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SOME OF THE FOREMOST CHALLENGES TO THE STATUS QUO

■ 1. Strong (Wo)man vs. Crisis of Democracy

There was a genuine cornucopia of reactions to Trump's victory – above all, of its explanations; but amazingly, explanations were almost consensual. Public opinion – inspired, nudged, beefed up and abetted as usual by the media chorus, all but-agreed that (just as the Brexit vote) Trump vote was a massive, indeed popular protest against the political establishment and political elite of the country *as a whole*, with which a large and continually growing part of population grew in recent years frustrated for failing, well – nigh systematically nor routinely, to deliver on its promises. Not being part of that elite, never having occupied any elected office, coming “from outside of the political establishment” and staying stubbornly at loggerheads even with the party of which he was formally a member, Trump's candidature appeared the first credible, indeed unique occasion for such a wholesale condemnation of entire political system – just as in the British referendum, where all major political parties (Conservatives, Labour and Liberals) united in their call to remain in the EU and so one could use his/her single vote to recall his/her distaste of the political system *in its entirety* with no need to inadvertently give preference to another part of the same discredited and resented political elite.

To cut the long story short: Trump won his presidency on the anti-establishment card. Presenting himself as a strong man with his hands untied by peculiar and selfish partisan interest, and for that reason able to set off a new beginning or a return to the glorious past, capable of playing down and sweeping aside the establishment sacrosanct principles of political/legal correctness deemed to bear the responsibility of the double sin of impotence to act effectively and indifferently to what the nation which that establishment

pretends to represent and intends to guide wishes to be done. What one heard however much less frequently from the opinion-makers was that Trump won his presidency because *his voters* dreamt all along of the same...

Those who mentioned that factor pointed out to the notable hunger of the population for replacing the endless but ineffective and impotent parliamentary bickering with an indomitable and unassailable will of a “strong man” (or woman) – a dictator or an authoritarian ruler – and his/her determination and capability to impose right away, without prevarication and procrastination, the quick fixes, shortcuts and instant solutions of his or her choice. Throughout the electoral campaign, Trump skillfully and consistently construed his own public image as a person of such qualities of which a large part of the electorate dreamt.

These were surely not the only factors contributing to Trump’s triumph but certainly crucial and perhaps paramount and decisive ones. Hillary Clinton’s, his main opponent’s thirty-years long membership of the establishment and her characteristically half-way, piecemeal, cautiously trimmed and conscientiously self limiting agenda militated, on the contrary, against trusting possessing and willing to deploy similar qualities.

What we are currently witnessing not just in the US but in a considerable and rapidly expanding sector of the EU is a thorough re-hushing of allegedly untouchable, indeed defining principles of “democracy” – though I don’t think that the term itself will be abandoned as the name of the political ideal, as a “significant”, as Claude Levi-Strauss would have branded it, “democracy” has been absorbing and is still capable of parenting many and different “signifiées”. There is, for instance, a distinct possibility of the traditional safeguards (like Montesquieu’s division of power into three autonomous – legislative, executive and judiciary – or English “check and balances” system) falling out of public favour and stripped of significance, replaced explicitly or matter-of-factly by the condensation of power in authoritarian or even dicatorial models. Symptoms multiply of a tendency to – so to speak – pulling power down from the nebulous unreachable and impenetrable elitist heights where it has been placed or drifted “closer home”: into a quasi-direct communication between the strong (wo)man on the top and the pulverised and eminently fluid and fissiparous aggregate of their supporters/subjects, equipped with “social websites” as apparently wide open and widely accessible gates to the public arena and to the indoctrination/opinion-surveys media.

■ “Us” and “Them”: Then and Now

Division of humans into “us” and “them” – their juxtaposition and antagonism – are inseparable companions of the human mode of being-in-the-world throughout history of the human species. “Us” and “Them” are related as heads *and* tails – two faces of the same coin; while a coin with but one face, were it to be minted as a model for inter human cohabitation, would be an unworkable oxymoron – contradiction in terms.

