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Not Every Man for Himself

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As suggested by Paolo Perulli's book title *Nel 2050*, the core of the work lies in envisioning a transformative future world, set a century after the author's birth. The climax unfolds in the epilogue, set in that year, portraying a fundamentally reshaped world: more sustainable and collective, with Europe becoming a continent-state and with a global citizens' jury rewarding those who contribute most to humanity. According to Perulli, we are already halfway through this transition, which began in 1989 with pivotal events such as the Tiananmen Square massacre, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the emergence of a globalized market dominated by financial capitalism and (increasingly digital) multinational corporations.

These changes have, through fracture, generated a new social strati-fication. At the bottom lies a *neoplebeian* class (pp. 16-25), unorganized and lacking a shared identity; cajoled rather than genuinely guided, through both a far right rhetoric celebrating the protection of privileg-es and territorial borders and the illusion of equality based on *smart-phones and consumption* – resulting in a poor class *shaped by technology* rather than liberated by it [Jünger 1981][1]. Higher up, there exists a *creative class* (pp. 26-32), more self-aware but still lacking the hallmark of a *general state*: it is the essential class for innovation, but it recaps meagre benefits in comparison with the profits amassed by the class above from its inventions. It is a hybrid, educated, and tolerant class that, although often politically engaged, frequently becomes a mere instrument of power. The most problematic aspect lies in the origins of its knowledge, which was initially developed to overcome Nature [Elias 1995], yet now it struggles to create a counter-product to pro-mote environmentalism.

At the top, we found the *elite* (pp. 33-37), a discredited but still domi-nant class, upheld both by a contagion from above (the desire to emulate the rich) and the manipulation of reactive forces from below. This class no longer questions itself and is therefore unable to critique its own sys-tem. It is no longer the secret society that some still imagine (Templars, Freemasons, etc.), but rather a highly visible, organized, and organizing class, promoting false myths to the other layers of society. Among these myths are the illusory freedom of choice within neoliberal democracy and the equally illusory freedom of expression found in the virtual-tech-nological realm – ideas that generate Bauman's *liquid society* [2012].

In this first section, which can be seen as an analysis of the current situation and its origins, in comparison with past social stratifications, we undoubtedly find one of the essay's key strengths. The examination of contemporary society, structured around the three new classes in a

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1 To address the lack of a dedicated section for references – neither at the end of each chapter nor at the end of the book – I have reconstructed them. To distinguish between the reconstructed references and my own, the former are enclosed in square brackets […], while the latter are enclosed in round brackets (…).

dialectical and comparative relationship, forms a solid foundation for the entire work.

Equally intriguing is the analysis of the relationships between these three layers, which gives rise to a precise formulation of a sharp contemporary vocabulary (pp. 39-49), beginning with a term that is currently very much in vogue: *mobility*. The neoplebeian and, to a lesser extent, the creative class are deeply rooted in *place* – not just as land, but as a space subject to forms of internal mobility (albeit limited), extending to the air as well, since it is the medium through which information travels (ether) and is stored (*cloud*). These mechanisms create the illusion of control over infinite spaces, but in reality, they contribute to making society more fragile. It is the elites who benefit most from mobility: as members of international power and money circuits, they are true *cosmopolitan* subjects, just as are their assets. This territorial analysis then leads to a reflection on part of the vocabulary where terms like *glocal* coexist alongside others that encompass both general and specific dimensions (e.g., city-region). In this cosmology the smallness of our cell phones leads us to the *open spaces* of offices and the globe, where *hubs* have emerged. As dense centres through which assorted goods pass, they helped, with the phenomenon of *spillover*, to fuel the optimal development of the pandemic. Moreover, they convey a vast amount of information that generate data *pools*. Finally, this data is analysed to transform the future from an adventure to be imagined into a predetermined and forecasted *event*, planned in advance and stripped of choice.

Another noteworthy merit, which, unfortunately, cannot be taken for granted, is the integration of examples and perspectives from outside the West – viewpoints that are often overlooked in analyses of contemporary society. The first instance appears when Perulli, focusing on the creative class, provides examples that show how the same three-tiered social stratification exists in other countries, albeit with significant distinctions (pp. 28-31). In particular, he highlights the (nowadays) world in reverse of the Chinese East, where the elite participates in political capitalism – a system composed of state

bureaucrats, landowners, and entrepreneurs, working in unison with the governing class. In this context, the neoplebs is represented by the masses migrating from the countryside to the metropolis, deprived of civil rights. Among them is an urban middle class, not necessarily creative but comparable to the lower-middle classes in the West: precarious, underpaid even when educated, and often weak socio-politically, with the sole aim seemingly being the acquisition of wealth. The second instance (p. 44) arises during the exposition of Branko Milanovic's inequality studies [2017]. Drawing on that, Perulli offers an international perspective that presents another triadic relationship: the global middle class from emerging economies (focused on resource consumption), the elites of advanced economies (reluctant to reduce their wealth), and the lower-middle classes of advanced economies (struggling to avoid downward mobility).

