessarily promote a religious persecution, no matter whether directly or indirectly – I think that the argument by one of the most important figures of French philosophy in the 1930’s, Benjamin Fondane, who died young in a concentration camp, deserves special attention. In his analysis²⁶ of Freud’s *The future of an Illusion* he

26 [TN] Del Noce is probably referring to Benjamin Fondane, *La conscience malheureuse* (Paris:

highlighted the axiological aspect that shapes scientism and leads its proponents, even if they are scrupulous scientists, to depart from science and to embrace the most mythical and arbitrary constructions: the hatred *a priori* against every form of transcendence. In other words, the $\upsilon\beta\rho\iota\varsigma$ of science, or scientific totalitarianism, originates from the fact that modern science knows only “horizontal causality,” since it searches for laws as constant relationship between phenomena, i. e. it studies reality as a system of forces, not of values. So far, its position is perfectly legitimate; but, what happens when one moves from science to scientism is that general conceptions of reality themselves are regarded – since they cannot be verified experimentally – as forces (as “ideologies” that serve the will to power). Furthermore, from the standpoint of absolute positivism God cannot exist to the extent that his existence corresponds to a human aspiration; paradoxically, if his existence were indifferent, then he could exist. If this vision is transferred to the field of ethical-political relationships, we reach that “ban of the questions” -- even when they are rationally legitimate or even necessary -- and that conscious and deliberate “obstruction of reason” which are the characteristics of totalitarianism according to Eric Vögelin. In every totalitarian system what starts as persecution of religion mutates into persecution of reason. But the lowest point of totalitarianism – which is already partially realized in the West – is the primacy of the economic principle, which brings about a total generalization of the category of “instrument.” The only value that scientism allows is vitality, which becomes negation of ethics when it is turned into an absolute. Indeed, what disappears in a scientific perspective is the very idea of “morals.” However, when power is not subordinate to an ethical principle it can only manifest itself as force. About this we quote Simone Weil: “ For the last two or three centuries, people have believed that force rules supreme over all natural phenomena, and at the same time that men can and should base their mutual relations upon justice, recognized as such through the application of reason ... It is inconceivable that everything in the universe should be entirely subjected to the rule of force and that Man should be able to escape the effects of this, seeing that he is made of flesh and blood and that his mind wanders here and there at the mercy of of sensory impressions ... If justice is ineradicable from the heart of Man, it must have a reality in this world. It is science, then, which is mistaken. ... Where force is absolutely sovereign, justice is absolutely unreal. Yet justice cannot be that. We know it experimentally. It is real enough in the hearts of men.”²⁷

At the end of the world war a choice was made in favor of modern science, viewed as an instrument of practical domination of the world, capable of producing justice automatically. But this latter cannot be produced automatically. Force – Weil goes on – “is a blind mechanism which produces indiscriminately and impartially just or unjust results, but, by all the laws of probability, almost always unjust ones. Lapse of time makes no difference; it doesn’t increase in the functioning of this mechanism the infinitesimal proportion of results which happen by chance to be in conformity with justice.”²⁸ Also Horkheimer argues that the positivist viewpoint is incompatible with political forms shaped by ethical principles, makes impossible any criticism of the rule of force and prevents the scandal in front of “the murderer triumphing over the innocent victim.”²⁹

The negation of the idea of authority thus coincides with the greatest degree of positivism, i.e. with total surrender to facts as they are. Today, the problem of restoring the idea of authority seems to originate from self-criticism of the idea of revolution, starting from the moral instance on which it is

Denöel et Steele, 1936).

27 Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (London: Routledge, 2002), 238, 241, 240.

28 Ibid., 240.

29 Max Horkheimer, *Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen: Ein Interview mit Kommentar von Helmut Gumnior* [The longing for the totally other: An interview with commentary by Helmut Gumnior] (Hamburg: Furcht, 1970), 75.

founded. Both Weil's and Horkheimer's processes of thought are clear examples of the truth of this statement.

