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Issues in Family, Culture & Science



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Agents of Control



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In his 1978 Harvard address, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn spoke as a survivor of the terrors of “hard totalitarianism” under the Soviet state, but he warned of a softer version, emerging from different, less obvious agents of control. This “soft totalitarianism,” enforced by the media, the academy, and corporations, was no less dangerous than its communist counterpart; it was undermining the spiritual freedom of the West. Today, there are individuals and institutions—whether totalitarians of some stripe or merely “influencers”—attempting to manipulate what we do, say, and think, often against the claims of conscience and the transcendent moral order. To recover our sense of dignity and agency over against the likes of the biomedical security state, surveillance capital, or gender ideologues, might well, in Solzhenitsyn’s words, “demand from us a spiritual blaze.”

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Children of the State: Youth Sexual Rights and the Illusion of Parental Rights

THERESA FARNAN

The pediatric medical office was bright, if sterile and antiseptic looking. A fish tank stood in the center of the waiting room, drawing attention from young patients. The walls were decorated with a lone poster, depicting laughing teens socializing. Block letters blared out the message. “HEY TEENS -- KNOW YOUR RIGHTS!” In fine print, the poster proclaimed “Once you reach age 13, you have certain privacy rights when talking to your doctor. Any questions? Ask your provider.” Before routine check-ups, teenagers are handed an iPad with a digital form designed to elicit information about the teenager’s sexual activity, drug use, and mental health. Teens are told to fill the questionnaire out on their own. Parents are not told how their child answered these sensitive questions—nor is there a sign informing parents of *their* rights to direct the upbringing of their children.

Why would a physician even consider cutting parents out of important conversations about these matters, which have significant spiritual, emotional, and physical consequences? Recently a group of scholars focused on this question, concluding that the justification for limiting parental rights was founded on the belief that children possess sexual and reproductive rights and therefore have autonomy in any matter related to sex and “gender identity.”

While this is a legal and political claim, it is first and foremost an anthropological claim, one that arose at the very beginning of the sexual revolution and now animates the transgender revolution. It is the claim that children are putative adults, possessed of “sexual rights” and “privacy rights,” whose highest good is to fulfill (“express”) their desires related to sexual activity and identity (“gender”). At the same time, parents are cast as antagonists to the child’s right to sexual expression. The youth “sexual rights” movement frames efforts to block parents’ involvement as benevolent, righteous, and necessary to ensure the child’s autonomous decision-making, and individual “expression.” Through norms and policies, which purport to respect the child’s “rights,” then, the sexual and transgender revolutions drive a wedge between child and parents.

It is time for the Vatican to “take its gloves off.” The Church must oppose not only the beliefs underpinning gender ideology, but all initiatives to promote sexual and reproductive rights of children.

Children’s “rights” are front and center not only in pediatricians’ offices, but also in schools, where administrators and staff routinely hide information from parents. For over a decade, many schools have used “gender support plans” that spell out how school personnel will “affirm” a student’s asserted “gender identity” and facilitate the child’s desired social transition. Many schools openly admit that they will hide these developments from the student’s parents, insisting that parents not only have no right to know what is happening in their own child’s life, but also pose a likely safety risk to their own child. As one policy notes “in the interest of safety, school officials should not use a student’s preferred name or gender marker on communications sent home unless expressly authorized by the student.” In some schools, children are coached to become allies or adopt a transgender identity through seemingly innocuous means, such as school guidance counseling, school clubs and activities. Some schools are more blatant in blocking parents’ influence over their own children (at least regarding sex and identity) by refusing to give parents notice when those topics are integrated into the curriculum or refusing to permit parents to exercise an “opt out” of objectionable content. Although the Supreme Court recently upheld the rights of parents to opt their child out of lessons that undermine the parents’ right to direct the religious upbringing of their children, schools continue to secretly transition children and insert objectionable “gender” instruction in sex education classes without notice to parents, in some states with open support from state government.

Despite the growing rhetoric around “parents’ rights,” the norm across child-serving institutions still is to deny parents’ rights, at least regarding “sensitive” topics, or to subordinate parents’ rights to the purported “rights” of the child. For decades, under laws and judicial opinions that treat minors as mini-adults with “privacy” or “autonomy” rights, parents have been sidelined from their minor child’s decisions and care regarding contraceptives, STI and HIV testing, diagnosis and treatment, drug testing, counseling (with some restrictions), abortion, and now “gender transitions” in states that permit judicial bypass to parental consent laws. Schools, physicians and courts displace parents and function as substitute gatekeepers, deciding if, when, and how the child may transition, regardless of parents’ wishes. States have deemed parents “unsafe” for a “transgender”-identifying child, and removed the child from the family home because parents have refused to use the child’s chosen pronouns or to permit the child’s desired “gender” transition.

Apart from these “sensitive” issues, Western culture generally does recognize that children are not miniature adults—that they need special protection precisely because they are dependent on adults and have not reached maturity. Child labor laws, for example, exist because children need protection from exploitation by predatory or indifferent adults. Contract law generally does not treat contracts entered into by a minor as binding, recognizing the child’s lack of maturity. Similarly, protective laws prohibit sales of alcohol to minors. Yet, on issues of sex and “gender identity,” all such recognition disappears. Children are left to the influence of unscrupulous or manipulative adults. Corporations and social media giants manipulate children with relentless pro-LGBT messaging and fearmongering about threats to sexual autonomy, thereby creating a youth market for the sex and gender industries. Stripped of their

parents' protection, children are defenseless against exploitation and corruption—and fall victim to their own immature, unwise decisions.

All of this is done in the name of maximizing the freedom of the autonomous “expressive” child. But at the end of the day, the child’s purported autonomy is illusory. At every step in the process, in online spaces, schools, counselors’ and physicians’ offices, the child always is nudged in one direction—toward the state-favored moral framework. So called “conversion therapy” bans, that prohibit counselors from talk therapy that seeks to help the child feel at home in his or her body even when the child seeks it out, illustrate that autonomy is only allowed if it affirms the anthropology of gender ideology. An honest observer must ask: to whom do these children belong? The parents? or the state? As for the consequences, gender ideologues minimize the permanent harm, both psychic and physiological, that so-called “gender affirming care” causes. The sexual and gender revolutions provide numerous, tragic examples of how the state-sponsored anthropology of youth sexual rights proves to be catastrophic for the physical and emotional well-being of youth.

The Catholic Church’s response

In this environment, the Catholic Church stands out as a constant and strong supporter of parental authority over children, defending it from the standpoint of the parent’s obligation to nurture, protect and form the child. The Church recognizes the natural inclination of parents to preserve the species in a way that is genuinely appropriate to human beings. Parents are not just to ensure that children are fed and sheltered, but are to nurture and love their children, protecting them from physical and spiritual harm. The Church’s description of parents as the primary educators of the child emphasizes the obligation that they form their children morally and intellectually, that they have the responsibility to care for the state of their children’s souls and help them learn to love God and order their lives accordingly. Recent popes have warmly praised the importance of family life, in which the domestic Church functions as a remote preparation for marriage and caring for one’s own children.

In recent years, as transgender ideology swept through the West, the Catholic church steadfastly has warned about its dangers. In their critiques of gender ideology, both Popes Francis and Benedict called attention to the anthropological error contained therein. Gender ideology rejects the unity of body and soul and denies the importance of sexual difference, proposing instead a view of the person as desire and will, with a body that has no intrinsic meaning but serves as a blank slate on which to project a chosen identity to others. Gender ideology redefines marriage and family, substituting instead chosen relationships where sex and sexual difference are fluid and interchangeable. Instead of freedom ordered toward the good, gender ideology proposes a directionless autonomy that inevitably turns inward to destroy the person.

The Congregation for Catholic Education’s document *Male and Female He Created Them* critiques the anthropological errors of gender ideology, and offers a thoughtful description of the importance of complementarity for the child’s development. It calls for a sound education of the child, based on Christian anthropology, accompanied by formation in virtue.

But this is not enough. The Church must identify the aggressiveness of gender ideology: its promotion in school clinics, comprehensive sex education programs, and media campaigns. *Male and Female He Created Them* calls for creating “the right conditions for a constructive encounter” and “an atmosphere of transparency,” between parents and school, while “facilitating maximum involvement” (presumably by the family?) to avoid the “the

unnecessary tensions that arise through misunderstandings caused by lack of clarity, information or competency.” Perhaps in some countries it is just a matter of “misunderstanding” or incompetence. But in the US, Canada, the UK, and other Western countries, schools deliberately have transitioned children without informing parents and intentionally have hidden information from parents. Secular schools, and even some faith-based schools, are suffused with LGBT propaganda, where “gender identities” are suggested to the child, the child is supplied a vocabulary for expressing these identities, encouraged to keep secrets from their parents—until the school determines that the parents will support the child’s chosen “gender identity,” or sexual activity—and then is celebrated for “coming out.” *Dignitas Infinita* also addresses the anthropological errors of gender ideology but fails to discuss how children are targeted by gender ideology. In its discussion of “sex change” procedures, it never raises the fact that since the publication of the Dutch protocol in the 1990’s, children have been the main target of these destructive interventions. Nor does it address how children confused about their sexual identity (so-called “trans-kids”) have been exploited by the LGBT movement to promote LGBT rights.

In short, Vatican documents don’t address the aggressive targeting of children, by gender propagandists. Nor, as it happens, do they discuss the destructive practical implications of gender ideology for children, nor do these documents seem to grasp the corrosive effect of youth sexual rights on families.

Why are these critical topics not addressed by the Vatican?

Several explanations come to mind, including the fact that relatively few children are under Vatican governance. More likely, those writing the documents simply don’t realize the scope of the issue. As theologians, they focus on how gender ideology affects catechesis and Church institutions, rather than how gender ideology affects school culture and practice, how it has fractured families, or the extent to which children have been subjected to these grueling, destructive sex-rejecting interventions.

Recent developments in Europe may change this, however. The European Union (EU) is considering policies that “support the development of legal gender recognition procedures based on self-determination that are free from age restrictions.” In other words, the EU is planning to compel member states to remove all age limits for changing a child’s identity. The EU also has endorsed a ban on “conversion therapies,” defining conversion therapy not only as including attempts to change sexual orientation and “gender identity,” but also encompassing attempts to regulate “gender expression.” These policies have direct implications for Catholic schools, as well as for Catholic parents. A Catholic school uniform policy that designates skirts for girls and pants for boys would violate the EU conversion therapy ban, as it would limit “gender expression.” As Italy is a member of the EU, these policies will be right on the doorstep of the Vatican.

It is time for the Vatican to “take its gloves off.” The Church must oppose not only the beliefs underpinning gender ideology, but all initiatives to promote sexual and reproductive rights of children.

The Church must oppose health care systems that shut all parents out of health care records, and schools that hide information from parents. This requires serious self-examination. How many Catholic hospitals participate in hiding medical records from parents because of the

“sexual and reproductive rights” of the child? It is not clear, but nothing in the USCCB Ethical and Religious Directives warns against this practice. How many Catholic physicians and hospitals are providing pediatric gender transitions? Again, it is not clear, but Catholic hospitals are included in a recent survey of insurance data that identifies hospitals that have provided medical and surgical sex-rejecting interventions for minors. In countries where Catholic schools are publicly funded, are Catholic schools hiding information about a child’s sexual activity and “gender identity” claims from parents? Evidence suggests that some schools are. For example, one Canadian family was shocked to discover that their Catholic school district secretly was transitioning their 10-year-old daughter. When the parents questioned this, the Children’s Aid Society of Canada launched an investigation *of the parents*.

Deconstructing the family in the name of children’s rights harms children. Children deserve a tranquil and innocent childhood and an adolescence that allows them to mature in accordance with their given sex. Children deserve education free from ideological attempts to categorize their behavior, likes or preferences as an identity, or orientation dissociated from their bodies. Children deserve to be protected from attempts to sexualize them or to separate them from their parents’ loving guidance.

Puberty is a normal and healthy part of a child’s development, not a threat to the developing child. No child should be told that he or she might experience the “wrong puberty.” Children should not be given “how to” guides for sexual practices, or roadmaps for gender transitions, or lessons in risk calculation about sexual practices. Children should not be encouraged to make health care decisions without their parents. By nature, children are not capable emotionally, morally or spiritually of “autonomous” decision-making to engage in sexual activity. Children should never be persuaded that they have an identity that is premised on rejecting the body. Because of the push for youth sexual rights, and its expansion to include “gender identity,” children are being steered by our culture toward actions that are wrong *per se*, not just wrong because of their age. (Unfortunately, most opposition to gender ideology has coalesced around the socially acceptable view that adults can do whatever they please, but kids need to wait until they are 18. This leaves struggling young adults at the mercy of the cult of gender ideology and ignores the fact that mutilating your body is objectively wrong, even when the person has diminished culpability.) Moreover, early sexual activity can harm a child’s developing body. Emotionally, the consequences of such activity last for years, if not decades. For children, the virtues of modesty, chastity, and obedience are protective and pave the way to full freedom as an adult. If the Catholic Church does not proclaim these truths, who will?

In addition, the Church must realize the need to catechize parents on this issue. Unfortunately, parents routinely acquiesce to laws and regulations that limit their authority in matters of sex and “gender identity.” Many parents are uneasy about the dominant “sex ed,” but lack confidence to complain. Others see nothing wrong with it because they believe that their children have autonomy in these matters. The church has the ability to move the needle in this area, however. At the height of the transgender craze, almost half of Catholics in the United States believed that sex assigned at birth could be different from a person’s “gender.” That number has fallen to less than a third, thanks to efforts by the US Bishops to catechize the faithful.

The Church has beautiful teaching on the family, describing it as the domestic Church, and insisting that “the future of the world and of the Church... passes through the family.” This teaching contains an implicit view of the child, as an innocent member of the family who needs his parents’ guidance and protection, especially in matters of human sexuality and identity formation.

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FEATURE ARTICLE

"Gentlemen Don't Read Each Other's Mail"*: Notes on Surveillance

KARL MACMILLAN

Many of us sense that others are watching us, whether in the digital world or as we go about our daily lives. From the ads that follow us from website to website, the cameras at every intersection, to the trail left by our phones and credit cards: it's clear people are watching. But who exactly is watching? For what purpose? How much can they see? What can they do with the information gleaned about us? Can I, as a "regular" person, control this at all or should I just relax and let it happen?

Answering these questions thoroughly is very difficult, which is all to the purpose of those that would like, for various reasons, to watch. But it's possible to note some general trends and get a sense of the broad shape of what is happening. With that, it may be possible for an average person to make some decisions.

Let us first consider how much of our lives can be observed with cameras (we'll consider other forms of surveillance later). As already noted, cameras are now everywhere: speed cameras, security cameras on homes and businesses, cameras on our phones and laptops, drones with cameras, self-driving cars with cameras, and on and on. If you live in a city, much of your life is within sight of one of these cameras. When you consider the cameras that we voluntarily invite into our lives on smartphones, laptops, tablets, and various home security devices, the potential for surveillance is nearly complete. From what we do in public to the most intimate moments in our homes, nearly everything is visible to one camera or another. But are these cameras being used to spy on us?

It is important to note that companies that make these devices have the power to turn on their corresponding cameras, whether the owners of the devices have authorized this or not. The devices have the capability of performing surveillance and uploading the results to the internet: it's simply a matter of the software running on the devices in question. Moreover, the devices that surround us run the software that the creators of the devices decide that they should run. Early computers were tools in the hands of their owners, ready to be loaded with software of their choice or programmed from scratch. As our devices have increased in

sophistication and have become used for financially lucrative tasks, many—including the device manufacturers, record labels, movie studios, video game companies, and large software vendors—have fought to control the software that runs on them. Device manufacturers and others seeking control over software on our devices have fought for and largely won this control against the owners of the devices themselves. An Apple iPhone is fundamentally under the control of Apple as Apple, not the device owner, makes the final decision about what software runs on that device. The owner might be able to select from the apps that Apple has approved to be in the Apple app store, but, at a fundamental level, Apple is in control. They approve every app and, more importantly, can add features to the system software of the iPhone that fundamentally alters its behavior. Apple is not alone in this. Android devices, various TVs, streaming devices, self-driving cars, security cameras, and the various “smart devices” in our homes are also very much under the control of their manufacturers.

The limit on surveillance is what the public will accept.

This is, admittedly, a confusing state of affairs. Cameras are everywhere, they are controlled by others, and are almost universally connected to the Internet—this all suggests that ubiquitous camera surveillance is *possible*. So, is it happening? If Apple and Samsung were turning on our smartphone cameras in bedrooms and bathrooms without our permission it surely would be generally known by now. So it is safe to say there is some measure of restraint by some companies. But it is also not hard to find overreach, whether it is Tesla filming in private spaces such as garages, Google Nest and Amazon Ring doorbell cameras forming nearly complete surveillance networks of neighborhoods that are then stored on their servers, or the Google maps street view feature capturing people leaving strip clubs and other sensitive places.

Often, at the heart of this tension is not, unfortunately, a principled debate over privacy. Undoubtedly individuals at some companies are concerned with the best interests of their customers and the general public. More often, though, companies’ self-interest is involved. The Google maps street view feature, for example, is useful and a strong differentiator for Google. Google maps, in general, is important to Google’s advertising business. Creating that feature requires capturing images of almost every place reachable by road on the planet and updating these continuously. This is surveillance on an unprecedented scale. That Google blurs some of the captured images as they release them online is a small concession, designed as much to make this large-scale surveillance acceptable as it is to genuinely protect privacy.

This pattern, where a company engages in as much surveillance as possible to create revenue and implements privacy features to make it acceptable, is the norm not the exception. It is impossible to know what each individual company is doing or might do in the future, but the general evolution within the technology industry has followed this course: The limit on surveillance is what the public will accept.

