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ALIMENTARE LA VITA,
ALIMENTARE LO SPIRITO.

Scuola Internazionale di Dottorato in
Formazione della persona e mercato del lavoro
Università degli Studi di Bergamo - Bergamo



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Feeding life, nourishing spirit: an integrating process

Alimentare la vita, alimentare lo spirito: alternanza di un processo

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If feeding life we feed spirit

Se nutrendo la vita nutriamo lo spirito

ANDREA CEGOLON

The text explores the concept of nourishment of human life in a holistic view, as required by the complexity of the person, as both a multidimensional reality and an integrated unit in need of material and spiritual food. The personal unity is taken as a criterion in the presence of foodstuffs exhibited in the Expo Milano 2015 to assess the potential of ethics they can enclose in view of values or non values involved in their production processes. The anthropological abstraction of the 'homo economicus', at the basis of the economic theory of the global market, sounds as a denouncement of the ideology we continue to send out through this production model; this same ideology is penetrated into education through the concept of human capital. The hope is that the comparison with other cultures, different models of production and of exchange may be an important opportunity to seek other bases for prosperity.

«Feed life, feed the spirit», the theme that follows the lucky slogan Expo Milano 2015 «Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life», chosen for the world exhibition, lends itself to multiple pedagogical reflections. Few expressions like that chosen to introduce the event in Milan could condense so many and varied reasons for reflection on crucial issues of our time.

Beyond the predictable and natural, cultural and socio-political differences the expression is an invitation to seek strong and shared spaces for meeting people. Besides the cultures, ideologies, beliefs, there is common ground, an objective universe of essential binding needs, linked to life itself, which of course you can only start from the primary need, that of nutrition.

The following reflections are just intended to deepen, in fact, the concept of nutrition in the broadest sense of the term, starting from this assumption: on pure pedagogical basis 'nutrition' is a metaphor for nourishment extending from the physical to the spiritual to match the complexity growth which in turns depends on the quality of the 'food culture' offered. Language documents how this food symbolism has been used to give visibility to education.

For a quick example, the term 'student' is derived from the Latin verb 'alere', which means 'to feed'. Children in the Middle Ages offered to the monastery to be educated were called 'fed'.

The nurturing of human life does not end, then, in correspondence to the physical needs. In addition, and not of secondary importance with respect to the 'material' facet, there is the 'spiritual' one. Bread is necessary to appease hunger, and this form of essential energy still has its dramatic depiction in the lost eyes of many African children, prostrate and exhausted prematurely from malnutrition. For paradox, in our part of the world you have to find the antidote to contain the result of overeating or, rather, look for a corrective physically compatible nutrition, less calorie and more natural. In any case the food for us human is an emergency which is one with our existence.

It is, therefore, not only on the physical but mainly on the spiritual side that these notes are proposed with the view of enhancing the fruitful interaction between the two dimensions.

So, let us consider the process of human growth. If we say that food for humans is never only physical, we must go back to early life experiences of the newborn that match, when we are fed breast milk, with an extraordinary relational - affective experience. Through eating we develop behavioral patterns of attachment to our mother, which is at the base of the attachment/separation dialectic affecting us for a lifetime. As a matter of course, we do not need to dwell on it, but here I want to emphasize this issue because there are many and precise pages of an author often and rightly mentioned, whom we refer to¹.

Thus, considered from this point of view, food provides an energy branching in the whole person and, along with the body, it also feeds the spirit in its socio - affective - relational - cultural demands. But that is not enough. In food there is also a spiritual resource for implicit values, innervated in the process by which it is produced. In this way, our perspective opens. Extending the period of these reflections over the vital phenomenology of the act of eating, you end up also to include the way in which food is produced, stored and distributed before arriving on our table. This brings us inevitably to the economic side and all becomes of course more complicated, especially today and for two tiers of considerations. The former is the crisis that, suffocating for a long time our society, at the same time makes it difficult to claim solutions and/or perspectives. The latter relates to the pervasiveness of our economic paradigm, figuring today as a benchmark in every field of human activity, where no or little space is allowed to critically grasp the theoretical basis from which it derives.

Trying, however, to address the issue raised here, that is to understand the way in which we feed our humanity through the economic-industrial-food industry system we are responsible for, for better or for worse, requires tracking the fundamentals of the economy market, the cardinal principle of global capitalism.

The first question with which we have to deal is to verify the alleged naturalness of this economic paradigm, far away from the awe of possibly bringing to light apories, ideological opacity, economic indulgence: in a word, it is up to us to shed light on inadequate attention and respect for the 'man consumer', relegated as he is to the role of mere commodity to be exploited. We are bordering with

these arguments close to a school of thought now very controversial, either idolized as a solution of the ills of humanity or pitied as an example of landlocked millenarianism².

