

spreading downward. But will this really happen? And will the Custodial State—if it arrives—really be compatible with traditional American values?

## THE END OF THE CIVIC ERA?

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*L'âge du renoncement* by Chantal Delsol (Paris: Cerf, 2011)

Chantal Delsol (or Delsol-Millon) is known for at least two reasons. The first is that political philosophers of the feminine gender are less than abundant, fewer in Europe than even in North America, where they are not frequent. The second is that she has a kind of sturdy, almost flamboyant courage in confronting the massive troops of political correctness.

Her theoretical foundations are unquestionably solid. Thus her two studies on the concept and the practice of subsidiarity are still the best that have been written on the topic (1991, 1993). Likewise her study of modern political philosophies (1991) is in my opinion just about the best introduction to the typology of political doctrines in the twentieth century written so far. Several years ago Chantal Delsol was elected a member of the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques, which, short of the Académie

Francaise, is the most prestigious French intellectual institution.

Delsol is a well-known and respected columnist in France, and several of her books may be read as expanded commentaries on the political situation and events in the past several decades. Three of these have been published in English by ISI (under the titles *Icarus Fallen*, *The Unlearned Lessons of the Twentieth Century*, and *Unjust Justice*); and she has lectured several times in the United States (Georgetown, Catholic University, Faith and Reason Institute, etc.).

Chantal Delsol can be placed ideologically in the continuation of Tocqueville, Max Weber, Pierre Boutang, perhaps also Gustave Thibon and others, therefore in the zone of liberal conservatism. For all these reasons, many of us will be somewhat surprised at least by the opening of her new book.

The first chapter of this work bluntly asserts that we have entered a radically new historical age, that we are experiencing not just a new movement and phase but rather a seismic transition of the kind that has been encountered in human history only two or three times before. Moreover, the author argues, this change is a regression, an abandonment, a “renouncement.”

Now let us stop here for a moment and remember that such a theory is not unique. Two decades or so ago Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History* (1992) spoke of the end of man, in the tradition of Hegel and the idiom of Nietzsche. (He later admitted he was wrong.) Earlier, Karl Jaspers in *Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (1949) had tried to set up the “Achsenzeit” (axial time) as a pivotal turning point or age in historical evolution. Jaspers believed that around 500 BC (a couple of centuries earlier and a couple of centuries later) we witness a coincidence of great thinkers: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras in Greece, the great prophets

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of Judaea, Buddha, Confucius, and others in the East, all of them leading to an awakening and emergence of human self-consciousness.

Interestingly, a more recent thinker such as Charles Taylor seems to grant serious attention to this hypothesis. The most relevant from the point of view of Delsol would be Ernst Jünger's "An der Zeitmauer" (1957), a very important essay in the philosophy of history; she does not cite it, although she is otherwise aware of other works by Jünger in the 1950s to the 1970s. (A French translation appeared in 1994; I do not believe we have a translation in English.) I say that it is the most relevant because, in a somewhat more visionary than empirical register, Jünger expresses a transformational theory that is quite close to that now put forward by Delsol.

Back to our book, however: according to Chantal Delsol, a whole age of monotheistic religion is coming to an end, after five hundred years or so of gradual decline. We will return, she believes, to the modes of "wisdom," by which she understands a combination of Stoicism, Epicureanism, Confucianism, and, yes, pragmatism. In fact, she turns repeatedly to the academic visit of John Dewey in 1919–21 to China (Delsol erroneously writes 1907–9), where some kind of mutual theoretical embrace was supposed to have taken place. That Dewey was enthusiastic about Chinese intellectual life and in turn was enthusiastically received by Chinese academics is beyond any doubt.

This new age begins, according to her, slowly around 1500 and reaches its completion and victory in our days. Truth is being replaced by "wisdom," God by nature; the primacy of ethics over religion becomes absolute; the "royal status of man" (a term she uses repeatedly) is abandoned; "why" is replaced by "how" (the instrumental, utilitarian, and practical have precedence in both

theory and practice); the whole architecture of meanings and values that had prevailed for 2,500 years or so crumbles. Consensus seeking is increasingly used instead of democratic debate, the foundations of prevailing public worldviews are now frequently "myths" (by which Delsol understands statements that are neither true nor false). Sacrality does not disappear; it just abandons transcendence and finds itself located in a global immanence, both pantheistic and syncretic, labeled by Delsol "oceanic mysticism." The search for truth and progress (not only under the sign of religion but even under the sign of various ideologies or philosophies) is in a marked decline; modest and local satisfactions seem preferable. Human dignity tends to give place to actual human superfluity. To use the terminology of Oakeshott, the fragile but important balance between *universitas* and *societas* seems definitively broken.

This regressive movement toward apathy is not due to some kind of objective and inevitable historical determinism of the kind assumed by Hegel and most post-Hegelians. Nor does the author attribute it to any "conspiratorial" activities. Rather it is the outcome of the very hubris of the prevailing precedent system of values or of its components. Truth had been profaned by the despotisms of Reason; salvation was corrupted by millenarian totalitarianism; patriotism was turned into nationalism, and so on.

It should be said that here more insistence on clarity would have helped. The examples of hubris adduced are encountered mostly in the past few centuries, whereas the general process of regression is supposed to have begun already around 1500. This is not necessarily an incapacitating contradiction in Delsol's argument; we can easily accept that adversities might have emerged at any (early) point, but they would have gained overwhelming force because of the faults and the

exaggerations of the principal value system as manifested later. A more patient explanation of the mechanism, however, might have been more convincing.