6. *The bourgeois spirit and authority*

Now I think that we can identify what characterizes the bourgeois spirit and define its attitude towards authority. What is typical of the bourgeois man is an “a-religious individualism,” centered on the idea of happiness that has become dominant since the eighteenth century – which is very different from the traditional idea of beatitude, which indicates a correct relationship with being – and on an instrumentalist disposition, which believes that everything is relatively good because everything can be useful. Hence, there is no Truth, there is no Good; a reality in which everything can be “useful” rules out the possibility of absolutes. On the one hand, then, the bourgeois cannot but profess to be democratic, on the other he is radically anti-Platonic. For him the transcendent must be brought down to man’s level: religion can be allowed, too, but as a vitalizing experience; truth must play second fiddle to life.

Thus, the evolution of the bourgeois spirit is driven by the revolutions, in the sense that it benefits from them to the extent that they reject some part of the tradition. To a partial revolution, like the French Revolution, corresponds a partial liberation from transcendence, in the sense of autonomous morals, of religion within the limits of reason etc.; it is a forced compromise with tradition. Conversely, the total revolution allows a total liberation. Hatred for tradition guides the bourgeois in choosing between the negations of what he regards as the past condemned by “progress” and the affirmation of a new absolute. It cannot happen otherwise, since his guiding idea – the possibility of happiness – forces him to believe in the natural goodness of man and in progress. As is often said, the bourgeois is the man of order and progress. In order for him to achieve complete success, order and progress had to be dissociated from both metaphysics and the revolution. Once every reference to metaphysical transcendence has been eliminated, the existing order is legitimized not in relation to absolute principles, but simply because it exists. The idea of revolution –characterized by a qualitative jump –is replaced by the idea of progress, made absolute both in the quantitative and in the economic sense.

7. *The idea of authority in the liberal era and after the First World War*

It is now clear how the process of criticism of authority, which originally was directed against conservatism, against false consciousness, against mystification etc., ends up reaching the greatest degree of conservatism and of linguistic falsification ever known in history. It would be easy to study from this perspective the new features displayed by the contemporary crisis: the collapse of faith in all ideals, to a degree never seen before; the resulting loss of hope; the falsification of love, almost always understood as something “from afar,” in order to justify indifference or hostility towards what is near. I will only bring up one point: today’s religious neo-modernism – criticism of authority in the name of conscience, or in the name of a historical process thought to be providential and irreversible because willed by God – pays homage to the rationalistic conception of history precisely when this latter is showing most evidently its weaknesses. Moreover, the modernist reconciliation is not the with revolutionary spirit, but rather with the bourgeois outcome of the process.

We now go back to the topic of the epochal character of the eclipse of authority, as the result of the World War. If we keep thinking of the historical process as a process towards immanence, secularization, demythologization and so forth, we will find ourselves on the road to nihilism. If we look deeper, if we interpret the expression “twilight of the idols” in a different or opposite sense from the usual one, we see instead that the crisis affects the attempts to provide a foundation to authority, or to reconcile authority and freedom, that were typical of the liberal age (1871-1914). This age was characterized by the persuasion that the end of the temporal power of the Popes and the Commune of Paris had symbolically marked the end both of Catholicism and of revolutionary thought, where the former was viewed as an expression of authority without freedom, and the latter of freedom without authority. In this period authority was actually embraced, but in such a way that people considered it completely disconnected from a metaphysics of transcendence. Its foundation was a critique of revolutionary thought, which extended to a critique of democracy and made it possible to establish various connections with the political positions of the Restoration. For example, there was a continuity with that age’s liberalism, because of the critique of Jacobinism and radicalism, and in a different way with traditionalism, because of the same aversion. The relationship between tradition and religion, however, was turned upside down, in the sense that it was not the latter that provided the foundation of the former, but rather it was the preservation of the former that implied that of the latter. This is the typical position of nationalism, which harbours an intrinsic contradiction.