History of homo sapiens may be written from many perspectives – but also, and most significantly for our theme – as a story of successive extensions of the volume of “us” – of integrated human groups, amenable to integration and postulated/pressed to integrate – from the primitive horde of hunters/gatherers which could not include into the notion of “us” more than 150 members, to the “imagined community” of the modern nation-state, but also and thus far more inevitably, as the story of “them”, against whom the groups, whatever their size, has been or ought to and is to integrate. Indeed, the idea of being “one of us” derives its meaning primarily from *not being* “one of them”, and only secondarily from being *unlike* “them”.

As the great Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth has argued and convincingly shown (Barth 1969): instead of borders being drawn to separate extant differences, it is differences that are sought, found or invented to legitimise and fortify (preferably to the point of non-permeability) the borders already drawn or keenly intended to be drawn. The snag is, that in most and perhaps all such cases a fully and truly airtight leak-proof and impassable non-porous borders are both logically and practically unachievable. Alongside “us” and “them” borders bring in the being, well-nigh inevitably, a cognitive and behavioural “green zone” of conceptual ambiguity and ethical/axiological ambivalence; an era reminiscent of the territories marked on ancient maps as *hic sunt leones* – the sphere of the unknown and for that reason dangerous, but also incommunicable. As Ludwig Wittgenstein put it – “if lions could speak, we wouldn’t understand them” (Wittgenstein 1953).

In case of the residents of (or exiles to) the grey frontier zones, the condition of “being unknown and therefore menacing” is the effect of their inherent or imputed resistance to unambiguous classification; eluding of assignment to any of cognitive categories serving as building blocks of “order” and “normality”, and first and foremost holding the separating borders impermeable. The cardinal sin or unforgivable crime consists in being the cause of mental and pragmatic incapacitation that follows the behavioural confusion they can’t but generate (Wittgenstein, let’s recall, defined understanding as knowing how to go on – 1953). In addition, that sin/crime encounters formidable obstacles to

redemption, given the stout refusal of the “us” to engage in a dialogue with “them” aimed at defying and mitigating the initial impossibility to understand them. The assignment to a “grey zone” is a self-propelling as well as intensifying process set in motion and beefed-up by the breakdown, or rather a priori refusal of communication; rising the difficulty of understanding to the rank of a moral injunction and a duty predetermined by God or History is, after all, the prime cause and a paramount stimulus to drawing and fortifying, mostly though not exclusively along the religious or ethnic lines, borders separating “us” from “them” – and the fundamental function they are ascribed to perform. The grey zone of ambiguity and ambivalence being an interface between “us” and “them”, it inevitably constitutes the major, perhaps even main and all too often the sole territory on which the implacable hostilities between “us” and “them” are played out and the battles are fought.

The “us” vs. “them” dialectics discussed here thus far is an anthropological *constant* of human condition; the dialectics entails, however, also historical, time-bound *variables* as the game of self-identification and separation (or, more to the point, the game of separation *because* of self-identification and the game of self-identification *through* separation) meets new issues and challenges positing by changing techniques of domination and technologies of social actions that serve them.

One of such new challenges has been the need to design a replica/equivalent/ smile, or an updated version of the orthodox, territorial variety of separation inside the online cyberspace of informatics notorious for allowing freedom to bypass border-posts and ignore borders. This challenge has been met; contrary to many a hopeful prognosis, the near-universal and 24/7 online availability of access to instant communication independently of geographical distance did not put paid to limits and off-bounds of information, but on the contrary: facilitated the job of mental separation and non-communication to the degree unattainable in the offline part of the universe we inhabit: nor in *Lebenswelte* shaped by the experience of the world deprived of the online sector. As shown by the research of practices deployed by a great majority of Internet users, the DIY “comfort zones”, “echo chambers” or “mirror halls” easily constructed online by the simple expedient of nipping communication in its bud or preventing its building are much more effective tools of creating and sustaining separation than the most refining technologies of “gated communities” or state-installed frontier walls, barbed wires, most ingenious passport-and-visa arrangements and heavily armed border patrols.

