

Honor to the southern spirit

Oikonomia/ 7 – There once was (and there should be) a road along which the poor are not damned

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“The social consequences of the disparities in our individual starting points tend to be denied. This often translates into a general disapproval of leveling egalitarianism, while defending meritocracy which exalts individuality.”

Federico Caffè, The solitude of the reformist

The Catholic spirit of capitalism is different from its Anglo-Saxon spirit. Until recently, when the centrality of consumption also began conquering Mediterranean humanism.

There is a distinct elective affinity between capitalism and the Protestant world. Of the fifty founding economists of the *American Economic Association* in 1885, twenty were Protestant pastors. Adam Smith formed his beliefs in Calvinist circles in Scotland, Malthus and Wicksteed, two economists and prominent figures in the history of economic thought, were both Protestant pastors. Alfred Marshall, perhaps the most influential English economist between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, trained as a pastor. Furthermore, Esther Duflo, Nobel laureate in Economics in 2019, said, «Protestantism is part of my family, my education and my social persona». In the Catholic world, however, the situation was very different. As far back in time as the abbot Antonio Genovesi in the eighteenth century, economists who called themselves "Catholic economists" favored an ethical, philosophical or historical approach, they did not however offer any contribution that ended up becoming part of the official tradition of economic science. Other such economists founded cooperatives, rural banks, and banks, or preferred working in a political and institutional sphere.

This does not mean that there is not a "Catholic" spirit even in modern economic science. Finding it, however, requires going beyond the visible boundaries of the Church and "Catholic" economists, and instead looking for it among economists of all ideological and confessional beliefs, different expressions of a meridian and catholic economy (understood in a non-religious, cultural sense), with a series of common traits although different in their habits and form. Only by limiting ourselves to the twentieth century and Italian economists, do we find, for example, Achille Loria and his criticism of rent and financial income, seen as the great enemy of an entrepreneur's profit and a worker's wages. After the war, Federico Caffè and Sylos Labini began to study inequality, linking it to income distribution and criticism of meritocracy, while Giorgio Fuà concentrated on the criticism of the GDP and on the qualitative dimensions of happiness and well-being. A theme which was also cultivated by Giacomo Becattini, the theorist of the industrial districts and Made in Italy, who placed the "vocation of places" at the center of his scientific research. Talking about places and not about GDP means placing the emphasis on human relationships, institutions and relational goods, another characteristic trait of this tradition. All topics that focus on relationships more

than on individuals, on the whole more than on particular details or aspects, on public happiness more than on that of the individual.

If we read and studied these authors, we would immediately notice that there is an objective harmony between their economic theory and the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. In particular, they share a distrust of the founding principle of Anglo-Saxon capitalism: the "invisible hand", an essential concept in Adam Smith's *Political economy* and in the entire Anglo-Saxon Protestant economic theory. Although it is often downsized by Smith's own heirs, the "invisible hand" expresses a fundamental idea, a direct expression of Nordic anthropology and capitalism. The common good does not need actions intentionally aimed at it, because the only good and effective way to achieve the common good is to create incentives for each individual to seek his or her own private interest: «I have never seen anything good being done by those who pretend to trade for the common good» (A. Smith, 1776). Order and wealth have no need for intentional acts aimed at the common good or for acts for the good of the other party with whom I interact in an economic relationship (contract). Instead, everyone must think about their own personal interest (*self-interest*), because a sort of secular providence (the *invisible hand*, in fact) will work to transform that sum of all private interests into a collective well-being and well-being for the other party as well. This theoretical expedient is decisive because it shuts the system of Anglo-Saxon capitalism off, and disconnects social results, from individual intentions. In capitalist society there is no need for any collective action, there is no "we", no relationship, no encounter.

Latin humanism never made this logic its own. The concept and mechanism of the "invisible hand" were evident in Genovesi (and before him in Vico), (the metaphor of the "hand" is also present in the work of Galiani), but only as a secondary and subsidiary mechanism. Because the fundamental economic principle here is instead that of "mutual assistance", where each individual, in addition to his own interest, intentionally wishes for the interests and well-being of the other party as well. Hence, mutual good is part of everyone's intentions. In this humanism, there is no common good without intentionally seeking it out. Intentions have always had a lot of weight under the Alps. The global environmental crisis is also a macroscopic sign of the failure to rely on the "invisible hand" to transform private interests into a common good. The differences in economic theory, however, are an expression of something much deeper, hidden in the roots of the Catholic and meridian tree. Here, the individual is important, but the person is even more important, and the community and intermediate bodies even more so. The community, with its warm relationships, however, is both heaven and hell, freedom and slavery, snare and flight, pain and love. The humanism of the community, unlike that of the individual, is a bumpy, slow, interrupted path, even if on some exceptionally clear days, someone is said to have managed to see a glimpse of paradise along that bumpy road.