The most emblematic figure in this respect is Serge Latouche. According to the French economist, the liberal capitalist system is based on three assumptions widely accepted in modern times. They are:

- naturalism
- hedonism
- individualism³.

The first, *naturalism*, is stated according to a dual meaning. For one thing it concerns the needs of the man, who carries natural absolute, the essential means for his survival. On the other hand, it regards the natural living environment, which proves inadequate to meet human needs. Disharmony connotes the relationship human/environmental Nature, suspicious each other as it were.

Hedonism is the spirit of enlightenment utilitarianism. In philosophy we must go back to Jeremy Bentham. In his case the profit is identified with the best solution providing maximum pleasure and with minimum pain and suffering. Actions are preliminarily subjected to a sort of calculation, that is how they generate happiness, keeping in mind parameters such as: proximity, intensity, duration, etc⁴.

Individualism, the central section of the Enlightenment, primarily connotes the anthropology of that historical movement. The individual is seen as the man actually centered on himself, closed, self-sufficient thanks to the power of reason through which he can overcome the problems of survival in a hostile and greedy nature. Isolated from his peers, he is opposed to them in the inevitable contention conditions for living.

This idea of individual generated in Stuart Mill the concept of '*homo economicus*', in opposition to the concept of person, which should be open to relationships, linked to his history and identity. With respect to the interpretation of human reality provided by thinkers such as Mounier, Ricœur etc. – outstanding representatives of the 'personological' tradition- the anthropological compromise, which we are likely to accept when reasoning in purely economic terms, is highlighted by the individualistic - consumerist logic assumed, highlighted,

by Nobel laureate economist Sen Amartya, through the identification of the following criteria:

- self-centered welfare, direct relationship between wealth and consumption;
- self-welfare goal, maximizing one's own well-being while ignoring the conditions of others;
- self-goal choice, satisfaction of one's needs, regardless of the preferences of others⁵.

This profile of the economic man, as depicted by the neo-classical traditional economy, unconsciously but constantly legitimized by our personal choices, is not actually immediately within our reach. Stunning consumption has a narcotic effect on our minds, refractory as we are to go beyond the well-being achieved. To grasp the real identity of the economic man we must, therefore, overcome the initial impression produced by the system trying to go deeper, through the three layers a capitalist organization⁶:

- surface technology (consisting of banks, from work, from trade unions etc)⁷;
- profound cultural, in which economy creates a way of thinking, a mindset;
- mythical roots of the system, where the economy gives life to the founding myth of capitalism.

Only in the last stage you can identify the constituent factors intertwined in the narrative plot that justifies the economic-existential approach to food. The ideological matrix of economic rationality confirms the conceptual device already highlighted. The only variant, its representativeness, that is depicted in a triangular shape marking the mutual dependence of the factors:

- a simplistic and reductive anthropology controlled by profit;
- a stingy and inhospitable nature causing in humans aggressive and belligerent activism;
- the fear of death, as the other side of hedonism and the unconscious motivation of the conflict that is under the illusion of being able to lie our anguish on others.

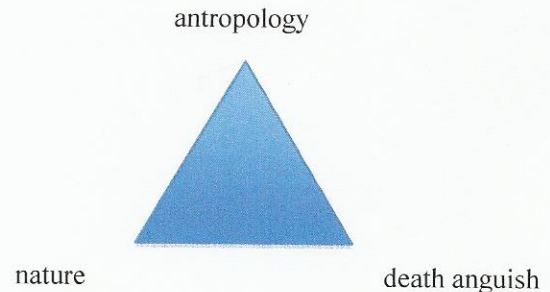


Figure 1 . The founding myth of capitalism

This vision of life, where everything is held and internalized by us, is part of our life in an unconscious way. Precisely because of this condition, it externalizes at the operational level, that is in attitudes, options, equities: even when we claim to profess values such as solidarity and justice.

The contradiction attests our lack of critical, non-confrontation with the founding myth of the market. Just in cognitive dissociation, of which we are demonstrating through the gap between said and done, you end up bringing new elements to the view of the merits of anthropology economist. Ultimately, the attitude of the *homo economicus* seems so ingrained, to come naturalized, considered universally recognized or recognizable because he is based on a spontaneous approach to the problems of survival.

Without going into classical theses related to the conversion of individual well-being and happiness to general well-being and happiness, the ideological nature of the economic paradigm in question emerges primarily from the fact that the mechanism distributor of the 'invisible hand'- guarantee of prosperity for all - not only has not been activated, but little or nothing seems looming, since in the economic model of global capitalism what is jammed is the most decisive factor of the distribution, ie the work. Mind, this is not to denounce inequality for inequality as such, since the human difference, as well as healthy, is also unavoidable. If anything, the purpose is to try to justify it in relation to the common good, making it sustainable. In this framework it is fully consistent the position of an economist very *à la page* today, Piketty:

«The question of the distribution of wealth is one of the most important and debated ... too important to be left to economists alone, sociologists, historians and philosophers»⁸.