The above described challenge of the online version of separation acquires moreover yet graver importance from its coincidence with another challenge – arguably the most seminal and most difficult to be met in the long history

of the human species. That another challenge is an unprecedented link in the long chain of expansions in the volume and reach of socio-political integration (and so, in effect, of the segments of humanity include in the “us” idea). Unprecedented – because all previous levels of integration – from primitive horde to nation-state – were produced and fixed using the same interplay of inclusion and exclusion: integration of “us” coupled, simultaneous and intimately connected to the point of non-discernibility of the separation from a joint enemy: some resented and assumed hostile “them”.

The next leap in the history of expanding integration – if it ever happens – will have to do however *without* the clutch of a shared enemy – of new divisions, new separations and new walls needed to accommodate (indeed, to give meaning) to the unity of expanded “us”. In our globalized world of universal interdependence we are all already cast, as Ulrich Beck insisted, in a “cosmopolitan *situation*” (Beck 2006) – but we haven’t as yet embarked in earnest on the long and wobbly road leading to the acquisition of its necessary complement: the cosmopolitan *awareness* – worldview, mind-set and attitude. And no wonder: those prospective “us” embracing this time – for the first time in human history – the *whole* of humanity, would need to acquire such consciousness with no help of our enemy: a *shared* enemy legitimising and demanding for that reason the solidarity of all of “us”. Is this however, with all its concomitants like an end to the grey zone of ambiguity and ambivalence, at all possible? Indeed, conceivable? To become a realistic proposition, this would at any rate require nothing less than an uphill-struggle to renegotiate and replace the thousands years old, deeply ingrained human mode of being-in-the-world.

The incompatibility of means and ends is arguably the gravest, the most intractable and potentially the most menacing among the manifestation of the present-day “instrumental crisis”, justifying the view of the current planetary condition as one of “interregnum”, defined by Antonio Gramsci as the state of affairs in which the inherited and extant instruments of collective action have stopped already or are imminent to stop working properly, while the new ones, adequate to deal with the already changed or emergent conditions, are still at best on the drawing boards (Gramsci 1971).

Such a mechanism served well all previous stages of the progressive expansion of politically integrated bodies – but does not square well with its last phase, imposed on the impending political agenda by the emergent “cosmopolitan condition”; indeed, it appears singularly unfit for performing “the last leap” in the history of human integration – raising the “we” concept and practices of human cohabitation, cooperation and solidarity to the level of humanity as a whole. Starkly, that last leap stands out from the long row

of its smaller-scale antecedents as not just *quantitatively*, but *qualitatively* distinct, unprecedented and untried in practice. It calls for nothing less than a necessarily traumatic separation between the issue of “belonging” (that is, of the self-identification), from that of territoriality of political sovereignty: a postulate loudly voiced a hundred or so years ago by the likes of Otto Bauer, Karl Reiner or Vladimir Menem in response to the multinational realities of the Austro-Hungarian or Russian Empires, though never and nowhere coming anyplace close to political usages and conventions.

Following that postulate doesn't seem on the cards in foreseeable future. On the contrary: most of the current symptoms (which I attempted to list in my study of “retrotopia” about to be published by the Polity Books) point to the ardent search for “them” – preferably the old-fashioned unmistakable and incurably alien hostile and pugnacious, fit for the job of identity-reinforcement, boundary-drawing and wall-building. The impulsive “natural” – impulsive as well as routine reactions of a rising number of powers-that-be to the progressive erosion of their territorial sovereignty – tends to be an effort to loosen their supra-state commitments and to retreat from previous consent to join resources and coordinate policies – that is moving yet farther away from complementing and matching their objectively cosmopolitan plight with programs and undertakings of a similar level. Such a state of affairs only adds to the volume of the global disarray that underpins the gradual yet relentless disablement of the extant institutions of political power. The prime winners are extraterritorial finances, investment funds and commodity trade of all shades of semi-legality; whereas economic and social equality, principles of inner- and inter-state justice are the losers – together with a large part, possibly, a growing majority, of the world population.

