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## COMMENTARY - THE VOCABULARY OF GOOD SOCIAL LIFE/2

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# THE HORIZON OF TALENTS

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There are many types of richness, just as there are many types of poverty. Some of them are good but others, even if they are very relevant ones, are bad. The great cultures of the world knew this well; ours, which is not a great one, has forgotten it. The plural and ambivalent nature of richness is inherent to its semantic texture.

The word richness is a distant derivative of *rex* in Latin (king), therefore it has to do with power and even with disposing of people through money and goods. To possess riches has always been and is still deeply connected with the possession of people; and the border line where democracy turns into plutocracy (the rule of the rich) is always quite faint, fragile and little guarded by those sentinels who are not paid by the plutocrats.

But richness also means wealth, and this English word comes from *weal*, meaning well-being, prosperity, individual and collective happiness. Adam Smith chose to use the word *wealth* (and not *riches*) for his economic study (*The Wealth of Nations*, 1776), also to suggest that economic richness is something more than the mere sum of material goods or our GNP.

In order to express this second type of richness, Italians and many economists from the Latin peoples chose the term "*felicità pubblica*" (universal happiness) so as not to misvalue the complex passage from richness to happiness. From the second half of the nineteenth century the tradition of "*pubblica felicità*" became an underground river and the old idea of well-being understood by wealth gradually disappeared. And so in the whole of the West the semantic range of richness became much poorer - and so did we. We have created a financial type of capitalism that generated much of the wrong 'richness' that did not improve our lives or that of the planet.

We have to urgently restart to differentiate between the forms of richness in order to discern the 'spirits' of capitalism and start saying publicly and with great force that not all things we call riches are actually good.

There is no good in the 'richness' that is born from the overexploitation of the poor and the fragile, or the one that comes from preying on Africa's raw materials, from illegality, from gamble, from prostitution, from wars, from drug trafficking, from the lack of respect for workers or nature. We should possess the ethical force to say that this type of pseudo-richness is not good and to say this with no 'if' or 'but' added. There are no good uses of these bad types of money, and least of all the financing of non-profits or institutions for seriously ill children - these children will 'judge' our capitalism.

Where does the good and real richness come from then? What about its origins and characteristics? For Smith, who also posed these questions and placed them in the focus of his research, richness was born out of human labour, and he wrote this as the first line of his study *Wealth of Nations*: "The annual labour of every nation is the fund which originally supplies it with all the necessaries and conveniences of life which it annually consumes". Natural riches, the seas, monuments and works of art do not always become economic or civil richness if there is no human labour that is capable of making revenue out of them.

But if we look at the deep roots of richness, we discover something that could be surprising for us, because we may realise that its more real nature is actually it being a gift, something donated to us. The good type of richness that is

born from work depends on our talents (the talent, that, according to the parable, is given to us), that is, from the gift of intelligence, creativity, ethical and relational givens.

Behind our richness there are providential events that are neither based on our merit nor just the fruits of our dedication (which is always essential, too): being born into a certain country, being loved by our family, having the opportunity to study in good schools, meeting a certain teacher and then the right people along the way etc. How many potential Mozarts or Levi Montalcinis have been already there who did not flourish just because they were born or brought up somewhere else, or simply because they weren't loved enough?

This tension between gift and injustice can be felt in the myth of Pluto (the Greek god of richness) who, after he is blinded, distributes his riches to people without being able to see either their being right or having merits. Similarly, we find the awareness of the gift of richness at the roots of the institution of the jubilee year in Israel, when, once in every fifty years "everyone is to return to their own property." (Leviticus) However, we have already forgotten and deleted from our civil (and fiscal) horizon that the possessing of goods and riches is a relationship, a social matter: "You are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody..." (J.J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*). If we delete this deeper and more real nature of richness and the universal destination of all goods, we also lose the feelings of civil recognition for our riches.

To every good type of richness, the foundation is gratuitousness - charis. Therefore we have to look at the world and say the following to each other: "I am you who make me rich". And never to stop thanking each other. What is my richness if not the fruit of a combination of relations, some of which have got very old roots? In the mediaeval ages the foreigners were inserted among the poorest people in religious processions (the order was based on the census) as they had no friends which made them lacking the most important richness, that of relationships.

Without this recognition and gratitude for the relational nature and gift of richness we end up considering every re-distribution of it a mere usurpation that, in turn, we perceive as a serious profanation by others' hands reaching right into our pockets. Entrepreneurs, too, know that their (good) richness really (and above all) comes from the richness of lands owned, the richness of talents and virtues of the workers, from the moral richness of contractors, banks, clients and public administration, from the spiritual richness of their people (and this is why the fiscal evasion is a serious act of injustice and non-recognition). And so, every now and then they return home after having relocated and tried themselves elsewhere because without these different types of richness they did not manage to grow even their financial richness. If richness is primarily a gift, then the sharing of it and the use of it for the common Good is not an act of heroism but an obligatory act of justice. We can and we have to share it because we have received it in most part. When a culture loses this deep social and political sense of their own richness, it perishes, declines and fades away.

Today the economy suffers and does not generate its typical good richness because the other forms of richness have been impoverished and a relevant part of this impoverishment was caused by the same financial economy that has consumed moral and spiritual resources without any efforts to regenerate these. This was similar to the behaviour of the bee-keeper who, in order to make more money with his bees, focused only on his beehives and ignored and polluted the surrounding environment. And so the fields and orchards have impoverished and today his bees that are very exhausted produce less and less honey, of worse and worse quality. If this bee-keeper wants to make good honey again, he should extend his problem's horizons and understand the real cause of his crisis. Then he should start work in the fields and in the orchards of the surrounding area with the same care he treated his bees and beehives. Every good is also a common good because if it is not common, in fact, it is not a good. To leave the 'employee area' and return to the land to take care of the fields and the orchards, of common goods: this is the main challenge to tackle if we want to return to generating the good type of richness, and therefore, work.

*Translated by Eszter Kató*