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History's Legacy: Human Nature Is Unchanging

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ABSTRACT

Today we ought to be in a completely different situation from that of Plato and Raphael during " italian renaisance ", thanks to the progress and power of technical knowledge. A knowledge which has become an end in itself for the modern world, one that should have provided answers to satisfy our primary needs, releasing us from our "shackles", reducing inequalities, freeing us, at least in part, from a life of fatigue and suffering in physical terms. Scientific knowledge should have helped to create a situation in which our free, inventive mind could once again be the driving force of life, leading us to that dimension of spiritual joy we admire in splendid works of art. This is what Keynes thought would happen. In his essay *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren* written in 1930 he said: 'Thus for the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem – how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, which science and compound interest will have won for him [...]. The love of money as a possession – as distinguished from the love of money as a means to the enjoyments and realities of life – will be recognised for what it is, a somewhat disgusting morbidity, one of those semi-criminal, semi-pathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease'.

Keyword: anthropological crisis, history repeat itself, economy is an mean not an end, economy is social science not rational science.

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL CRISIS NOT ECONOMIC

Analyses of history by great European scholars and philosophers, who never ignored the humanistic culture and always tried to use this when interpreting the evolution of history, show common lines of investigation and development despite personal differences in terms of their times, origins and experiences.

So, historians, philosophers, sociologists, theologists, and those who study psychology and the human mind identify certain common points that must be examined in order to interpret the becoming of history. Points that can be summarized as follows.

- Human nature is unchanging and swings continually between a drive to assert a genetic aggressiveness and an evolution towards behaviour more oriented towards mutual acceptance by developing a sense of "societas".
- The primary drive is seen in aggressiveness – death – because human beings are not naturally good, otherwise religions would not need to state "love thy neighbour as thyself" as the first commandment. But when a society favouring an individualistic and egoistic approach asserts itself this leads to clashes and consequent suffering. To escape from this humanity is then forced to search for a loving relationship – "Eros" – and values more oriented towards the spiritual sphere, which lead to reconciliatory phases in history after conflict and wars.

- After wars, periods of peace in different societies create a momentum towards a form of composition of interests, especially if these are threatened by a danger from outside. But once the danger has passed challenges and struggles start up again, leading to a weakening of the opposing parties and exposing them to the risk of foreign domination. For instance, the Greek polis failed to find a form of union but then were forced to unite when faced with the threat of the semi-barbarian Macedonians. Later, Venice, Florence and Milan met with the same fate when they also failed to unite and found themselves subjugated.
- The alternating of these periods can be observed when history is reviewed over longer time-spans. Good and evil times follow each other but the former, one hopes, will manage to prevail in the long run thanks to a fuller maturity of the sense of society. The challenge to good is continually re-proposed so that God can continue His work of creation and achieve a final victory over evil. This is how the struggle is presented by famous literary figures, for instance, in Goethe's Faust God accepts Mephistopheles' provocation who in the end loses but then later makes a comeback in a different manner to continue the struggle between good and evil.
- Historical phases in which one of the two tendencies – aggression and socialization – prevails more clearly seem to be punctuated by a period marked by greater social harmony. There is a growth of creative and humanistic thought in which the encounter between different sciences in the absence of dogmas and preclusions favours cross-fertilization, as in classical Greece and the Italian Renaissance. A representation of this harmony is depicted splendidly in Raphael's fresco The School of Athens in which Plato points skywards – symbolizing the world of ideas – while Aristotle points downwards – therefore to the need to remain grounded in the real world. But being unstable the human soul moves continuously like a pendulum between the two extremes, although the hope is that future evolution of societies can contribute to reducing the degree of these swings.
- Social equilibrium – we can define it as a trend towards democracy – achieved after a great deal of effort and clashes can be compromised by the rise to power of minorities that become dominant and aim to reinforce their position and egoistical interests over the others, who become, in turn, the majority in numerical terms. At that point the system will tend more and more towards a marked form of oligarchy.
- The dominant oligarchy, the minority, detaches itself from the rest of society, whereas the majority, which becomes instrumental and ends up no longer pursuing the common good, overcome by a desire to achieve its own opportunistic interests. This leads to a kind of social monopoly that seeks to maximize personal gain by means of what people hope is everlasting "rentier capitalism".
- At this point the risk of a change in the dominant class' privileged situation is threatened and so it resorts to exercising power also by means of a kind of cultural immobility in society. It reduces the creative drive and turnover of ideas and of people who had initially legitimated it to govern. In this way the dominant minority loses touch with an ever-changing reality and attempts to freeze the social order so as to stabilize its privileged position by repelling the spiritual trend and social values that can reawaken consciences. This attracts people to power of a lower cultural and moral level, and lastly promotes the dominance of material and sensate values. These become widespread until such time as the entire system starts to collapse. But history moves on and questions

this ossified model, which marks the moment when the pendulum of society starts to swing back in search of a new equilibrium.

- The appearance and assertion of scientific knowledge as being the decisive and, indeed, sole truth to observe in decisions concerning the development of society becomes an accelerator for change because evolutionary processes between one model and the next become faster and more consequential. Technical knowledge has illuded people that its growth automatically coincides with a better and more equal society. The hubris that brought about the downfall of Adam and Eve is reminiscent of a form of omnipotence and dominion over nature in general, but especially the idea of being able to ask science to provide unlimited answers as regards the suffering of life. Technical-rational knowledge applied in an absolute manner to a social science like economics ends up by making it a moral value.
- So technical-rational knowledge becomes the detonator for change in society, always hovering between one phase of values and another, depending on an increase in awareness of the need for democracy and greater equality. The tendency is therefore to delegate technological development as being the science capable of providing an overall improvement of humanity's wellbeing and standard of living.
- Technical knowledge coupled with and extended to include economic sciences ends up by playing the leading role in government policies and social orientation: the "financialization" of the real economy represents the extreme evolution of this cultural model and marks its failure.