From the more specifically philosophical viewpoint, there was a quest to preserve the aspect of the authority of the moral law, separated from its metaphysical-religious foundation. This separation was achieved through autonomous morality, whose model was Kantian ethics. In a rather unstable position, though, because it oscillated between a reduction of morality to sociology and the reaffirmation, in order to avoid such an outcome, of the metaphysical-religious foundation. Finally, there was the attempt to interiorize the idea of authority by developing an idealist-subjectivist type of metaphysics.

At this point, I think we must recall: Taine’s (1828-1893) critique of the Jacobin mentality as found in his work *Les origines de la France contemporaine* (1876-1893); Pareto’s (1848-1923) critique of the progressivist mentality; the advocacy of authority by Charles Maurras (1868-1952). This latter’s ideas would deserve a careful analysis, both because they influenced French political thought and, above all, in order to identify the deviation due to the influence of Positivism, which caused the relationship between authority and tradition to take the form of nationalism.

Croce (1866-1952) criticized activist libertarianism, which replaces of the religiosity of freedom when everfreedom is separated from respect for tradition. But the lived meaning of this unity is not given an adequate philosophical foundation. Croce’s speculation achieves the highest degree of criticism of revolutionary thought “within” a reformation of Hegelism. But this position cannot be sustained, as is shown both by Gramsci’s journey from Croce to Marx and – above all – by the fact that Gentile’s (1875-1944) actualist philosophy is much more consistent as a reform of Hegelianism. His philosophy represents the most consistent attempt to preserve and, at the same time, to purify through immanentism the ideas of authority, tradition and religion. Therefore its defeat is the decisive proof of the impossibility to reconcile the idea of authority with philosophical immanentism, even in the form of immanent divinity.

Since Gentile’s investigation is carried out in strictly philosophical terms, we recall that politics faces the same problem as metaphysics, namely how to realize the opposite poles of the one and the

many, without confusing and without suppressing them. But for Gentile this connection takes a particular significance, because he intends to surpass speculative philosophy, or – as he often says – intellectualism, into philosophy of praxis. Thus, the reductionist tendency that characterizes metaphysical rationalism is pushed to the extreme (multiplicity is reduced to the absolute and exclusive unity of the act), while at the same time the critique of intellectualism leads to the affirmation that philosophy is an essentially political endeavour.

Resuming the line of thought of the *Risorgimento*, above all in its Giobertian form, secularized along Hegelian lines by Bertrando Spaventa, Gentile intends to reconcile the terms authority and freedom. These two must be linked, because freedom without authority ends in anarchy, and authority without freedom in despotism.³⁰ Subsequent reconciliations (people and government, general will and individual will, law and personal autonomy, conservation and progress) must refer back to this first one. Idealism allows us to use the idea of reform (hence, of a new form assumed by the tradition) to replace both the idea of conservation and that of revolution, which according to Gentile are both naturalistic: conservatism representing the materialism of the *status quo*, and revolutionary thought the materialism of utopia. The spirit is conceived as perpetual self-making, and thus as continuous opposition of what ought-to-be vs. what is; authority (the ought-to-be) is thus brought inside the spirit itself. In other words, Gentile wishes to continue the Hegelian claim of going beyond Spinozism by thinking totality no longer as a substance, but as a subject, thus realizing the “Christian philosophy.” What really happens is that his thought combines the difficulties both of metaphysical rationalism and of the philosophy of praxis, even though it formulates decisive arguments against both. The interiorization of authority leads to the idea that the state is found *in interiore homine* rather than *inter homines*. Except that the transition to authority coincides for Gentile with the affirmation of the unique transcendental I. In this way, the Spinozian theme that only God exists is carried to its extreme consequences, but in a peculiar way, i.e. with an inextricable confusion – which is objectively so -- between God and the human subject. According to a formula that Gentile uses often, the will is “free as it makes itself free; it is subjected to the law that it unceasingly keeps creating.”³¹ This means that his philosophy ends up making the creator God immanent. This God/Human-Subject, though, cannot recognize others beyond himself, so that the consciousness of the individual is transformed into God, but in a “thingifying” God, so that all other subjects are reduced to objects, to instruments. Thus, every subject is for another subject nature, matter, instrument of creation. If the purpose of Gentile’s thought is to realize an universal will that may surpass and unite the will of the individuals, the outcome is, instead, the greatest exaltation and at the same time the greatest humiliation of the individual. No matter how often it is said that we want to understand authority as a superior will that can discipline the associated wills, bringing them together in a common law, in reality what is missing is precisely this unitary principle. Gentile’s philosophy is the proof that within immanentistic thought authority cannot be distinguished from force, and it is suffered as such by each individual. This topic would be fully elucidated if one studied the point-by-point coincidence between the contradictions of Gentile’s philosophy and those of Fascism.

