

THE VIRTUE TO BE REDISCOVERED IN ORDER TO SAVE US FROM EXTINCTION

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It's fraternity. Few associate it with economic talk. But without it, there's no model that stands. As is happening today, the individual logic of maximizing one's advantage at the cost of everyone's interests is bringing us to a dead end.

Talk about the commons makes its way always more as one of the great topics of our times: if the most important goods become commons, we need to develop new virtues, as the market's typical individual virtues are not sufficient to overcome new challenges.

But what is the "Tragedy of the commons"? First of all, it's the title of the celebrated article published by biologist D. Hardin, in 1968, in the prestigious *Science* magazine.

The thesis is strong and clear: when we deal with goods in common (*commons*), even if each person prudently follows his own interests, there is the risk that, without wanted it or realizing it, the branch we are all sitting on will be sawed a little each day. Why?

There is a noteworthy example in Hardin's article, by now in every microeconomics textbook, of the common and free pasture, where each farmer brings his cows to graze. The choice that maximizes freedom and individual interest is that of increasing the cattle brought to graze, as the individual advantage of bringing an extra cow to graze is + 1, while the reduction of grass is only a fraction of - 1 (as the damage is shared among all the other farmers who use the common pasture). Therefore, the individual benefit is greater than the individual cost, and this pushes each one to increase their use of the common. This increased individual advantage with respect to individual loss goes also when we get close to the last free square meter of grass, which leads to the destruction of the pasture, if...something does not happen which limits individual freedom in some way.

The difficult relationship with limits

From the trees on Easter Island to the hole in the ozone, from the truffles of my region of Marche to the unstoppable lowering of the water table in India and in Lake Albano, the big daily story tells us about these tragedies. They happen in communities and civilizations, small or large, that have "collapsed" (as Diamond would say), as we were not capable of no going beyond the *limit* or the critical point of no return beyond which the process becomes irreversible. On Easter Island, the extinction of that population was not linked to cutting down the last tree, but to have had surpassed, at a certain point and without knowing it, a limit, a threshold, beyond which the extinction of that last tree was inevitable.

Human history, however, tells us of many other stories, where communities were instead capable of stopping themselves in time, of coordinating, of limiting individual freedom and did not tragically collapse. Social norms, laws, antique traditions, uses and customs could be understood as the instruments that civilization invented to avoid collapse. Today, when we think of water management, of cities, the environment, the tragic and always more urgent question is this: will we go beyond the limits and follow the path of the ancient inhabitants of Easter Island, or will we be capable of stopping ourselves in time, of coordinating? Will we, therefore, be capable of that individual and collective wisdom that allows communities - including the worldwide community of human beings and other species on this planet - to not collapse and implode, but live and grow in harmony?

To be able to hope that the second option will come true, we need new virtues today, as the typically individual virtues (like seeking self-interests) do not offer guarantees in knowing how to face the challenges of common goods, and therefore the challenges of the "Common Good" (there is no Common Good without the commons).

Need of fraternity

In order to have the commons, there is need for reciprocal virtues that immediately express a link among people. Which ones?

The first virtue that should absolutely be raised as the founding principle of post-modernity, of the globalized society and of the economy of commons, is fraternity. Today there is an always more urgent need for a new, worldwide social pact among equal and free citizens who self-limit their use of shared goods (not only on the part of citizens represented in the G20, but potentially among everyone).

The words *freedom* and *equality* say individual. Fraternity, instead, is a *good that is a link* among people, a link that expresses the same ambivalence that exists in the word "link", if it's true that a link is both a relationship and a bind. But without recognizing the links that unite us with one another, we cannot escape the tragedy of the commons, which is a tragedy because of the lack of awareness that common living is a network of relationships between persons, communities and peoples, a network of relationships that globalization and technology are making always more thick and intricate.

The epochal change which our post-modern society is experiencing deals with the centrality of shared goods, which are becoming the rule rather than the exception in economic and civil life.

Today, the quality of development of peoples and of lands certainly depends on shoes, refrigerators and washing-machines (classic private goods), but much more so on the goods (or evils) in common, like greenhouse gases, water, or the trust stocks of financial markets (the financial crisis can also be seen as a tragedy of the common good of *trust*), on which food, shoes and refrigerators depend.

The history of peoples has seen many moments where we have found ourselves at a crossroads between fraternity and fratricide, two roads that have bordered one another since the times of Cain. Sometimes we have chosen the direction of fraternity, and other more numerous times we've followed that of fratricide. Today, the crossroads is still in front of us, and we need to do everything so that the direction we take be that of fraternity. The future of our very species is at stake, and luckily we are still in time.

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