Instead of an earnest, consistent and coordinated, long-term undertaking to uproot the resulting existential fears, governments all around the globe have jumped to the chance of filling the legitimating vacuum left behind by the shrinking social provisions and abandoned post-war efforts to lay foundations under a “family of nations” by a powerful push toward a so-to-speak “securitization” of social problems and in consequence also the tenor of political thought and action. Popular fears, aided and abetted by an unwritten yet intimate, truly buddy-buddy alliance of political elite and mass information and entertainment media and spurred yet further by the rising hegemony of the “strong men” (and women) demagoguery, are for all intents and purposes welcome as the most precious ore fit for continuous smelting of ever new supplies of fresh political capitals which the let-off the leash commercial powers and their political lobbies and executors covet having been famished of their orthodox varieties.

From the top to the bottom of society, incorporating labour markets that set the tune played by their pipers for us, the *hoi polloi*, to chant or croon – an ambience is spewed of mutual (and a priori) distrust, suspiciousness and cut-throat competition. In such climate suffocate, wilt and fade germs of communal spirit and mutual help (if their sprouts haven't been forcibly nipped out before). With the stakes in a concerted, solidary actions losing their values day in, day out, and their potential effects dimming, the interest in joining forces and attend to shared interests in common are robbed of most of their attraction and so the stimuli to engage in a dialogue targeted on reciprocal recognition respect and bona fide understanding die out.

■ Existential Uncertainty and Migration Panic

There is, let me start, the phenomenon of *emigration/immigration* (from/to). And there is another phenomenon, of *migration* (from, but where to?) – all too often failed to be distinguished from the first and for that reason attempted to be dealt with the same policies. The two phenomena are ruled by different sets of laws and logics, their difference having been determined by the divergence of their roots; all the same, there is similarity between their effects, dictated by the semblance of psychosocial conditions at identities of destinations. Both their differences and similarities are magnified by the ongoing, and in all probability unstoppable, globalization of economy and information. The first makes all genuinely or putatively sovereign territories into “communicating vessels”, between which their liquid contents are known to keep flowing until an equal level in all is reached. The second stretches the stimuli diffusion, copycat behaviour and the reference areas and yardsticks of “relative deprivation” to the fully and truly planet-wide dimension.

The phenomenon of immigration, as uniquely visionary Umberto Eco pointed well before the present-day migration of peoples took off¹, “may be controlled politically, restricted, encouraged, planned, or accepted... This is not the case with migration”. Immigration can be controlled politically, but like natural phenomena, migration can't be “As long as there is immigration, peoples can hope to keep the immigrants in a ghetto, so that they do not mix with the natives. When migration occurs, there are no more ghettos, and intermarriage is uncontrollable”.

¹ Here quoted from *Migration, Tolerance, and Intolerable* in transl. by Alastair McEwen (2001), *Five moral pieces*, Secker & Warburg, p. 93. Originally published as *Cinque scritti morali* by RCS Libri in 1997.

Eco asked then (quite a few years before the “immigration panic” took off) the crucial question: “Is it possible to distinguish immigration from migration when the entire planet is becoming the territory of intersecting movements of people?”. And suggested in his reply: “What Europe is still trying to tackle as immigration is instead migration. The Third World is knocking at our doors, and it will come in even if we are not in agreement... Europe will become a multiracial continent – or ‘coloured’ one... That’s how it will be, whether you like it or not”. And, let me add – whether *all* of “them” like it or/and *all* of “us” resent.

At what point of time emigration/immigration turns into a migration? At what point the politically manageable trickle of immigrants knocking-at-our-doors turns into the quasi-self-sustained and self-propelling flood of migrants overflowing or by-passing all doors complete with their hastily patched together political reinforcements? At what point the accrued quantitative additions turn into qualitative changes? All answers to such questions are bound to stay essentially contested well beyond the moment which might be retrospectively recognized to have been such a watershed.

