

A conversation with Luigino Bruni, political economist The Market Changes the Soul (or it sells it)

By Gino Dato

Published in La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno (The Midday Gazette) on 3/05/2010

"In the last two centuries, it has reached extraordinary economic, technological and civil results...but today it has become obsolete." We're talking with Luigino Bruni, professor of political economy at the University of Milano-Bicocca, about capitalism and its present and future fate. In fact, in the past, it made us freer individuals and more equal amongst one another, but it no longer raises peoples' well-being along with the increments in goods production. Where the "scarce good" marks the relationship with others and the environment, the god of goods no longer deserves to be adored and is affecting society. Bruni's courageous writing, *The Ethos of the Market* (Bruno Modadori, ed.), covers the relationship between capitalism and ethics.

You say that capitalism has made us freer and more equal. What does that mean?

"It's enough to look at Medieval civilization to realize the difference (and therefore the inequality) between the life expectations of a serf's son and the son of a feudal lord. They were not equal in these expectations. This happens in a feudal society, with a very low level of civilization, in which the relationships between persons were "relationships of power". It was the same in the market, in politics, in culture..."

Capitalism has changed all this.

"In the last two centuries, that form of market which is capitalism has reached extraordinary economic, technological and civil results, playing an important function in the transformation from a feudal society - hierarchical and unequal - into a composition of freer and more equal individuals".

What is its greatest invention?

"Having aimed at the inclusion of millions of people that were earlier excluded, playing on their desires and want for growth. When a farmer, son of a farmer, buys a Mercedes, he feels (and in a certain sense it's true) like the son of a noble and of a banker. It is on this want of growth and of freedom that capitalism has been able to bring that 90% of the population which the Ancien Regime had left out of the "civil arena" back into it. And when we see the development of India and China today - and tomorrow that of Africa - the market continues to play this civilizing and inclusive function, because it allows billions of excluded persons to be protagonists, and it gives one hope that one's children will be better off than he was."

And yet, capitalism is "obsolete", you say. As what happens with technology?

"Capitalism has become obsolete because, while considering "freedom" and "equality", it has forgotten "fraternity", and without fraternity, individual and societal life does not flourish. Besides, while up until a few decades ago, raising production of goods meant raising people's well-being, today - in a world where a "scarce good" is in force - a system based on goods and GNP is not mistaken, but obsolete."

What are the signs of this crisis? First of all, in the relationship with the external world, with the environment...

"They are under everyone's eyes: terrorism, the environment, finance, energy. We cannot limit ourselves to analyzing the financial crisis without linking it together with the "other crises": the world is struggling to keep itself together in globalization. It gives signs of subsidence because we are consuming more than what is in our possibilities (in income, in relationships, spiritually...). There is not only an environmental sustainability in our civilization. There is also, and above all, relational and spiritual sustainability. This market economy and this market society are exhausting their forces for social change and their civilizing nature, because we're paying the conquests on the level of individual freedom with the currency of environment and social relations."

Already, in our relationships with others?

"The market economy has determined a change in human relationships, becoming an ethos, a lifestyle that itself influences on common living. The market arises from (and develops from) its humanism: the promise of inter-human relationships without the wound of the other. The history of cultures is history of attempts at freeing man from the vulnerability associated with the presence of another who is equal to himself and just as free. This is a tale of roads taken to melt the paradoxical tension between the invincible desire that pushes us towards the others in search of community and the need to free ourselves from the deep links that every community creates."

Therefore, we need to go beyond the market economy. What does this mean? Who is to be responsible of this task?

"The great operation that awaits us is to go beyond this market economy without giving up the conquests of civilization that this economic and social system has helped us reach. Finding interpersonal relationships that remove us from the solitary immunity that dominates our cities without falling into forms of communitarianism that are often unliberal, nostalgic of ancient communities - a worse remedy than the illness that we want to cure. It is a task that up to everyone, but if we want to find a subject that is perhaps more inclined to taking up a similar change, civil society comes to mind."