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“Corporeity”, Equality and Contemporary Man

Motto: “Cultural trends now fashionable in the West favor an egalitarian approach to life. People like to think of human beings as the output of a perfectly engineered mass production machine. Geneticists and sociologists especially go out of their way to prove, with an impressive apparatus of scientific data and formulations that all men are naturally equal...” (Carlo M. Cipolla, *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity*, 1976).

Introduction

As it is well known, in the 19th century, the very theoretical beginning of physical anthropology was related to the name of a scientist who was also a racist, an antisemitic, and an anti-democrat – Joseph Arthur de Gobineau (*An Essay on the Inequality of Human Races*, 1884) (Cf. Pribac, 2004: 25). Other specialists in physical anthropology such as Paul Broca and Alěš Hrdlička have had secularized perspectives which influenced the development of their discipline. Given these circumstances, and also the dominant evolutionary theory in the 20th century, the perception of human body in the field of general anthropology was a secularized one.

In addition to that, the colonialist epoch put its fatal imprint on the anthropological view for many decades. As a result, we would find in any textbook of anthropology phrases and expressions like this: “Like other animals, human populations evolve genetically in response to natural selection...”; or we would find “Allen’s Rule”, which is a zoology rule, applied to pygmies, and so on (Kottak, 1987: 56, 57). As I believe, this situation led to a simplified approach of the topics (race, kinship, body build, body decorations, body language etc.). By its

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conception, the research was neglecting many cultural aspects regarding human body as a cultural construct, in different geographical or historical contexts; and all these under the claim that the anthropological researches have a scientific nature by all means.

Cipolla's perception could be anyone's perception, given the obvious signs we encounter in nowadays media, especially in social media, as well as in any form of mass culture. In fact, contemporary civilization is so marked by a consumer mentality that this perception of an equality among all human beings proves to be very fit and very convenient. In my opinion, it is also a contemporary continuation of the process of massification, a social process conceptualized by the philosophers of Frankfurt School (Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm etc.)

If we were to think about Cipolla's perception from an anthropological perspective, we could distinguish two different nuances in this egalitarian approach of contemporary man, an approach highly extended indeed. The first nuance is a descriptive one: the cultural tendencies, the genetic data, the sociological discourse, all these seem to scientifically claim that there is an objective equality among human beings. And this equality has nothing to do with the political concept of equal chances, as long as genetics has something to say about it. The second nuance is a normative one: the claim is only apparently scientific, but it seems more like a wish, like a desirable and fashionable belief, or even like an ideological struggle to impose this equality among human beings. Maybe here we could suspect a political goal.

As I believe, in the very egalitarian view – which is embodied in a naturalistic view of human life – is to discover the contemporary perception of human body as an instrument among other instruments, better or worse than other instruments, at the owner's disposal.

In this paper I will try to emphasize what I consider to be some of the cultural roots of the contemporary egalitarian conception regarding human beings and human bodies. It is the same basic conception we encounter in anthropology and I think that, by judging the historical facts and theoretical data, we will be able to more clearly evaluate whether the egalitarian view is a descriptive (even scientific) one or just a normative one. Also I'd consider the cultural reverberations which this value of equality has been producing in the Western civilization until this day. In the process, I will strive to identify the place of anthropology's "voice" in the contemporary "chorus" on this topic of human body, including contributions of philosophy, sociology, theology.

History of an ideal

Equality, together with liberty and fraternity, has been a flagship value of the French Revolution. It has been decisively influencing the entire modern and contemporary history; egalitarian mentality expanded from our 1848 movement or the American Revolution to the contemporary world-wide promotion of the Human Rights.

Now, the question is: to what extent this value of equality has been applied and observed in the French and American societies of those times and how it is promoted nowadays?

Historical details show that the attempt of the French revolutionaries to lead the country pursuing the three great values as ideals – liberty, equality, fraternity – translated into successive establishments of terror and destruction (Madaule, 1973). What exactly went wrong in the revolutionary ideology and strategy of promoting liberty and equality?