From this position, it follows, therefore, that the problems now facing us challenge us directly and can no longer be delegated only to experts. Food, nutrition holistically considered and proposed to humanity for today and especially tomorrow, is too important and involves everybody *ab ovo*. We cannot, that is, be involved only in the last link of the food chain, at the time, that is, consuming. And yet, even this moment can signal the early steps just to leave out the fairy tale of all-in-all well-being still dimming our minds. You can start it from breaking the individualistic approach of the *homo economicus* and thus setting out for a new perspective: that is, to view consuming no longer as an individual action, but as a social one. It is the first step to isolate the prevailing model of the individualized hyper consuming, which is limited to the sole relationship between the buyer - in search of satisfaction - and the product - which seems to promise that satisfaction.

Within this self-centred relation, the consumer is a victim of both the market and its logic. Let's take into account a different view. Suppose the product is considered in a social way, beyond the deriving subjective pleasure. In this manner it begins to be chosen or rejected for the values it conveys, as environmental sustainability, justice, equity, social relations, solidarity etc⁹.

So, the question we must ask is this: 'post-modern people' as we are, are we still convinced of the last grand narrative of modernity at the base of classical political economy?

We try to answer briefly alongside one of the most influential paradigms in the search field of pedagogy and education in recent years: the concept of 'human capital'. Developed in the 50s by the economists of the Chicago School, initially criticized, as a result, as pointed out by one of the exponents of this approach - «it was accepted without problems by the vast majority of people not only in the field of social sciences, but also in the media»¹⁰. But to avoid being dazzled by language, we must recognize that the term Human Capital was a brilliant idea, certainly in tune with the changing conditions in terms of context. This applies, in particular, to the evolution undergone by

the capital when, in fact, it has created a «knowledge economy»¹¹.

The quotation marks, on the other, could cause some misunderstanding, legitimizing, at least, the objection, quite obvious, that the economy is increasingly knowledge-based, chiefly at the stage where it begins to be projected as political economy, when, that is, it becomes a science of rational choice under scarcity. Leveraging on the progress of knowledge, in fact the various industrial revolutions have been made possible, which in turn have taken advantage of the research findings on renewable energy, through the application to steam first, then electricity and electronics today¹².

It was, however, knowledge of the external economic world, independent variables of a system which on its behalf continued to stand on capital and labor. Obviously certain ratio was changed or improved, but in any case far from sudden and uncontrolled shocks due to qualitative changes in the products as a result of innovations derived internally at work.

By contrast, in the idea of human capital, endorsed by the theories of endogenous growth, a new factor makes itself conspicuous, that is the investment in education: not as an independent external variable, but as an internal variable, associated almost to the point of replacing the physical capital¹³. In the background you can see the threat hanging on the nature of the relationship of production. The competent job - embodying knowledge, intelligence, creativity - makes premium on physical capital, over all the assets (buildings, land, buildings, machinery, infrastructure, patents, etc.) and on financial factors (bank accounts, bonds, stocks, pension funds etc.) owned by the property. This way is also promising a greater distribution of wealth since we realize that «the growth of physical capital than conventionally measured, explains a relatively small part of the income growth» and the search for explanations best leads to consider increasing interest «less tangible factors, such as technological progress and human capital»¹⁴.

But after the first suggestion, the drama of inequality emerges, now aggravated by a disillusionment factor on education, because they are not spared from discrimination even those who have invested in training. Today the most

serious problem concerns, paradoxically, not only unemployment, but also the inactivity of graduates.

The dramatic questions not to be escaped are these: why, despite the recognition of the role of knowledge, despite the spread of knowledge, despite the investment in skills and training, differences remain and grow unacceptable? Why the workload is no longer so effective in the composition of national income, definitely not more than the capital it continues to be?¹⁵

Let's suspend for a moment this reasoning, to which we will return later, just and try to pick up the thread of our reflection on modernity, the crucial period in which the base of the political economy here analyzed are placed.

Individualism, hedonism, naturalism, the characters of modern anthropology, can be more easily grasped in their ideological essence if contextualized within the cultural orientation of the time, as a result of social epistemology based on the «theory of genetic definition or description», a replacement of the famous scholastic definition «for proximate genus and specific difference»¹⁶. In order to understand the social structure it is useful to go back to the parts making up and keeping everything together. But if we want to deconstruct social relations we cannot stop half way. A real analysis must be taken to the utmost consequences, to the end. We cannot stop even in front of the evidence of the historical impossibility in history to find disrupted elements since man does not live isolated, but always included in some form of relationship. For this, we should not be afraid to continue the analysis even in the abstract, imagining a hypothetical natural state before the birth of society. It is the way followed by Hobbes and Rousseau: the basic social contract is based on the identity of the natural man. The same method, the same reasoning is followed by J. Stuart Mill: in its natural state, the economic man is solely driven by the desire for wealth, the absolute, absorbing passion. Besides being capable of overpowering each other, it is at the base of the institution of property and the market¹⁷.

