COMMENTARY - GENOVESI'S CALL TO ITALY (AND SOUTH OF EUROPE): BE YOURSELF!

EYES THAT ENCOURAGE RECOVERY

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The connected, interdependent networks making up the market economy can bring about both wonderful and terrifying outcomes. In times of prosperity, wealth is distributed among everyone, while during depressions problems are interconnected and amplified; the virtue of interdependence is replaced by a vicious cycle of people inflicting losses on one another. Customers don't pay, banks don't loan, and suppliers don't receive payment and are unable to pay their own debts. This process, like a maelstrom, spirals ever downwards swallowing factories, jobs, houses, lives.

Throughout Italy, but particularly in the South, and in southern Europe workers and the unemployed have been suffering. The crisis has canceled the economic development of the past two decades. I believe that it is possible that an economic recovery will make the South Europe's new center of gravity. Many talented people and potentialities from the South have been crushed and stifled by events in the recent and far past.

Latin and southern culture is full of blessings, but mainstream capitalists only see its wounds (shortcomings). Though we thought we had ended the unfortunate brain drain to the North, a new massive one has begun. The best of our young people migrate for “bread and dignity”. Southern Europe needs trust, esteem, and self-esteem; it needs “courage”, according to one of the fathers of Italy’s Civil Economy, Antonio Genovesi. People today should read his works and more about him.

His book, Lessons of Civil Economy (a new edition will soon be released), is even more relevant today than back when it was written in 1765. Regarding southern Italy he wrote: “Their wines are served as nectar on the best tables, held in highest-esteem by England and even France, where Burgundy is intensely praised… It consists of counties covered with wool, linen, canapé, and various animal species; it is the country of cheese, wheat etc., and great minds… We should therefore have four times more money than the other nations; five times actually, if we include the oil, six for the wine, seven for the silk, and so on.” Therefore, the question is still the same: where is this money? “I’ll never believe in the lack of talent – does one really think that colder climates produce sharper brains than warm ones? - nor in the absence of hard work;… I therefore conclude that we are short of courage and are misusing our labor.”

For Genovesi, the absence of “courage” and well-employed labor is due to: “The burden of finance encumbers the arts but not land and possessions. This has discouraged and devalued the arts.” These are indeed inspired words. The future of a nation is gloomy if it “discourages” and “devalues” the arts, i.e., if it taxes craftsmen and businesses while promoting speculation. In fact, our neo-feudal social and economic system (together with all other feudal regimes) is sustained by privileges that overvalue income from assets.

We have condemned this and will continue to do so. Genovesi saw quality and potential in the Italian economy and ingenuity in the soul of Italy and its people - besides their other evident attributes. He was aware though that, despite these virtues, there were also shortcomings; they are always present. In fact, after listing the virtues and merits of the kingdom, he pointed out that: “If a foreigner happens to read this article, he or she should keep in mind that I wrote it after chugging a dram of rhubarb on an empty stomach.” His optimistic writings inspired reforms and revolutions in the Kingdom of Naples. None managed to last long, but they were inspiring and followed by others.
The ability to promote pride and hope based on the national attributes of both past and present depends on the civil talent of governors and intellectuals; they can give a “soul” to the country. Through this they offer the people a “not yet fully realized” reality that is better than the one “already here” or which “once was”. When a nation doesn't have this ability, people only denigrate, criticize, curse, and infect each other with pessimism.

If we wish to boost our economy and civil society, we must produce income from art, culture, nature, history, food, wine, tourism, beauty, and the many other unique national and European assets. These are still under-valued and should be promoted, especially in the South. We are called upon to recover our economically productive identity. It is one not based on Germany or the USA, but based on the human and cultural capital we inherited from the past; this heritage is still capable of producing wealth. Our ancestors and nature have granted us extraordinary gifts: “Oh how bewildered are you! You have turned your back to nature that generously offers its true, long-lasting and blessed riches, and have followed bodiless bizarre fantasies. When will you ever wake up from these dreams?”.

Genovesi’s words aren’t enough, nor are the most inspiring thoughts from other philosophers or poets; much more is necessary to boost the economy. However, during hard times it is useful to seek help among the great visionaries; they can give us insights into how to find solutions from within and from the spirit of the world around us. Businesses, communities and people are bound together in a moral and civil network, which is full of hidden resources, goods and capital. If we are able to recognize this, we could produce jobs and income. Once a farmer told me: “I was hopeless. One morning though I walked out of my house and saw a warehouse. It had always been there, I just hadn't noticed it in the past years”.

Solutions are almost always under our noses, but in hard times we just don't see them. We are called upon to find our true capital and goods. The worst consequence of a crisis is when it blinds our souls and minds.

_Translated by Cristian Sebok_