Then, from the global, the analysis shifts to the local, focusing on the specific Italian case (pp. 53-57), with an intriguing emphasis on data regarding individuals, families, and enterprises from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT microdata). Here, we observe the neoplebs slightly contracting, alongside elites with their supporting subclass. In contrast, the creative class, accompanied by its own supporting subclass, is expanding and appears to still have room for growth, given the relatively small proportion of graduates. After this summary, Perulli concludes with a more detailed analysis of *local* cases, examining the peculiarities of Italy's major cities.

For the author, the local dimension is essential. Locality serves as the meeting point where the neoplebs and the creative class should come together and form an *alliance*. In particular, the creative class should aim to direct its innovations downward. Conversely, a repeated tendency to use these innovations solely as a means of social ascent has generated a sense of distrust towards creatives among the neoplebs. Similarly, there is a reciprocal sentiment of alienation toward those further down the social ladder: poverty, in fact, is perceived as a disease to be avoided at all costs. Finding common ground between these two classes requires new models of education – less hasty and more

reflective – countering the relentless speed that leads to alienation and overheating (Eriksen 2017), product of a capitalist system presenting itself as the only possible, desirable, and imaginable world.

As in the first part, the second opens with an overview of society, this time focusing on the future. It will be an *intelligent, glocal* society, aware of both its global and local roles, rather than of one or the other. Herein, historical dynamism will be recognized as a result of a patient assembly (p. 66) over time, influenced by and influencing the macro context. This intelligent, glocal society is presented as the antithesis of the current urban society, which relies on the spatial concentration of people and goods, the *carbon model*, and a singular focus on profit. Instead, the new society will be driven by a more diverse and complex collective, where *social intellectual work* (p. 72) takes centre stage. The author emphasizes that this type of work already exists but has yet to guide innovations in the right direction. To achieve this shift, irresponsible capitalism must be forced to make room for a responsible framework that embraces permanent change (rather than static rents of position) and prioritizes collective well-being over the prevailing ideology of individual profit.

The glocal intelligent society will proceed through *collective action* (pp. 75-80). Financial economy that does not serve the common good must be replaced by a more collective, foundational economy (AA.VV. 2019). In the present historical context, the concept of collective has been equated with the mass (of *mass* media), and cross-cutting movements remain fragmented, easily managed separately by the capitalist system, which invariably subdues them. There is also a lack of convergence between protest movements and specialized knowledge, even though these should unite within the glocal dimension of interstate spaces – quietly reshaped by the collapse of U.S. alliances following their supposed global victory. In this framework, the author asserts that both the United States, through technology, and China, through political power (the old and new centres of the world), have simply developed European ideas. Europe, therefore, can and must reclaim its

rightful place on the global stage, transforming itself into a vast continental state – a potential precursor to a planetary world state.

However, Perulli also acknowledges that this perspective risks overlooking the once *non-aligned* countries, which are now often referred to as *developing* by more lenient authors (pp. 81-85). As in the past, the myth of economic growth and the associated efforts have proven not to be a panacea, as the development of stability and social justice never accompanied them. Without considering the unique characteristics, history, and resources of these regions, the analysis of today's world and its future remains marred by blind spots. The urban population seems destined to grow in Africa, the emerging and thriving cities today are in China, and we hear news – though not so often transmitted – about strong collective actions in Taiwan and Hong Kong. It is in these overlooked regions that newer and more innovative forms of renaissance are taking place. In summary, for 2050, the envisioned society will be intelligent, glocal, driven by collective action, and grounded in a perspective where no country is excluded. But how do we address the problems we have created and achieve this desired future? In the final chapters, Perulli suggests six practical actions: internalizing, reducing incalculable risks, localizing, opening, landing, and responding.

For a long time, states and administrations have relied on *shifting out* policies, like outsourcing and privatization. In contrast, the first practical action is *to internalize* (pp. 86-92): governments can no longer neglect their responsibilities, and value chains must no longer be transnational. Instead, they should span across the regions of the continent-state Europe, which will have the task of overcoming the nationalist connotations that internalizing still carries today. The first step could involve implementing a new, fair tax policy that includes digital multinationals, which should be subject to the same duties as the common citizen (AA.VV. 2019).

The second action stems from the financial economy and the complacency of policies that have fostered a high-risk society – a society of gambling, distrust, and long international supply chains with high interdependence. It is necessary to *reduce risk* and restore trust (pp.

94-105), for example, by reintegrating the creative class and the neo-plebs as active participants in a Europe with an independent supply chain, composed of local systems, as Amin theorized in his concept of the *delinking* of non-aligned countries [1990]. These steps are toward the creation of what Perulli calls the society of Knowers. He argues that today we live in a society of Knowledge, where the accumulation of culture and information dominates. This resonates – with my own connection – Goffredo Fofi's views on the new opium for the people. Once, religion obscured minds; today, it is culture and knowledge, consumed in all-you-can-eat buffets, such as festivals and TV programs, where people dive in without reflection (2019). In contrast, the desired society of Knowers is one in which humanity actively uses this knowledge, rather than merely accumulating it greedily.