What sets the two phenomena apart is the issue of “assimilation”; its endemic presence in the concept “immigration” and its conspicuous absence in the concept of “migration” – a void filled first by the notions of “melting pot” or “hybridisation”, and now, increasingly, by that of “multiculturalism”: that is, of the cultural differentiation and diversity set to stay here for a foreseeable future, instead of being a stage on the road to cultural homogeneity and so, essentially, no more than a temporary irritant. To avoid the confusion between the extant state of affairs and policy planned/tried to tackle it – a kind of befuddlement for which the concept “multiculturalism” is infamously notorious – it is advisable to replace that term with the concept of “diasporisation”: suggestive of two crucial traits of the state of affairs currently emerging in the result of migration – a state subject much more to the grassroots of processes and influences than dependant on a top-down regulation, and grounding the interaction between diasporas more on the division of labour than on gelling of cultures.

At the time when Eco published his study (about 20 years ago) in the city of New York “the whites” counted 58% and were ever nearer to becoming a minority; 42% of the “whites” were Jews, the rest was divided between Wasps, Poles, Italians, Hispanics, Irish etc. (2001: 92). A very similar amount of distinct ethnic, religious or linguistics categories and of the distribution of their percentages can be recorded in great cities of all continents, whose number is also on the rise. And let’s recall that for the first time in its history most of humanity lives in cities, where life patterns for the rest of the planet tend to be set and daily modified.

This seminal departure in the *modus operandi* and the consequences of “peoples on the move” is – to deploy Eco’s distinction – the outcome of *migration*, not *immigration*: of a self-propelling process, rather than of politically/militarily-supervised undertaking. Heterogeneity of urban environment can no longer be supposed, perceived and treated as bound to be made null and void ensuing the cultural assimilation of the currently alien elements: the inevitable – voluntary or imposed – surrender/annihilation of their cultural idiosyncrasies. Cultural heterogeneity is fast becoming – and recognized if not approved – as an un-detachable and irremovable, indeed endemic trait of the urban mode of human cohabitation.

Whether we like it or not, we the urban dwellers find ourselves in a situation requiring the development and appropriation of the skills of living with difference daily, and in all probability permanently. After a couple of centuries spent on dreams of cultural assimilation (unilateral) or convergence (bilateral), and on ensuing practices, we begin to face up – even if in many a case reluctantly, and often with un-mitigating resistance – to the prospect of the mixture of interaction and friction between multiplicity of irreducibly diverse identities of neighbouring and/or intermixed cultural diasporas. Realization of such prospect does not come easy and the first response is one of denial – or a resolute, emphatic and pugnacious rejection.

Intolerance, Eco suggests,

comes before any doctrine. In this sense intolerance has biological roots, it manifests itself among animals as territoriality, it is based on emotional reactions that are often superficial – we cannot bear those who are different from us, because their skin is of different colour; because they speak language we do not understand; because they eat frogs, dogs, monkeys, pigs or garlic; because they tattoo themselves... (2001: 99–100).

To put yet stronger emphasis on the main point for the reason of its stark opposition to common beliefs, Eco reiterates: “doctrines of difference do not produce uncontrolled intolerance: on the contrary, they exploit a pre-existing and diffuse reservoir of intolerance” (2001: 100). Such a statement chimes well with insistent of Fredrik Barth, the formidable Norwegian anthropologist, that boundaries are not drawn because of noted differences, but the other way round: differences are noted or invented because boundaries have been drawn. According to both thinkers, doctrines are composed to “rationally” explain and justify, retrospectively, the already present and in most cases and in most cases firmly settled ill-disposed, disapproving, antagonistic, resentful and bellicose emotions.