Most of the above-enumerated signs of abandonment and renunciation had been noticed and described by numerous intellectual commentators (if anything, one could add to, lengthen, and strengthen Delsol's list), but seldom have I seen such a coherent depiction: relativism and indolent resignation on the ideal level and the practical consequences thereof in human life and behavior. The tone of Chantal Delsol in these early chapters is interesting: nostalgic and elegiac, with light regret and even lighter irony, hiding perhaps a layer of genuine sadness. To give a small sample (in my translation): "Let us remember that with us Christianity had been for almost twenty centuries the compass of human life; it inspired its world vision, it sent out hope, it triggered the idea of progress; it invented modern democracy on the foundation of monastic practices; it promoted the division of governmental institutions and the establishment of legal institutions, separate branches of government and the rule of law; it indirectly gave rise to human rights; it implanted the certainty of individual dignity. All arts and letters are rooted in it. Everyday morals no less than governmental morals used to appeal to it."

Yet this melancholy tone changes in the last two or three chapters. At this point the author begins to unveil what appear to be the threatening implications of a radical change in the existential horizons of the Western world, or perhaps of the human species as a whole. The cornerstone of Delsol's suspicions and doubts appears to be the replacement of democracy by the search for consensus. She compares the latter to what she calls *palabres*, that is, the kind of discussions more often encountered in archaic, tribal, clan-type

communities, which are quests for unanimous agreement. By contrast, democracy was and ought to be, she believes, a robust wrestling between competing philosophies or political standpoints. Such natural rivalry is now fading, she suggests.

Who and what replace serious debate? It is precisely the technical/managerial subject matter of the current public discussions (the emphasis on the "how") that increasingly eliminates first some individuals and groups but then even common sense and natural reason themselves from genuine and substantial participation. Decisions are increasingly reserved for "specialists," for a thinner and thinner category "in the know"; leadership is transferred and deputized. The author cites the unabashed statement of a major French public figure about a decision of national interest: "The essential is not whether you agree or disagree with me, but whether you have fully understood what I said." In one emphatic section, Delsol declares that relativistic nihilism is only and can only be a transitional, limited stage, soon to be replaced by authoritarianism. More generally, Delsol believes that we now witness the beginnings of an authoritarian-technocratic system of governance. Perhaps one concealed reason, we are told, is that there is a deep mistrust in the "simplistic" conservative instincts of the masses. (Personally, I am here reminded of a French historian's observation that after 1815 the disastrous error of the Bourbons was not granting universal suffrage immediately, which would have consolidated and ensured their throne.)

Likewise, culture with its sophisticated grammar of meanings (a complex "cosmos") is being deconstructed in order to permit the full flowering of a pacifist syncretism, steered by the "wisdoms" emitted by the "specialists." (Surprisingly, Delsol does not include in her definition of the new elites

“the chattering classes” of the media.) The passivity and indifference of most citizens result in a waning of dynamism and hope and a multiplication of dark, even apocalyptic scenarios, incessantly brooded over.

Even while I agree broadly with Delsol’s analyses, I have to demur on a few points. Her work is clearly parochial. It is a largely correct depiction of the sociocultural environment of western Europe but not of the world. Thus we know well that, while all or most of the symptoms adduced can be recognized in North America, they are not (or not yet) prevalent there; the dice have not been rolled, conflicting forces are at play, the future is still in the balance. Likewise the “roll-back of religion” is evident in western Europe but not in eastern Europe, and even less in the Southern Hemisphere. Anybody familiar with the research and the studies of Philip Jenkins will immediately respond and object with abundant arguments and evidence: Christianity grows dramatically and ripens substantially; it does not decline over the largest parts of the globe. One may additionally look at the condition of Islam and Hinduism, neither of which finds itself in ruins. (Delsol herself mentions in passing samples of diverging views: considered critical positions by the Singapore leader Lee Kuan-Yew, whom many describe as a genuinely Aristotelian leader, well-known essays by Solzhenitsyn and Zinoviev, the Islamic critiques of the West, and the very remarkable alternative declaration of universal human rights composed by Russian Orthodox intellectuals and clergy and hardly known in the West.)

Delsol’s last chapter is highly interesting. It evokes some options for those dissatisfied with the heavy-handed regime change and regime instauration that she posits. Inside the modified horizons, despite an emphasis on the individual person, Delsol recognizes

(like so many others) the establishment of an increasingly matriarchal system and the marginalization of heroic, virile, or enterprising virtues. Once association and solidarity as institutional modes tend to disappear, “piracy” (of the individual or of small gangs) begins to flourish. Short of this open adoption of antisocial behavior and values, the better endowed opt toward a “Thebaïde” solution, after the name of the southern Egyptian desert province where in the third and fourth centuries solitaries and hermits, individually or in small groups, invented the conditions for early monasticism. Alternatively, Ernst Jünger’s “Waldgang” had delineated (symbolically) a resort to and retreat in “the forest” as a valid existential option. Those of us who have spent some of our lives under communist oppression can immediately recognize the credibility of such a mode of life. (To become again personal and subjective: I was particularly glad to discover here a parallel with the idea of an archipelago of external and internal fortifications as outlined in my own book *Postmodernism and Cultural Identities*.)

Despite everything, Chantal Delsol’s essay remains a text of pessimism and disenchantment. In my opinion this is precisely the reason it should be read and become an object of reflection. (An English translation would be highly welcome.) No, I do not believe that she has projected for us a certain and necessary outline of the future. I do take in earnest her scenario, however: I admit its possibility, and I consider it as a warning that thoughtful persons should meditate on and keep in mind.