After the First World War two books were published in Italy which challenged the dominant culture, that is, Croce’s and, above all, Gentile’s versions of idealism. The first book was *Filosofia dell’ autorità* by Giuseppe Rensi (Palermo: Sandron, 1920). From the theoretical standpoint, it can be viewed as a naturalistic-skeptical inversion of actualism: if one looks at the results of Gentile’s philosophy from the viewpoint of nature and of multiplicity, instead of the unity of the act, they lead to

30 See his political essay on Gioberti of 1919, later included in Giovanni Gentile, *I profeti del Risorgimento italiano* [The prophets of Italian *Risorgimento*] (Florence: Vallecchi, 1923).

31 [TN] Giovanni Gentile, *Sommario di pedagogia come scienza filosofica* (Bari: Laterza 1922), 44.

a kind of Protagorean skeptical conservatism. What makes Rensi's book interesting is, perhaps, that it is the last book in which the idea of authority is tied to philosophical skepticism, proposing a form of conservatism that has no longer any connection with the idea of tradition viewed in its religious-metaphysical foundation. Even though Mosca and Pareto are not mentioned at all, Rensi's work can be considered the philosophical endpoint of the thought of those authors in their positivistic aspect. Today it gives an impression of inner consistency but also of being irremediably dated.

The second book is *Riflessioni sull'autorità e la sua crisi* by Giuseppe Capograssi (Lanciano: Carabba, 1921), which did not have a large impact in its time and is still not well-known, whereas it deserves instead the greatest attention, since it is one of the best works ever written on this subject. In those uncertain years Capograssi already grasped perfectly what was being lost in the collapse of the idea of authority, and displayed an exceptional awareness both of the positions of modern thought, which had to be criticized in order to restore that idea, and of the tradition that has to be rediscovered: Rosmini, Vico, St. Thomas, thinkers who at that time were considered different from or even opposed to each other. Capograssi was able to see the continuity among them in a truly rigorous fashion, rediscovering it through the analysis of the idea of authority and its metaphysical implications.

Lack of space prevents me from discussing other thinkers worthy of attention from that period and from the next. However, a brief comment on Max Weber is indispensable, since his theories illustrate well the transition from the liberal age to the next phase. The fact that the social sciences do not formulate judgments of value did not mean for Weber anything that could be related to some of today's positivist positions. On the contrary, he expressed the need not to confuse, not to contaminate what ought to be with what is. In 1905 he wrote that "The reason why I denounce with such extraordinary fervour ... the confusion between 'ought' and 'is,' is not because I undervalue the problem of the 'ought,' but just the opposite: because I cannot bear problems of world-shaking importance, of immense ideal proportions, in a sense the highest problems that can move a human being – I cannot bear these problems being turned into a technical 'question of productivity,' and discussed here as if they were within the province of a specialist discipline like economics."³² After the war, the distinction between judgments of value and judgments of fact was regarded as the foundation of the consensus – albeit tacit and indirect – with the existing order: precisely this point was the original focus of the criticism both by Lukacs's Marxism and by the Frankfurt school. The point of agreement between revolutionary thought and metaphysical thought is the rejection of an autonomous morality, which is founded precisely on the distinction between the two types of judgments. This brief comment about Weber may help explain why the Frankfurt school is interesting in order to explore more deeply the idea of authority today, provided that we recognize Horkheimer as its most representative figure. Indeed, we find in it all the essential steps: critique of the period 1870-1914 – viewed in its theoretician, Weber --, revolutionary thought, critique of revolutionary thought, re-proposal of metaphysical-theological thought.

