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CONTRIBUTION TO THE HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT OF “INDIVIDUO” (THE INDIVIDUAL) AND INDIVIDUALITY IN THE EUROPEAN CULTURE

Abstract: We are the children of our land and the concept of individuality has been shaped by the history of our culture.

In this exercise (and let me congratulate with Garry for the choice of this subject which is a typical intercultural and interdisciplinary subject for WAAS) there are two preliminary remarks I would like to do:

First, despite the geographical distance sometimes, there are great similarities in the definition of “individuality” among cultures like for example those between India and Europe.

Second in our globalized society we have to look for those elements in the puzzle that constitute “the concept of individuality” which are common.

If we try to provide a reasonably shared definition of an “individual” as we conceive it today we could say that:

The individual is a free human being with his own values and which is “protected” by the “Universal declaration of human rights” as adopted by the United Nations. Applied by many, but not all the UN member states.

Authoritarian regimes do not recognise the individual rights particularly if the individual brings with him his or her values which are different from those as imposed by the authoritarian power.

I will not make a list of this countries “pro bono pacis”, but as you know is a long list.

In my intervention I’ll try to sketch the history of individuality in Europe

Still not so far away, in the past, the church was imposing the dogma of the “holly writings” and was ready to condemn or to simply burn those men or women with different ideas from those proclaimed. No space for the recognition of indi-

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viduality as in the case of Giordano Bruno and the many others burned alive. Same music, at that time, for the protestant world.

In the ancient Greek and roman world, dominated by the ideal of “aristocracy” the status of a recognized individual applied only to few: philosophers, tyrants, priests, emperors. Augurs and few others. A society for privileged individuals where few had all the rights and many nothing. This type of society dominated Europe at least ‘till the transition middle-ages renaissance

At the end of the middle-ages the concept of “individual” begins to emerge. But it took a long time to become a formalized universal concept. We can say that all took origin in a time that goes back to a period between 1200 and 1400.

This is a time of transition at the edge of the renaissance and the end of the middle-ages. An old equilibrium is breaking up.

This type of status in thermodynamics as well as in society tends to create turmoil and novelties with the tendency towards a new status. Prigojine docet.¹

The concept of individual could not but appear in a period of dramatic transition.

End of a world that lasted nearly 2 millenniums if we consider the fundamental contribution to our culture of the Greek world.

The European of the XVth century finds around him the ruins of his/her old certitudes.

The earth is not any more the centre of the universe. Where is Good? Cristoforo Colombo discovers another world with strange animals and humans. So different from those of the holly bible and from those we were used to know for centuries. So the Bible? All this with the company of the black death during 1300/1400 which reduced drastically the entire European population

The Europeans to escape country brigands and the vexations of the landlords assembled in towns protected by walls: the “commune”.

The “individual”, the concept of “individuality”, emerges, in fact, during this troubled times, with the rise of the “Commune” a revolutionary new social aggregation and with the birth of a new social class: the bourgeoisie.

There are many reasons to support this idea.

The disregard for practical and manual activities, this aristocratic attitude that, as we have seen, goes back, to the mental habit of the Greek and roman society (where, for example, Euclid refused to consider any practical application to his mathematical theories) is coming to an end.

At the end of the XIIIth century many philosophers and thinkers started to recognize the importance of the “*artes mechanicae*”, craft activities, and manual labour. The franciscan, Ruggero Bacone (1214–1292), supported in his writings the “*artes mechanicae*”, experimental activities and experimental research, being critical against the traditional attitude of the rest of the church and particularly against the Aristotelian Tommaso d’Aqino. Bacone about Aquinuo: “how can this person

¹ Ilia Prigojine, Isabelle Stengers. *La fin des certitudes*

without knowing optics, mathematics and alchemy, without knowing "le arti minori" how can he know "le arti Maggiori"? (philosophy, theology, ecc.)

Now in a transition period so important, for our history, focus is put on human beings, and on the world around us, the earth, and on a series of activities that in the previous time were disregarded,

Even the church with thinkers like Bacon or the school of Chartres take the eyes down from the sky to look with a different spirit the earth around us and the simple manual activities.

Nobody would have dared in the past, to praise the technical progress and technical instruments like Bacon and Petrus Peregrinus of Maricurt did.

Bacon tells about Petrus Peregrinus "he is shameful to ignore what is known to the ignorant, he is expert in the arts of those that are working metals and minerals of any type, he always gave attention to the enchantments of the old ladies and those of the witches".

Ruggero Bacone, was an alchemist and an outstanding mathematician, and represents an important turning point in the attitude of the Church. Bacon the technician and the inventor of all sort of ideal machines but also Bacon that has been able to predict with genial intuition the technological destiny of the men.

So now, the idea that a large part of the population, also those that with a modern term we could call commoners, have their activities recognized as well as their status of individuals start to be accepted.

It is a great cultural change: also the time is secularised with the bell of the enterprise and not the bell of the church, that marks, during the day, the working hours.