The answer to what can be seen then is: as much as companies feel they can get away with. This is true in the physical world where not just cameras, but microphones, cell radios, GPS receivers, and other sensors track us as we move about. It is even more true in the digital world where it is even easier for companies to track all that we do. Again, it is possible, but not always the case, that companies are tracking what is happening when we do things locally on our devices (e.g., when we play a video game on a game console, use accounting software

installed on a PC, or send messages via encrypted messaging apps on our phones^[1]). Online, most of what we do is seen and tracked, often by multiple parties. Those that own the services that we use, certainly, but also advertisers, search engines, and internet service providers among others. Many companies like to talk about security, but it is important to remember that this is typically the fox guarding the hen house. It is helpful that the foxes are keeping out the coyotes, mountain lions, and other “nasties” that would otherwise eat us, but can you really trust the fox?

At this point it may feel like we have answered who is watching, but the picture is not quite complete yet. What we have talked about is those that are *gathering* the information about us. Cell phone carriers are capable of gathering information about where we are by tracking which cell towers we connect to, but that information is too interesting, and too valuable, for them to keep it to themselves. Advertisers might want information about where people live and shop. Law enforcement might rather simply purchase information about people’s locations rather than going through the tedious process of obtaining warrants. Our intelligence agencies might want to gather all of the information, store it, and then implement their own internal processes to determine when they can look at that information to protect our national security.

Much of the vast amounts of information that is gathered about us is shared and sold by those companies who gather it and is often an important revenue stream for them. The advertising industry is perhaps the most prominent example, but it is far from the only one. In many ways, the most concerning players in the surveillance information business are various levels of government. In imagined dystopias with big brother-type broad surveillance, it is usually the government which directly gathers information on its citizens.^[2] In actuality, federal, state, and local governments often rely on commercial companies to gather information and then enter into relationships—either straightforward commercial transactions or more complex contractual arrangements—to obtain it.^[3] Doorbell cameras made by Ring are a good example of this. For many years, Ring proactively shared video footage with law enforcement, turning people’s front doors into de facto law enforcement outposts. (It should be noted that the company has in recent years taken a less proactive approach to sharing its video footage, but still makes it possible for users to easily share footage and responds to requests from law enforcement.)

This mixing of commercial and government interests has echoes of the Renaissance-era Age of Exploration, especially in the digital world. Just as the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, and England granted vast powers to commercial enterprises such as the Dutch East India Company to explore, settle, and operate as a quasi-government within its settlements, governments have ceded vast authority in the online world. Companies such as Meta (previously Facebook) and Google operate online empires over which they exercise almost exclusive control. As these companies and others work to bring more of our lives online through AI and augmented and virtual reality, they will inevitably have more control over the digital world. Simultaneously, these same companies are working to blur the digital and physical worlds through computer control and automation, thus extending their control from the digital to the physical world. Within the digital sphere, these companies can implement surveillance that, if done by the government, would be neither legal nor acceptable to the public. Yet this surveillance is taking place as we speak, and the government can, through financial transactions, influence, or court orders, gain access to the vast amounts of data collected. Moreover, companies can govern our behavior within digital worlds, with the power to determine what behavior is acceptable, to remove users at their discretion, and even, as in the case of Meta, to set up complex governance structures outside of the legal and court structures of the countries in which it operates. Again, as the line between the digital and physical is blurred through augmented

reality, home automation, self-driving vehicles, robots, and drones, the control of these major companies over what we can and cannot do will extend into the physical world. This control, though similar to the control that a traditional company might have over what its patrons can do in its stores, is different in that these companies hope to weave these services into our lives in unprecedented ways. The technology companies will then have control over both our digital and parts of our physical lives and that control will be available for the government to exploit.

Now that we have examined what can be observed and who is observing, the key question that remains is *why*. Going back to the example of what can be observed with cameras, if viewed with the mindset of a police stakeout or a Cold War spy agency, little of this makes much sense. In that mindset, surveillance had specific goals—e.g., get a photo of this specific criminal selling drugs—and was performed to obtain a specific piece of direct evidence to satisfy that goal. Much of modern surveillance only makes sense if it is in the context of the immense data processing that surrounds it. Instead of hoping to get a single valuable image, companies such as Google, Tesla, Amazon, and countless others collect vast quantities of images that they then use to train AI models or process with AI models. For images, those models might perform facial recognition to detect shop lifting, monitor shoppers to understand their behavior, hand out automated speeding tickets, determine whether employees are doing what they are supposed to be doing, or any other countless tasks. The processing of the images turns the images into a source of data, and those that create these systems have a deep belief in the power of data to help them understand and shape the world.

A similar process happens with our online behavior. All that we do—whether it is our purchases, financial information, website visits, web searches, or anything else—is turned into a stream of data that can be used to create models of us. These models can then be used to select ads relevant to us, predict our cost to an insurance agency, or assess whether we are involved in terrorist activity. We become not individuals with humanity, families, hopes, and dignity but rather statistical models that can be searched, probed, and evaluated en masse like bacteria on a slide under a microscope.

Having access to streams of data about our lives and behaviors means wielding immense power. For some, that power is used to turn our attention into ad revenue by understanding what we like and want. The stream of articles, posts, images, and videos served by Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Google, for example, are designed to enthrall us so that we can be shown ads. The way in which these companies know what to show us, whether it is content or ads, is based on the surveillance that they have performed and then processed to create a model of what exactly we are most likely to continue to watch or click on. The surveillance done on us and the resulting data give the digital giants the power to capture our attention. Others have more noble goals, such as national security. Their hope is that by collecting this data and then processing it they can see the threats and stop the attacks. There is a whole industry around this idea, from data analysis companies such as Palantir to classified cloud AI from Amazon Web Services, Google, and Microsoft. The US government has spent billions of dollars building massive data centers pursuing this idea. Many other uses are emerging, such as health insurers automating prior authorizations through AI.

What these organizations, whether public or private, all have in common is a reliance on vast streams of data. The techniques used to predict our preferences and behaviors increase dramatically in effectiveness the more data that is used in their training. That, to a large extent, explains the desire of many of the tech giants to collect so much information, and even their willingness to explore the limits of what consumers will accept and what is legal.

Those that are creating surveillance systems believe that they give them the ability to

understand and control the world, whether that is for their gain or for the common good. Time will show whether what is gained is worth the loss of privacy and whether the potential for abuse is realized. We will see, also, whether what is ultimately built delivers the power that is promised.

In closing, then, let us turn to the final question of what a regular person may be able to do to avoid this surveillance. Is it possible, through reasonable choices, to avoid being surveilled and prevent tech companies from exerting control over us? As was detailed above, much of modern life, especially as it intersects with the digital world, involves surveillance. Avoiding surveillance, then, is often a matter of withdrawing from or limiting interaction with modern life. This can be done, as will be described below, but it requires making trade-offs, sometimes onerous trade-offs, and often requires both effort and technical knowledge. There is no simple, easy path that will curtail the activities of tech giants in our lives.

Companies themselves employ various tactics to make it hard and confusing to both use their services and select options that might enable additional privacy. For example, in 2023 Google deployed what they call a “Privacy Sandbox” to their Chrome web browser that, when presented to the user, appears to offer enhanced protection from user tracking and profiling. The reality is that this is simply a trade-off that allows Google to perform this tracking versus allowing third parties to do so. Understanding the implications of this single feature requires research into its technical aspects as well as de-obfuscating the seemingly misleading jargon used by Google to describe it. This is all too typical for tech companies and represents a kind of war of attrition against users. Many users will tire of researching these options and will simply accept the defaults.

If you desire to take more positive steps than simply selecting options presented by tech companies to enhance privacy, the process is more complex and onerous. The basic options are complete withdrawal and the use of alternative technologies. Sometimes complete withdrawal is not an option, as is the case with surveillance that is happening in the physical world. Cameras in public spaces, on roads, and in businesses cannot be avoided practically speaking.^[4] Participation in the modern financial world of credit cards, loans, and online shopping will also leave a digital trail. Cash is, of course, an option. Crypto currencies were supposed to provide for anonymous online currency, though they have failed to become a widely accepted form of payment.^[5] Since carrying a cell phone, even a “dumb phone,” will allow your location to be tracked in various ways, the most private option is to forego a cell phone completely. Avoiding the use of social media, online shopping, online media, video games, and other digital tools is an obvious step.

If you are willing to devote the time and effort, there is an active privacy-focused community within the free software community that provides alternative technologies to big tech. Free software is created cooperatively online and is freely available for use and modification. Linux, an alternative to Microsoft Windows or Apple MacOS, is perhaps the best-known example. It is not enough to simply use Linux as your operating system, however. While that does prevent Microsoft and Apple from performing some forms of tracking, any online activity done from Linux is still trackable. The truly devoted set up an entire online environment for themselves, including hosting software on servers connected to the Internet for services such as email, photo storage, and document storage. There are mobile options as well, such as the Android variant GrapheneOS. This parallel world of software is interesting and, with sufficient effort and technical knowledge, it is possible to avoid much of the surveillance. This is not, however, an option for most users.

When pursuing these alternative technologies it is important to remember how difficult it is to

create something secure and be certain that you have succeeded. Modern hardware and software is enormously complex. When using something like GrapheneOS it is likely that you will use hardware, in the form of cellular modems in the phone, and software, such as device drivers and apps, that you do not fully control or understand. Any of those components can easily undo all of the work that you have put into creating a secure phone. It may be that GrapheneOS will reduce the intrusive surveillance by companies such as Google, but truly eliminating surveillance in the digital realm is enormously difficult. It is worth remembering that most of us have an intuitive grasp of the physical world and it is much easier to understand how to keep in-person conversations and physical documents private. For anything that we wish to keep truly private, the simplest and most foolproof option is likely the physical world.

**The quote which inspired the title of this article is attributed to Henry L. Stimson who served both as Secretary of State and Secretary of War in several administrations.*

[1]The overall security of end-to-end encryption systems, such as iMessage or Signal, is a broad topic, but the key to remember is that the messages must be decrypted at some point to be displayed to the user and, whatever device this decryption process happens on, has access to the message. This has led to real-world disclosures of end-to-end encrypted messages, including the large-scale release of celebrity nude photos in 2014. The bottom line: systems such as Signal and iMessage are relatively secure, but unless you understand and control all aspects it is best not to bet your life (literally) on the security of such a system.

[2] Interestingly, *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson, the book that gave us the term metaverse, imagined a world where much of the surveillance was done by commercial companies and sold to various parties, including the government.

[3] Some of the most detailed disclosure of these relationships and the flow of the data from commercial companies to the US Government came from the disclosures of Edward Snowden.

[4] For a while, facial recognition models were fooled by painting your face in the style of the band “Insane Clown Posse.” Readers can decide for themselves whether this is a step they are willing to take in the interest of privacy.

[5] It is unclear whether Bitcoin and similar crypto currencies are actually currencies according to some economists.

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Issues in Family, Culture & Science

FEATURE ARTICLE

Atheism is the Real Climate Denier

MICHAEL LEHMANN

The media often covers climate change by focusing on extremes, such as activists stopping traffic to warn of a climate disaster or elected leaders dismissing it entirely. When discussing how climate change impacts human beings, one deeper question escapes attention: Do human beings exist in the first place?

The answer might sound obvious. But atheism is the real denier—not just of climate change, but of existence itself. The initial mistake of denying God skews subsequent actions by eliminating both people and purpose. After detailing why this is the case, I will explain how the Catholic Church’s strong metaphysical foundation offers a path forward. This path provides stirring motivation to care for the planet and invites Catholics and secular activists alike to work together.

Atheism’s contradictions begin with metaphysics, the branch of philosophy that deals with the fundamental building blocks of reality. Metaphysics focuses on first principles, asking questions such as “Why is there something rather than nothing?” “How do we define consciousness?” and “What exists?” Taken to its logical conclusion, atheism incinerates this branch and boldly answers the last question: “nothing.”

Theologian and philosopher Conor Cunningham (and others before him) convincingly argue that if atheism is true, then materialism must be true. Materialists believe that matter at the subatomic level is all that exists, but if that’s accurate, “existence” itself becomes illusory. If everything is just lumps of matter, then problems arise. Or, rather, problems vanish, as do people. For if all things are merely piles of matter, it no longer becomes possible to say that this bunch is a car, that bit over there is a rock, and another blob is “Bob”—a scientist who claims climate change is real and a threat to human beings. The more elusive the definition of “matter,” the more a materialist metaphysics collapses into a collection of absurd conclusions: no objective morality, no consciousness, and no existence.

As Cunningham explains in his book, *Darwin’s Pious Idea*, materialism “is not a true thesis but something more like fashion, taste, hubris, and wishful thinking. In short, what at first glance appears to be all ruddy, full of the meat of the earth, dealing only in the soil of the empirical, is

rather more ephemeral, immaterial, if you will, at least insofar as it is an ideal, if anything at all.” In a materialist universe, attempts to identify one collection of matter as a person and another as a Porsche collapse into incoherence. As the Apostolic Constitution of the Church states, “For without the Creator the creature would disappear.”

Atheism is the real denier of both people and purpose. Far from being a caricature, some leading atheist philosophers explicitly make such arguments. In *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality*, for example, Alex Rosenberg declares that reality is “What physics says it is.” He then follows this claim to its logical conclusions: life has no meaning or purpose, and objective morality and free will aren’t real. He goes on: “There is no self, soul, person. Scientism must firmly deny its existence. The self, as conveyed to us by introspection, is a fiction. It doesn’t exist.” This ontological wasteland is atheism’s final destination.

Climate activism built on atheism’s shaky metaphysical footing is self-defeating: unable to account for the existence of a person, or of climate change, or of any moral responsibility to care for the Earth.

Devotion to these intellectual consequences proves difficult in practice. Atheism subjects our existence to a question mark and undercuts any moral imperative to do anything. That is significant because it hampers the ability to tackle *any* problem, let alone address a challenge as large as climate change. Atheism’s metaphysical foundation is riddled with confusion because it rejects God, who is truth, goodness, and beauty. A worldview that forsakes this grounding becomes untethered from reality, ultimately declaring increasingly bold lies—such as proclaiming that purpose, free will, and the self are illusions. However, atheists go about their lives denying these dogmas, as if they have a self that can indeed make daily choices toward their preferred ends. It is impossible to live out a worldview that denies the possibility of living.

The contradictions of atheism’s metaphysics affect all subsequent policy discussions, because the incoherence of this foundation can only lead to further confusion. Take the activism surrounding climate change. Some secular climate activists push for population control to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and almost all assume that supporting abortion is consistent with caring for nature. I am not arguing that atheism directly leads to specific policy positions; I am arguing that atheism leads to increasing confusion that begets a variety of conflicting takes and introduces significant creep into one’s aims and mission.

The Center for Biological Diversity claims that, “Human population growth and consumption are at the root of our most pressing environmental crises, but they’re often left out of the conversation. We can fight to curb climate change, stop habitat loss, and clean up pollution, but if we don’t also fight for reproductive justice for those most severely harmed by these environmental crises . . . it’ll remain an uphill battle we can’t win.”

While the Sierra Club rejects population control as a climate solution, it is unabashedly pro-abortion—along with other prominent climate organizations like the Natural Resources Defense Council and Greenpeace.

Secular climate activism that calls for population control and defending abortion sends the

confusing message that there is no conflict between protecting nature and viewing human life as disposable. This message, in turn, hinders our response to climate change by fueling anxiety and fear about how climate change will affect us. Climate anxiety leads many to question whether they want to start families.

A Nottingham University study shows that 47 percent of U.S. adults think they should not have children or regret having had children because of climate concerns. Climate anxiety-induced doubts about procreating are even more troubling because populations are declining in both developed and developing countries.

Climate activism built on atheism's shaky metaphysical footing is self-defeating: unable to account for the existence of a person, or of climate change, or of any moral responsibility to care for the Earth.

The past two popes have offered a hope-filled alternative, built on strong first principles, that confronts the climate problem while championing human life.

Pope Benedict XVI's *Caritas in veritate* (Charity in Truth) laments "the rejection of metaphysics by the human sciences." He adds, "Without God man neither knows which way to go, nor even understands who he is." We cannot understand who we are apart from God, let alone gain perspective over a problem like climate change.

In the same encyclical, Pope Benedict clarifies that "the truth of ourselves, of our personal conscience, is first of all *given* to us. In every cognitive process, truth is not something that we produce, it is always found, or better, received." And in his lecture at the University of Regensburg, Benedict explains this truth flows from God—the *logos*, who is both reason and word—to us. God creates the universe and allows us, made in His image, to comprehend reality. Instead of attempting to assemble subjective truth ourselves, God provides us with objective truth and the ability to comprehend it. With this metaphysical foundation, we can say that human beings exist, climate change is a threat to us, and that we have a moral obligation to address it.

Establishing sturdy first principles based on the Church's wisdom makes life possible and clarifies our relationship to the planet. There is something rather than nothing because God willed it. God created everything—not because He needed to, but because He wanted to. And this God, who loves us dearly, has commanded us to care for our terrestrial home and honor human life. *Caritas in veritate* puts it beautifully: "The environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole." Protecting the environment and human life go together.

Pope Francis' *Laudato si'*, operating with the same first principles as Pope Benedict, builds on this point: "Since everything is interrelated, concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion. How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is uncomfortable and creates difficulties?" We should not sacrifice humanity for the environment's sake. We should safeguard the environment for everyone's sake.

The point here is not to divide Catholics and secular climate activists but to offer a blueprint for common ground. Secular climate activists are often more vocal than Catholics about the issue. Catholics should support our secular brothers and sisters who want to steward the planet, while respectfully but confidently challenging their metaphysics and any misanthropic policies. Honest dialogue will lead to a better understanding of each other and depolarize the

climate conversation.

