

## The End of a Sociocultural Model: The Evidences

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### Prologue

Zeus, whoever he may be,  
I address him by this name  
if being called thus pleases him.  
If suffering that precipitates into folly  
must be cast out of the mind by truth,  
then weighing up everything  
using knowledge that exists  
and will not be denied,  
I cannot think of any other but Zeus. [...]  
[...]Zeus, in guiding the mind of man,  
has established that knowledge  
acquires strength through suffering.  
When, during sleep, anguish caused by the memory of suffering  
seeps into the heart then, even against his will,  
man will be instilled with knowledge that saves him.  
Perhaps this is a gift of the daemons  
who sit in grandeur on the sacred seat of Zeus.

Aeschylus (c.525-456 BC), 'Hymn to Zeus', in *Agamemnon*

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### The “ History “ offer the bill

A visit to the Vatican Museums gives a chance to explore the history of humanity through its genius and works of art. The masterpieces found there illustrate the sense of aesthetic and cultural values of that history, the spirit of those who created them, the inspiration and willpower that guided their task. In short, what human beings have been capable of producing is simply amazing. Initially visitors admire the beauty of these works, often without asking themselves what the artist wanted to express, just taking in the exterior image while failing to observe the sense and spirit that breathes through their works.

Among these masterpieces, a really outstanding one (and also very pertinent to this book) is *The School of Athens* that Raphael painted starting in 1508 when, aged 25, he was called to Rome by Pope Julius II. Raphael grew up during the Italian High Renaissance and drew on

legendary characters who have contributed to creating world history as we know it today, adding his own contribution.

In that extraordinary, perhaps unique period, artists, poets, intellectuals, scientists, philosophers, mathematicians and physicists met and exchanged ideas in an ongoing dialogue about the essence of man, which was the focus of their interest. A cultural scene free of dogma and intolerance was created, one open to a cross-fertilization of ideas that led to a great leap forward in creative and intuitive thought.

A similar cultural scene had previously existed during the golden age of Athens and the thinking of that time can rightly be considered one of the cornerstones of our history and culture.

In his fresco Raphael portrays the characters with such masterly brush strokes that even their spirit reaches out to fire the imagination and penetrate the heart of those viewing it. The leading lights of that era are all there, gathered around the two central characters – Plato, his finger pointing skywards to indicate the world of ideas and the spirit, and Aristotle, who instead stretches out his hand palm down to indicate the real world and scientific experience.

The world of ideas and the spirit can never be divorced from an empirical quest for truth. So everything must be focused on a search for what is true, for beauty, in an effort to promote the primary aim – the fulfilment of human happiness. But the world was by no means a paradise in either ancient Athens or in Raphael's time. Both were times in which life was generally extremely hard, unrefined, times of trepidation and suffering. And yet despite these conditions human beings managed to achieve moments of sublime creativity.

Today we ought to be in a completely different situation from that of Plato and Raphael, thanks to the progress and power of technical knowledge. A knowledge which has become an end in itself for the modern world, one that should have provided answers to satisfy our primary needs, releasing us from our "shackles", reducing inequalities, freeing us, at least in part, from a life of fatigue and suffering in physical terms. Scientific knowledge should have helped to create a situation in which our free, inventive mind could once again be the driving force of life, leading us to that dimension of spiritual joy we admire in splendid works of art.

This is what Keynes thought would happen. In his essay *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren* written in 1930 he said:

‘Thus for the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem – how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, which science and compound interest will have won for him [...]. The love of money as a possession – as distinguished from the love of money as a means to the enjoyments and realities of life – will be recognised for what it is, a somewhat disgusting morbidity, one of those semi-criminal, semi-pathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease’.

Sadly, this has not been the case, in fact, the very opposite has happened. Technical-instrumental knowledge has become moral knowledge, an indisputable truth and so in no way open to discussion. It dictates the rules for everyday life to the point that humanity itself has become its instrument. The technical culture of modern times has failed to achieve the aim that was hoped for. However, it is not the culture that is at fault but the improvidence of *homo sapiens*.

We have failed to redistribute wealth; inequalities, famine and poverty have increased; we have not resolved major health problems afflicting a majority of the world's population. Technical knowledge has separated us from our souls, made us sterile and impersonal, incapable of true human relations and the profound sentiments of love and joy. Unless, that is, these are linked to the sole satisfaction of material and fleeting pleasures. We have imprisoned thought, disintegrated family bonds and forced youngsters to roam the streets without hope. All of us have made this mistake, given that responsibilities are always personal, even if at different levels. This modern age needs rethinking if we are not to find ourselves once more facing chaos.

The first step we must take is to ask ourselves if all this talk about the economy being the cause of the crisis of these times is really true. Can we continue to think that all the misfortunes mentioned previously are the result of the malfunctioning of rules governing the economy? Or should we admit that a cultural model which has produced the opposite results to those intended has collapsed?