The same applies to technology: it should not deceive us. It must no longer be a factory of goals, but rather a tool to achieve them. In this way, globalized capitalism has so far only concerned itself with the allocative dimension of resources, neglecting the authoritative and organizational dimensions. To counteract this, the third action calls for a return to *locality* (pp. 106-118) – not necessarily in terms of geographical proximity, but also virtual closeness. Only in this way can we bridge the gap between humans, recognizing the need for direct cooperation, attention to the vulnerable, and the sharing of knowledge. This is no longer about a vast global village that erases smaller communities, but a true cooperation of localities.

This glocality also stands in contrast to the phenomenon of border-blocking, which has confined states and people within narrow limits, fostering an escalating trend of closure and securitization. In contrast, we should *open up* (pp. 119-130) – but above all, open up what remains obscure. Specifically, this means: *international organizations* that still treat recently independent countries as territories to be exploited; *banks*, which are always bailed out in crises despite the hidden mechanisms that govern them, and which must give way to solid entrepreneurial networks rooted in social capital, woven over the long term, within a virtuous framework that combines capitalism,

local savings, and territorial economies; *bureaucracies*, which must become appealing, transparent, and subject to bottom-up control, so that their systems cannot harbour loopholes or obstacles to public debate; and finally, *gender equality*, which must be embraced. Even the latest provisions of the Recovery Fund have failed in this regard, financing male-dominated sectors while neglecting those predominantly female (unfortunately, such sectorization persists).

The penultimate point focuses on the interpretation of the French thinker Bruno Latour [2004]: we must *land*, meaning we must descend to Earth-Gaia (pp. 131-142), which, for too long, has been reduced to a mere globe, we have exploited, believing ourselves to be external and superior to Nature (and to humans that did not align with this vision). In this regard, on one hand, we can focus on individual actions related to our behaviour, which must become more sustainable in both production and consumption, detaching growth from the predatory exploitation of resources. On the other hand, collective actions are required, such as, at the European level, implementing real control over emissions and harmful substances. This means removing the logic of self-certification, punishing non-compliant entities rather than consumers downstream of the process. We should also embrace education in the circular economy, a *strengthened environmental Keynesianism* which combines the efforts of states and markets.

This attention to Gaia is the goal of the protest demanding more sustainable development models. And this protest is one of the issues we must *respond to* (the sixth action). Responding means also accountability (pp. 143-154). Citizen and democratic representation must therefore be expanded, promoting inclusion so that no one is left behind – starting with addressing the post-pandemic effects. Perulli states that it is necessary to fully implement the European project (now past its constitutive phase) because it can leverage a long and complex history of local realities, filled with knowledge accumulated diachronically, an equally rich history of rights, and more inclusive and equitable social systems compared to those in the United States and China.

In my view, Perulli's argument begins to falter at these final points. While his analytical groundwork is undoubtedly strong, his conclusions reveal two major weaknesses. Both stem from the aforementioned claiming that the USA, through technological advancement, and later China, through political dominance, have merely expanded upon *European ideas* (pp. 79-80). This statement leads to the assertion that Europe must reclaim its position on the global stage (the first point) by evolving into a massive *continent-state* – a potential precursor to a global planetary state (the second point, at p. 80).

Firstly, the notion of European ideas arises from an overly Eurocentric perspective on both past and modern history, relying on a fictional image of a world neatly divided by socio-political borders and characterized by a purity of thought. Attempting to prove that ideas inherently belong to a specific entity – let alone to Europe – is bound to be an extraordinary failure. Moreover, even if we were to accept that these ideas are indeed European and have been adopted by others, it does not follow that they are best utilized by their originators. In fact, throughout human history, this has rarely been the case with most inventions.

The second point addresses the concept of Europe as a continent-state. Like other solutions presented in the book, it reveals itself to lack the originality and innovation found in other academic perspectives that dare to imagine more radical alternatives (e.g., Graeber 2007; 2011; Rossi 2019). The idea itself also presents a major flaw. Envisioning the evolution of the nation-state into a continent-state is rooted in the belief that humanity's progress must inevitably move upward, toward larger entities. However, the biosphere has long signalled that the real solution lies in slowing down and scaling back. Both bio-physiological and socio-physiological principles, as well as historical precedents, suggest that the rise of giants is typically followed by their collapse and the fragmentation of systems. Given that, our focus should shift to fostering interconnected local dimensions – without the presumption of imposing a state-structure that governs and controls them in a hierarchical and centralized manner.

Perulli's vision of Europe, by contrast, imagines a large state capable of challenging giants like China, the United States, and Russia – powers that, much like the great empires of history, have left destruction in their wake, including the devastation of the ecosystem. Smaller systems of power, however, have historically proven to be less harmful and more sustainable. As we transition from the age of consumption to the age of preservation, survival depends on embracing the ethos of conservation: "You are what you conserve. 'I am what I save and protect'" (Atwood 2015). The smaller our systems, the less damage we inflict – and the better the outcome will be.

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