THE GREAT TRANSITION – VULNERABLE TRUST IS THE STRONGEST
MAKING NEW ALTERNATIVES TO THE LOGIC OF THE CASTES GROW

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‘Communitas is a set of people united not by a “property”, but by a duty or a debt. Not by a “more”, but a “less”, by a lack, a limit that is set up as a burden, or even as an obligation or even as a defective way for the person who is “affected” by it, unlike the one who is “exempt” or “exempted.”

(Roberto Esposito, Communitas).

Communities and organizations that have preserved their creative and fruitful character over time have been able to live with their vulnerability; they have not eliminated it entirely from their territories but they took care of it. Vulnerability (from vulnus: wound), like many true words of the human realm, is ambivalent, because good vulnerability coexists with bad vulnerability, and often the two are intertwined. Good vulnerability is inscribed in all generative human relationships, where if I do not give the other the possibility of “hurting me”, the relationship does not reach the depth to be fruitful.

Good vulnerability is what we experience in loving relationships with our children, in friendship, in the primary communities of our lives. Today we know that the most creative work teams are those where people receive an authentic - therefore risky - openness for credit. Generativity in all areas has a vital need for freedom, trust, risk, all of which make the person who grants these vulnerable. Life is generated by relationships open to the possibility of relational injury.

We would not help any child in becoming a free person without granting them a vulnerable trust inside families, in schools and in the many places of education. And as adults we cannot flourish at the workplace without receiving and giving risky and vulnerable confidence.

But the culture of the big global companies today looks for the impossible: it wants creativity from their employees without accepting the vulnerability of relationships. Think of the growing phenomenon of the so-called “managerial subsidiarity”, according to which the manager has to intervene in the decisions of a group, taking up the coordination only for those activities that would be worse without his “subsidiary” intervention. Large companies are, in fact, realizing that in order to get the best from their employees they must grant the proper conditions for them to feel free and as protagonists of their own work. No creativity is given except out of freedom, but for subsidiarity to function it is essential that workers and work groups experience genuine confidence - but then
they can also abuse it. There are few things on earth that give as much of joy as the participation in free collective action in the company of equals.

In order for this beautiful and ancient idea of subsidiarity not to remain just a principle to be written in social budgets, it is essential that the management should really trust the work group, and it shouldn’t want to control the entire process to prevent abuse of trust and receiving “wounds”. If, however, those who are given “delegation” perceive that in fact this “trust” is only instrumental, a technique to make more profits, subsidiarity stops producing its effects. That’s why subsidiarity in companies would need the owners’ and not capitalists’ assets, where the delegation does not proceed from the top down to the workers, but in the opposite direction (as in politics, where the principle of subsidiarity was born). When, however, subsidiarity descends from above it becomes something else that only works when and if the owners decide they should, and it is therefore not very resilient to failures of subsidiarity. Only intrinsic motivation associated with the appropriate institutions allows for subsidiarity and for the participatory forms of surviving after crises due to serious abuses of trust. In reality, the naturally subsidiary institutions would be the democratic and participative businesses (just like cooperatives), where “sovereignty belongs to the people” indeed, i.e. the workers-members that grant it upwards to their managers and directors.

In other words, subsidiarity and confidence can really work when they are risky and vulnerable. If we were to design a coin of human relations, one side would represent the joys of the free encounter between acts of gratuitousness, and the other would show the many images of our wounds that those joys generated.

But - and here is another paradox of our capitalist system - the culture taught in all business schools hates vulnerability and considers it the greatest enemy. And for many reasons. Throughout the centuries, western civilization has formed a clear separation between the places of the good and the bad vulnerabilities. It has not accepted the ambivalence and thus created a dichotomy. Good vulnerability, capable of generating blessing has been instead associated with private life, the family and the woman, who is the first image of the generative wound. In the public sphere, which is based entirely on the male register, vulnerability is always bad. Therefore economic and organizational life was also based on invulnerability. Showing wounds and fragility in the workplace is only and always a negative value, inefficiency, demerit. The past decades of financial capitalism have amplified the invulnerable nature of work culture in the large global enterprises, where every vulnerability must be ejected.

