

Subsidiarity. New inflections of an ancient principle

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There is not good civil and political life without subsidiarity. This is one of the big lessons of the 1900s, of its totalitarianisms and ideologies, among which the most recent is perhaps the most dangerous (because it does not appear so): the market understood as the only regulatory principle of society. Subsidiarity is an expression that comes from subsidy, help. This principle was explicitly pronounced for the first time by Pope Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931, during an historical period that had killed freedom and democracy also because it had first killed that principle. Implicitly, however, the principle of subsidiarity is ancient and dates back at least to the first ecumenical Councils, to the Fathers of the Church, to Scholastica, when it becomes an elaborated category of person. A very close relationship exists, in fact, between the principle of subsidiarity and the personalistic principle. Let's see why.

The first definition of subsidiarity could be the following: the choices that regard a person or community should be taken at the closest level to the people involved. Every other intervention more distant is "good" if it is of help (that is what a subsidy does) to the lives of those people. It is, instead, "bad" if the more distant action substitutes that which is closer to the people. In other words, a public intervention or a collective action should be preferable the more it involves the subjects interested by that intervention or action. Participation, the process, is not less important than the objective to be reached, as the "how" often does not count any less than the "what".

The principle of subsidiarity is also one of the principles of the European Union (which however, only partially understood it, because it unhooked it from the personalistic principle), and which is always more invoked by who searches for an institutional architecture which respects "proximity" and deliberative democracy. Until today, such principle was mostly applied in its "vertical" version (as regulatory criteria of the relationship between the various levels of public administration: state, region, municipality...). Recently, the "horizontal" aspect has also been emphasized (regarding the relationship between civil society, market and public administration).

I am convinced that a new declension of this fundamental principle of civil life is necessary. It could be formulated like so: do not make a contract out of what could be done with reciprocity (gratuitousness). Or, in a more positive version: the market contract is the form of a fully human and civilizing relationship when it is subsidiary to reciprocity. The market contract becomes, instead, an enemy to the common good when it becomes a substitute for gratuitousness, as, unfortunately, is happening in our market societies, even when they abstractly invoke the principle of subsidiarity. In certain contexts, above all those in which the protection of disadvantaged subjects is at risk, and where there is structural asymmetry between the parties in question, the contract can reveal itself a valid instrument that serves, helps (subsidizes) gift and gratuitousness (many micro credit experiences are positive examples of this version of subsidiarity). May contracts and the market be welcomed, but if they help to increase universal fraternity.

At this point, the nexus with the personalistic principle should be clearer. Why, in fact, should we prefer the intervention of the municipality to that of the state (in the “vertical” version of subsidiarity) or the nursery school managed by a cooperative of parents rather than a public nursery school (in the “horizontal” version)? Because at the basis of the principle of subsidiarity, one finds the implicit hypothesis that people are truly people when they meet and when they live relationships of reciprocity, and precisely because the human being is not individual but person, that is to say, he is himself only in relationship with others. It is in the personalistic principle that we should trace the presence of the principle of subsidiarity in the original design of the Republican Constitution, in all of the tradition of civil, social, cooperative economy, which has always existed even without being called by that name (it’s a difficult name, also because it is often poorly explained and in an abstract way).

Always on the same personalistic basis, subsidiarity can be explained in the relationship with the new media: a media (e-mail, Skype, Facebook...) is good if it favors personal meetings. Instead, it’s bad with it becomes a substitute for real human relationships – the border between the good and the bad is often subject to a critical threshold.

In conclusion, I want to cite a phrase that I heard from Mons. Bregantini, and which I personally consider the best declension of the principle of subsidiarity: “Only you can do it, but you can’t do it alone”. Subsidiarity is, in fact, an extraordinary principle also in every authentic educative relationship: if the parent, or the teacher, or the adult, is not subsidiary but substitutes the other, the educative process doesn’t work and only produces pathologies and narcissism (not by chance the big illness of post-modernity). Analogous discourse on the theme of development: every type of help that arrives to people from the outside is efficient only if it supports and empowers the first fundamental movement that happens entirely within a person: his desire to live!

Subsidiarity is, therefore, a big civil word because it offers the criteria for organizing diversity, for articulating the multiform colors and facets of the *communitas*, for creating the cohabitation of differences. That is why it’s a word charged with future, in a world that will become always more multiform and rich with diversity.