
COMMENTARY - IT IS NOT ABOUT THE DIET: IT IS ABOUT HUMANITY

NEW REALITIES AND OLD IDEAS ABOUT PROSPERITY

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There are many good reasons why more and more people go jogging in parks, bike through the streets, or even do calisthenics on the beach. Clearly, our bodies have yet to adapt to the fact that the world - or at least most of it - has changed. We still find greasy, high-calorie foods more attractive than vegetables and lean meals, which makes sense when we think that for roughly one hundred thousand years (the period of the early homo sapiens) the necessary calories for hunting, keeping warm, escaping from predators and surviving were scarce.

The human body takes much longer than society and culture to change. Thus, to stay healthy we must balance the natural impulses of our bodies with activities that burn our excess calories. We must artificially change our eating habits and go on diets that are costly both to society and individuals.

Likewise, our society consumes more junk foods than healthy ones and does not make the effort to get in shape. Our parents and grandparents are the last remnants of a world defined by scarcity, where famine and starvation were a constant threat. Back then, the symbols of prosperity were abundance, plenitude and the increase, in size and number, of individual possessions (a new home or vehicle) and community assets (from church steeples to high-rise towers).

In art rich or holy people were portrayed as being plump. The songs, religion, work and myths of the past were expressions of ever-present scarcity coupled with the hope of abundance. Even ethics was based on appreciating and finding contentment in little things. In that culture, no feast went without an overabundance of food, clothing and grandiose wastefulness. Feasts were a celebration of desired prospects that nurtured the dreams of comfort of the poor, who could feel (almost) rich for at least a day. Those genuine and powerful dreams have propelled the world forward. Unless we capture the echo of this culture, we will not be able understand, for instance, our anxiety about food or why we accumulate so many things in our closets (some have estimated there are over 30,000 objects in the average home). In this culture, however, abundance was not the only thing associated with prosperity. The diminished social status of women and the underprivileged, intertwined with hierarchical and unequal relationships, was also a part of that world.

An apartment culture was a reaction to this, as young couples began to emancipate themselves from the hierarchy of patriarchal families and build their own homes to enjoying intimacy and their long-awaited freedom. The rise of a market economy is looked upon - and rightly so - as a path of deliverance from restrictive community relations forged by bonds that were akin to shackles. "What have I done for you to abandon me? Maybe you have found a better worker than me", wrote Luigi Einaudi to describe the dialogue between a cobbler and a fellow citizen who had changed trades (*Lessons on Social Policy*, 1949). We have been brought up in a paradigm that equates "good" with "plenteous", in which prosperity means abundance, "better" is a synonym for "more" and growth is measured in terms of increased possessions for the individual and family. That is what we wished for our children. The environment today no longer sustains that kind of humanistic abundance, and relational goods that until recently were plentiful enough to be perceived as evils - and often they were - are fast becoming the most scarce, desirable and valuable goods.

Many would trade entire fortunes for a gesture of true selflessness (and often this desire is so intense that they fall prey to false graciousness). However, the symbols and codes of communication used in politics, economics, the media and advertising (centered on food and things, especially for children) are still those of the old world, encouraging us to consume “things” and isolate ourselves. As a logical consequence of this imbalance, very little is done to help the outrageous number of people who still live in poverty and are threatened with starvation. We must urgently adapt our vocabulary of the good life, starting with our schools. This does not mean we should no longer study Verga, Rabelais or Dickens, or that we should abandon the classic tales that come from the past world of scarcity. Instead, we should complement old educational “motifs” with other images and symbols that meaningfully associate prosperity and relational exchanges, with more graciousness and freedom. The classics already provide the themes, but we must strive to create new ones and avoid living off educational and cultural entitlements.

There are signs of change, but more needs to be done. We need to reinforce the importance of relationships with stories like the ones that made people feel satisfied and rich in times of scarcity and hunger. We need new “lands of plenty” that inspire dreams and desires. For all the talk about relationships these days, there are no new myths or narratives that move the heart and spur individual and collective action. Europe - especially the South - will once again enjoy comfort and a healthy economic life as soon as we reinvent our collective idea of prosperity. The same holds true for our idea of nourishment, because nothing reveals the quality of family relationships in a community more than its eating habits. Indeed, the foremost sign of the relational poverty of our times is the “solitary meal” culture (perhaps we will be able to focus on relationships at the 2015 Feeding the Planet Expo).

Europe can make it. Its history is full of extraordinary cases of civil and economic success born out of real communities, fertile lands and diverse people who were capable of inventing democracy and markets. Today they can reinvent them. Especially during times of crisis, our most valuable asset has always been relationships, not securities. “An artist is never poor”, Babette would say after a wonderful lunch. In fact, Babette’s art went beyond cuisine: it was about relationships as well. Material wealth is important, but it only improves our lives when enjoyed in fellowship. Assets should be a vehicle for closeness, and they should build bridges instead of walls. Let us therefore focus less on consumption and more on our relationships, turning our eyes away from material objects and towards one another.

Translated by Tomás Olcese