The best way to eliminate vulnerability inside the community has always been immunity. Immunity is the main feature of the large capitalist enterprises today. Every invulnerable culture is also an immune culture: if I don’t want to be hurt in my relationship with you, I have to stop you touching me by building a system of relations that avoids any form of contamination. Immunity is the lack of exposure to the other person’s touch. Immunitas is the negation of communitas: the soul of
Communitas is munus (gift and duty) in reciprocity, while that of immunitas is reciprocal ingratitude, the absence and the opposite of gift (in-munus, immune).

All immune companies are radically hierarchical, because they increase the vertical and horizontal distances between people to prevent them from touching each other, and so manage them and direct them according to the company’s purposes. The first function of the hierarchy is not to let people mingle with each other (this is the origin of the Portuguese word casta: not contaminated), not to let them touch whoever is different among them, only those that are similar. In all immune-caste societies it is strictly forbidden to touch those that are different because only members of the same caste can and must touch each other. For this reason, caste-driven companies know little about creativity and innovation, because only biodiversity is always generative.

This lack of contact between those who are different is a root cause of the decay of the elites inside caste societies, including our global enterprises. The beggars’ movements of the 13th-14th centuries were the forgers of great innovation and economic, social, political and spiritual generativity, disrupting the early mediaeval order of castes and immunity characterising their society, because they welcomed the rich and the poor, and people coming from any region or township in the same monasteries. Those new communities were capable of bringing forth some huge innovations because they put merchants and the poor, bankers and craftsmen, artists and mystics together. That biodiversity turned into creativity and innovation, an innovation that was born from not being afraid of wounds or the stigmata of fraternity. Fraternity is anti-immune, as Francis of Assisi tells us by embracing and kissing the leper - solidarity-philanthropy is almost always immune, fraternity never.

The root of every immune-caste civilization is the installation of the fundamental distinction between pure and impure: there are activities, people, things that are pure and can be touched, and others that are impure and can only be touched by the lower castes. But in all immune-caste societies there is also a deep interdependence between the castes. Even Brahmins need the pariahs (and vice versa), because as a consequence of immunity in these societies the division of labour is radical. This is why the presence of mediators is indispensable, as they have the special function of putting in contact those who cannot touch each other.

This way it is understandable why the big capitalist enterprises are now the sharpest images of an immune-caste society, and that managers are the mediators connecting the various ‘castes’ of the company without anyone touching the others, the impure ones. Touching is only possible between equals (sometimes there is too much of it among colleagues and it can even hurt). The members of the “lower” ranks can be touched by superiors only with tools and techniques, not directly. Large companies are less and less mixed, even when people work in open space offices (where they remain well separated in terms of power and wages).

We cease to be generative in all areas as soon as we stop meeting and embracing each other, especially the poor. People lose creativity when over the years they reduce contact with those who are different. Something similar is happening to the elites of the organizations, institutions, and therefore also to companies: the
culture of immunity that leads them not to get contaminated pre-determines their sterility and decadence. Much of our generativity, energy and strength depend on being in contact with other humanities, cultures, lives and bodies. Hope and excellence are born and reborn from the promiscuous places of living, from the meeting of the entire humanity, from being fed by the many foods of the village.

A deep crisis of capitalism is on the horizon, generated by the decay of the impoverished elites and by their immunity and being unfertilized by good vulnerability of entirely human relations. The fear of relational wounds is creating a global culture of immunity, of which large companies are the major global carriers. For this reason, a major challenge of the coming years will be the very survival of organizations. The apotheosis of the immune-invulnerable culture will in fact be the elimination of organizations, the disappearance of the places where people co-habit and co-operate (live and work together), in order to create decentralized production in their place where everyone works at home thanks to the ever more sophisticated technologies. Consumers without shops, banking without banks, online schools without teachers and students, and perhaps even hospitals without doctors and nurses, populated by highly efficient robots and cameras. The final elimination of vulnerability will eventually be reached this way, we will finally have found the tree of life, but it will be a tree without fruits, or with flavourless fruits. And it will be the hunger for tasty fruits to make us still meet, embrace and live.