A humanism that should not be compared to Protestant humanism in an attempt to decide which is better. They should be compared only to understand their destiny, what they have in common and where they differ. The crisis in Southern Europe is also the result of an insufficient reflection on its economic vocation, both similar and different from the Nordic and Protestant one. Europe will continue to be a wonderful collective dream as long as it remains subsidiary and diversified, as long as there is a dialogue between different spirits, including economic ones. The Catholic world has always seen the birth of capitalism and its growth as something alien. It never felt comfortable with the idea that profits and wealth were a blessing. It experienced a sense of inferiority when looking at the large, rational and scientific companies and banks in the north, while comparing them to its small factories, the rural banks or its cooperatives, where employee and friend were frequently the same person, where the company was also family, where during the day you could fight over a contract, and then play cards together in the parish or in the community center that very same evening. There is also a great sense of inadequacy, disdain, inferiority and shame involved in the economic and social crisis of many Southern regions of the world.

The meridian world has frequently tried to take work seriously; however, the idea and experience that work is above all about fatigue, pain, and labor, was and still continues to be stronger; the idea that it is first and foremost a natural duty and then, perhaps, also a vocation (*beruf*, *berufung*). Working was the

profession of living, of living a difficult life. The Catholic Church wanted to welcome and enhance a whole world of spirits who lived in the countryside and in the cities long before Christian religion gave them other names. It did not fight these spirits, it did not fight the saints, it did not call them "idols", and it did not condemn farmers and peasants as idolaters. Even after the Middle Ages, it continued to cultivate a religion that grew side by side with the religious aspect and sense of the fields and the harvest, where theology has always been less important than mourning, processions and newsstands in the crossroads of the paths leading to the fields. A Church that over the centuries has had to accompany men and women who were more experts on the saints than on the Trinity, more devout to Mary than to God the Father, who loved the angels and were afraid of demons. Over time, this gave life to a popular culture that later could not bring itself to believe that the new demon-spirit of capitalism from the North, which associated blessings with money and wealth, could be a good spirit, because it was too different from that ancient discipline based of life and land.

To the South, the wealth of the ruling class was also a good thing because it contributed to making churches more impressive and beautiful, even if the rest of us remained poor and ignorant, at least during Sunday Mass we were as beautiful and surrounded by splendid marvel as they were. We did not know how to read, we did not understand Latin, but the frescoes and paintings spoke to us. We dreamed of them at night, hence even in our difficult lives we could still have beautiful dreams, populated by angels and saints, and so when we eventually arrived in paradise, we would be able to recognize them immediately. We did not understand the different music played by the bands on fair days, but we understood that they were beautiful, and as soon as we made two pennies, we sent a nephew to study the accordion. We were almost always poor, but not always, not really, because on holidays we too, at least on that one day, felt rich, on that day we were no longer ashamed of our poverty. We loved many things, but above all, we loved feasts and parties, processions and saints. A certainly imperfect world, full of contradictions and pain, but in which the poor were not considered cursed. They were the children of life, the same life everyone else lead, and for generations their pain flooded hospitals, schools, orphanages, generating a host of saints and, then, our wonderful welfare state.

The wealth that originated from the factories was instead seen as something suspect. This is also why when the first industrialists started building factories almost as large as those in America, the relationship between those (few) capitalists and the territory and its people was different from that of Nordic and Protestant capitalists. They were rich, of course, but their wealth was not considered, by them or by the community, as a blessing, but as destiny, sometimes as a cruel fate. All this humanism, popular and different as it was, was slowly devoured and disappeared almost entirely in a few decades, when we convinced ourselves that the only good spirit was that which came from the North and from overseas; when the idea of wealth as a blessing, shifted from production to consumption. The move from the factory to the shopping center was a decisive one, combined with the development of speculative finance that freed and strengthened that ancient trend-temptation to engage in lotto and gambling, typical of meridian cultures. Meridian humanism was, by its nature, very sensitive to the social and ostentatious dimension of wealth. We have always done it, with lunches, with clothes, with brides, even with funerals. Our competition has always been above all a competition of things, of objects, therefore a showy business. We have never competed in terms of work; it is simply not visible enough. In order to truly let ourselves go in the contest, we need visible things that everyone can see. Hence, the capitalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, founded on factories and work, was not seductive enough to buy our soul. That of the 21st century, however, based entirely on consumption and finance, seduced us to the point that it had no need to buy our soul, we gave it to it freely.