At this point, however, some Catholics might disagree that climate change is worth tackling or happening at all. First, our metaphysical convictions demand that we respect creation. Paragraph 2415 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is clear: “Man’s dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator is not absolute; it is limited by concern for the quality of life of his neighbor, including generations to come; it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation.”

Second, while it is easy to disregard various apocalyptic pronouncements about climate change that have failed to happen, it is difficult to ignore the signs of climate impacts all around us. Consider a few examples: changing bird migration patterns, fewer days to ice fish in Wisconsin, and D.C. Cherry Blossoms reaching peak bloom earlier and earlier.

Armed with the Church’s insights, that the creator God who loves us is the grounding of reality and source of objective truth, Catholics are equipped to engage secular culture on climate change. We should slice through simplistic debates by highlighting that without the correct first principles, both human beings and climate change vanish.

In charity and truth, we can explain that secular climate activists care for the planet despite their metaphysics, not because of them. We can then invite all to work with us, caring for our common home together. It is God alone who makes our existence possible and plants the seeds of environmental stewardship in our hearts—including those who deny Him.

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FEATURE ARTICLE

“Gender Affirming Professionals” and Transfers of Power: Children and Parents Divided *Contra Mundum*

AMY E. HAMILTON

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.
Hebrews 4:12

There is almost no rival to the power that gender ideology seeks to wield. It seeks nothing less than god-like power, using language not to clarify what is real but to divide, disrupt, and disorient. It cleaves body and soul (“gender identity”), bringing not peace but a sword. Gender ideology does not deal in objective material facts or diagnosable physical conditions but presents an alternative worldview about the truth and the nature of the human person. This body-soul *disunity* stands in direct opposition to Judeo-Christian anthropology. Children receiving instruction in gender ideology are catechized into a fundamentally different religion. Whether they come to deal with gender identity issues or not, all who accept the ideology’s premises have now had their world fundamentally re-ordered in echoes from Eden: “ye shall be as gods.” And this divisive thrust of gender ideology not only disintegrates individuals, it also divides parents from their children and undermines their authority both to form and to protect them.

Drawing from the insights of Carl Trueman and others, I consider gender ideology through this lens of a “secular religion,” the central doctrine of which is that human beings have the power to self-define. In Nietzsche’s words: “We, however, want to become who we are—human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves!” (GS 335). The Psalmist wrote of such ambitions long before: “With our tongue will we prevail; our lips are our own; who is lord over us?” (12:4). Many excellent pieces have been written on this topic in similar terms. What I hope to contribute here is an examination of “gender affirming professionals” (GAPs) (i.e., doctors, counselors, educators, judges) own

words, which reveal that they are driven by secular values as zealously as any sect, and their language conveys the religious tenor of their commitments. These professionals and religious adherents act as power brokers that strip parents of their legitimate authority over their children. They arrogate that authority to themselves, using it both to dangerously *empower* the children and *disempower* parents and other professionals who might thwart the “new creation.”

The prerequisite power that GAPs must assert before all else is over language: the authority to name and re-name. In his reflection on the Psalms, Father Patrick Henry Reardon writes:

[A purely sociological] view of language is also egregiously dangerous to spiritual and mental health, for such a view of language dissolves the relationship of speech to the perception of truth, rendering man the lord of language without affirming the magisterial claims of truth over man

Gender ideology names and thus creates a separate kind of human, a special class of being: “transgender” or “gender nonconforming” children. From the perspective of GAPs, this is not an overstatement. For example, Canadian social work professor J. Pyne (who is also a trans-identified activist) writes as if describing a new, almost mythical creature with a different kind of life cycle from other humans.

At the very least, what we can learn from the increasing numbers of young people transitioning to new gender roles, is that the body and its meanings are contingent. For some young people, puberty might be delayed, or might be reversed with cross-sex hormonal treatment. For these young people, transition is part of the life cycle, and must be presented as such in mainstream sexual health education settings. We are badly in need of new tools for teaching about health and the body beyond narrow and normative understandings of sex and gender possibilities.

Note the meta-physical claims: “the body and its meanings are contingent” and for some, a novel life cycle exists that includes transition and may necessarily include medicalization. Yet Pyne insists that these radical, unprecedented claims be taught “in mainstream sexual health education settings.” Because gender ideology has indeed gone mainstream, parents often have to fight for their rights to opt out of this “self-creation” indoctrination. In June, a group of Maryland public-school parents won their battle to opt out in the highest court in the land. The battle only intensifies when children express gender identity differences, and parents have been thwarted many times. For example, in February of this year, the First Circuit Court of Appeals in Boston upheld school policy rather than parental rights. The Ludlow School Protocol not only required school staff to use a student’s new name and pronouns and to treat them as the other sex (e.g., permit them to use opposite-sex facilities), but it also forbade parental notification without the child’s consent. The unanimous ruling reads:

a school district had a compelling interest in protecting the physical and mental well-being of transgender children... (“Some transgender and gender nonconforming students are not openly so at home for reasons such as safety concerns or lack of acceptance.”) The Protocol plausibly creates a space for students to express their identity without worrying about parental backlash.

Having named the special class of human—“transgender” or “gender nonconforming” children—the three-judge panel asserted that a school district has the right to act in loco parentis in direct opposition to the parents’ wishes. Note that this policy transforms all employees of the school district into GAPs who must deny the material reality of sex and disrupt boundaries or limits parents might set for their children. In a twisted inversion, the court and the school district conspire as GAPs to “protect” children from their parents.

The Hippocratic Oath discarded, good therapy thwarted, good medicine disrupted, all for the sake of a chosen self-creation.

Crucially, school employees are mandated to facilitate and collude with a child’s social transition to another gender without parental knowledge or consent. The ruling also contended that in allowing social transition, the school was not providing “medical treatment.” But social transition is not a neutral permissiveness, simply allowing a child extra emotional latitude. In well-known psychologist Ken Zucker’s words, it is a “therapeutic intervention.” The Endocrine Society guidelines even admit: “Social transition is associated with the persistence of [gender dysphoria] as a child progresses into adolescence.” According to psychiatrist Stephen Levine, transition “is an experimental procedure that has a high likelihood of changing the life path of the child, with highly unpredictable effects on mental and physical health, suicidality, and life expectancy.” In light of this, Dr. Levine also urges those in the child’s life to ask the question, “Why now?” He wisely warns that “today’s passion can be tomorrow’s regret. Making a diagnosis of gender dysphoria is easy. Thinking about what it is a response to is not.” But the GAPs make sure parents are kept in the dark; far from a “parental backlash,” parents aren’t even allowed to ask basic questions that might steer their children away from the dangerous path of medicalization.

Within the realm of gender medicine in the U.S., perhaps no GAP is more high profile than Dr. Johanna Olson-Kennedy who runs the largest clinic for trans-identified youth in the country at the Children’s Hospital in Los Angeles. Despite receiving ten million dollars in NIH funding, last year she admitted withholding the results of her study, which showed no mental health improvements from puberty blockers, for fear the facts would be “weaponized.” She has recommended mastectomies on girls as young as fourteen years old (and is currently being sued by a former patient who underwent the procedure). In an interview alongside Aydin, her trans-identified (i.e., female) “husband” who is a social worker and therapist for trans-identified youth, Olson-Kennedy explained how she got into the field of pediatric gender medicine:

This was an incredible kind of a congregation of science and human rights and social justice and medicine and education that really was a remarkable thing to take part in. But then, when I started working with trans youth, I knew that I would never do anything else, really moved by young people who are really chasing authenticity in a way that very, very few human beings are.

Note the recurring and central tenet of gender ideology—there is a special type of human, one who is “chasing authenticity” in ways that other human beings aren’t. This “authenticity” is at

odds with the material reality of their sexed body. Enter the GAPs to use language to affirm the child's new creation, redistribute authority, and enable the child to enact the "authentic self" via medical technology. The power gender ideology wields to divide what should never be separated now becomes even more apparent. The healing professions will henceforth be used to inflict harm, and parents will now be divested of their rights, not only to form their children, but even to name them.

"And a little child shall lead them..." GAPs bestow authority on children to self-define and to self-name. The child now has the authority to discard the name given to them by the ones who gave them life and whose duty it is to protect them. The parents are now placed in a subjugated position—the children now have power over themselves. Parents are now mere "listeners" who must follow the children's lead and revelations of self-discovery and disclosure. Only affirmation is allowed. GAPs often become the trusted confidants of the children and "mediators" of conversations between parent and child. As Dr. Olson-Kennedy describes:

So I will ask the young person, "Are you comfortable talking about your gender journey with your parent or your parents in the room?" and if they are, then that young person can talk to me and tell me things, and their parent can witness it, and it doesn't require them to tell their parent specifically. And I can probe about things like, "What does it feel like for you when you're called your birth name? How does it land for you when somebody uses this pronoun versus this pronoun?" And so that that's not maybe a conversation a parent would ever think to have, but they're in it as a listener ... and it's also really important for anyone doing this work as a professional to model the way that we want parents to be communicating with children, using the name that most correctly reflects that human, and using the pronouns that correctly reflect them... being a mediator sometimes can be really helpful.

In keeping with the religious tenor of the discourse, Olson-Kennedy describes feeling similar to an obstetrician and speaks of a child's gender revelation/transformation in terms of joy and a new birth:

...the relief that they experience, and then when they start moving forward in whatever that way that means to them, just the overwhelming joy. It's very similar to being present at a birth. It really is. And I've thought about this all like, I want pictures of all my patients, like OBs have pictures of all their patients, but it's, it's a profound—many, many profound moments.

With parent and child roles now reversed, parents are further stripped of the power to consider their child's long-term wellbeing and seek to make decisions for them from a "whole life perspective." Dr. Jemma Anderson, a gender-medicine doctor in Australia, affirmed this inversion of roles, granting a degree of discretion to children totally out of proportion to their maturity:

From a pediatrician's point of view, we want to do, to be doing everything we can to support a young person so that they don't have adverse mental health outcomes, so that they can live their life as they choose without

harming anyone else.

Similarly, the Endocrine Society's guidelines state:

These recommendations place a high value on avoiding an unsatisfactory physical outcome when secondary sex characteristics have become manifest and irreversible, a higher value on psychological well-being, and a lower value on avoiding potential harm from early pubertal suppression.

Hence the sword cleaves again: Doctors and entire medical associations claiming to benefit mental health while knowingly risking and harming physical health, all so that young people—minors—can “live their life as they choose.” In this way, GAPs also thwart the good practice of those in the health professions who want to do authentic therapeutic exploration instead of instant affirmation. One group of Australian clinicians, led by Dr. Kasia Kozłowska, reported that “a large subgroup of children equated affirmation with medical intervention and appeared to believe that their distress would be completely alleviated if they pursued the pathway of medical treatment.” The children acquired these beliefs not only from social media but also from healthcare workers (GAPs). Kozłowska and her colleagues lamented the fact that efforts to discuss risk and undertake therapeutic inquiry “fell on deaf ears.” And with respect to parents, they noted: the “same overall dynamic also put many parents—who were trying to support their children in a more holistic way but who were aware of potential long-term harms—in a difficult and untenable situation.” The Hippocratic Oath discarded, good therapy thwarted, good medicine disrupted, all for the sake of a chosen self-creation.

When GAPs encourage a child in an identity that goes against material reality, they help set the child up for conflict not only with themselves, but everything in the outer world around them. As J. Pyne described, one “gender affirming” father of a trans-identifying child remarked, “My daughter’s gender is not a problem ... it’s everything else around her that’s a problem.” The child “empowered” to stand *contra mundum*. A heavy load to bear. Interestingly, Dr. Olson-Kennedy claims that the individual “trans” child also carries trauma coming down through the generations. She describes it like a mystical body of believers in which the child is participating:

People don’t really understand the magnitude of the generational trauma that’s been inflicted on the community. So people that are even 11, 12, 13 years old, are also carrying the trauma that was inflicted on the trans community in 1910, in 1935, and you know the stories as they roll down through the generations. It’s a story of overt and covert violence and that’s very hard to overcome, even with supportive environments, even if your school is supportive, your parents, your family is supportive, you’re getting all of the interventions that you need.

GAPs genuinely believe that it is the world, not the experience of a body-soul disunity, that is the problem. Olson-Kennedy continued: “We still live in a cisgender normative society, and because of that, if you’re a trans or non-binary person, you are experiencing covert and overt aggression.” Aydin Olson-Kennedy concurred: “There will always be accommodations required as a trans person to cope in this world that is not really set up for us, right?” What then is a “cisgender normative society”? And does it really cause harm to people? One recent study, entitled, “Cisnormativity and the Frustration of Core Emotional Needs Among

Transgender and Gender Diverse Individuals,” reads:

Numerous studies have demonstrated that the poor mental health outcomes experienced by many TGD [transgender and gender diverse] people are associated with exposure to stigmatization and marginalization...These negative experiences arise in the context of the dominant sociocultural narrative of cisnormativity; cisnormativity posits that there are only two genders (man and woman), and that a person’s gender identity aligns with their presumed sex at birth...

What is cisnormativity? An oppressive system or accurate anthropology in accord with material reality. As for the study’s conclusion: “[T]argeting manifestations of cisnormativity across society is integral to improving the well-being of TGD individuals.”

Dr. Olson-Kennedy agrees. In a comment in the *Journal of the American Medical Association-Pediatrics*, she attributes “[t]he distress that arises from same-sex attraction or transgender experience” to be external in origin and ascribes this to “sociopolitical rigidity and ideological conviction.” She regards the therapeutic effort to help “transgender” people experience peace and acceptance of their own bodies as a “dangerous practice” of “conversion therapy.” Instead, she advises: “...perhaps humanity might redirect its reparative efforts toward dismantling the harmful hetero and cisgender normative choke-hold that continues to asphyxiate social evolution.”

Humanity needs to “dismantl[e]” the “choke-hold” of reality. *Contra mundum*. Gender-affirming professionals, rejecting bodies and the world as it is, ply scalpel and sword, demanding they become as they wish them to be. In the interest of a chimerical project, they divide body and soul, fracture the wholeness of male and female, and disrupt the intimate, natural alliance of fathers and mothers with their sons and daughters. Nothing less than the meaning of the world is at stake. Parents, shields up, and battle on.

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Huxley v. Orwell? The Orwellian Fist in the Huxleyan Glove

JOHN WATERS

In recent times, it has repeatedly been argued that the more accurate prophecy of the totalitarianism we have been experiencing is to be found not, as has often been suggested, in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), but in Aldous Huxley's novel, *Brave New World*, published nearly twenty years before in 1931. Whereas Orwell anticipated a world dominated by torture and terror, Huxley foresaw humanity imprisoned by seduction, sedation, and diversion.

From the mouth of O'Brien, the torturer of his chief protagonist, Winston Smith, Orwell spells out the ultimate destination of society as he saw it:

There will be no curiosity, no enjoyment of the process of life. All competing pleasures will be destroyed. But always—do not forget this, Winston—always there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler. Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever.

Huxley, though coming before, seemed to take a more sophisticated approach to the potential of the future. Set in London in A.D. 2540, *Brave New World* anticipated subsequent developments in sleep-learning and psychological manipulation being used to impose the will of the few upon the many. In the “brave new world,” there is no such thing as marriage or sexual fidelity. The society is a “benevolent dictatorship,” and the subjects are maintained in a state of pseudo-contentment by conditioning and narcotics—a drug called “soma.” Huxley describes the ultimate oxymoron, a benign dystopia, a society in which children are mass-produced by in vitro fertilization and allocated to different castes which correspond to the various future production needs of industrial society, being conditioned for their future roles. Visiting the United States was a major influence on Huxley, who when he first went

there was perturbed and fascinated by the way consumerism and advertising had rendered the population supine and docile. He also feared that the world would come to be dominated by the ideas of the technological philosopher Frederick Taylor, who devised the principle of mass production first successfully utilized by Henry Ford to manufacture the Ford Model T.

One of the symptoms of our post-sixties actual utopianism is that, whereas many of our real freedoms are being increasingly circumscribed, these constrictions are simultaneously being defined and understood as new freedoms. Many of the technologies we use to “increase our freedoms” are doing the precise opposite: locking us into a grid around which we move as though in house arrest, wearing ankle bracelets.

We live in a virtual world, hiding from the real one. This feels free, but only because we have increasingly unreliable models with which to compare it. Reality begins to fade from our memories, and gradually we are enslaved to the will of those who wish to exploit us more effectively by reducing our expectations to next to nothing. The citizen can have everything except his freedom, but mostly he does not miss this, having no clue what the word means.

The choice, by Huxley’s persuasive logic, was always going to be between two forms of despotism, and it now seems clear that the choice has been made: in the future, human beings will live in a supranational plutocracy, sustained in a kind of peace by drugs, technology and welfare, with the jackboot laces slightly undone, as though at the end of a hard day’s kicking, but ever-ready for the morrow.

In fact, these circumstances are not particularly new to human reality, and their imminence has been mooted in literary mutterings for decades, in fiction and out of it. The playwright, essayist, and sometime politician, Václav Havel, found himself confronting such fundamental conundrums in the actual Soviet dystopia of his native country, Czechoslovakia, in the 1970s and 1980s. Traditional parliamentary democracies, he insisted, offered no fundamental opposition to the automatism of technological civilization and the industrial-consumer society, for these niceties of liberal society, too, were being dragged helplessly along by these phenomena, which had become the enslavers of man by exploiting his weakness for comfort and ease. Thus, Havel identified a novel form of tyranny, which “oppresses” man by cossetting him—Huxley rather than Orwell, or perhaps the Orwellian fist in the Huxleyan glove; or perhaps the Orwellian boot in the Huxleyan sock. People, he wrote in his most famous essay, “The Power of the Powerless” (1978), are manipulated “in ways that are infinitely more subtle and refined than the brutal methods used in the post-totalitarian societies,” but the processes of capitalism, materialism, advertising, commerce and consumer culture all combine to repress in the human being the questing for the “something” that defines the human. In the communist system, fear of repercussions led to a quiescence that was usually enforced without external evidence of violence; in the twentieth-century West, he added—47 years ago—the “oppressor” had become the human unwillingness to sacrifice material benefits so as to retain

spiritual and moral integrity.