Eco goes as far as stating that intolerance arising in the absence of any doctrine is the intolerance's "most dangerous form" (2001: 101). One can, after all, engage in polemics with an articulated doctrine and disprove one by one its explicit assertions and latent presumptions. Elemental drives, however, are immune to, and insulated against arguments. Fundamentalist, integralist, racist and ethnically chauvinist demagogues may and need to be charged with feeding and capitalizing on the pre-existence "elemental intolerance" for political profits, widening thereby its reverberations and exacerbating their morbidity – but not with *causing* the phenomenon of intolerance.

Where to look therefore for the origin and mainspring of the phenomenon? In the last account, I suggest, to the fear of the *unknown* – of which the "strangers" or "aliens" (by definition insufficiently known, yet less understood, and all but unpredictable in their conduct and their responses to one's own gambits) are most prominent emblems: most tangible because nearby and conspicuous. On the world map in which we inscribe our destinations and the roads leading to them, they stay uncharted (again by definition: have they been charted, they would have been moved to some other than the strangers' category). Their status in uncannily reminiscent to that signalled on ancient maps by the warning "hic sunt leones" inscribed on the outskirts of the inhabitable and inhabited *οικουμένη*; with a proviso, though, that these mysterious, sinister and intimidating beasts, lions in the migrants disguise, have left by now their distant lairs and squatted, surreptitiously, next door. If in the times when those road-maps were sketched one could prudently avoid venturing anywhere near their dens and by such a simple stratagem steer clear of trouble, such an option is no longer available. "The beasts" are now at our doors and one can't dodge encountering them whenever stepping out to the street.

To sum up: in the world in which we live, one can attempt to control (even with but a minor success) the issue of immigration – but migration is bound to follow its logic whatever we do. All in all, as things stand now and promise/warn to be standing for a long time to come, mass migration is unlikely to grind to a halt – neither for the lack of prompting nor for the rising ingenuity of attempts to stop it. As Robert Winder wittily remarked in the preface to the second edition of his book (2013) – "We can park our chair on the beach as often as we please, and cry at the oncoming waves, but the tide will not listen, nor the sea retreat". Building of walls in order to stop migrants short of "our own backyards" comes ridiculously close to the story of the ancient philosopher Diogenes rolling to and fro the barrel in which he lived along the streets of his native Sinope. Asked by the reasons for his pointless behaviour, he answered that noting his neighbours being busy barricading their doors and sharpening their swords, he wished to add his own contribution to the defence

of the city against its being conquered by the approaching troops of Alexander of Macedonia.

What has however happened most recently, in the last few years, is enormous leap in the numbers added by refugees and asylum seekers to the total volume of migrants knocking to the doors of Europe; that leap was caused by the rising number of “failing” or rather failed already states, or stateless and so also lawless territories, stages of interminable tribal and sectarian wars, mass murders, catch-as-you-catch-can, and round-the-clock banditry. To a large extent, this is the collateral damage done by the fatally misjudged, ill-starred and utterly calamitous military expeditions to Afghanistan and Iraq, ending in the replacing of dictatorial regimes with the open-all-hours theatre of unruliness and frenzy of violence – aided and abetted by the global arms trade unleashed from control and beefed up by the profit-greedy arms industry, with a tacit (though all too often proudly displayed in public on international arms fairs) support of GNP rise-greedy governments. The flood of the refugees pushed by the rule of arbitrary violence to abandon their homes and cherished possessions, of people seeking shelter from the killing fields, topped the steady flow of the so called “economic migrants”, pulled by the all too human wish to move from the barren soil to where the grass is green: from impoverished lands of no prospects, to dreamlands rich in opportunities.

■ Back to the Self

The call “back to self” has been born as a battle-cry of the war of liberation from the horrors of tribal imprisonment resurrected by the still-birth of its ostensible cosmopolitan alternative; just as “back to tribes” was, and still remains, the motto of running-for-shelter from the abominations of the loneliness of the orphaned/bereaved individuals of the post-liberation era. Both calls are poisons, curiously serving as antidotes to each other.

