

## REFLECTIONS OF THE BOLOGNA GROUP ON THE ISSUES ADDRESSED BY THE 2015 INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE



The group focused on the first issue addressed by the International Conference to be held shortly in Rome: *Is sustainable growth possible without compulsive consumption?*

The group believed that a cognitive, detailed analysis had to be based on anthropological rather than economic criteria (Evangelii Gaudium, 55). Hence a sociological survey and a research of external contributions. Attention focused on the French philosopher and anthropologist René Girard, in particular on what he writes in his book “The origin of culture and the end of history” which examines the complexity of the human condition, always prey to conflicting anthropological dynamics. He further elaborated the subject in his essay “Bringing von Clausewitz to the extreme”. The group studied and discussed Girard’s theories and added its own contributions, briefly recapped as follows:

1. Today for the first time in history we live in a unique situation; our society cannot be compared to previous ones because for the first time it embraces the whole globe: culture has been globalized. And globalization evolved step by step, beginning with the geographic discoveries of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.
2. Today we are not at the terminal point of ideological evolution, as F. Fukuyama affirmed.<sup>1</sup> Ideologies are not violent per se, it is human beings who are violent. Ideologies are the mystic “happy ending” of our history of persecution. The mechanism of the sacrificial lamb (a concept elaborated by Girard) offers a systematic closure that allows social groups to start functioning again, to begin a new cycle and continue to ignore the true meaning of that systematic closure, i.e. believing in the guilt of the sacrificial lamb, of the ousted enemy, of evil that has been overcome.
3. A functional society is a society whose institutions work without being constantly disrupted by violence. More in detail, there are:
  - (a) Societies defined by the concept of dharma, which basically means clearcut separation by caste. Dharma defines the obligations of each person towards his/her caste, social mores, civic and religious laws. Society is thus stable, each individual does what he/she is expected and told to do. External mediation follows the hierarchic template typical of traditional cultures. This is the case, for example, of the social-religious structure of India and was true in the Middle Ages when societal separations and the feudal hierarchic structure were mirrored by the hierarchic structure of the Church. This notwithstanding, the ever present threat

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<sup>1</sup> F. Fukuyama “The end of history and the last man”

of famine or insufficient food triggered periodic crises and destabilized the social order. Hence the theory, confirmed by Paul Dumouchel<sup>2</sup>, that the juridical system is able to keep under control episodes of marginal or sporadic violence but is absolutely impotent when violence expands beyond certain limits and therefore legal institutions have limited power in preventing violence.

- (b) Society's evolution from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment to our present stability, when the medieval concept of dharma has disappeared, is no longer based on hierarchic symbolic structures but on the Christian-Judeo principle of a human person capable of dominating his/her violent impulses. Contemporary society is governed by the inner mediation advocated by it.
- (c) Modern society (Christian protestant cultures) devised other ways of "controlling" violence through different forms of dharma, in particular the role of "social distance" (a subject analyzed by Emile Durkheim<sup>3</sup>). Social distance is the logical consequence of the division of labor and provides a way of controlling mimetic rivalries. The division of labor in fact empowers individuals – at least in theory – even though the market may force them to make certain choices rather than others. Girard underlines that the organization of labor plays a particularly relevant role in maintaining social stability in advanced capitalistic societies such as the United States. The theory that the division of labor can keep under control mimetic rivalries cannot be confirmed because the question is too complex, but social mobility, already a major factor in the United States, is growing incrementally in the rest of the world despite periods of uncertainty and rigidity.
4. Structural injustice at global and national level – lately increased by expansive monetary policies, as confirmed by wealth concentration data and by the Gini index– is still present with its potential of aggressiveness and must be constantly blunted by the market, that needs wider circulation of human capital, and first and foremost by Christian ethics. Social mobility is useful as a means of controlling mimetic rivalries among individuals. Western economy as it evolved after the industrial revolution is the first civilization which, through economic competition and social fluidity, makes positive use of mimetic rivalry, i.e. the rivalry among individuals: there is always a person who wishes to be like another person (model) and thus acquire his/her possessions and social status (the concept of mimetic rivalry is central to Girard's work). Social stability is the result of a range of factors: faith in our abilities, moral principles, firm economic regulation and of course its implementation. But moral and ethical values remain of paramount importance, particularly in the context of exacerbated individualism that threatens our society.

