

Chantal Delsol, *The Unlearned Lessons of the Twentieth Century*, trans. by Robin Dick. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006.

excerpts selected by Charles Bellinger

- 7-8 “late modernity has rejected the terrorist aspects of totalitarianism, but it has not abandoned the ideological underpinnings of totalitarianism itself.”
- 13 “Dehumanization begins with the denial of human status, with the expulsion of certain humans beyond the frontiers of the species. One cannot brand others as ‘undeserving’ of human dignity without first branding them as ‘subhuman’—that is, without first dismissing them as radically other.”
- 18 “Unless the being of mankind is given serious thought, appearances or phenomena reign, with nothing to check the temptation to discriminate.”
- 21-22 “The creation story, which bestows meaning, guarantees human dignity better than any form of reason ever could.”
- 22 “The repetition of a crime is avoided only by exposing the subterranean foundation that gave rise to it, by undoing its hidden dynamics.”
- 25 “Any selection that separates the more human from the less human—or, to use current terminology, *persons* from *unpersons*—is the consequence of man’s control of his self-definition.”
- 29 “The obligation to reckon with an incorrect understanding of mankind thus becomes a moral obligation—so long as we admit, having drunk the bitter cup down to its dregs, that utopias sow death.”
- 30-31 “There will be no post-totalitarian future without a clear and well-argued rejection of everything that built the anti-worlds of the twentieth century. . . . Antiutopian hope is anchored in a world that is not *invented* but *recognized*, including its needs and dreams, which hope protects and expands. . . . The ‘utopias’ of the twentieth century rested on the myth of self-creation, self-foundation, and on the self-sufficiency of mankind. . . . The lesson of the twentieth century is the following: we have limits that we do not choose, and which it would be in our interest to accept rather than suppress, given the damage attempts at suppression have caused.”
- 33 “To experiment is to be closed within oneself and one’s own bare will. To experience is to embrace being—but this movement of the mind has left us. It will have to be relearned, like a lost art.”
- 39 “Communism did everything it could to break down community and hierarchical bonds, encouraging even family members to inform on one another; these bonds are now undone by indifference. In other words, we have not really broken with this recent past; our world is an extension of it. It is as if the nihilism of late modernity were pursuing the uncompleted work of utopian ideologies.”
- 54 “Scruples are what resists the will to transform or destroy morality. . . . The one who sweeps away our last scruples, the one who presides over the auto-da-fe of scruples, is Hitler.”
- 58-59 “What has been forgotten is that man becomes civilized through the cultural architecture of myths, norms, and laws. Totalitarianism made humanity barbarous by depriving humans of their cultural world. Nazism uprooted the foundation of the culture of dignity by rejecting the unity of the human species; communism rejected the

expressions of this culture without replacing them—law and morality are bourgeois, hence to be eliminated. It arrived at barbarity through the annihilation of properly human requirements, for a society without laws and morality ends up forgetting the very foundations of its humanity and therefore treats some men like animals. . . . We may have rejected totalitarian terrorism; we have not restored the common world that its postulates destroyed.”

- 61 “The contemporary individual believes he is capable of inventing whatever it is he wants to be, and takes himself for God. In this respect he has inherited an ideology which thought it could reinvent humanity, cast off the ballast of constraints, and play the demi-urge. Contemporary individualism represents the continuation, in solitary form, of the utopian dream.”
- 68 “To ‘raise’ a child, in its most concrete sense, is to help him emerge from the naked and unspoken tragedy into which his birth has thrown him, and to give his world a meaning. Of course, this meaning will be incomplete and always too meager, but it will make of him an upright being in spite of the tragedy and the wound.”
- 79 “The irresponsible individual who lives for the moment is nothing more than a figment of the imagination, in the sense that he would never be able to survive. Without realizing it, he would need a despot who would force him to reestablish the limits that he himself would be unable to define. No human society can persist in the face of the chaos of individual capriciousness. . . . If the human being is irresponsible, he must be brought under control; if he wishes to be free, he must be responsible for the consequences of his acts.”
- 80 “The major error of late modernity is to believe that the way of progress is the way of individual self-sufficiency. In this sense, it is still drawing from the utopian wellspring. To leave utopias behind would mean to recognize more clearly man’s constitutive insufficiency. Then the way of progress would be the way of expanding individual responsibility.”
- 82 “The subject who is faithful to himself lives his history. The ephemeral individual renounces nothing. His own history remains foreign to him: he admits to living successive lives. The contemporary individual, even as an adult, remains an unstable adolescent characterized by his scattered desires, his contradictory opinions, his obliviousness, his irresponsibility, and his constant clamoring for things he has done nothing to deserve but to which he feels entitled. In fact this is why he has such low esteem. To the extent that there has to be a minimum of coherence before self-love is possible, how can we reckon with something that is essentially shapeless? The man of holistic societies existed as a member of a group. The contemporary individual is no longer a part of an existing group, but neither has he become a self. His mirror reflects no image.”
- 86 “The ideologies of the twentieth century provided supposedly definitive answers for a subject tired of living in perpetual questioning. They were supposed to heal modern man, sick of the unlimited freedom that had been falsely attributed to him. Perverse systems are the result of a misunderstanding of what freedom is.”
- 87 “The individual lost in the crowd swings between indifference to all certitudes and submission to received opinion, which bespeaks a deteriorated relationship to truth. Why this paradox? The individual has no certainties, merely opinions with no grounding outside his subjective point of view. He is therefore constantly aware of the fragility of

his own thought; he finds reassurance by adhering to dominant opinion. The objectivity of the Good has been replaced by the magnitude of consensus.”