In the “Privatisation of Hope”² – a succinct, yet all the same trenchant and incisive and first and foremost sincere (one is tempted to say: audaciously sincere) vivisection of human bonds – currently falling apart in the consequence of having been by and large abandoned to the individual humans’ own wits, their chronically inadequate resources self-referential nature of their concerns, initiatives and undertakings – published in the “Boston Review” on 26 April 2016, Ronald Aronson asserted:

² <http://bostonreview.net/us-books-ideas/ronald-aronson-privatization-hope>

Hope is being privatized. Throughout the world but especially in the United States and the United Kingdom, a seismic shift is underway, displacing aspirations and responsibilities from the larger society to our own individual universes. The detaching of personal expectations from the wider world transforms both...

We have not lost all hope over the past generation; there is a maddening profusion of personal hopes. Under attack has been the kind of hope that is social, the motivation behind movements to make the world freer, more equal, more democratic, and more liveable.

In the nutshell:

At one time, workers understood that they could improve their conditions by collectively asserting themselves; now workers understand that their best option is to protect themselves *by themselves*. Among self-seekers, experiences of class and solidarity are impossible and irrelevant. As [Steve] Fraser says, when the self is the only viable site of betterment, when there is no possible gain from collective action, collective consciousness seems “foolish, naïve, woolly-headed or, on the contrary, sinful and seditious”.

Once abandoned to the markets game which they had little choice but join in the double capacity of sellers and the commodity on sale, the commodified humans are pushed and/or cajoled to perceive their being-in-the-world as an aggregation and succession of buying/selling transactions, and to regard the population of that world as accumulation of so many peddlers flaunting and haggling their wares each one of them displays on a privately owned and run market stall.

The people you meet on the first entry to that world, and then again and again upon successive entries to each one of its compartments, are most likely to “interpellate”³ you, and equally likely to be interpellated by you, as rivals and competitors; from time to time, may be as candidates for an occasional ad-hoc alliance, but hardly ever as natural brothers/sisters-in-arms – whether actual or destined to become. We are currently forcefully pushed – though with not much resistance on our part being evoked – back, to the early 19th century, when the peasants in many countries of Europe, and craftsmen and artisans in all of them, were expropriated on an accelerating pace of their means of production, and thereby also of their social standing and social capital. They have been crowded thereafter into the space of “life nasty, brutish and short” because conducted in a world engaged in the “war of all against all”, a world populated

³ A term introduced by Louis Althusser (1971).

by miserable like them, like them faceless and not fully human, and like them finding their new surroundings to be as alienating as are much hostile. It took them many decades to discover a common interest in that anonymous crowd clocking in and out the early capitalist factories and to crown that discovery with the notion of “solidarity” that ushered them in the era of experiments, aborted or stillborn attempts, false-starts, defeats and short-term triumphs stored in long-term memory; and yet more time to invent, institutionalize and practice a systemic and systematic solidary action aimed to replace enslavement with emancipation.

We are now in an era similar in its ambience. Some of us derive endurance from hoping for the forthcoming of new, more promising beginnings for all. Some others, disenchanted and exasperated by hopes’ addicted to frustration, invest their aspirations in turning back to the past. But it seems that large majority among us don’t care one way or another (either about the future or about the past), busying themselves instead in finding ways to disarm the unendurable prospects with the gadgets likely to deliver small but day in, day out satisfactions: cutting down on ambitions and expectations, having first retreated into the deceptively safe shelter of self-concern and self-reference. We haven’t yet started however to take earnestly note of (let alone to draw conclusions from) the deceitfulness of that shelter’s safety and disingenuousness of the self-reference. Blowing on singed fingers, most of us go on believing that – as Fraser noted – collective consciousness (not to mention collective action) is either seditious or naïve.