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<sup>2</sup> J.P. Dupuy and P. Dumouchel "Le Signe e l'Envie" in "*L'Enfer des choses*", Paris 1979

<sup>3</sup> E. Durkheim "The division of social work", 1999

5. Economic globalization has a positive effect on social dynamics because it fosters regulation. It guarantees no absolute certainties since too many factors are involved. There are still many factors of instability and injustice but there are also elements of stability.
6. Girard underlines also that every individual needs centers of stability, functioning in accordance with their respective dharma, extremely important to our way of living. Everybody lives in fear of losing those centers, mainly for selfish and material reasons. Selfishness is causing serious damage to the environment, damage that will be fatal in the not too distant future, though we do not know where, how and when.
7. The global economy is a consumption economy, which widens the field for rivalries and may reduce potential conflicts. By placing at everybody's disposal the same goods, objects, merchandise and services modern society reduces the opportunities for conflict and rivalry between individuals (supporting Montesquieu's intuition<sup>4</sup> of *sweet commerce*). The problem is that if this trend is pushed to its extreme people will eventually lose interest for these objects, all identical and universally available and therefore less desirable. As all sacrificial solutions even contemporary society needs periodic, cyclical renovation and must be offered ever new goods to survive, resulting in compulsive consumerism. And yet as more sacrificial remedies are available their efficacy wanes. Shopping becomes purely destructive, a wondrous embodiment of pure loss. This is today's problem: our consumerist society needs to destroy resources to survive, but this mechanism is beginning to show its weaknesses. Which leads to the conclusion that there cannot be sustained growth without compulsive consumption.  
A consumerist society brought to its extreme turns all of us into mystics, in as much as it highlights that goods, objects, cannot satisfy our desires. If on one hand this awareness can lead us to engage in all sorts of meaningless activities, on the other it makes us realize that we need something entirely different, something that a consumerist society cannot give us (a concept articulated by the epistemologist Pierre Dupuy<sup>5</sup>). Modern individualism is also very ambiguous, we live in a world where we have ever fewer needs but ever more desires, which may be a positive and negative fact. This is true also of modern subjectivity. Today a person has a real possibility of achieving autonomy, of forming personal opinions.
8. Unfortunately what happens most of the time is that this possibility is discarded in favor of a false individuality: today nobody thinks himself conventional, commonplace, everybody believes himself more original than those around him. Hence the success of virtual realities such as Facebook and other social networks, where everything hinges on

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<sup>4</sup> Montesquieu "*Lettres Persanes*", Paris 1721

<sup>5</sup> J.P. Dupuy and P. Dumouchel "Le signe et l'Envie" in "*L'Enfer des choses*", Paris 1979

selfpraise via pictures, words, thoughts to be shared with one's "virtual" friends. People believe they are being original and are members of a fraternal community: in truth they are trying to affirm their identity, they suffer from solitude but end up more individualistic and selfish. The communal sense of subsidiarity and solidarity is lost.

9. The dynamic of the search for differentiation, or the dynamic of the desire not to be different, goes beyond consumerism: it produces snobbishness, indifference, minimalist and anorexic aesthetics. The consumption society has morphed into a simple exchange of signs rather than material goods. Western countries favor minimalism because a world where consumption is proof of wealth is no longer attractive: a person must be wearing torn jeans and look unwashed to be truly cool. The problem is that everybody uses the same tricks and so they all look the same. The so called BRICS countries and the developing ones favor opulent consumerism; out of mimetic desire they want to be like western economies: wealth, good living, art and culture must be emphasized, luxury goods and even exotic food must be had. And this is of course particularly true of the "nouveaux riches".
10. But if we go back to Montesquieu and his "*sweet commerce*" - i.e. to the idea that the exchange of goods eases social conflict – we cannot but underline the indispensable role of money and credit. This peculiarity of the circulation of money and its inverse correlation to social tensions caused by increased mimetic desires and conflicts may offer us the key to an anthropological interpretation of the expansive monetary policies that are being implemented. Over the last twenty years moral and ethical relativism has affected social ideologies both progressive and conservative and thus the selection of a political class. We have handed over the management of social tensions to plutocratic technocrats, tensions that used to be prevented or attenuated by political elites with policies aimed at the common good of society and more or less effective results of income and wealth redistribution.