To call this a tyranny might until recently have risked ridicule, but now, it is clear, only such a word is capable of adequately capturing the nature, scope and implications of what our societies are turning into. On the evidence of the events of the past five years in what was once the “‘democratic’ West,” it is clear that the option of applying science to the project of nurturing a race of free humans has been abandoned, and that the world is moving towards a default reliance on coercion as the preferred mode of governance. Science, it appears, has moved to the dark side. What we experience, as a result, is unlike the classical tyrannies in that the application of force is covert and contingent. For the most part this nouveau tyranny protects itself by enabling the distraction or anaesthetization of its subjects. In the minority of cases where this fails, it summons up a mob to denounce, shame and ostracize. After this, for the determined dissenter lies banishment and, where necessary, the threat of criminalization and all this entails. Here, then, the Huxleyan and Orwellian visions tend to converge.

The more accurate prophecy of the emerging totalitarianism, I would suggest, is to be found not, as is often suggested, in Orwell, nor yet in Huxley’s, but in a such a mixture of the two—fist and boot in velvet glove and sock—but with Orwell shading the soothsaying contest between them because he read human nature slightly better. The choice, by Huxley’s persuasive logic, was always going to be between two forms of despotism, and it now seems clear that the choice has been made: in the future, human beings will live in a supranational plutocracy, sustained in a kind of peace by drugs, technology and welfare, with the jackboot laces slightly undone, as though at the end of a hard day’s kicking, but ever-ready for the morrow.

There are those who remain convinced that both Orwell and Huxley were privy to insiders of the establishment and not prophets and thus were relaying factual information rather than imaginative visions.

Huxley certainly had an inside track on the future, being the younger brother of Julian Huxley, an evolutionary biologist, eugenicist, and the first Director General of UNESCO—the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization. UNESCO, according to some critics, is an internationalist body masquerading as an instrument for peace and unity, when its real intention is the fomenting of an international collective communism, the dominance of science and the introducing throughout the world of “common core” education, so as to indoctrinate the young with an impoverished education. We can imagine that Julian Huxley might have occasionally brought his work home with him. In some of his own writings he essentially sets out the whole scenario of *Brave New World* with a straight, matter-of-fact face.

Orwell was less visibly an insider. One narrative has it that, as a member of the socialist Fabian Society, he used his novels to warn mankind about the concrete plans of that society, for which his employer, the BBC, worked as a key propaganda organ. The title-year of his novel, 1984, resonated with an old Fabian boast that it would take 100 years—since its founding in 1884—to utterly turn Britain on its head.

Orwell wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* more or less on his deathbed—an amazing feat of human endurance in which he was as though driven by visions. He wasn’t a religious believer—not a literal one anyway—but he had a finely tuned ethical perspective and a fundamental belief in the notion of the dignity of every human being. He got things slightly “wrong” than Huxley, but not, I mournfully observe, the essence of the future we’re now facing.

Fourteen years on from its first publication, Aldous Huxley wrote a new Foreword for the 1946 reprint of *Brave New World*, in which he explained that his main interest was in the effects of

science as directed at mankind. The advance of unrestricted and poorly regulated technological progress, he believed, would make totalitarianism not merely inevitable, but actually essential. The people governing the brave new world, though not exactly sane, were not madmen either, he insisted. Their aim was not anarchy but social stability. If the tyrants could be given what they wanted by lesser means, he postulated, they would probably go for it. “It is in order to achieve stability that they carry out, by scientific means, the ultimate, personal, really revolutionary revolution”—which is required to occur “in the souls and flesh” of human beings.

Remember, he wrote *Brave New World* between the wars, a time of dissolution and rising insanity. Reconsidering the book after WWII, he placed sanity as his highest value. His comments are largely particular to their post-war moment, touching on war, atomic energy, the nuclear threat, Bolshevism, fascism, inflation. He says very little that resonates with the world of the third millennium. Like most seers of the pre-1989 era, he saw nuclear obliteration as the defining threat. The nearest to a general prediction is this:

To deal with confusion, power has been centralized and government control increased. It is probable that all the world’s governments will be more or less completely totalitarian even before the harnessing of atomic energy; that they will be totalitarian during and after the harnessing seems almost certain. Only a large-scale popular movement toward decentralization and self-help can arrest the present tendency toward statism. At present there is no sign that such a movement will take place.

There was, he noted, no reason why the new totalitarianism should resemble the old. Government by terror and violence had become not merely difficult to sell, but actually inefficient. To overcome this, it would be necessary to make people love their servitude, rendering coercion unnecessary. This, he believed, was some way off, due to the crudity and unscientific nature of the available techniques of propaganda, as channeled through media and education systems.

This was also to be his essential response to the 1949 publication of his former pupil, George Orwell’s novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, conveyed to the author precisely three months before Orwell’s death from tuberculosis in January 1950. This episode accentuates a strange incongruity: the two books, 18 years apart, appear to be in the wrong order. One might have expected the boot-in-the-face dystopian story to emerge first, followed sometime later by the account of the tyranny-by-pampering. Huxley’s—perhaps due to its author having the inside track—came first, by nearly two decades.

In this letter, Huxley used an interesting phrase for what both he and Orwell were anticipating in their respective works: “the ultimate revolution.” Incidentally, in 1962, Huxley would deliver a lecture at U.C. Berkeley titled “The Ultimate Revolution: Getting People to Love Their Servitude,” in which he defined this process as “a method of control by which a people can be made to enjoy a state of affairs by which by any decent standard they ought not to enjoy.”

Having assured Orwell—whom he had taught French at Eton—how excellent and profoundly important his book was, Huxley went on to engage it in what reads in retrospect like an unfavorable contrasting of the book with his own prophetic work of 18 years earlier. He identified in Orwell’s novel a strand of thinking that placed sadism rooted in sexuality as the psychological mainspring of the tyranny but doubted whether this “policy of boot-in-the-face” could continue to be useful indefinitely. New ways would be found, he reasoned, by which

ruling oligarchies would be able to satisfy their lust for power, and these, he said, would be more likely to resemble the ways of ruling outlined in *Brave New World*. He believed that animal magnetism and hypnotism would provide more practical means of achieving control over human politicians, and only an ignorance of these areas had delayed the “Ultimate Revolution” by several generations. Freud, for example, by his failure to master the technique and his resulting disparagement of hypnotism, had delayed its application to psychiatry for at least 40 years.

Within the coming generation, he anticipated, the leaders of the world would discover that infant conditioning and narco-hypnosis—a combination of hypnosis and barbiturates—were more efficient as instruments of government than coercion and violence and would ensure the emergence of generations of humans who had come to love their servitude without any necessity for flogging or kicking. This, he said, would ensure that the world would move towards the vision he had outlined in *Brave New World*, and away from Orwell’s ostensibly darker prognosis.

Education was the key, he opined in that 1946 Foreword, to the assertion of ultimate control over humanity—*refusing* to educate, that is: to persuade people that servitude amounted to contentment and they should accordingly accept the redefinition of human happiness. The love of servitude, he wrote, required firstly economic security, but then, and more importantly, a deep, personal revolution in human minds and bodies.

The Ultimate Revolution would require, *inter alia*, much improved techniques of suggestion, starting in the cradle, and later an enhancement of these by drugs—something both less harmful and more enjoyable than alcohol or hard drugs. It would also require a more sophisticated hierarchy of humanity, so as to enable each individual to be allowed his or her proper place in society and the workplace, as well as a system of eugenics capable of standardizing the “human product.” He guessed that the real-life equivalents of soma, hypnopaedia and a scientific caste system were by then probably no more than three or four generations away. He thought the sexual promiscuity of *Brave New World*, judging by the fact that American divorces were already on a par with marriages, was within reach.

In a few years, no doubt, marriage licenses will be sold like dog licenses, good for a period of twelve months, with no law against changing dogs or keeping more than one animal at a time. As political and economic freedom diminishes, sexual freedom tends compensatingly to increase. And the dictator (unless he needs cannon fodder and families with which to colonize empty or conquered territories) will do well to encourage that freedom. In conjunction with the freedom to daydream under the influence of dope and movies and the radio, it will help to reconcile his subjects to the servitude which is their fate.

By 1946, Huxley felt certain that the world was moving inexorably closer to his vision of its future. He referred to this vision as both a “horror” and a “utopia,” which, in any event, he believed might arrive within a century—500 years before he had anticipated at the time of writing his book. He briefly gestured towards the possibility of an alternative course for society: the development of science not as the end of human progress but as the means to producing a race of free individuals. Otherwise, he saw a choice between an assortment of independent militarized, localized totalitarianisms, or a single supranational kind, as the sole means of managing the chaos arising from untrammelled technological progress, finally arriving at “the welfare-tyranny of Utopia.”

Although what has happened now appears superficially to adhere more closely to the Huxleyan blueprint of tapping into human desires, instincts and vices in order to draw humanity into an essentially digital/cultural prison and keep it there, it is the Orwellian model that has remained uppermost in human consciousness and apprehension. This is because of Orwell's depiction of both the potential for authoritarian state violence and the psychological reality that emerges in response to its presence or threat—i.e., the constant actuality of the fear of violence, which is, as he also conveys, even more powerful than violence per se. In O'Brien's electrical torturing of Winston Smith, it is clear that once he has established the potential of the technique for imposing pain, Winston's will falls to pieces, and any residual resistance is swept up by the mere threat of “the worst thing in the world”—a different fear for each person—in the dreaded Room 101.

It will be contested that it is inappropriate to compare the violence depicted by Orwell with anything happening at the official levels of our societies today. This is in large part because of the normalization of the radical alterations of our societies by the false version of reality that has been successfully peddled by a mainstream media dedicatedly corrupted for this purpose, resulting in the suppression of facts likely to give the game away, and of the kinds of discussions which might result in a blurting out of actual truths.

A profound and yet simple question: is there really any moral distinction to be asserted between what happened in the formerly democratic countries of the West during the Covid tyranny and the violence depicted by Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*?

Think of those extraordinarily imagined scenes in the Ministry of Love,—when Winston Smith is waiting, following his arrest—which read like episodes from an extreme horror nightmare. Orwell describes in graphic detail the countenance of a prisoner who is brought into the room, his appearance sending “a momentary chill through Winston.” The man is emaciated, his face that of “a skull,” the eyes “filled with a murderous, unappeasable hatred of somebody or something.” The man, Winston realizes, is dying of starvation. Another prisoner, overcome with pity, takes his life in his hands by trying to pass to the skull-faced man a grimy piece of bread he has secreted in a pocket of his overalls. A voice roars from the telescreen, and two guards, one an officer, enter the room. At a signal from the officer, his underling lets loose a savage blow to the face of the man who has offered his last piece of bread to the dying man.

The force of it seemed almost to knock him clear of the floor. His body was flung across the cell and fetched up against the base of the lavatory seat. For a moment he lay as though stunned, with dark blood oozing from his mouth and nose. A very faint whimpering or squeaking, which seemed unconscious, came out of him. Then he rolled over and raised himself unsteadily on hands and knees. Amid a stream of blood and saliva, the two halves of a dental plate fell out of his mouth.

Nothing like that, it will be claimed, has happened in any Western country arising from the Covid episode or subsequent shifts in political culture, and nor could it ever happen in “our democratic societies.” Is not totalitarianism a matter of violence, of brutal repression, of industrially generated terror? Ergo: Orwell's vision has no relevance for us today.

But there are differing forms of violence, just as there are differing forms of pain. Is there any true moral distinction between smashing a man in the mouth and condemning an elderly person to die by stress, misuse of sedatives and/or ventilators, while depriving him of the attention, affection, and care of those most dear to him—his spouse, sons and daughters,

grandchildren? Is this somehow morally preferable?

We need to be mindful of something about licensed state violence that has always been true but is not obvious in the quotidian context: that its very existence in the background is in the vast majority of cases sufficient to do the heavy lifting of coercion. With most people, even the ones who have seemed to be indomitable, the very capacity or exclusive entitlement of the state in the exercising of democratically sanctioned coercion and force is itself, in all but the rarest of cases, sufficient to break the dissident or refusenik will. It is rarely necessary to turn up the dial on the shock treatment more than once or twice for the fear of its potential to do the rest in what appear to be relatively “civilized” conditions.

As Sally Minogue beautifully exposes in her Introduction to the 2021 Wordsworth Classic edition of Orwell’s novel, the two central relationships depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—between Winston and Julia and Winston and O’Brien, are both “affairs of a sort”—both of his “lovers” seeming to seek Winston’s ultimate wellbeing: Julia through affection, O’Brien through torture. Both “relationships” start with a meeting of eyes, and both operate at a level of intimacy Winston has not experienced before; both figures grow in his imagination as “revolutionary comrades.” In fact, of the two, he is “attracted” to O’Brien much more immediately than he is to Julia, whom at first he believes to be spying on him on behalf of the Thought Police.

Although Orwell does not imply the term, there is an intimation in Winston’s relationship and interactions with O’Brien of something that was to surface as a strong subtext of the Covid coercion from the spring of 2020: a kind of sadomasochistic insinuation in which Winston’s “treatment” by O’Brien consists in an alternating of torture and morphine, a process in which he—superficially, perversely—comes to trust and even love O’Brien: “He had never loved him so deeply as at this moment, and not merely because he had stopped the pain.”

This vaguely familiar syndrome seems to work on the imputed guilt of the suspect, and is perhaps a quality of the newer forms of tyranny, which have at their cores some perverted sense of the “common good,” in which the coercive authorities-without-authority purport to act not merely on behalf of power and the law, but also for the “good” of the suspect, who has been led woefully astray by the enemies of order. In this scenario, the jailer/torturer becomes, simultaneously, a “reluctant” administrator of state coercion and violence, and also a benign figure who administers punishment for the betterment of the victim. In this sense, the modern forms of totalitarianism differ from tyrannies involving an individual dictator, becoming a form of “conspiracy” between the oppressors and the oppressed—indeed, a form of sadomasochistic “game” in which both participants seem to crave that which they experience, and the victim most of all.

In the course of the Covid coup, the entire panoply of rights and freedom accumulated by democratic societies across multiple centuries were obliterated overnight, as peoples beyond number were compelled to comply with a series of absurd and irrational measures based on a fundamental lie and a contorted version of the “public interest.” These were not technical infringements, but fundamental assaults on the very sovereignty of human beings, as police forces arrogated to themselves an entitlement to menace and brutalize in ways that would hitherto have been regarded as criminal and tantamount to despotism. People were dragged from their homes for posting message on social media, or from trains and buses for declining to wear useless and dangerous but compulsory masks. People lost their jobs because they refused an untested “vaccine” (an untested form of gene therapy, *not* a vaccine).

Were these not denials of mercy? Was this not violence? In what sense can the perpetrators of

these obscenities claim to be better than the thugs imagined by George Orwell?

And what about premeditated killing by poison injection? Might we call this manslaughter? Democide? Genocide? In Ireland, the level of excess deaths in 2024 increased to 19 per cent, bringing to approximately 20,000 the number of additional deaths in the period from the “vaccine” rollout in the spring of 2021—i.e. multiple orders of magnitude over and above what would have been regarded as a serious health crisis just five years earlier.

Meanwhile, Ed Dowd’s latest international research indicates that one in five people worldwide who took any kind of Covid “vaccine” has been adversely affected. Approximately five billion people on the planet accepted a vaccine of some sort. Applying the scale of the death rate in the US to the wider world, Dowd estimates that deaths from these injections globally is somewhere between 7.3 million and 15 million. By the same measure, disabilities arising directly from the injections are estimated at between 29 to 60 million globally, and sundry forms of injury at between 500 million and 900 million. For the avoidance of doubt, all these people received at least one of some kind of Covid-related injection; most were of working age. The level of slaughter has not yet reached the level of a demonstrable attempt to obliterate a particular population, but overall it amounts to a level of homicide that has no parallel since WWII—which ended just four years before Orwell’s most famous book was published.

Add to this the new forms of violence engaged in by former democratic regimes using proxies such as Antifa, BLM, and LGBT goons to impose their will without the outward appearance of direct state involvement—the farming out of state coercion to achieve deniability. Add also the constant mood of menace generated by related concepts of cancellation, censorship and constant surveillance, the depiction and labelling of mere dissenters as extremists and domestic terrorists, the washing of whole cultures in propaganda and multiple modes of psychological manipulation, the suppression of free speech in every formerly “democratic” jurisdiction. These too amount to forms of violence against human beings, often the most frail and vulnerable. And all under the pretense of “saving lives.” We look back at these events and surely realize that they deliver into our time and our spaces a total vindication of Orwell’s darkest visions.

In a certain light, it becomes clear that the existence of dystopian fables and legends in a culture can serve to inoculate that culture against their detection in actually existing reality. If Orwell, instead of choosing 1984 as the dateline of his book, has opted instead for, say, 2054, would the world have remained so inert in the face of totalitarian’s early-stage manifestation in 2020? Big lies rely on scale to retain the sense of improbability that enables them to blossom and propagate in circumstances where smaller deceptions might well be rumbled and extinguished, and this sense of implausibility is likely to be augmented by the added inconceivability of a long-established fable of tyranny suddenly manifesting as reality. When this happens, it remains in a sense invisible by virtue of seeming far-fetched.