And suddenly appears, in our history, the "machine" another crucial actor and a further step, as we will see, towards the recognition of the individual.

Many hypotheses have been made on the appearance of the "machine" a phenomenon which is called the "machinisme".

For nearly half a millennium, from the end of the roman empire, there has been no significant technical innovation and now suddenly "impromptu" all sort of technical instruments, tools mechanisms and machines are popping up. Why such a change?

Is it due to the lack of manpower? In Europe, at the end of the middle-ages there are practically no slaves left and the Black Death wiped out a large portion of the European population so the need and interest to mechanize the work, May be.

Simple tools like the gear or others needed to apply the energy of watermills to various production are now in use. The building and diffusion of new machines might have been facilitated also by the new progresses in metallurgy which made iron cheap and of easy access.

Typical is also the fact that only now appears the invention and use of the helm that will allow, with the new building techniques and with the help of compass and astrolabe, the oceanic crossing.

There is no satisfactory explanation for appearance of the "machinism".

As we all know the history of science and technology as well as the history of our society is no linear but is made by sudden, unforeseen and unpredictable changes. And as Popper says any Historicist or deterministic explications will be wrong. And the great historian of science Alexander Koyre reminds us that Pisa do not explain Galilei or Siracusa Archimede. Nor London, I would ad, Newton.

Inside the commune, the diffusion of the machine with the establishment of small laboratories and ateliers is creating a concentration of workers. They associate in corporations and "gilde". Associations of free "individuals" with the same interests and profession.

The corporations had democratic statutes in order to protect the "identity" the work and the activities of their members.

Also the commune is governed with democratic rules with the participation of citizens represented trough the corporations and other associations. A large part of the inhabitants of the "commune" start now to be recognized as a socially and politically active part of the community: as "individuals" with their rights and duties. Typical, in this respect is the constitutional text of the municipality of Todi in which is stated that the municipality will be run by common people and craftsmen with popular laws...

This is why we consider the "commune" as a democratic experiment typical of the European society, the culture medium of the "individual".

In the Muslim society the commune disappears in the "mare magnum" of the Umma, the universal community of the Muslim world. And in China the Commune had mainly a rural character.

During the XIVth and XVth centuries, laboratories began to associate themselves, leading to the creation of small enterprises concentrating the entire production cycle: raw material, industrial treatment and commercial distribution of the production.

The owner of this first enterprises is the "bourgeois" a new social actor, an "individual ante litteram" in the European panorama as we know him: capitalist and entrepreneur, far from the byzantine and European merchant of Braudel, and well described by Werner Sombart. The bourgeois is fundamentally individualistic and promotes the protection of his private and intellectual property. Thanks to the development of the press the first patents emerge in Florence in 1421 and in Venice in 1474 and will rapidly spread in other countries.

Sombart in his book "the bourgeois" give us a vivid picture of the bourgeois through the person of Leon Battista Alberti.

Industrial activities are expanding all over Europe in a sort of pre-industrial revolution and the bourgeoisie confirms itself as an increasingly economically powerful social class, the engine of the industrial and social development in Europe. From "homo sapiens to homo faber". Large masses of peoples who once did not have a specific identity marginalized by the feudal system are now assuming their own identity in the new historical context

The individual start being also physically protected in England, by Habeas Corpus (in the Magna Charta signed by King John Without Land in 1215 who had

guardianship over not only private property but also over the physical integrity of its citizens.)

The European society is now rapidly evolving with the raise of the bourgeoisie and tends to become largely composed by recognized "individuals". Hence the ignition of the great individualistic bourgeois engine from Renaissance times and thereafter will propel Europe towards the industrial revolution and the well known series of scientific, technological, economical and social successes. (not to forget "les droits de l'homme" after the French revolution)

Jacob Burckhardt, the great historian of the Renaissance in his book "la civiltà del rinascimento in Italia" (Renaissance civilization in Italy), provides us with a first modern definition of the would be "individual":

"During the middle-ages the veil covering human souls was a cloth of faith, biases, ignorance and illusions...in so far as the human being was considered only as belonging to a race, a population, a party, a corporation, a family or any other forms of "community". For the first time, it is Italy that has broken this veil and dictated the "objective" study of the State and other worldly things. Close to this new way of considering reality, it further develops the "subjective" aspect, and man becomes "individual", spiritual, assuming consciousness of his new status."

And I would agree with Burckhardt saying that, in the western society, the "individual" is the Renaissance's child

Was not an easy path as we said; we took almost 500 years, with great pain if we remember Giordano Bruno and the many others. Today in our European world the human being finally is no number but an individual.

The Monster ready to cancel again the free identity of the individual is still here and his name can be Big Brother or the various racist and extremist groups active in our democratic society. The monster is also still there inside the theocratic regimes or inside those regimes inspired by the black, red or green fascism.

Primo Levi remind us in his book, "Se questo è un uomo" (If this is a man), the humiliation of no longer be considered as an individual but relegated as a mere number in the Nazi concentration camps.

It is up to us, free men and women, to chase back, in an irreversible past, this monster.