Frustration and the pain of singed fingers are all but genuine – but conclusions most people draw from them in practice even if not always in theory are not the only conceivable or even the sole convincing, let alone “foregone” or predetermined; just on the contrary, they are perched on several layers of tacit make-believe presumptions none of which holds much water. Jim Jackson, professor of sustainable development in the University of Surrey, managed to embrace all of these levels in a single concise phrase: “I t’ s a s t o r y a b o u t u s , p e o p l e , b e i n g p e r s u a d e d t o s p e n d m o n e y w e d o n ’ t h a v e o n t h i n g s w e d o n ’ t n e e d t o c r e a t e i m p r e s s i o n s t h a t w o n ’ t l a s t o n p e o p l e w e d o n ’ t c a r e ”⁴. Cut to dry bones, this phrase means: we have been drawn into all those senseless preoccupations and routines, which we came to trust as the *foolproof* recipe for confirming our *illusory* status.

To apply Robert Merton’s memorable distinction between the manifest and latent functions of social arrangements and the behavioural patterns they insinuate and demand, the manifest function of the mode of life imposed by

⁴ https://www.ted.com/talks/tim_jackson_s_economic_reality_check

the consumerist culture is to service the clients' needs and choices and facilitate their gratification; why the latent function (as Merton suggests, the factual engine of the whole arrangement) is to allow the users to reconcile and adjust to a life in which the chronic lack of needs servicing is made liveable by the stratagem of illusory gratification of the phantom ones.

Drawing on the presently all-too-common and therefore familiar manifestations of that rule in operation, Umberto offers (in one of his 1991 essays – Eco 1995) an outstandingly, genuinely, uniquely perceptive autopsy of its mechanism:

The man with power is the man who is not required to answer every call; on the contrary, he is always – as the saying goes – in a meeting...

So anyone who flaunts a portable phone as a symbol of power is, on the contrary, announcing to all and sundry his desperate, subaltern position, in which he is obliged to snap to attention, even when making love, if the CEO happens to telephone... The fact that he uses, ostentatiously, his cellular phone is proof that he doesn't know these things, and it is the confirmation of his social banishment, beyond appeal.

His eye-opening, meticulously and in-depth researched study of what he calls “The Age of Acquiescence”⁵ – a genuine compendium of factors joining forces in the job of reinforcing such “men with power” inside the castles to which they retreat and of making them immune to the acts of dissent and protest by those barred access – Steve Fraser subtitles “The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power”. His question is not why did the “Occupy Wall Street” happen (a question with a too obvious an answer to demand a five-hundred-pages long study), but why it *didn't* “happen much sooner than it did?”. And, as we may add with the benefit of hindsight when reading that book two years after it left the printing presses, why did it fade, wilt and grind to a halt so soon, leaving little if any trace on the Wall Street practices and eroding next to nothing of the “men in power” insurance against the thoughts and deeds of the remaining 99% of the nation? Considering that the “political class prescribed what people already had enough of: yet another dose of austerity, plus a faith-based belief in a ‘recovery’ that for the 99% of Americans would never be much more than an optical illusion”, and that in those years “the hopes of ordinary people for a chance at a decent future waned and bitterness set in”?

⁵ Published in 2015 by Little, Brown and Company.

What we are witnessing today, indeed day in, day out, is a compound of acquiescence and frustration, disenchantment and frantic search for alternative ways to act and live, disillusion and hope, feeling of letdown and expectancy of redemption: apocalypsis amalgamated with the foretaste of a messianic era. That compound is anything but cohesive or equilibrated: it needs to be viewed as an unfinished process rather than a fixed state of affairs. That process has been triggered by the failure and discreditation of the political class; it seems to be moving back to self – toward the paradox of a reciprocal sustenance of the self's autonomy and a decisionist ruler at the top.

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SOME OF THE FOREMOST CHALLENGES TO THE STATUS QUO

Donald Trump's election, results of the British referendum on membership in the EU and the rise of populist parties in Europe constitute various aspects of the challenges to the status quo resulting from the growing economic and cultural gap between privileged elites and the masses, as well as from the immigration from less developed regions to the rich countries of North America and Western Europe. The existing democratic systems have been unable to cope with these challenges and a fundamental change in the status quo is necessary if authoritarian trend is to be stopped.

Key words: elites, immigration, popular protest, retropia