When we say that our system is as the Orwellian fist in the Huxleyan glove, we intimate that the regimes of our post-democratic societies have projected or foisted onto their citizens the blame for their abuses, implying that, in defense of our comforts and securities, we demand the satisfaction only of our basest instincts, and cannot demand also the frills of liberty, “a far right obsession.” But this is, ultimately, folly. In this regard, the Huxleyan hypothesis is, of its essence, a misreading of human nature, for it assumes that human beings can be rendered permanently satisfied with material distractions, sensations, pacifiers, and reliefs, whereas even the most rudimentary psychological or anthropological framework betrays a radically different picture. Man, as Václav Havel prognosticated, requires a “something” that the

material world cannot supply. To deprive human beings of spiritual nourishment is violence, just as to deprive them of love, affection, company, friendship, culture or mental sustenance amounts to torture.

In succumbing to our basest instincts, we misread our own natures, as well as our capacity for freedom, and so carry out the tyrants' work for them, anaesthetizing ourselves in pleasure and diversion, pursuing only what is selfish and short-sighted. This, being governed by the demon of addiction, is a trap from which the possibilities of escape are rare and risky. If we try to restore our correct perspective on freedom, we end up willy-nilly where Orwell predicted: under the boot of the enforcer, unleashing against ourselves the full wrath of the regime. In the process we learn that the Huxleyan model is a mere decoy, a false facade to allow the regime to rely on our debasement so as to continue to appear "democratic."

This is why they push sex so much, and from so many angles: to draw people down to the lowest level of engagement with reality, so that they will remain in the most debased and derelict state of existence, forever looking for satisfactions of unsublimated instinct and unmoderated lusting, gorging and grasping. These are essential accompaniments of the Huxleyan model of "soft" tyranny, but this too is ultimately underpinned by the constant threat of coercion by violence. The brave new world only *appears* not to have this element; it's just better at hiding it.

In psychoanalytic theory, as defined by Freud, sublimation is a defense mechanism where socially unacceptable impulses, including especially sexual and aggressive ones, are channeled into socially desirable behaviors of a productive or creative nature. In the brave new world, these priorities and mechanisms are reversed, with all the inevitable consequences: submission of the masses to the shadow of the lurking boot, but also an incremental destruction of the culture of the implicated society, which in the absence of the sublimated energies, begins to deteriorate in precisely all the categories which had led to its attainment of civilization in the first place. This is the ultimate destination of a society elevating promiscuity, homosexuality, abortion, transgenderism and drag queen story time, a society which relies on the degradation of its population and which, in its extreme and cumulative state, will be manageable only by the boot poised over every human face, this reserved, in particular—as a source of salutary examples—for those spirited ones who insist on resisting, and who will be accused by their contemporaries of "spoiling our fun" and "threatening our freedom."

This, then, is where we are, in our onetime "Free West": trapped between the binge and the boot, the orgy and Room 101, the ultimate instrument of the Ultimate Revolution.

John Waters's latest book, *The Abolition of Reality: A First Draft of the End of History*, has just been published by Western Front Books.

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Eating Alone: Leaving the Table, Losing Community

KALAMOS VRADYGRAPHOU

Once upon a time, people gathered to eat their meals; they sat around a table facing each other and gave thanks to God for the food which they smelled, touched, and tasted; they looked into the eyes of those images of God sitting around the table with them, and they listened to one another. In stark contrast, people are now prone to eating alone in front of the computer, television set, cell phone, or steering wheel; they frequently forget to give thanks to God for the food which they barely smell, touch, or taste; as they eat, they often stare into a screen and hear sounds filtered through electronic means. Recognizing this revolution in human behavior, physician Leon Kass urges us to recall the communal dining table as the font of civilization, and psychiatrist Theodore Dalrymple warns that the lack of a dining table desiccates civility in the home and in society. Much has happened to cause people (rich and poor alike) to eat alone, and the consequences, from what the U.S. Surgeon General has dubbed an “epidemic of loneliness,” cannot be bright. Indeed, history testifies that those who seek power can easily control lonely, isolated individuals, but not communally connected groups (people who recognize their dependence upon one another). An intentional return to shared meals may provide a fruitful way to rebind social ties and to relearn that only by receiving wisdom may we flourish together and resist exploitation by false authorities.

In *The Hungry Soul*, Leon Kass offers a history of the table as the center of communal life. Whether for daily domestic dining or for banquets and larger feasts, the table offers a gathering place where people stop working and sit down, facing one another, making “a commitment to spend some time over one’s meal...a commitment to form and formality.”[1] There is structure to the meal, and the diners converse together, for, as Kass writes, “[w]ithout conversation the belly rules the mouth.”[2] Kass contrasts this commitment to form with its neglect, as when we privately devour food from the fridge, eat on the go, or even snack with friends, trough-style, in front of the television. By contrast, when we sit at table, we face one another, not our food, tacitly recognizing a shared commitment to social forms, which “operate, regulate, and inform our behavior and that signify our peculiarly human way of meeting necessity.”[3]

The dining table’s orderly manners and its face-to-face conversation pass down civilizing knowledge from generation to generation. Kass points to table customs (such as what is eaten,

where, when, and with whom) and table manners (such as how to eat and how to listen) as powerful communal forms. Through daily repetition of dining together, people learn about their inherited “sensibilities and attitudes—about life, necessity, violence, dignity, and our human place in the world. Amending slightly Brillat-Savarin’s famous aphorism, ‘Tell me what [*and how*] you eat: I will tell you what [*and who*] you are.’... These civilizing customs are tailor made to fit and reveal the human form and to nourish the hungry soul.”[4]

Our society cannot easily withstand those agents who seek to control us unless we turn toward each other once again in attitudes of receptive attention.

In *Exodus*, God’s people are instructed to share their meals with their neighbors,[5] and for thousands of years thereafter Jews and Christians have offered prayers and hymns of thanks to God for their food and fellowship. Yet, in eating alone, even the faithful frequently neglect to “say grace” or restrain their appetites. Kass observes that a culture’s received wisdom and basic civility become difficult to maintain when people neglect to dine together:

Modern America’s rising tide of informality has already washed out many long-standing customs—their reasons long before forgotten—that served well to regulate the boundary between public and private; and in many quarters complete shamelessness is treated as proof of genuine liberation from the allegedly arbitrary constraints of manners.... But eating on the street—even when undertaken, say, because one is between appointments and has no other time to eat—displays in fact precisely such a lack of self-control: It betokens enslavement to the belly. Hunger must be sated now; it cannot wait. Though the walking street eater still moves in the direction of his vision, he shows himself as a being led by his appetites.[6]

We must, therefore, remember why manners and customs exist. They promote and protect civilization, showing us a humane way of treating others. Table manners—including listening to one another—are sometimes forgotten even before the table itself is jettisoned. At restaurants, today, groups of people stare at cellphones as they eat. They sit together, yet eat alone, for the presence of digital screens—which are intentionally designed to capture and hold our attention—diminishes our ability to attend to each other. Inevitably, when we stop offering attention to one another, we become lonely. Robin Phillips and Joshua Pauling in *Are We All Cyborgs Now?* explain, “The erosion of attention can lead to profound loneliness, as we become unable to enjoy the meeting of minds that comes from joint attention sharing, but instead begin relating to people only in slices and disconnected bits.”[7]

A 2023 report from the U.S. Surgeon General confirms the point, noting that

about one-in-two adults in America reported experiencing loneliness... Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling—it harms both individual and societal health. It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular

disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death. And the harmful consequences of a society that lacks social connection can be felt in our schools, workplaces, and civic organizations, where performance, productivity, and engagement are diminished.[8]

Significantly for our thesis, the Surgeon General recommends the following remedy to combat this epidemic of loneliness and foster good health: “Make time to share a meal. Listen without the distraction of your phone.”[9]

As Kass avers, people gain more than good health by sharing meals. They receive customs and formative knowledge, and, by gathering regularly, they develop strong bonds, whereas those who abandon the constraints of manners or champion the liberation from form may devolve into people like the Cyclopes from Homer’s *Odyssey*. Kass explains:

The Cyclopes are a lawless, savage, impious, uncivilized race of men who live in caves widely separated from one another, devoid of community or council... “Each one is a law for his own wives and children and cares nothing about the others.”... [T]he Cyclops has a single, round, immobile eye in the midline; he thus lacks a horizon, all depth of perspective, and can see only what is immediately before him, here and now. His one eye, lined up directly over his mouth, seems to serve his mouth (like a telescopic sight for capture) rather than the mind, as a window for the wondering beholding of the articulated world.... His barbaric treatment of strangers is central to his ways, and reveals his defective understanding of, and relation to, the world.[10]

In denying both natural form and natural necessity, the Cyclops stands in the world as a tyrant. Everything in the world is appropriable and appropriate for his voracious, limitless appetites. No natural form or given order elicits his respect or reverence.... Like all tyrants, who make *themselves* the measure of all things, the Cyclops lives in folly no less than in wickedness, *for he lives in contradiction with the truth about himself*. [11]

Drawing upon decades of work in mental health, Theodore Dalrymple concurs that antisocial, Cyclops-like behavior follows when the dining table disappears:

About half of British homes no longer have a dining table. People do not eat meals together—they graze, finding what they want in the fridge, and eating in a solitary fashion whenever they feel like it (which is usually often), irrespective of the other people in the household. This means that they never learn that eating is a social activity (many prisoners in the prison in which I worked had never in their lives eaten at a table with another person); they never learn to discipline their conduct; they never learn that the state of their appetite at any given moment should not be the sole consideration in deciding whether to eat or not. In other words, one’s own interior state is all-important in deciding when to eat. And this is the model of all their behavior.... Children grow up now in circumstances in which discipline is merely a matter of imposing the will of one person on

another; it is raw power devoid of principle. Lenin's question—Who, Whom? or who does what to whom—is the whole basis of human relations.[12]

Children who mature without dependence on a true authority (one who helps them to grow and flourish) fail to learn the virtues required for giving and receiving (such as honesty, patience, and generosity), which are the basis for all communal pursuits.[13] With no examples of a fruitful way of being in the world, they become like the Cyclopes, not knowing how to care for and depend upon others. This interdependence must be taught by example and can be done at the dining table, whereas abandoning the civilizing forces that accompany dining together removes our sense of dependence upon one another and isolates us. Such isolation not only leads to loneliness and ill health but also to our society's susceptibility to totalitarianism. As Hannah Arendt points out, "[T]error can rule absolutely only over men who are isolated against each other... therefore, one of the primary concerns of all tyrannical government is to bring this isolation about.... The preparation has succeeded when people have lost contact with their fellow men as well as with the reality around them; for together with these contacts, men lose the capacity of both experience and thought." [14]

While no tyrannical government forced Americans to cease to dine together (except during the COVID lockdowns), many powerful organizations have lured people away from sharing meals. For decades, movies, television shows, popular songs, and advertisements have told us, "Do your own thing." [15] Subsequently, many have abandoned communal pursuits for individual pursuits, gaining an illusion of self-sufficiency. To further this illusion, we have acquiesced to the digital-screen revolution, which allows computers and cellphones to mediate our relationships and eliminate our sense of dependence upon the physical presence of others and the physicality of the real world. According to Arendt's observation, America seems ripe for rule by false authorities (those who subjugate men and repress their growth). Our society cannot easily withstand those agents who seek to control us *unless* we turn toward each other once again in attitudes of receptive attention.

Receptive attention, in fact, forms the basis for our ability to become educated. John Henry Newman, in his *Idea of a University*, insists that the conversation and communion among students and teachers can bear more fruit than the lectures. He maintains that a residential college offering shared meals and ample time for conversation, but without any lectures at all, would be more successful in "training, moulding, enlarging the mind" than would a college offering lectures but lacking all personal contact. He suggests that conversation shapes society as it educates: "Turn to improved life, and you find conversation in all its forms the medium of something more than an idle pleasure; indeed, a very active agent in circulating and forming the opinions, tastes, and feelings of a whole people." [16] Similarly, philosopher R. J. Snell writes, "Instruction is necessary, but not by ideas alone.... We need to dwell differently, and this requires cultural forms and practices, not merely lectures and ideas." [17] Both Newman and Snell point to the necessity of practicing a physically present and attentive *way of being* that may be maintained and repeated daily at the table.

Just as we have ceased to dine together, Americans have ceased to pray together, sing together, and converse together. We have forgotten God and our ancestors and their wisdom. We come to know neither each other nor even ourselves, and we are poised to believe a paraphrase of Henry Ford's dictum: "Reality is bunk. The only reality worth a tinker's dam is the reality that we make today." [18] Anthony Esolen diagnoses this anomie as a disease of societal dementia, and he prescribes a remedy:

If a people has no music or poetry to begin with—I do not mean as individuals here, but precisely as a people, a culture—are they already beyond dementia?... How does one treat the dementia of a people who can talk but cannot mean, who can shout but cannot sing?...[19]

[W]e must take up the slow and necessary work... of reclamation, of recollection... to give back to our fellows something of their and our lost humanity... [L]et us, one by one, household by household, congregation by congregation, learn to hear and to sing again.[20]

Each day, the dining table offers us an ideal place to listen and sing, beginning with giving thanks to God through hymns in gratitude for the meal set before us and the people sitting in front of us. Unlike the Cyclopes, who neither seek nor know how to live in communion with each other, we learn the truth about ourselves *at the dining table* through example, conversation, and the customs in which we participate. Indeed, the truth that we learn at the dining table can set us free from tyrants, civilize us, and liberate us from loneliness.

[1] Leon Kass, *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature* (New York: Macmillan, Inc., 1994), 133.

[2] Ibid., 146.

[3] Ibid., 133.

[4] Ibid., 152, 154.

[5] Exodus 12:4, “If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share with their nearest neighbors...”

[6] Kass, *The Hungry Soul*, 149.

[7] Robin Phillips and Joshua Pauling, *Are We All Cyborgs Now? Reclaiming Our Humanity from the Machine* (Emmaus: Basilian Media Publishing, 2024), 168.

[8] *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*, 2023, 5.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Kass, *The Hungry Soul*, 110.

[11] Ibid., 111–13.

[12] Jamie Glazov, “Interview with Theodore Dalrymple,” *Frontpage Magazine* (31 August 2005).

[13] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 127.

[14] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951), 474.

[15] See, chapters on John Stuart Mill in Theodore Dalrymple, *In Praise of Prejudice: The Necessity of Preconceived Ideas* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007), 42–59.

[16] John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1966), 130.

[17] R. J. Snell, *Acedia and Its Discontents: Metaphysical Boredom in an Empire of Desire* (Kettering, Ohio: Angelico Press, 2015), 97.

[18] “History is more or less bunk. It’s tradition. We don’t want tradition. We want to live in the present, and the only history that is worth a tinker’s dam is the history that we make today” (Henry Ford, *Chicago Tribune* [1916]).

[19] Anthony Esolen, “A Society That Has Forgotten How to Sing,” *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*, vol. 48, no. 4 (April 2024) 16.

[20] *Ibid.*, 19.

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Follow the Scientism

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Because we would all prefer to forget the Covid crisis and move on, the following may have already faded from our collective memory. Only a few years ago Australia rounded up citizens exposed to Covid, including asymptomatic people, and shipped them involuntarily to detention facilities against their will. Videos of Australian quarantine centers made their way onto social media before tech censors, at the behest of governments, dutifully scrubbed them from the internet. Many provincial governors in Australia abused their emergency powers: while not every Australian state chose full-throated authoritarianism, several of them did. Canada likewise built detention facilities for infected persons, and the state of New York fought an ongoing legal battle to do so.

Authoritarian measures during the Covid crisis went beyond forced detainment of suspected or actual cases. The Medical Indemnity Protection Society (MIPS) in Australia, which provides medical malpractice insurance to all the country's physicians, published twelve commandments for physicians on their website to avoid disciplinary "notifications"—an Orwellian euphemism for investigations overseen by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulatory Agency, the governing entity overseeing all physicians. The MIPS Commandment #9 instructed Australian doctors as follows:

Be very careful when using social media (even on your personal pages), when authoring papers or when appearing in interviews. Health practitioners are obliged to ensure their views are consistent with public health messaging. This is particularly relevant in current times. Views expressed which may be consistent with evidence-based material may not necessarily be consistent with public health messaging.

Read that last sentence one more time: "evidence-based material" refers to peer-reviewed scientific papers or other sources of credible medical information. So, if Australian doctors mention findings of a published study which are not consistent with "public health messaging"—i.e., the approved views of the public health bureaucrats in power—these physicians could potentially lose their ability to practice medicine. Notice that this applies also

to physicians “authoring papers,” meaning that if a doctor conducts research and his findings contradict “public health messaging,” he’d better think twice before publishing the results.

Likewise, in the U.S., the Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB), an authority on medical licensure and physician discipline, passed a policy in May 2022 on medical misinformation and disinformation that guides all state medical boards and the nation’s physicians they license. My home state of California took up the FSMB’s suggestion to codify these recommendations in law with Assembly Bill 2098. I traveled to Sacramento to testify against this legislation when it was debated in the State Senate. The law would empower the state medical board to discipline physicians—including revoking their medical licenses—for spreading “misinformation,” defined in the law as statements that contradict the current scientific consensus. Undermining its own central claims, the text of AB 2098 made three statements about Covid that were already outdated by the time I testified, because science constantly evolves. Science relies on evidence, not on consensus, which is why I argued in my testimony:

A physician with a gag order is not a physician you can trust. Advances in science and medicine occur when doctors and scientists challenge conventional thinking or settled opinion. Good science is characterized by conjecture and refutation, lively deliberation, fierce debate, and openness to new data. Thus, fixating any consensus as “unassailable” will stifle medical progress. Frontline physicians challenging conventional thinking played a key role in advancing knowledge of Covid treatments. In medicine, *yesterday’s minority opinion often becomes today’s standard of care*.