Our lack of a social and spiritual life, of creative and intuitive thought, the drabness of an existence in which we are no longer capable of questioning the meaning of life itself – can all of this depend on a malfunctioning of the economy? We urgently need to review our recent history. We have to question the role we have assigned to the economic sciences and methods of study these have been based on for the past thirty years. Methods effectively founded based on the fundamental idea that economic sciences and the underlying choices and decisions involved are “totally” independent from human nature. So this means our emotions have no bearing on these choices and decisions. The assumption has therefore been that given equal conditions and information the results will always be the same, thereby endorsing a rational approach that cannot be questioned.

Instead the technical-rational culture applied to a social science like economics has produced a non-science. Friedrich von Hayek already warned us of this in his speech on accepting the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 1974:

‘It seems to me that this failure of the economists to guide policy more successfully is closely connected with their propensity to imitate as closely as possible the procedures of the brilliantly successful physical sciences – an attempt which in our field may lead to outright error. [...] This brings me to the crucial issue. Unlike the position that exists in the physical sciences, in economics and other disciplines that deal with essentially complex phenomena, the aspects of the events to be accounted for about which we can get quantitative data are necessarily limited and may not include the important ones’.

Hayek's warnings didn't manage to halt the diffusion of a model that we could define as “the mirage of rationality”. Today we find ourselves having to face the failure of a model that has separated the nature of people from the results of their activity. We have ignored six thousand years of history with an arrogance that can only have been inspired by the hubris of technical science and interests that the latter ought to have legitimated.

The inseparable bond between the technical culture and economics, as recognized and studied, leaves the door wide open to humanity's ancestral greed. A limitless hunger for profit realizable only through material goods. It creates the very system we are prisoners of today and is

the source of a deadly risk. The risk of a society in which we become objectivised and lose all sense of ourselves, of our life, our feelings and creative ability.

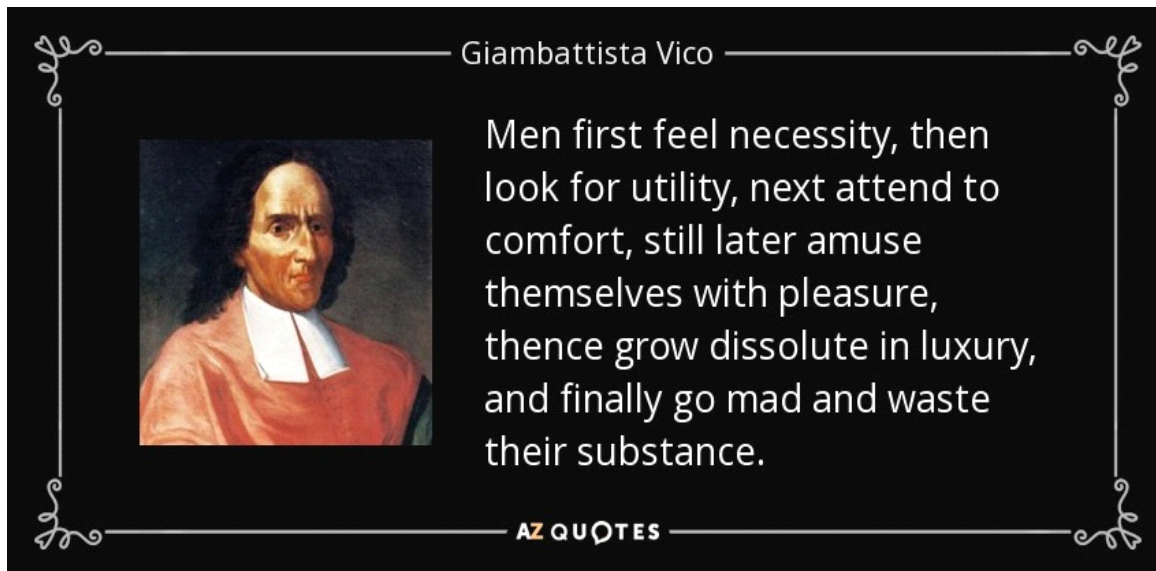
It is artistic masterpieces that show how our most intimate being is rooted in a sense of creative spirituality as opposed to being concerned exclusively with an obtuse rationality for its own sake.

So today the time has come to again make economics a tool and not an end in itself. A process must be launched to humanize it, abandoning the absoluteness of a rational approach that repudiates history. Rethinking our role and the sense of our life is the real challenge we must face all together, for ourselves and for future generations.

This is the philosophy I have attempted to investigate in this book, an ideal continuation of my previous one, *La Competizione Collaborativa* [Cooperative Competition – available in Italian only]. A philosophy that has developed over the years by means of study, curiosity and a close attention to facts. But in particular, thanks to human experiences made up of acquaintances, friendships and a mutual interest in various issues with the people I have been fortunate to meet.

I owe thanks to many of them, first and foremost to my family who put up with the idea of my writing another book. To my exceptional lifelong friends with whom it is always easy to find moments of irony, and to all the other people I've crossed paths with during my life.

As for the many young people I have met, I hope they will have stimulating professional lives with a wealth of experiences that promote personal growth. But above all I hope they have the good fortune – as I have had – to meet many people who sincerely care for them and wish them well.



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