The epistemological reference is apt to demystify a given mistakenly datum assumed as axiomatic: the *homo economicus*, is no more a counterfactual hypothesis. In the followers of classical economic theory, he becomes a real one. And this explains why today it is denounced as a lie¹⁸, a clear evidence of an ideological adherence.

This ideological nature of classical political economy becomes manifest when the economic behavior of the pre-modern Western society is studied. In particular, we realize that the institution market is not necessarily an expression of *homo economicus*. In the Middle Ages, near the abbeys the market is not carried on a competitive and conflicting basis, but on assumptions of solidarity and reciprocity. With the same values it is interpreted in the Italian Renaissance and the Enlightenment authors, little unfairly evaluated, as Antonio Genovesi, the first Italian university professor of economy, in his work *Lessons of Civil Economy*, says that «virtue is not a invention of philosophers (...) as claims the author of the infamous Fable of the Bees, but is a consequence of the nature of the world and of man»¹⁹.

This different interpretation exchanging goods is also confirmed by the anthropological and ethnographic research. In non-Western primitive people, the satisfaction of basic needs is not reserved to specific actions we define 'economic', but they are social functions inserted in the relational plot they contribute to consolidate and strengthen. For example, studies made by Malinovski in the Trobriand Islands have shown unequivocally that an economic action is fulfilled not through the market but through the more binding exchange of the gift²⁰.

The discovery of the activation by humans of different forms of exchange had the effect to downsize the role of the market. From that moment on they started various forms of reservations about the competitive-aggressive form of the exchange quantified solely in terms of interest and helpful emerge. The most important consequence associated with this new awareness is precisely the complaint of the ideological nature of the classical political economy, as mentioned above: due, ultimately, to an anthropological simplification.

The different forms of exchange and their possible integration in a solidarity concept show that the exchange itself is not under attack, but the idea of man who claimed to express it. In other words, a more detailed anthropology, a more realistic reading of human reality, a commitment to integrate the utility function with emotional affective - relational - social dimensions: everything really seems to be the only resource to humanize the market and correct

the narrative that still threatens to pollute - in real and figurative sense - the food that we eat.

But back to the idea of human capital, already studied elsewhere²¹. In the light of what has been claimed, reservations are reasonable where the connection with the different anthropological basis is not taken into consideration.

The most problematic aspect of the expression 'human capital' is precisely the concept of *capital*. because if it «exploits the work, you can also say the same of human capital? In other words: it is possible to argue that skilled and unskilled workers are opposed to each other in the eternal conflict between capital and labor?».

We can - we reply - because it is precisely what has occurred and is occurring today, to quote Rifkin, with his ideas of «the end of work» and the crisis of the society based on work²². When labor, capital and the market continue to be considered only within a partial optical part and the competitive logic - above analyzed - all the critical issues emerge. From positive agents of aggregation units they in fact lead to division and confrontation.

The term 'human capital' - as well as that of 'market' - is not in itself a problem, but becomes such in a well defined framework, that is, within an idea of humanity at odds with humanism, luckily the backbone of Western civilization, historically consolidated.

At this point you may be wondering: is there any point of contact between what we said and the theme, apparently more prosaic, of Expo 2015? Well, if the intent was to take stock of the situation of our planet, comparing asymmetries and points of convergence in the progress of

peoples and communities of the planet, a not secondary point could be to extend the idea of globalization in the most universal of the word sense and thus answer crucial questions such as : what is the man today? Where we have come and what is our direction? What values and beliefs are conceivable in a world where harmony is imposed to the conflict, the common welfare to the oppression of the fittest, the acceptance of less lucky people to selfishly closed privileges?

From this point of view the experience of the Expo may be important as a unique opportunity to compare different cultures. It should help to resize and explore our beliefs in order to affirm a culture in the direction of a genuine globalization. I think, for example, of a topic such as the 'gift', to give out of generosity, would open a huge space for reflection and rethinking about the horizons of values underlying it.

In conclusion in this way you would not want to leave the impression that the world that we should expect or build is made of beautiful souls. The economy cannot and must not be indifferent to profit, but must question itself about the absolute limits of this wild ride and which are represented by two objectively overarching categories. I say the respect for both the environment and the things around us, and most for the people: a value in themselves, the sum of a huge capital accumulated in the process of their formation. These are the two sides least exposed of the Expo, but intended to last for luck beyond the 6 months provided for the stands, that is when the spotlight will be off and we will return to deal with our present and, especially, with our future.

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