Following my testimony, the Senate committee voted on strict party lines to move the bill to the Senate floor, where it was voted into law. Along with three other physicians, I challenged this law in Federal Court in a case called *Hoeg v. Newsom*. After the judge in our case issued a preliminary injunction against the law for violating Constitutional rights, the state legislature saw the writing on the wall and repealed it. Nevertheless, in passing this legislation, California lawmakers showed just how far they were willing to go to exercise raw power over the authority of the physician’s clinical judgment.

How did we get here? The Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce, who came of age in the 1930s and observed with horror the emergence of Mussolini’s fascist regime in his native country, warned that “the widespread notion that the age of totalitarianisms ended with Hitlerism and Stalinism is completely mistaken.” After witnessing the bloody contest of ideologies in the twentieth century and the apparent triumph of liberalism as that century came to a close, Del Noce soberly observed:

The essential element of totalitarianism, in brief, lies in the refusal to recognize the difference between “brute reality” and “human reality,” so that it becomes possible to describe man, non-metaphorically, as a “raw material” or as a form of “capital.” Today this view, which used to be typical of Communist totalitarianism, has been taken up by its Western

alternative, the technological society.[1]

By technological society he did not mean a society characterized by scientific or technological progress, but a society characterized by a view of rationality as purely instrumental. Human reason, on this view, is unable to grasp ideas that go beyond brute empirical facts: we are incapable of discovering transcendent truths. Reason is merely a pragmatic tool, a useful instrument for accomplishing our willful purposes.

Totalitarian ideologies deny that all human beings participate in a shared rationality. We therefore cannot really talk to one another: it is impossible to deliberate or debate civilly in a shared pursuit of truth. Reasoned persuasion has no place. Totalitarian regimes always monopolize what counts as “rational” and therefore what one is permitted to say publicly.

When science becomes an ersatz religion—a closed and exclusionary belief system—we are dealing with scientism.

Authorities in such regimes assume that dissenting opinions must be motivated by class interests, or racial characteristics, or gender, or whatever, which dissidents are trying to defend. You don’t think such-and-such because you reasoned logically to that conclusion; you think such-and-such because you are a white, heterosexual, middle-class American male, and so forth. In this way, totalitarians do not persuade or refute their interlocutors with reasoned arguments. They merely impute bad faith to their opponents and refuse to engage in meaningful debate.

The totalitarianisms of the twentieth century were grounded in pseudoscientific ideologies, e.g., the Marxist pseudoscience of economics and history, or the Nazi pseudoscience of race and eugenics. In our own day, the pseudo-scientific ideology that drives societies in a totalitarian direction is *scientism*, which must be clearly distinguished from *science*.

Science is a method, or more accurately, a collection of various methods, aimed at systematically investigating observable phenomena in the natural world. Rigorous science is characterized by hypothesis, experiment, testing, interpretation, and ongoing deliberation and debate. Put a group of real scientists in a room together and they will argue endlessly about the salience, significance, and interpretation of data, about the limitations and strengths of various research methodologies, and about the big picture questions. This is because, contrary to how it is often presented to the lay public, science is not an irrefutable body of knowledge. It is always provisional, always fallible, always open to revision.

Scientism is the philosophical claim—which cannot be proven scientifically—that science is the only valid form of knowledge. Anyone who begins a sentence with the phrase, “Science says...” is likely in the grip of scientism. Genuine scientists don’t talk like this; they begin sentences with phrases like, “The findings of this study suggest,” or “This meta-analysis concluded...”. Scientism, by contrast, is a political, or even a religious, ideology. “It has been evident for quite a while that science has become our time’s religion,” Giorgio Agamben observed, “the thing which people believe that they believe in.”[2] When science becomes an ersatz religion—a closed and exclusionary belief system—we are dealing with scientism.

The characteristic feature of science is warranted uncertainty, which leads to intellectual humility.

The characteristic feature of scientism is unwarranted certainty, which leads to intellectual hubris.

Del Noce realized that *scientism is intrinsically totalitarian*, a profound insight of enormous importance for our time. To understand why, consider that scientism and totalitarianism both claim a monopoly on knowledge. The advocate of scientism and the true believer in a totalitarian system both assert that many common-sense notions are simply irrational, unverifiable, unscientific, and therefore outside the scope of what can be said publicly. Antigone's claim, "I have a duty, inscribed indelibly on the human heart, to bury my dead brother" is not a scientific statement; therefore, according to the ideology of scientism, it is just meaningless nonsense. All moral or metaphysical claims are specifically excluded because they cannot be verified by the methods of science or established by the reigning pseudo-scientific totalitarian ideology. In *A Guide for the Perplexed*, E.F. Schumacher captures this move brilliantly, describing it as a "methodological aversion to higher levels of significance."^[3]

Of course, the forced exclusion of moral, metaphysical, or religious claims is not a conclusion of science, but an unprovable philosophical premise of scientism. The assertion that science is the only valid form of knowledge is itself a metaphysical claim, smuggled in quietly through the backdoor. Scientism needs to hide this self-refuting fact from itself, so it is necessarily mendacious: dishonesty is baked into the system, and various forms of irrationalism follow. Because scientism cannot establish itself through rational argument, it relies instead on three tools to advance: brute force, defamation of critics, and the promise of future happiness. Incidentally, these are the same tools deployed by all totalitarian systems.

To hide its own internal contradiction from view, the self-refuting premise of scientism—that science is the only valid form of knowledge—is rarely stated explicitly. Scientism is instead implicitly assumed, its conclusions repeatedly asserted as propaganda, until this ideology simply becomes the air we breathe. Careful policing of public discourse admits only evidence supposedly supported by "science," and this atmosphere is rigorously enforced. As we experienced during the Covid crisis, qualitative (e.g., familial, spiritual) goods were repeatedly sacrificed to quantitative (e.g., biological, medical) goods, even when the former were real and the latter only theoretical. This is the fruit of scientism, which turns our scale of values and priorities upside-down.

It would be hard to find a more effective ideological tool to impose a totalitarian system than by appealing to "science" or "experts" and thereby claiming a monopoly on knowledge and rationality. Those in power can readily choose which scientific experts they endorse and which they silence. This allows politicians to defer inescapably political judgments to "experts," thus abdicating their own responsibility. One's ideological opponents are hamstrung, their opinions excluded as "unscientific," and their public voice silenced—all without the trouble of maintaining a regime of brute force and physical violence. Defamation and exclusion from public discourse works just as effectively. Those in power maintain a monopoly on what counts as Rationality (or Science); they do not bother talking to or debating the [fill-in-the-blank stigmatized group] "bourgeois," "Jew," "unvaccinated," "unmasked," "anti-

science,” “Covid-denier,” etc.

Repressive social conformity is thus achieved without resorting to concentration camps, gulags, Gestapo, KGB, or openly despotic tyrants. Instead, dissenters are confined to a moral ghetto through censorship and slander. Recalcitrant individuals are placed outside the purview of polite society and excluded from enlightened conversation. The political theorist Eric Voegelin observed the essence of totalitarianism is simply that *certain questions are forbidden*.^[4] The prohibition against asking questions is a deliberately and skillfully elaborated obstruction of reason in a totalitarian system. If one asks inconvenient questions—“Do we really need to continue locking down?” or “Are we sure these vaccines are safe and effective?” or “Why has the promised utopia not yet arrived?”—this will not spur reasoned discussion or civil debate. Instead, one will simply be accused of being a pandemic denier, wanting to kill grandma, being anti-science, or of placing oneself on the “wrong side of history.”

We can now appreciate why Del Noce claimed that a technocratic society grounded in scientism is totalitarian, though not obviously authoritarian in the sense of openly violent forms of repression. In a technocratic society, one ends up in a moral concentration camp if one is not on board with the pseudo-science *du jour*, the ideological trend of the moment. Whatever questions, concerns, or objections one might raise—whether philosophical, religious, ethical, or simply a different interpretation of scientific evidence—need not be considered.

Scientism is a totalitarianism of disintegration before it is a totalitarianism of domination. Recall that lockdowns and social distancing during Covid, with their inevitable social isolation leading to profound loneliness, necessarily preceded vaccine mandates and passports, when the repressive regime really tipped its hand. Each of these measures relied on exceptionally sloppy data presented publicly as the only authoritative interpretation of science. In most instances, the pretense of scientific rigor was not even required.

In a scientistic-technocratic regime, the naked individual—reduced to “bare biological life,” cut off from other people and from anything transcendent—becomes completely dependent on society. The individual, reduced to a free-floating, untethered, and uprooted social atom, is more easily manipulated than a person with deep social and familial ties. Del Noce made the startling claim that scientism is even more opposed to tradition than communism, because in Marxist ideology we still find messianic and biblical archetypes dimly represented in the promise of a future utopia.^[5] By contrast, “scientistic anti-traditionalism can express itself only by dissolving the ‘fatherlands’ where it was born.”

This process leaves the entire field of human life wide open to domination by global corporations and their suborned political agents. In this global non-society, individuals are radically uprooted and instrumentalized. The ultimate result, in the last analysis, is pure nihilism: “After the negation of every possible authority of values, all that is left is pure total negativism, and the will for something so indeterminate that it is close to ‘nothing,’” in del Noce’s bleak description.^[6] This is clearly a society suited neither to a meaningful human life nor to social harmony.

The technocratic society, with scientism as its public theology, is not the inevitable

consequence of scientific advance or technological progress. The problem is not science, but the mischaracterization of science as the only valid authority, the enthronement of science as the exclusive reigning principle for all knowledge and for all of society. This ideology rests upon a particular interpretation of contemporary history implicit in scientism's founding myth. It is not the pursuit of science or technology as such, but a myth of progress via radical rupture with the past, that lies at the root of our technocratic society and its totalitarian threat.

Del Noce described this myth as follows: "What motivates the criticism of tradition and all its consequences is the millennialist idea of a sharp break in history leading to a radically new type of civilization." [7] Scientism is founded on a revolutionary utopian dream that destroys everything which came before in preparation for a totally different future. This interpretation of contemporary history began to take hold in Western countries in the decades following the Second World War; but as I've suggested here, the idea accelerated dramatically during the Covid crisis.

A genuine historical awareness allows us to question the idols of our scientistic-technocratic society. This non-society has become focused exclusively on purely material wellbeing, understood as the increase of vitality and the preservation of bare biological life. However, there is nothing "scientific" about enshrining raw vitality and bare life as our highest goods, at the expense of all other human and spiritual goods. Likewise, there is nothing "scientific," much less rational, about ignoring such universal human goods as family, friendship, community, knowledge, beauty, worship, devotion, virtue, and God.

[1] Augusto del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity*, trans. Carlo Lancellotti (Montreal McGill-Queens University Press, 2014), 232.

[2] Giorgio Agamben, *Where Are We Now: The Pandemic as Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 49.

[3] E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 44.

[4] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*, Charles R Walgreen Foundation Lectures (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

[5] Augusto del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity*, 90.

[6] Augusto del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, trans. Carlo Lancellotti (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2017), 29.

[7] *Ibid.*, 85.

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Power-Without-Authority: Genesis, Nature and Mechanisms of Subversion

MARGUERITE A. PEETERS

In his *Eros and Civilization* manifesto (1955), Herbert Marcuse called for a social revolution that would bring about what he called a *non-repressive society*: a society in which the individual would be freed from all institutional pressures, in which the satisfaction of his sexual drives would become socially desirable, and hedonistic gratification would turn into political values. Marcuse laid out the “liberation from repression” platform of the sexual revolution. He was its leading “intellectual agent.” Its operational agents enthusiastically set to work in the 1960s. From the onset, they had an internationalist perspective. In the shade of the Cold War, they established a partnership with the UN and wove their subversive objectives into the fabric of international cooperation. In the 1990s, the paradigms they forged (reproductive health and gender chief among them) became practical norms and cross-cutting priorities of global governance. For over a generation, the “non-repressive” agenda of a western minority has efficiently spread globally, down to the local level. The western cultural revolution and its globalization happened through a power grab. Power shifted from the alleged “repressors” to the alleged “liberators.” The “liberators” developed an ability to coerce and manipulate. The cultural revolution came along with a political revolution. A new politics quietly emerged, endowed with novel concepts and mechanisms. “Power-without-authority” has been both the ultimate goal of the cultural revolution and the political means through which it achieved its deconstruction-of-what-is. In this essay, in three flashes, I will reflect on the genesis and purpose of power-without-authority, its key conceptual features, and some of its operational mechanisms at the level of global governance.

Genesis

In all things, it matters to know the origin. The rise of power-without-authority was possible once authority, in both its rational and transcendent dimensions, had come to be associated with repression. A long and complex process laid the groundwork for the advent of an anti-authority politics. I will pinpoint four major historical milestones.

First came eighteenth-century *deism*. Leading figures in the birth of modern democracy, particularly in France, were deists. Deism deified reason, murdered God *as Father*, and replaced the Father with an impersonal Great Architect. As per deistic logic, the citizen of modern democracy is not a *son* engendered by a loving Father. He is not a *person*, but a mere *individual*, left on his own to organize the world and his destiny, relying on his sole *reason* and *power*. Not *receiving* his identity, he must *construct* it on his own.[1] I would argue that the origin of power-without-authority is theological. The rejection of the Father from whom “all fatherhood on heaven and on earth is named” (Eph 3:14), as the loving and transcendent source of order and authority, impacted the modern concept of citizenship, in France more than in America.

Deism quickly led to atheism: the second milestone, this time in the nineteenth century. Nietzsche declared the death of God. He posited the superman as the remedy to the despair brought about by apostasy and the loss of morality that would logically ensue. The idea that salvation comes from power laid the foundation for power grabbing as a goal in itself. If the only *Omnipotens* from whom all power comes (cf. Rom 13:1) is proclaimed dead, then man must self-empower.

Third, the twentieth-century milestone, springing from the two preceding ones: the cultural death of the human father. As Henri de Lubac brilliantly observed in *The Drama of Atheistic Humanism*, the death of God leads to the death of man. Following Freud’s re-founding of anthropology on the libido principle, psychoanalysis soon identified the father—along with any form of authority, be it that of truth and reality, the voice of conscience, moral laws, civilization, its institutions and norms—with the repressor of our individual freedom and sexual drives.

The fourth milestone, pushing the “liberation” from the order of the Father towards social militancy, is French atheistic existentialism. Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre wanted to make the individual exit from one’s given essence so that he could be liberated from it, could choose “freely” and live for himself (“existence”).[2] To exercise the power of his right to choose, the individual must, according to their logic, engage in negating whatever pre-exists that choice. It was not a matter of passively denying reality, of not doing anything, but of *active commitment in this negation*. The refusal to commit morally thus contrasts with the demand for commitment in social activism. A fish rots from the head down. The ideas of a few leading intellectuals became culture. Social movements and NGOs pursuing subversive objectives were born against this ideological backdrop in the second half of the twentieth century and started partnering with the UN.

Global governance rules at all levels (down to the grassroots). It establishes a transnational order. It uses regulation, command and control. The question is who rules over whom within global governance.

As the cultural revolution unfolded, it became ever clearer that at its core, its rebellious agenda consisted in negating what is, in particular, universal human nature, and asserting man’s *power* to *reconstruct* himself, *ex nihilo*, according to his *choices*. This utopian project is doomed to fail: evil, as we know, is deprived of content and always self-destructs. All it can do is “deconstruct.” The deconstruction process has come to a head in recent decades, reaching

the historic moment where man, aping the Creator, uses language to negate our sexual differentiation as man and woman and perform an identity of his choosing: an “*identity without an essence*,”[3] as David Halperin, a gay activist, appropriately named it. In his book *No Future, Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, queer activist Lee Edelman calls queers to “accede to their status as figures for the force of a negativity” that he links with “irony, jouissance, and, ultimately, the death drive itself.” He called “No Future” the tipping point the revolution has now reached. The writing is on the wall.

Promethean self-empowerment has now arguably superseded pleasure as the primary motivation for the human act. As any revolution, the Freudo-Marxist-Nietzschean rebellion is more about process than about content. Deprived of actual substance, it is what Marx called a “permanent revolution,” never satisfied with its “gains,” powerfully driving a political revolution.

Conceptual nature

The cultural demise of authority had political consequences. Inspired, as of the 1960s, by the post-structuralist French theory cultural movement, the new political perspective has devalued and weakened institutions, dogma, anything formal, juridically binding, considered to be top-down. By contradistinction, it has valued and empowered any informal, parallel, fuzzy, non-governmental, seemingly soft and bottom-up process. Authority being a service to the common good, it has swept away both notions of service and common good. Celebrating the individual’s absolute “freedom to choose,” his “sovereignty” and “autonomy,” it fed the illusion that, as it were, we no longer needed to be governed. The culture demeaning authority provided a breeding ground for the development of new political concepts. Let us pick two examples that have by now won the day: governance and soft power.

In the 1960s international relations scholar James Rosenau coined the *governance* concept in reference to a pattern of *managing* affairs on an international platform. Incidentally, it is interesting that governance was conceived within an international perspective that soon became a *global* one. According to the renowned scholar, the difference between government and governance is that the former “suggests activities that are backed by formal authority,” while “governance refers to activities backed by shared goals that may or may not derive from legal and formally prescribed responsibilities.”[4] Governance is then “a more encompassing phenomenon than government. It embraces governmental institutions, but it also subsumes informal, non-governmental mechanisms.”[5] In the early 1990s, Rosenau defined global governance as “an order that lacks a centralized authority,”[6] as “systems of rule at all levels of human activity ... in which the pursuit of goals through the exercise of control has transnational repercussions.” Deprived of formal authority—and to that extent seemingly “soft,” governance exercises effective *power* through formal-informal means. Being “broader” than government, it *transcends* government. Global governance *rules* at all levels (down to the grassroots). It establishes a transnational *order*. It uses regulation, command and control.[7] The question is who rules over whom within global governance. As its concrete history demonstrates, the new concept allows for what is non-governmental, soft, informal, “sovereignty free”[8] to quietly grab power and rule over what is governmental, hard, formal, “sovereignty-bound.”