In fact, illusions are unmasked not only because society fails to improve its standard of living but also because it generates a growing inequality in terms of income redistribution. At this point the dream of technical knowledge as being the panacea for all ills is forced to face a reality that clearly highlights all of its limits.

Sorokin believed that the existence of some very rich individuals within a highly privileged minority becomes the cause of bitter resentment among the majority and even if the standard of living in a material sense increases the latter will still feel the need for social justice. And while in the past the unequal distribution of the world's goods between a privileged minority and an underprivileged majority was considered to be inevitable, technological progress in the Western world has now made it an intolerable injustice.

The cycle indicated in the previous pages is clearly borne out by facts and shows how economic science as it has been devised and studied doesn't take into account human nature, which has reinforced the development of society moving in the wrong direction. Economics has taken on a moral value – an unquestionable truth – betraying its original role as a tool to respond to people's needs. It is now an end in itself and tool for cultural domination that has led society to face the dilemma of it becoming. And once again after having thrown human nature out of the door it has forced its way back in through the window. The aggressiveness and greed of this economic model have grown enormously but without ever managing to be satisfied. The idea of justice as represented by a society of equals has been ignored and replaced by a society of unequals, with a concentration of wealth in this "democracy" that is unparalleled in world history. Once more history shows that the tool in itself is neither good nor bad, but always depends on the use made of it based on prevailing values of the times.

Economics has taken on an unjustified role in our society by becoming an end. The construction of the "new science of economics" that began with the exclusive use of the positive disciplines back in the 1960s was based on an unfounded hypothesis – it assumed that human beings, studied in a mechanistic way, don't have an emotional life, contradicting all the evidence provided by history. Our age and its economic model seem to have failed in their mission to free us from concerns to satisfy primary needs and provide people, in general everywhere, with a higher standard of living. While in past centuries it seemed that the standard of living improved for everyone, it is also true that the starting point was very low in the various levels of the social scale. Today the situation is different because as we have seen important scientific discoveries have created the illusion that it is possible to reduce inequalities faster and respond in a more adequate manner to real needs. The orientation of the current economic model has discarded a long-term view of the real economy and replaced it by the short or extremely short-term view of the financial economy. One that favours the achievement of immediate, utilitarian profit in a manner that increasingly ignores ethical principles. The time has come for us to draw on our wisdom and redesign our age.

The book of Ecclesiastes starts with the verse 'Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity', and says that there is a time for all things: 'To every thing there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven'. Ecclesiastes indicates the variety of human vicissitudes and changes of scenario in history in which we must, using wisdom, identify the time for everything. Saint Ambrose often cited this text and in his writings on Tobias wrote 'Seeds open in their season, animals give birth in their season'. In fact, 'there is a time for giving birth and a time for dying […]. There is a time for gaining and a time for repaying, a time for preserving and a time for casting away'. To rethink the meaning of our age and human life, to once more make it the focal point of our interests with a less precarious respect and equilibrium. But this cannot be achieved without a profound rethinking of the role and methods of study of economics in our life. Today, finally, our age is again faced with the enigma of life with a crisis that begs the question of which path to follow in the future. We need to rethink the values underlying current problems. An inability to see the roots of these leads to thinking they can still and always will be resolved by means of technical measures because the assumption is they are caused by malfunctioning markets. The real underlying cause is a society that is no longer able to respond to the real problems facing humanity and that by depriving human beings of their conscience has transformed them into tools that no longer know how to find the meaning of life. The real challenge facing us in this phase in history is to regain an awareness of the meaning of life seen from a more human standpoint of our being.

As regards Italy, what is needed is to restore moral fibre and again find the courage of great politicians, like De Gasperi, who contributed to reconstructing Italy in the postwar period. De Gasperi, speaking before the allied powers, had this to say about the role Italy could play in the world's future: 'The most substantial reparation that Italy can offer is its contribution in terms of efforts and culture towards building a new world […]. Cultural accomplishments in terms of sobriety and industriousness, a centuries-old tradition of Christian morality and sense of justice can still make this country a safe bridge for Western civilization'. (M. R. De Gasperi, *De Gasperi*).

CONCLUSION

Technical-instrumental knowledge has become moral knowledge, an indisputable truth and so in no way open to discussion. It dictates the rules for everyday life to the point that humanity

itself has become its instrument. The technical culture of modern times has failed to achieve the aim that was hoped for. However, it is not the culture that is at fault but the improvidence of *homo sapiens*. We have failed to redistribute wealth; inequalities, famine and poverty have increased; we have not resolved major health problems afflicting a majority of the world's population. Technical knowledge has separated us from our souls, made us sterile and impersonal, incapable of true human relations and the profound sentiments of love and joy. Unless, that is, these are linked to the sole satisfaction of material and fleeting pleasures. We have imprisoned thought, disintegrated family bonds and forced youngsters to roam the streets without hope. All of us have made this mistake, given that responsibilities are always personal, even if at different levels. This modern age needs rethinking if we are not to find ourselves once more facing chaos.

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