One explanation could be that the mere play on some abstract values and ideal rights is not enough to lay the moral and then legal foundation of a society. It was a “philosophical revolution” (*ibidem*), as criticized in the epoch (Burke, 1951: 128-129). Due to its abstract values replacing mandatory rules and laws, individuals cannot peacefully cohabit. Only on a sound legal base, a system of civic and moral rules, principles and norms could be effective, although the moral norms should initially inspire the legal norms. Only a system which all the members of society abide by, accepting their duties and rights, could lead to a peaceful society. Otherwise the equality of all men could signify that anyone is in danger to lose his/her life, liberty, property etc. And that seemed to be the case with so many years of revolution. It goes without saying that the value of human body was dramatically decreasing, since in that times the death toll ranged in the tens of thousands, other hundreds of thousands emigrated and settled as far as the icy regions of Canada and almost half a million people have been arrested (*Cf.* Madaule, 1973). The English thinker Edmund Burke was writing: “France has bought poverty by crime! France has not sacrificed her virtue to her interest, but she has abandoned her interest, that she might prostitute her virtue” (Burke, 1951: 30-35 *sqq.*) The French have been blamed for the fact that they despised the specialists’ expertise in politics and religion, all the debates, the resolutions, the procedures, while the enforcement of any new measures by the “enlightened” neophytes entailed the use of armed force (*ibidem*, 212, 213).

Human Rights have been articulated in the spirit of the Enlightenment, the influential movement in the 18th century Europe as well as America. At the onset of the French Revolution, the Declaration of the Rights of the Man and of the Citizen (*La Déclaration des droits de*

l'homme et du citoyen) has been proclaimed. Its first article provides: “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions can be founded only on the common good” (*Declaration of the Rights...*).

This text, albeit simple and reasonable, raises issues related to its ethical, social and political functionality.

First of all, the phrase “les hommes”, although translated in “men”, referred only to the male citizens, not to all individuals (*ibidem*). This makes it less encompassing.

Second of all, a right is enunciated (the equality in rights of all individuals), but it is not ensured through special, state-regulated, legal measures, but through what is expected from men, a subjective wishful attitude: men should consider themselves equal and agree on the common good. It goes without saying that, if this scenario is not put into practice, out of belief or for fear of being sanctioned, then this right remains abstract and completely non-functional. That's because any lucid human being has the psychological tendency and even the biological egoism to consider his/her person more important to himself/herself than other beings, human or animal, and to act according to this subjective evaluation.

These historical realities make one wonder why the ideologies based on human Reason and on the high values of liberty and equality have been producing, throughout the last two centuries, so many conflagrations? Given the generous view on the universally reasonable human being in the background, couldn't they have evolved otherwise, less aggressive? In fact, if we wanted a more profound answer to the question what went wrong with the idealistic French Revolution, we have to consider the consequences of a “complete change”.

Obviously, in the beginning, any complete change, through a revolution, as it was intended for the first time in history in 1789, leads to chaos. But since 1789, a lot of “complete changes” have changed, indeed, Western civilization, emancipating it from medieval religion. But since religion was abolished, public morality based on it was also abolished and nothing new could have been set as functional instead. The French historian Jacques Madaule pinpoints:

“It is beyond doubt that the philosophical movement of the 18th century has been more directed toward the church than against the instituted power. When speaking about abuses, one would refer both to the ones of the clergy and the ones of the monarchy and the privileged. The first task of a «rational» government seemed to be the crushing of the power of the church. A thing was forgotten, namely that although Catholicism had lost great part of its prestige among the leading classes, in exchange, faith had maintained its position particularly in the rural areas. The civil constitution has thus carved a gap between revolution and a part of the French people” (Madaule, 1973: 166).

So, the effect of the social chaos, in which neither the social equality nor the liberty could be acted out, was triggered by the abolition of any form of religious belief and practice, as the French historian, Jacques Madaule, suggested. The atheist constitution and the force measures had formed a gap between the revolutionaries and a part of the French people, still interiorly driven by religious concepts.