Concomitantly with the breakout of the global governance revolution at the end of the Cold War, Joseph Nye elaborated a theory about alternative ways of exercising power and coined the *soft power* concept[9]: a power of “conviction” and “persuasion,” an ability to influence by attraction and cooptation. Nye acclaimed the author of cultural hegemony by consent:

“Political leaders and thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci have long understood the power that comes from determining the framework of a debate. If I can get you to want to do what I want, then I do not have to force you to do what you do not want to do.” Surely, the agents of the cultural revolution have mastered the art of making their ideological perspectives appear “self-evident” or common sense for all, to the point of rendering impossible or senseless any alternative view. When closed to universal reason and transcendence, soft power, alias power-without-authority, is dangerously manipulative.

In consonance with its “soft” character, the global governance political revolution’s defining feature is to have been a *quiet* revolution. It happened without bloodshed, coups, political repression, institutional upheaval, without infringing upon democratic principles. Institutional façades remained standing. The anti-institution revolution did not set in place new institutions. It was a revolution *within*. Its non-state agents of change ended up ruling over sovereign UN member states through global governance and soft power.

Mechanisms at the level of global governance

In a historical process I expose in *Global Governance, History of a Quiet Revolution Within the United Nations (1945–1996)*,^[10] the UN has—in practice “softly,” not juridically—transformed itself into global governance: a global, tripartite partnership coopting states, non-state actors and the global “people” for the purposes of achieving, “globally-to-locally,”^[11] a corpus of interdependent paradigms largely absent from the UN’s foundational documents by “experts,” within a new framework called “sustainable development.” An ECOSOC-accredited non-state global elite not only forged the new paradigms but developed the political mechanisms through which they were intergovernmentally endorsed, implemented “globally-to-locally”^[12] by an expanding web of partners, and their implementation has been surveilled. Through soft power mechanisms such as consensus-building, semantic manipulation, cooptation, “dialogue” and linkages^[13] they wove the goals of the non-repressive society into the fabric of international cooperation as of the 1960s, and in the 1990s got them to become effective norms of global governance. Through mechanisms such as indicators of progress, they monitored implementation. I shall focus on another category of mechanisms which regards their own hegemonic empowerment.

As Bella Abzug (appropriately nicknamed “Battling Bella”), a hardline feminist and a leading advocate of the shift from institutions to “people” who led the Women’s Caucus at the UN conferences of the 1990s, told me in an interview, the word “*partnership* is in the documents [of the conferences] because we demanded it.”^[14] Gender eco-feminists are the primary authors of the new partnership politics. The “convincing” and manipulative rationale the non-governmental agents of change used for the establishment of the partnership system was threefold. First, they argued the UN’s new socioenvironmental goals were *mandatory*, and government authorities, at all levels, had an (ethical) *obligation* to achieve them, as they had “committed” to do so by joining the conferences’ (soft) consensususes. Secondly, their scope would be such that their achievement would overcome governments’ sole capacities. Thirdly therefore, partnerships were needed at all levels, with all sectors of society without exception (business, industry, academia from kindergarten to post-grad, trade unions, media, young people and children, women’s movements, local authorities, indigenous peoples...). UN member states not only tolerated partnerships, but they formally endorsed them as a principle to implement sustainable development as an integrated agenda. National governments thereby became *partners* of experts and transnational NGOs in global governance.

The construction of the new regime demanded political restructuring. This restructuring took

place formally-informally through *power-sharing* mechanisms and a quiet power redistribution of a historic nature and scope. The post-Cold War UN conferences redefined and redistributed roles in the implementation of a “global agenda” that was, in its subversive components, set by a minority of non-state actors. Governments were to *enable change* towards the global platform[15] and global partnerships. To that end, they were to facilitate the empowerment of non-state actors, to which the new politics now granted no longer a mere consultative role as provided for in the *UN Charter*, but a political function, from policy- and decision-making all the way to surveillance.[16] As Agenda 2030,[17] the current “framework” of international cooperation, makes plain, the multi-stakeholder partnership, deprived as it is of checks and balances, has kept on consolidating itself since the conferences of the 1990s. With incontrovertible success, unaccountable soft power-grabbers—deprived of any legitimate authority—have made sovereign governments, which are the only legitimate holders of authority at the UN, behave as their fellow travelers. Thus, the UN stopped acting as a mediator among sovereign governments in negotiating international cooperation.

Conclusion

The rebellious son wanted to liberate himself from the transcendent and loving authority of the Father and set about to deconstruct what is given and construct a purely immanent and “non-repressive” brave new world. His thirst for power over the centuries led him all the way to the helm of global governance, a global “soft-hard” regime endowed with mechanisms through which he imposes his Promethean agendas on all nations. Now, however, is a Kairos moment. Let us seize the opportunity before us to liberate humanity from the oppressive and cynical Diktats stemming from a long process of cultural subversion and loss of faith in the Father. We have seen where power without authority can lead humanity. As we move forward toward liberation, let us remember that authority without love is equally dangerous and would provoke a backlash. Let us hope America will play its part and reawaken as a people to its leadership responsibility and vocation.

[1] See Marguerite A. Peeters, *The Gender Revolution. A Global Agenda. A Tool for Discernment* (St. Louis: En Route Books and Media, 2024).

[2] See Marguerite A. Peeters, *The Globalization of the Western Cultural Revolution: Key Concepts, Operational Mechanisms* (St. Louis: En Route Books and Media, 2023.)

[3] See David Halperin in his book, *Saint Foucault, Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

[4] James N. Rosenau, “Governance, Order and Change in World Politics,” in *Governance Without Government: Order and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 7.

[7] Ibid., 8.

[8] James N. Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity* (Princeton University Press, 1990), 36.

[9] See Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (Autumn, 1990), 153–71 and *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

[10] See Marguerite A. Peeters, *Global Governance. History of a Quiet Revolution Within the United Nations (1945–1996)* (Valencia: Tirant humanidades, 2024).

[11] To ensure the local implementation of global goals, *global-to-local* mechanisms allowed transnational pressure groups to wield power at the local level, in ways bypassing the national peoples' democratic checks, such as Local Agenda 21, or partnerships with NGOs operating locally, as for example United Cities and Local Governments.

[12] The word *mechanism* has belonged to the language of UN conferences since the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the environment. It appears 221 times in Rio's Agenda 21 (1992). Beijing's Women Conference (1995), for example, recommended the establishment of "mechanisms" to involve NGOs and other non-state, non-governmental groups in "government policy-making, program design, as appropriate, and implementation within the health sector and related sectors at all levels" (*Platform for Action*, par. 106 s).

[13] Proactively, they linked their interests to the themes of international cooperation (for example, family planning to human rights, population stabilization to environmental protection).

[14] See Marguerite A. Peeters, *Global Governance*, 760.

[15] The Habitat II Conference (Istanbul, 1996) expressed the role the new politics assigned governments as follows: "Governments *as enabling partners should create and strengthen effective partnerships* with women, youth, the elderly, persons with disabilities, vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, indigenous people and communities, local authorities, the private sector and non-governmental organizations in each country" (*Report*, par. 213).

[16] Agenda 21 urged countries to "develop or improve *mechanisms to facilitate* the involvement of concerned individuals, groups and organizations *in decision-making* at all levels" (par. 8.3.c). It provoked society, governments and international bodies all at once into developing "*mechanisms to allow NGOs to play their partnership role responsibly and effectively*" (par. 27.5).

[17] Agenda 21 recommended, for instance, that governments "review formal procedures and mechanisms for the involvement of [NGOs] *at all levels*, from policy-making and decision-making to implementation" (par. 27.6) and that NGOs be involved "in the conception, establishment and evaluation of official mechanisms and formal procedures designed to review the implementation of Agenda 21 at all levels" (par. 27.8).

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Issues in Family, Culture & Science

BOOK REVIEW

Your Life, Their Data

MOLLY BLACK

Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (PublicAffairs, 2020).

I have been averse to technology for a while; like many “tech-hesitant” twenty-something women, the initial trigger was social media. For several varied and unsurprising reasons, mainly time-consumption and vanity, I deleted my accounts in an impulsive moment of annoyance about three years ago. The “What have I done?” feeling that quickly followed left me riddled with agitating questions. For although it might seem excessive or even foolish, I doubted whether or not I would still function normally without access to these platforms. They entered into my life at the influential age of thirteen and had unquestionably left their mark: Would I be able to maintain distant friendships without “liking” pictures on Instagram? How would I stay politically up to date without Twitter? Did I need SnapChat to stay connected? Etc., etc. For nearly a decade, this was how I had interacted with many of my peers; conceivably, by removing the tool I was functionally removing myself. Understandably, I felt trepidatious.

To my surprise and delight, however, this modest step in digital asceticism offered me a new, refreshed perspective on the broader digital world. I found myself noticing an increasing number of problematic themes, largely exemplified by my iPhone: the functional invisibility of digital devices (they’re always there, mediating our lives, but do we notice them?); their mindless irresistibility (mechanically scrolling online while waiting at the doctor’s); and the frictionlessness to which they habituate us (intent and action uniquely become one in digital devices; we are now aggrieved by a *seconds*-long wait time). A litany of impressive scholarship exists on this topic of technology and its influence on our social life; in terms of the practical threat it poses, Shoshana Zuboff’s *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* offers a remarkably incisive exposition of the system to which we are subject. No less relevant today than it was following its 2019 publication, the work explores recent social and economic developments that have contributed to the rise of what she coins “surveillance capitalism”—a new economic system that presupposes and

necessitates a conception of man whereby he is primed for predictive control.

The new economic system initially, according to Zuboff, appeared to fill a “social justice” void created by the free-market capitalism of Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek. Apple, Google, and Facebook seemed to offer a corrective to the supposed social and economic inequalities of capitalist systems: singular maximization of shareholder value, wealth accumulating to “the few,” and an undermining of the general welfare in favor of private advantage. With “an advocacy-oriented digital capitalism,” by contrast, the new tech giants promised a market economy that would ensure equal access, control, and information for all. As Zuboff expounds, the barrier to entry for the new system, afforded by what is now Alphabet and Meta in particular, was free of monetary constraints: one need only accept the “terms-of-service” agreements to participate. But, infamously long, dull, and complicated, these agreements are designed to disincentivize careful, or any, consideration of the text: we are meant to scroll, submit, and use. The hidden cost of this consent, as Zuboff details with chilling clarity, is nothing short of our lives: we surrender ourselves to the new barons of surveillance capitalism.

Zuboff defines surveillance capitalism as “[a] new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales,” wherein “the product of goods and services is subordinate to a new global architecture of behavior modification.” The system’s market is “behavioral futures,” and it trades in “surplus behavioral data” reaped from the countless hours of the countless people who have ever once used Google, logged onto Facebook, liked an Instagram post, or purchased an iPhone. It parasitically renders our experiences, emotions, desires, interests, and insecurities into binary data, which is then sold to those who are willing to pay for a chance to read our minds and influence our lives.

When man is viewed from behind the veil of binary uniformity that now shrouds the world, the gulag archipelago becomes unnecessary; man has become an island unto himself, and the fragility found in this isolation suffices to ensure conformity.

Tracing the history of this development, Zuboff notes that this surplus behavioral data was first discovered, somewhat accidentally, by Google in the early 2000s when analysts noted a correlation between keyword searches and developments on a television show. This binary arena remains surveillance capitalists’ stronghold; our communications, searches, purchases, movements, appointments, photos, likes, and connections are its principal resources. But knowledge has quickly become power in this new system; the “extraction imperative demands that everything be possessed,” and in recent years, the horizon of influence has moved beyond the digital and into the real world. Our biological data—faces; voices; heartbeats; sleep-wake cycles; workout duration, frequency, and intensity; hydration and hormone levels; ailments and medications—is extracted by increasingly common wearable devices that are designed to be a technological extension of the self, while our homes and cities are datafied by iRobot vacuums, smart home devices, surveillance cameras, and Google maps.

The data culled from surveillance capitalism’s digital dominance and expansion into the real

world is what Zuboff calls the “shadow text”: the “burgeoning accumulation of behavioral surplus” acquired from our “experiences as we engage in the normal and necessary routines of social participation.” Individual privacy is a myth; we are socially, financially, and practically compelled to sacrifice the particularities of our lives as fodder. As Zuboff takes pains to emphasize, we are neither the customer nor the product; “[we] are the abandoned carcass. The ‘product’ derives from the surplus that is ripped from [our lives].”

Customer satisfaction in this economic order is closely tied to risk minimization. Our data is sold at a premium, and direct results are expected. The corporations and governments who purchase the shadow text want to know their influence is secured, and surveillance capitalists must anticipate the success rates of their “suggestions”: Did we buy the product, or merely click the link? Did we attend the rally, or just like the post? Did we read the article, or simply repost it? Did we vote the right way, or only comment on the videos? But predicting human action, even with these vast swaths of data, still leaves revenue on the table; why bother predicting what you can *control*?

The incursion of digital apparatuses into our lives is threatening generally, but the theoretical reduction of man presupposed by this system and the conception of man it has actualized are diabolical, for when Google rediscovered human life as “raw material supply,” Meta replaced human community with online connection, and Apple invented a digital organ, man became little more than “the user.” Here, what Zuboff calls the “instrumentarian” logic of the surveillance capitalist system comes into view.

Instrumentarianism is defined as “a market project that converges with the digital to achieve its own unique brand of social domination.” It is, in other words, a logic of accumulation that informs a power that seeks to attain panvasive control of human action. The tech giants only beat the behavioral futures market if their subject is entirely predictable—there is no room for the uncertainty and randomness of human action. To illustrate the attraction of the “digital nudge” designed to alter our behavior, Zuboff offers the following remark given by the chief data scientist at a drugstore chain: “You can make people do things with this technology. Even if it’s just 5% of people, you’ve made 5% of people do an action they otherwise wouldn’t have done, so to some extent there is an element of *the user’s loss of self-control*.” This usurpation of our freedom, Zuboff argues, is informed by the conditioning logic typically associated with B. F. Skinner, who believed human behavior could be altered as a result of the application of various reinforcements.

Man, in the narrative terms set and presupposed by the behaviorist logic of surveillance capitalism, is algorithmicized: he is exhaustively defined as an isolated, impotent, instantiation of the random, quantifiable process which purportedly produced him. He is conceptually reduced to “the lowest common denominator of sameness—an organism among organisms.” True human action and individuality give rise to ineliminable errors; action must become behavior, and the individual, mere organism.

Beyond the obvious technological wizardry, the real novelty of this instrumentarian power is the sheer breadth of its scope and the potency with which it effects its ambitions. It pervades all aspects of existence, and no facet of life is concealed from its penetrating gaze. Through its omnipresence and omniscience, its invisibility and intangibility, its complexity and elusiveness, it has woven itself so perfectly into the fabric of our lives that it has nearly vanished from sight. We, the users, fumble about at this precipice of power, with nary a thread to grasp.

Zuboff emphasizes, at length, that this new “instrumentarian” power is different in kind (not

merely degree) from the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. The latter, as Hannah Arendt notes, effected behavior by means of “handmade terror” that forced people into a social and spiritual homelessness wherein “ordinary human bonds” were destroyed. In contrast, physical violence is not perpetrated by surveillance capitalists; they instead employ “prediction products designed to forecast what we will feel, think and do; now, soon, and later.”

But it seems to me that the difference between these two systems is one of practical necessity, not kind, for not only the end but also the presuppositions of both are undeniably related. In each instance, absolute control of human action is the goal; to do this the system must be capable of perfect “modification, prediction, monetization, and control.” It is the means necessary to bring about these conditions wherein a difference is found. The brute power typified by totalitarian systems is unnecessary when the internal control exemplified by instrumentarianism is perfected. Coercion, in other words, is dispensable when individual action has given way to conditioned behavior; herein lies the radicality of instrumentarian power. When man is viewed from behind the veil of binary uniformity that now shrouds the world, the gulag archipelago becomes unnecessary; man has become an island unto himself, and the fragility found in this isolation suffices to ensure conformity. Though her work is in many ways exemplary, Zuboff fails to fully expound upon just how far this system of control has penetrated the human person.

Of course, this begs the question: “What can we do?” In a way, the answer must be the usual: “Very little.” Digital technology has implicated nearly every facet of our lives in a potentially irrevocable manner, to say nothing of the destructive technocratic logic which undergirds modernity itself. To think these far-reaching consequences can be successfully parried by new (albeit laudable) legislation is to misunderstand the gravity of what we face. That said, I remain hopeful; “very little” is not nothing. And unlike many scholars on the topic, Zuboff is surprisingly encouraging—particularly where the younger generation is concerned.

For starters, we can, and should, delete our social media. Not only does it expose us to endless behavioral “nudging,” but it also abstracts us from the context of our existence. Examples of this abound; while dining out, it is not uncommon to see both children and their parents mutely transfixed by screens. Similarly, we can spend more time in silence; it does not do to constantly consume. Intentionally transitioning away from shopping online is also a fabulous way to both invest oneself more fully in local communities while reducing consumerist urges. Modernity is filled, as Lewis Mumford perceptively noted, with individuals who have endless possessions, but no self-possession; practicing acts of self-denial is a good way to combat this.

We should also be living a liturgical life. In times of joy and celebration, feast! Throw dinner parties, go dancing, spend time enjoying this wondrous world within a community. And in times of penance, deny a worldly desire or two. This, of course, leads to the most obvious salve: going to Mass, where we’re safe from the greedy panopticon of surveillance capitalism and surrounded instead by a sympathetic cloud of witnesses beckoning us along our pilgrim way. Catholicism, in its sacramentality, is far more efficacious than any system we men could produce; we only need to open ourselves to its graces. These might seem like small acts and of course, in a way, they are. But they are nevertheless capable of filling life with immeasurable joy and beauty; in this, there is much hope to be found.