- 92 “Totalitarian man is capable of the worst crimes because, in essence, he has been robbed of his conscience. But Ionesco was intent on portraying this same loss of self in contemporary society. ... Our contemporaries admire Copernicus because he struggled against the church. But they do not admire him for his independent mind. Their packaged truths have no place for any new Copernicuses.”
- 95 “In the wasteland grows a society of individuals without depth, without their own ideas, without habits of questioning, without distance from themselves, yet who all the while assert their sublime liberty.”
- 99 “Subjectivism, which produced both twentieth-century totalitarianism and individualism, issues from a subject who is self-sufficient. ... It is precisely this self-sufficiency that the dissident contests, this conviction that the alpha and the omega are within oneself, this pretension of rivaling the absolute.”
- 108 “he whose intention is considered pure is absolved in advance”
- 113 “a restoration of the subject will require first an understanding that one’s neighbor is the initial other in moral life.”
- 119 “The self-sufficient man lives in a prolonged instant, because he lacks an imagined future. He lives in repetition, and goes from the same to the same, like a prisoner serving a life sentence. The perpetual present is a cell, too narrow to contain reparations and forgiveness.”
- 121 “The self-founded individual has nothing to look forward to: he believes he already possesses everything. The self-sufficient individual resembles the individual that Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor might have created: complete, he is thus liberated from his freedom and from the anxiety of achieving his own completeness. The authentic subject has an intimate sense that he is incomplete, only half-created. Marie Balmary writes that the creator in Genesis stayed his hand before completing his work, leaving it unfinished: the only way to confer freedom.”
- 127 “Relativism is by nature intolerant: it destroys the foundation on which any common discourse must be based. ... Individuals rally around their lifestyle preferences, their cultural attachments, or their status as historical victims.”
- 128 “By banding together in groups of like individuals, they seek strength in numbers... The person-subject accepts differences and seeks complementary relationships because he is less interested in furthering himself than in furthering a world in which he takes part.”
- 130 “If the space that separates individuals is not filled, if no language based on common referents exists between them, and if the only common norm is the one according to which each lives as he likes, then the only possible interaction is violence. ... Unable to make the other its neighbor, it will make it its enemy.”
- 132 “The society of late modernity ... no longer knows what the law should be founded on.”
- 133 “Society consists in bonds between individuals, not individuals themselves as a conglomeration. It is law that ensures real peace, in the sense of peaceful living in diversity.”

- 134 “If each individual lays claim to his own conception of good and evil, to his own morality and law, then dialogue is no more possible than if each were to speak in his own tongue.”
- 166 “We can struggle against evil, but we cannot pose as supreme righters of wrongs, searching out evil wherever it may be found and then eradicating it.”
- 170 “to drag our ancestors through the mud does not indicate very sound judgment. Indeed, it bespeaks an infantile form of Manicheanism—do we really think that time stops with us?”
- 172 “True repentance means a reversal of the self that takes place in the shadows of a reflective conscience: it is to abandon and let go of the ‘old’ self; it is the inner death of a self that has since been transformed. Repentance is possible only through the slow and painful inward journey that overturns rationalizations, accepts shame, and transforms it into a new hope. It is possible only in a culture that recognizes the importance of the individual conscience. Only the person as subject can repent and convert.”
- 175 For Fichte, “the German people were ontologically innocent. . . . The founding folly of the twentieth century lies in the certitude that elimination of the bourgeoisie, or of the Jews, would at last open the way for a free, just, and peaceful society. Scapegoating can be seen as the predominant mental process of the modern age.”
- 177 “The foundations of contemporary thought remain those of the same revolutionary modernity that gave rise to totalitarianism.”
- 178 “No executioner is entirely evil, no victim entirely innocent. Essences escape us. We remain a mysterious mixture, forever more complex than the categories into which we slip. The very idea of *person* expresses this infinite complexity: a fathomless well, impenetrable thickness, which no one can reduce to an act or trait.”
- 179 “If every man has dignity, I can hate no one, not even my worst enemy.”
- 181 “It is the demonization of criminals that excuses them, since it relieves them of responsibility by denying that they had freedom to act.”
- 183 “We must acknowledge the ubiquity of evil, because the rejection of the idea of original evil gives rise to Manicheanism, scapegoating, and, ultimately, the splintering of humanity into separate species. . . . [the dissidents rejected] the twins goals of re-creating human nature and personifying evil—ideas that are mutually sustaining.”
- 185 “the philosophy of rights is possible only if the dignity of each man remains independent of his crimes”
- 202 “In order to care for, improve, and clear the brush away from what exists, we must keep in check our will to begin again *ex nihilo*, loving both existence and those beings who exist. That is, we must love them more than the products of our own minds. The failures of the twentieth century reveal who we are. We are not demiurges. We are gardeners.”