I think I must also explain briefly the reasons for an omission, that of Maritain. In fact, he is present throughout this essay: so present that an explicit citation seemed superfluous. All of this essay is centered on the meaning of Thomism and on the present significance of its distinctive features. I have taken as already known that Maritain has been, among today's Thomists, one who has most reflected on and written about the topic of authority, motivated both by the desire to understand this fundamental theme of Thomism and by his sensitivity to the most significant events of contemporary

32 Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik* [Collected essays in sociology and social politics] (Tubingen: Mohr, 1924), 419.

history. What matters most in his position is the perception of the meta-historical nature of the supreme principles, which are the depositaries of authority, and are distinct from what he calls the “parasitism of the contingent,” in which can be found the historical motivation of the criticism against them.

8. *Conclusions*

The philosophies of history of the nineteenth century, extending a judgment that had already been formulated by the Enlightenment, established an opposition – which afterwards has never been abandoned by the majority of authors – between primacy of freedom (West, progress, modernity, dynamic and innovative spirit) and primacy of authority (East, Middle Ages, despotism, past, immobility). At the present time such opposition keeps shaping ethico-political and historical judgments. Because of this, the idea of authority is tied to that of coercion. Thus, the affirmation of the primacy of freedom characterizes the contemporary age and presents itself as a major conquest. There were also attempts to justify the role of authority, lest freedom degenerate into anarchy. The age of the revolution abandoned completely and irrevocably this search for a unity, and affirmed a sharp and irreparable opposition. The ideal is identified with liberation from authority, from the reign of force and necessity. On the contrary, we have to say that the rejection of authority, understood in a metaphysical-religious sense, leads to the instauration of an absolute form of “power,” so that the opposition authority-freedom is replaced by the opposition authority-power, which has a strongly oppressive character; or, to put it better, the complete divorce of authority and freedom took place in what can be called the “age of secularization” -- the age that followed the revolutionary age in the proper sense, which somehow still recognized authority by attributing it to history. It seems hard to deny that the process of revolutionary liberation leads to the complete dependence of man on society. The consequence will be that man is entitled to exist only inasmuch as he is socially useful, that is, inasmuch as others judge him to be so. Today's altruism takes shape as the perversion of the idea of solidarity.

A famous passage from Kierkegaard's *Journal* says: “Only a wretched and mundane conception of the dialectic of power holds that it increases in proportion to its ability to compel and to make dependent. No, Socrates knew better, that the art of power lies precisely in making free. ... it is something only omnipotence truly succeeds in ... one human being cannot make another wholly free, because the one with the power is himself captive in his possession of it and is therefore continually coming into a false relationship with the one he wants to make free.”³³ This text can serve as an epigraph, because of the relationship it establishes between the exigencies that move Greek anti-sophistic metaphysics since its origins and its fulfillment in theological thought.

Thus, I would say that all that has transpired may end up turning upside down the very idea of “criticism.” Until yesterday criticism indicated a process of liberation from the last dogmatic remnants of classical metaphysics. Today, on the contrary, the “political occasion” may lead to the inversion this meaning, and to the attempt to define that inadequate expression of classical metaphysics, as infidelity to its own beginning, that can explain the rise of the mistaken view that we have discussed and that has manifested itself in the present crisis.

33 Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin 1996), 234-5.