As I believe, the single “reasonable” reason for promoting the equality among all people is the Christian perspective on Man as a divine creation. Only if we accepted this divine origin, we could rely on an equality and even on a liberty which only God could provide, and only in a transcendent axiological context. In the medieval theology this equality was not preserved and promoted from the Bible, and the real Christian ethics was not assumed. This seems to be the reason why the revolutionaries, and the Illumines before, have violently rejected this theology. Unfortunately, they have rejected the entire Christianity, and so the Christian root of equality between men failed to be promoted. They have been promoted an illusory equality, as a desideratum of the universal human Reason instead.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche criticized the illusions of reasonability in the history, and apparently his famous critique was made from an anti-Christian point of view; in fact, as the son of a pastor, his critique came from a disappointment by the way Christianity was falsified and compromised in the history by a corrupted clergy, and from the disappointment by the way the atheist ideology praised human Reason, as well. He said: “Ah, reason, seriousness, mastery over emotions, this whole gloomy business called reflection, all these privileges and showpieces of human beings: how expensive they were! How much blood and horror is at the bottom of all «good things»!” (Nietzsche, 1993: 55).

The modern context of equality

Alexis de Tocqueville, the French sociologist who visited and judiciously analyzed the American society, stated in 1835: “In America, the people is felt everywhere. (...) in America, man never listens to his fellow, but rather to justice and law” (Tocqueville, 2005: 129). He praised the peaceful organization, the morality and the activism of the common Americans, who have named themselves in a revolutionary spirit “We the People”; they were promoting a Christian morality, unlike the French people. Their pragmatic rules, values and principles were ensuring normality and equality between the peers, the development of good initiatives and the decline of mean likings (*ibidem*, 273-277). Tocqueville declared: “I should have loved freedom, I

believe, at all times, but in the time in which we live I am ready to worship it (...) All of our contemporaries who would establish or secure the independence and the dignity of their fellow men must show themselves the friends of equality (...) Thus the question is how to make liberty proceed out of that democratic state of society in which God has placed us” (*ibidem*, 338).

Paradoxically, the Americans still faced the risk of the “tyranny of the majority”, according to Tocqueville; American individualism tended to intensify and soften up the civil vigilance of the citizens, exhilarated by well-being and hedonism. This would have rendered the freewill less useful and less frequent (*ibidem*, 334).

Paradoxically – once again, according to Tocqueville, this freedom-loving and godly nation displayed a tyrannical behavior toward the indigenous populations and the slaves (“Alexis de Tocqueville”). A Civil War between North and South exploded because of these contrasts and contradictions. The improvement, rather than the resolution, of the slavery issue consisted more in a hope, according to the Christian Protestant vision of President Abraham Lincoln; the hope that the freed slaves could share with the free, but harshly exploited workers from the North, the hope to choose freely, to change their tiresome lives, to pursue their happiness (“Abraham Lincoln on Freedom...”, 2010).

The Protestant ethics of the Puritans emigrated from Great Britain and the Netherlands represented a feature of the 19th century American society, according to Max Weber. It has been translated in efficient social and economic norms for the United States, as compared to the turbid situation in the continuously revolutionary France. The rational asceticism of the Protestants oriented them, in the German sociologist’s vision, toward the value of labor, of the dignity of the profession, of moderation and modesty, of charity etc. However, in its turn, the Protestant asceticism “has been influenced by an overall cultural environment of society, particularly the economic one, in their development and specificity” (Weber, 1993: 182-183).

So, judging by these perceptions of the two sociologists, we can understand that the perspective of Protestant civic ethics on human being is a more dignifying one. The equality is not stated as a genetic issue, but more as a wishful social relation between men in their interaction. So, the perspective on human body is still preserving the biblical perspective from the book of *Genesis*: God created man out of earthly dust, gave him the breathe of life and thus man became a living soul. So, man’s body has been transformed from simple matter to vivid matter, it is part of the living human being. This gave to the human body a solemn value, not as a vehicle for man’s soul, not an instrument, but a constitutive part of what we call “man”.