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Issues in Family, Culture & Science

BOOK REVIEW

A Smart Catholic Critique of the Liberal Progressive Project

GERMAIN MCKENZIE

James Kalb, *The Decomposition of Man: Identity, Technocracy, and the Church* (Angelico Press, 2023).

James Kalb's *The Decomposition of Man* is a fine book, one particularly helpful for the increasing number of ordinary people trying to make sense of the current cultural milieu of the United States, the West, and beyond. Kalb's work aptly explains the origins and workings of what we may call the "progressive liberal project," widely disseminated in the past twenty-five years or so and which proposes the celebration of diversity and the promotion of inclusiveness as key ideas around which the social order should be organized. In this sense, Kalb's book can be added to similar works by Douglas Murray, James Lindsay, and Helen Pluckrose, with the difference that unlike the classical liberal position adopted by these authors, Kalb writes from a Catholic standpoint, one that resembles what Tracey Rowland calls a theology mediated by "strict observance Thomism."^[1]

Kalb's bold claim in the first part of the book is that, despite its liberating claims, the challenge to traditionally basic identity markers—sex, family, community, national culture, and religion, for example—as oppressive social constructs is really a manipulative maneuver. Under the guise of liberation from social structures, such a strategy becomes a way to detach human persons from elements basic to their wellbeing and turn them into isolated and atomized individuals. This move is supported by state bureaucracies and transnational corporations so they can use people for their own purposes, the ultimate aim of which is increasing the power they already have. Kalb's view here resembles Max Weber's understanding of modern society as destructive of community links, one that becomes a bureaucratized and rationalized impersonal body. He thinks the disintegration of traditional identities that, with their strengths and weaknesses, have allowed human beings to understand themselves and their place in society is regrettable. Dissolving identities will worsen the problems that disempowered groups in society may already face, rather than solving them.

Kalb makes the claim that what lies behind the progressive liberal attack on human identity is

an ideal that affirms that everything should be made equal, efficient, and rational. This, in turn, gives birth to a technocratic ideal which insists that “rational action consists precisely in the efficient, orderly and technically rational use of available resources for whatever goals happen to be chosen.” At the root of this ideal, Kalb finds intellectual and material causes such as credentialism, scientism, subjectivism, an “industrial” view of society, the mechanization of work, and the de facto rule of economic and political elites. However, Kalb’s understanding of one root of this contemporary malaise is especially important: the change in our understanding of knowledge from the contemplation of ultimate realities from which one receives guidance for prudent action, to a model of knowledge as a device whose purpose is to control the world around us through science and its technological applications. This notion coincides to a degree with what Pope Francis has denounced as a “technocratic paradigm” and “modern anthropocentrism,” although from a different perspective.

The liberal progressive project is a quasi-religion, and its god is a jealous one.

In the above situation, traditional identities rooted in such things as sex distinctions, defined family forms, inherited cultural communities, and religion are rendered as having no public relevance and are redefined as mere alternative options of personal preference. They are thus surreptitiously replaced by identities that serve the purposes of bureaucracies and corporations: identities found in career, bureaucratic position, wealth, and lifestyle choices. All this is effectively enforced by liberal progressives, paradoxically, under the guise of tolerance and inclusiveness through the disciplining of language (political correctness). Anyone who may not want to accept it is considered dangerous and hateful.

In the second part of the book, Kalb insightfully explores the consequences of the progressive liberal project in our day-to-day social and personal lives. Of particular interest is his discussion of the kind of social and cultural orders this project creates. Here again his analysis is broad and insightful, but I would highlight only a few ideas. One is that the liberal progressive project is a quasi-religion, and its god is a jealous one. This is particularly important for explaining the virulence with which liberal progressives tend to react against any challenge to their arguments and for giving an account of the strong ethical condemnation of those who do not share their views. The second idea is Kalb’s answer as to why this is so attractive. He believes this is because the principles of the progressive liberal project, whatever their inconsistencies, are clear, simple, and forcible, and that they “align with the active, enterprising, domineering and anti-contemplative [...] spirit guiding modern life.” The third idea concerns the weakness of the progressive liberal project, with Kalb arguing that careerism, consumerism, and devotion to equality and inclusiveness do not lead to the creation of durable identities. In the end, the project is unable to provide what it promises.

The third part of the book is about what can be done to change the course of Western history. “The obvious way forward is restoration of the Western Christian tradition. If what was imagined to be reform did not work, why not revert to what worked?” This entails changing the way people think about institutions, which will require time. “A stable system of traditions and identities is necessary for a rational and coherent way of living.” Although he mentions several elements of this new understanding of human beings, society, the world and God, Kalb insists on the fact that the issue is to propose an alternative to classical liberal and liberal

progressive views of them.

In Kalb's mind, three elements are necessary for such an alternative to develop: natural law, tradition, and religion. Natural law is a system that guides human life in accordance with our nature and good as knowable by experience and reason. In this light, family becomes a basic reality that roots the sexual and political orders, followed by concentric community forms all the way to national identity. However, natural law principles, in order not to remain abstract, need traditions that tell us how to put them into practice. Based on accumulated experience, they take concrete forms in symbols, practices, and beliefs that put patterns of a good life into a usable form. Finally, religion is to offer an authoritative voice so differences in interpretation do not generate unending conflicts. Kalb sees the Catholic Church as the only organization capable of assuming that role.

Despite its many strong points, the argument in the third part of the book presents some problems. First, intellectually overcoming the classical liberal and liberal progressive projects will require assimilating any kernel of truth they may contain and giving compelling answers to the questions they raise. Hence, issues of the tyranny of a few or of the fate of minorities within a democratic society should be considered, explained, and provided with a solution. Second, the proposal of retrieving the principles of the Western Christian tradition for the needs of the present needs to be supplemented with some reflection on how their limitations were manifested in history. Finally, it seems to me that Kalb's response lacks breadth and depth in its philosophical and theological considerations. It misses the positive elements present in the modern project that have been appropriated in several ways into the Catholic tradition by, for example, the *ressourcement* school. The reaching out towards personalism, phenomenology and hermeneutic philosophy, or Henri de Lubac's interpretation of Aquinas's understanding of the relationship between the natural and supernatural would be some examples of this.

Kalb's book is an essay, and a good one at that. His prose is agile, the structure of the argument is clear, and many examples illustrate his points. His analysis of liberal progressivism, its roots and dynamics is insightful. His proposal about how to respond to it has some shortcomings, as mentioned, but the book makes for great reading for a general audience.

[1] Tracey Rowland, *Doing Catholic Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017).

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BOOK REVIEW

The Quiet Revolution: From International Institution to Global Government

TIMOTHY HERRMANN

Marguerite Peeters, *Global Governance: History of a Quiet Revolution within the United Nations* (Tirant Humanidades, 2024).

The United Nations (UN) is a complex, esoteric institution that many ignore or misunderstand. Often perceived as quasi-mythical or useless, it operates largely unnoticed. Its inner workings—vast bureaucratic networks, billion-dollar programs, and year-round General Assembly meetings in New York—are unfamiliar at best. Many view it as ineffective, believing it has failed to achieve its expressed goal of saving “future generations from the scourge of war.”

In her meticulously researched book, *Global Governance: History of a Quiet Revolution within the United Nations*, Marguerite Peeters reveals the profound, often overlooked impact of the UN on global society, making a compelling case for its significance. This work, accessible yet insightful for UN insiders as well, seamlessly connects the dots between the individuals and organizations that have driven the UN’s evolution over the years. Peeters illuminates the relationships that positioned the UN at the vanguard of global governance and the visionary ideas that transformed it into a key laboratory for an entirely new human anthropology, which it then promoted internationally.

Founded in 1945 in the devastating aftermath of WWII, the United Nations “was the largest international organization in terms of state membership that had then far existed.” With the express purpose of bringing together all the nations of the world, its membership rapidly expanded from the 50 states that first signed the UN Charter in San Francisco to the 192 states now engaging in its daily deliberations and formal meetings from New York to Nairobi.

However, as Peeters quickly points out, the UN project would not remain in the hands of sovereign member states for long. Over a relatively short time frame, it moved from being a state led project to a globalist movement. That movement was led by special interests and non-

State actors, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), unbound by national priorities or democratic accountability.

As Peeters methodically demonstrates, it was not international cooperation *per se* that gave rise to the regime of global governance. Instead, it was shaped by the ideology of “internationalism” and novel power-sharing models pioneered by organizations like the International Labour Organization (ILO), where decision making was distributed among states, labor unions, and employers’ organizations. While this organizational model was not originally part of the UN Charter, it gained traction through two waves of UN conferences, the first beginning in the 1960s and the second in the 1990s.

During the first wave, international cooperation remained dominant but increasingly challenged. For example, it is true that sovereign States initially retained primary authority in key UN bodies like the Security Council, where hard power was at stake. However, as conferences on social, economic, and environmental issues were organized under the auspices of the UN’s Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the soft power of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) was amplified. It was these conferences, held on the “periphery,” where these non-governmental and supranational actors gained significant influence in shaping global agendas.

Today, it would take both the layman and academic only a matter of hours at a UN meeting to observe just how far the UN’s technocratic intelligentsia has removed itself from the common man and the reality of his daily life and struggles.

As a result, international cooperation quickly became divorced from what gave it substance and legitimacy, namely, individual nations. This then gave way to “the will, identity, norms and objectives of national peoples [being placed] above their sovereignty.” According to Peeters, this shift was largely facilitated through “partnerships,” which she defines as the collaboration between the UN’s official governing mechanisms, like the UN Secretariat and specialized bodies like UNICEF, and non-governmental organizations.

This new form of cooperation became more formalized and more concrete with each UN Conference as insistence on their participation grew and as state collaborations with these organizations became more deeply embedded in conference outcomes. While states still negotiated and willingly adopted the outcome documents, they were increasingly shaped by the influence and direct contributions of non-state actors, as well as by supposed “experts” and dignitaries chosen specifically by the UN to lead these processes and who even sat on some delegations.

Slowly but surely, through the promotion of conference outcomes and the increased participation of NGOs and experts, the UN became a globalist institution, less and less defined by state participation and sovereignty and increasingly determined by the influence and vision of NGOs and experts. These actors, without any specific legal obligations or national ties, aligned themselves purposefully with a generic global population, a “we the people” comprised of nondescript global “citizens,” “children,” and “youth,” whom they not only defined, but also

claimed to partner with and at the same time represent. Today, Peeters cites the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda as a prime example of how pervasive and far-reaching the UN's global governance model has become.

What sets this book apart from more conventional accounts is Maguerite Peeters's ability to lay out the historical genesis of this transformation and to clearly define it through the formal definitions of terms like "partnerships" and "internationalism." In addition, while most studies portray the UN as a well-intentioned, albeit utopian, endeavor, Peeters reveals how its original state-led vision was deliberately redirected early on, hijacked by non-state actors who reshaped its trajectory far beyond the intentions of its founding members.

This shift is particularly evident in the way NGOs leveraged UN conferences to advocate for and normalize controversial concepts such as gender equality, reproductive rights, and empowerment. Successive conferences introduced, and then reaffirmed, language and ideas entirely absent from the UN Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the UN's founding documents. Over time, this created a new "globally normative framework" that while not initially agreed to or even promoted by member states, nonetheless profoundly shaped contemporary policies and political discourse.

As Peeters further demonstrates, it is not by chance that this new language was defined by the logic of power and underpinned by an anthropology that only considered "people's 'needs' and 'rights'—not people's inherent, inalienable dignity in the traditional sense, open to divine transcendence." Tied intimately to the ideology of internationalism and the world view of its globalist institutions, it ushered in the age of the new "Promethean" man who was "an absolute citizen divorced from the person he was. He was nationally and sexually undifferentiated." In the new realm of global governance, this was Adam. The new man without roots and free to "make" himself, finally liberated from the constraints of sovereign states or the natural, moral order that historically defined and shielded humanity from arbitrary power.

Critiques of Peeters's Analysis

Having worked in and around the United Nations for nearly 15 years, including with the Holy See, I have both observed and experienced many of the dynamics Marguerite Peeters accurately documents in her research. Below, I offer several critiques based on my firsthand perspective.

First, the challenge at the UN's inception was not merely establishing a shared set of principles or rules to govern the international system but determining where to anchor them. This was most evident during the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). At the time, the world was deeply divided—both ideologically and geopolitically—into the liberal democracies of the West and the autocratic communist regimes of the East. These blocs were underpinned by competing ideologies with fundamentally different views on reality, society, and human rights. Consequently, while States could agree on broad, intentionally ambiguous objectives like disarmament, development, or human rights, their interpretations of these principles diverged sharply, creating fertile ground for contention.

This ideological divide likely also facilitated the "quiet revolution" Peeters describes. Indeed, the UN's original vision was not sufficiently objective or normatively robust to resist being reshaped by non-state or more ideological actors. Beyond the influence of NGOs and experts with distinct agendas, it was also this lack of a unified, philosophically sound foundation which allowed the UN's trajectory to be redirected in ways that diverged from its State led

origins. This much was also feared very early on by philosophers like Jaques Maritain who were tasked in the early 1940s by UNESCO with the impossible task of providing the UN with an agreed metaphysical framework, something he was never able to do.

Finally, while Peeters emphasizes the pivotal role of non-state actors, particularly NGOs, in transforming global governance, she overlooks the complicity of the member states themselves. Many NGOs, even those with international reach, operate locally with government funding and support. For instance, organizations like Planned Parenthood and foundations such as Ford and Rockefeller have long advanced agendas backed by significant state funding, often serving as proxies for state policies under the guise of local, community-driven initiatives. These same organizations also participate as experts on the delegations of the most vocal and powerful member states, like the United States, as well as the European Union and, increasingly, the Global South. This dynamic obscures the true chain of influence, as state-supported NGOs appear independent while actually promoting agendas aligned with governmental interests. Peeters's analysis would benefit from acknowledging this interplay between states and NGOs in driving the global governance shift.

These critiques only provide further support to the undeniable conclusions drawn by Peeters with respect to the United Nations' central role as the crucible for global governance. Today, it would take both the layman and academic only a matter of hours at a UN meeting to observe just how far the UN's technocratic intelligentsia has removed itself from the common man and the reality of his daily life and struggles. Ironically, for as much as those immersed in the UN world speak about humanity and humanity's problems, their ideological rhetoric, often antihuman in its anthropology, reminds one of Ivan Karamazov's famous quote in Dostoyevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, "The more I love humanity in general, the less I love man in particular." This is the price the UN has paid for creating its own parallel universe, driven by its detached, increasingly abstract, globalist agenda. And yet, as Peeters shows us, this ideological abstraction deserves our close attention, especially given the profound effect it has had on real world, international politics and domestic social policy.

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The Problem with Our Infinite Appetite for Distractions

NEIL POSTMAN

The term “agents of control” likely evokes the great dystopian image of Big Brother, the classic literary symbol of totalitarianism, historically realized to a significant degree in the Soviet Union. The regime exercised a monopoly of power from its command economy to its state-run education and media to its vast propaganda machine—all of which aimed to control the horizon of meaning.

However gripping it might have been, this is not the specter that haunts us now. We won the Cold War, after all. The Iron Curtain fell, the Berlin Wall crumbled.

And yet, there is a widespread sense of insecurity about our freedom, about the omnipresence of things that control us, not from a single center but from multiple loci. These are what we might call “meta-agents of control,” and their ambition is every bit as vast as a totalitarian regime. They seek a monopoly over our attention, a colonization of our consciousness. Enter the metaverse where real things are steadily replaced by simulacra and identities by avatars. As Mark Zuckerberg enthused when announcing this next frontier in virtual technology: “Think about how many physical things you have today that could just be holograms in the future.” For this new generation of agents of control—whether it be the purveyors of AI, chatbots, or VR headsets—the key is to render us dependent upon digital technology, which entails at root an overturning of a traditional understanding of the world as good and of reality as compelling. In the bracing words of software engineer Marc Andreessen, for most of humanity “their online world is, or will be, immeasurably richer and more fulfilling than most of the physical and social environment around them in the quote-unquote real world.”

Though media critic and educator Neil Postman died before the advent of these technologies, he could have predicted their invention because they spring from the logic and dynamism of modern technology, which appeals to the basic human drive to maximize pleasure and avoid pain. If unchecked and undisciplined by higher principles, this drive can trap us in a state of arrested emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development. Postman witnessed this already fifty years ago when the only digital technology on offer for most people was the television. Its effects were doleful but limited by the size and mass of the machine. Now, the ever-thinner, ever-lighter screen

is everywhere, invading all spaces without discrimination, private, public, sacred, profane. Our devices—the medium of the “meta-agents of control”—are undermining our capacity for sustained attention, awareness of our surroundings, and our taste for real human presence. To invoke Wordsworth’s poignant phrasing, “For this, for everything, we are out of tune / It moves us not.”

As Neil Postman astutely observes in the following selection, the introduction to Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business (Viking/Penguin Random House, 2006; first ed. 1985), we’re in a dystopia, different from Orwell’s to be sure, but no less threatening, and the new Big Brother fits comfortably in our pockets.

We were keeping our eye on 1984. When the year came and the prophecy didn’t, thoughtful Americans sang softly in praise of themselves. The roots of liberal democracy had held. Wherever else the terror had happened, we, at least, had not been visited by Orwellian nightmares.

People will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.

But we had forgotten that alongside Orwell’s dark vision, there was another—slightly older, slightly less well known, equally chilling: Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Contrary to common belief even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley’s vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny “failed to take into account man’s almost infinite appetite for distractions.” In 1984, Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.

This book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right.

Neil Postman was an American scholar and prolific author whose work focused on culture, communication and the critique of mass media. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, one of his most notable and prophetic books, was translated into sixteen languages.

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