The contemporary context of equality

Over the years, under the pressure of economic interests, the religious belief degraded and its impact on the social relations diminished. Weber observed: “The modern man is in general, even with the best will, unable to give religious ideas a significance for culture and national character which they deserve...” (*ibidem*, 183). Initially, the care for the material needs was compared to a light cloak on the shoulders of the puritan Christian who would have been at all times able to throw it aside if it had become too cumbersome (*ibidem*, 181). His freedom and his equality were guaranteed by divinity and, as the basis of his world, they were an extension of the Christian life principles. This represented the ascetic protestant way of being in the world without becoming worldly. Gradually, this veil turned into an “iron cage”, according to the author.

Gradually, as industrialization boosted and the consumption society consolidated, the American Protestants – growingly drawn into production and consumption, into wealth accumulation and never-ending business development – become more and more worldly. To a certain extent, Tocqueville’s prophecy came true. Obviously, a reason for which the value of the Christian principles of life management diminished is the failure to realize their fundamental role for efficient action.

Weber expressed his concerns related to the burst of the “lust for gain” in the country of all freedoms, beyond the religious morality as early as 1920. They came true 30 years later. As I believe, the separation from the Christian thinking tradition and from the protestant values has been depicted through the concept of “the lonely crowd”, coined in the 50’s by three American sociologists, David Riesman, Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, in *The Lonely Crowd*. They described the process of abandonment by entire masses of people of the tradition in which they grew up – family life, school’s and churches’ authority, community life, honest work, weekly rest etc. This process took place due to the technological and labor force outburst, due to the phenomenon of commuting, of the inter-state migration of the labor force, to large distances. Another type of socialization was needed, other lifestyles, an orientation toward oneself or the peer-group, or the movie “heroes”, rather than toward tradition. The authors talk about a new phenomenon of privacy breakdown or privacy socialization, “for reasonably serious love-making” (Riesman, Glazer and Denney, 1950: 66 *sqq.*). At the same time, this abandonment of the familiar tradition and values also represented an uprooting. The lonely crowd is the one inhabiting the large urban areas, in which no one interacts profoundly and efficiently with anyone, in which the lack of free time and the daily turmoil secludes men from society.

Loneliness can also be the result of the abandonment of the healthy moral principles from the home communities, under the pressure of the libertine lifestyle of the large cities. As such, the individual becomes estranged from himself, from his personality, and the likelihood of him becoming a free human being decreases, given this sudden and profound change of his values.

Furthermore, from the documented opinions of the mentioned authors we could observe that the teenagers and even the children are oriented and socially free to treat their own body like an adult body, while their emotional life and their thought remains at a childish level of development: “Dating at twelve and thirteen, the child is early made aware of the fact that his taste in emotions as well as in consumers goods must be socialized and available for small talk” (*ibidem.*) In these circumstances, a new body culture arises, setting other values and rules in young people’s life, and eventually in the entire society. That is because, as the three authors declare, every relation and interaction in a community changes, from the one with parents, or the one with teachers to the one with the peer-group and even with oneself. In the end, there is a change of the human character, of the self, of the personality, in which the body is the leading element. As it seems to me, the loneliness of contemporary society’s man is to be explained by the initial gap between man’s two components: body and soul, and by the phenomenon of estranging from himself of man, while treating his body as another self. The final phrase of *The Lonely Crowd* is: “The idea that men are created free and equal is both true and misleading: men are created different; they lose their social freedom and their individual autonomy in seeking to become like each other” (*ibidem*, 307).

Conclusions

So the value of equality takes the form of an equalization of people; this equalization regards their chances to social and individual development, but also their tendency to failure and degradation. It seems obvious now that the egalitarian perception which I was mentioning in the beginning is not at all a descriptive one, but a normative one. There are no irrefutable reasons to claim that there is a natural, biological equality among people. This equality is more like a desirable goal to achieve.

The Anglican theologian and priest John Stott emphasized these phenomena explaining how democracy, as the most permissive form of government, allows human dignity to come to light, but it allows human degradation to spread as well (Lane, Bulzan, Rogobete, Stott, 1996: 153).

If we were to accept that protestant morality has a significant beneficial influence not only on prosperity, but also on liberty and equality, we ought to try to scrutinize the future social developments in the attempt to identify the directions in which secularization or laicity are headed.

That is because these contemporary trends are manifesting not only in today's American society and in many Western societies, but also in ours, and the phenomenon of globalization tends to universalize them. These communities are nowadays establishing the axiological coordinates of our civilization, including the chances to promote both human dignity and human degradation as well.

In a consumerist society, religiously disenchanted and globally oriented, people merely perceive bodies as biological products of a "mass production" (as Cipolla mentioned). So, the value of a body seen as a product is to become the value of an instrument, of a useful tool at the disposal of the owner or of the owners. As a consequence, the owner or the owners would have the liberty to treat the owned body or bodies discretionary.

In the 20th century, the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel was highlighting this phenomenon of instrumentalization of the human body, forging the concept of "corporeity". He was writing: "I shall use the word «corporeity» to mean that property which makes it impossible for me to picture a body as living except on condition of thinking of it as the «the body of... someone» (...) Perhaps a man is really less of a slave to his body in proportion as he makes less of a claim to have it at his disposal" (Marcel, 1997: 97-98).

So, corporeity is to be regarded as the frontier distinct between being and having. As regards human body, "having" defines itself somehow in terms of "someone's body", that is, the property of ones own body. "Having" always implies an assimilation: "I only have something which has been made mine, in some way, no matter what" (*ibidem*, 99). This assimilation and instrumentalization of the body is, in fact, the consequence of an atheist perspective, which separates the human being from the transcendence, from a Creator, and reduces it to an immanent Self owning a vivid body. This self can disappear as the the body cease to be alive: "We are tempted to think that no longer having anything is the same as no longer being anything; and in fact the general trend of life on the natural level is to identify one's-self with what one has: and here the ontological category tends to be blotted out" (*ibidem*, 100).

As David Le Breton suggested, only in the religious context the body is "inseparable from man and from the world; it is the man and it is, on its scale, the cosmos" (Le Breton, 1990: 47). So, in Marcel's terms, "having" becomes "being" again. The significance of this spiritualized

body or bodily spirit is increased by the fact that the ancient Greek word *kosmos* meant “order”, leading to the idea of the earthly harmony of human body reflecting the celestial harmony of the Universe. I would add that only in this religious context we can understand the uniqueness of a human being, together with the equality of all human beings as creatures seeking to relate to their Creator.

In the beginning of my paper I was evoking the initial evolutionary approach of physical anthropology, influenced by colonial mentalities, ethnocentrism and racial prejudices, which, in my opinion, made this discipline too simplistic in treating the topic of human body. But at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of 21st century, things have begun to be more complex, more nuanced in any theoretical field; the relativist perspective evolved, and some anthropologists have questioned some traditional claims. One of them was the claim of objectivity in gathering field data; another was the claim that an anthropologist could fully detach from his/her own culture and plunge into the culture which he/she was studying. The very scientific nature of the field research in anthropology was questioned. It is the case of Clifford Geertz, who launched the new perspective of an interpretive anthropology (*Interpretation of Cultures, Local Knowledge, Available Light* etc.).

Given all these transformations in the anthropological field, my opinion is that, regarding the topic of human body, it is a task for the future research in interpretive anthropology to reveal its rich, profound, mysterious meanings. In this regard, my expectation is to discover more fruitful interdisciplinary initiatives. Given the increasing complexity of contemporary knowledge, the increasing speed of the various discoveries, we are witnessing the rise of what was called “the knowledge based society”. Thus, I believe that only an interdisciplinary approach could be revelatory for the new realities; to give some examples, I’d mention the new discoveries in DNA, or the new born scientific branch named “epigenetics” which are questioning many data offered by old traditional genetics of the 20th century.

In the same time, for a relevant interpretive approach of the human body in anthropology, I think that only a cross-disciplinary initiative should be appropriate; it should include philosophical, sociological, theological, ethical, psychological, and biological discourses together with the anthropological one. As I mentioned in my paper the French Christian philosopher Gabriel Marcel, there are a lot of interesting thinkers who addressed the topic of human body from various perspectives and who are not professional anthropologists (Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Étienne Gilson, Edgar Morin, Erving Goffman, Alain de Botton etc.); but their

thinking and their discourse deserve the attention of contemporary anthropologists as a professional group, if they wanted to finally be more profound and more relevant on this topic.

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