

Economic Science, Humanism and Religion. The Philosophical Anthropology of “La Rivista Trimestrale”

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1. Two ontological ways of representing the world.

As a theoretical economist and a social scientist with wide philosophical interests, I welcome the opportunity to speak about such an interesting and unusual subject. In my opinion, humanism and religion are two different approaches to the search for truth. Two ontological representations of the relationships between human beings, nature and society. As such, they have largely influenced the recent historical development of economic thought and the ethical valuation of economic systems.

One of them, humanism, is a philosophy of life which acknowledges the human essence of man (that of animal rationale and *homo humanus*), assigns man a priority, takes him as a measure of all things and in its non-religious versions considers Nature as the material generative principle¹. For the other one, religion, a superior spiritual entity, God, takes the place of Nature as world creator and the common faith of human beings performs the positive function of a social intermediary.

Both these conceptions afford the problem of the relations between human beings, as individual persons, and the surrounding world – relations involving nature, civil society and transcendence. And both of them have been praised and contested. From Nietzsche’s times onward there have been many inconclusive debates on the alleged ‘death of man’ (the dissolution of humanism) and the alleged ‘death of God’ (the end of religion, conceived as an illusory escape from reality).

Scholars interested in hermeneutical ontology and the philosophy of language and social communication – from Nietzsche to Heidegger, from Gadamer and Habermas to Rorty – have analyzed from different points of view the possible impact on the search for objective knowledge of reason

¹ As such, humanism should be distinguished from humanitarianism, a different term which implies humanitarian actions to relieve human suffering.

and faith, consciousness and unconsciousness, nature and grace. On the controversial problem of the relation of men with truth they have come to different conclusions.

Humanism and religion are not incompatible. They can be regarded as two mutually consistent approaches, two 'philosophies of good-will' which offer distinct but convergent solutions to the lack of credible values that characterizes a capitalistic society, where human beings are reduced to labour power and are only worth their capacity to work and produce wealth.

I shall consider humanism a theoretical position with the following distinctive features:

- i) a non-fundamentalist epistemic attitude that would replace the human factor (labour) at the centre of the economic discourse, would not recognize scarcity as the central hermeneutical category of human existence and would not obey a universal principle of rationality and efficiency by which human beings would count only for their productive capacity;
- ii) a revaluation of use value with respect to exchange value and a consequent refusal to conceive production as exclusively oriented to the market;
- iii) a dislike for any kind of economic determinism, including faith in economic laws and dialectical materialism.

Humanism in economics entails a positive anthropocentric attitude to life and work and an appeal to social justice. Humanism takes human beings and their social relations in consideration.

It follows that humanism is not compatible with the pursuit of particular vested interests. There cannot be a humanist or compassionate kind of capitalism, based on corporate social responsibility and not motivated by greed. That is a non fundamentalist, ethical type of capitalism, where values and profits are happily merged. A way of getting profit decently, without exploiting people, either physically (through surplus labour) or psychically (with alienation), is pure nonsense.

For the sake of completeness and to allow for a comparison, we shall refer also to some post-modern anti-humanist theories of knowledge who assert the priority of the material structure over man and society (such as Louis Althusser's "aleatory materialism") and to other post-structural non-humanist gnoseological conceptions of French origin, such as Michel Foucault's "microanalysis of social structure", Jean-François Lyotard's "libidinal economics" and Jean Baudrillard's "political economy of sign

and symbolic values”². All of them regard truth as correspondence to reality, rather than as a purely semantic linguistic notion, or as a revelation by a transcendent entity.

Economic activity has much to do with the psychical mechanisms which regulate the projection and repression of human impulses. There is a phase in human life in which primitive, unconscious processes are substituted by more organized and unified conscious ones. It is in that phase that economic activity becomes important.

Psychology is recognized by many economists as a form of knowledge which can usefully mediate between individual and social behaviour. And thus provide a missing link between the economic structure and the super-structural sphere.

Humanists reject the idea of a merely technical nature of economic science. They regard economics as a critical subject concerned with the reasons of human actions and with the ends to be pursued. Whereas many non-humanist authors consider economics a purely instrumental branch of learning, one which should only be concerned with the best ways to achieve given ends in presence of scarce means.

2. Humanism as an alternative to theocentrism.

As a philosophical and ethical attitude and an anti-authoritarian way of thinking reality and history, humanism trusts reason and progress and pays have a basic solidarity propensity with other people. They refuse the utilitarian ‘logic of capital’ and the alleged ‘reasons of profit’ that induce people to accumulate wealth, rather than to satisfy social and relational needs. They are committed to answer some fundamental philosophical questions. Who are human beings? What is the essence of human nature? Is it labour? Are men responsible for what they do, or not?

There is a plurality of humanist approaches. We shall here recall some of them. Starting from the evangelical humanism of the good Samaritan and from a ‘theocentric’ conception: a transcendent kind of humanism, based on faith and reason, where all humans are supposed to be God’s children and are recognized equal rights of access to the natural resources of earth.

² Namely, Georges Bataille’s conception of a general and unrestricted economy, Wilhelm Reich’s “sexual economy”, Jacques Lacan’s unconscious symbolic order of the discourse, Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionism, Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s “schizo-analysis of desiring production” and Paul Ricoeur’s “epistemology of symbol”.

Religious humanism is 'Christianity fulfilled'. It must be distinguished from laic, or 'secular' humanism, an anthropocentric philosophical conception based on reason and freedom of conscience, which regards man as master of his environment and God as an object of faith, not of knowledge. Or as a fiction of the human mind, that tends 'to create its creator' as its own product.

It may be noticed that in the ancient Rome the word 'umanitas' (*humanism*) meant the human essence and was opposed to 'divinitas', to underline the human autonomy from divinities³.

There are several types of non-religious humanism. One of them is Kant's humanism, based on an ethic of duty and on a politically correct existential conception implying equal natural rights and universal human solidarity. Another one is Rousseau's humanism, which was directed to the coming back to an imaginary state of nature and to the original simplicity and spontaneous sociality of the primitive man, uncorrupted by the deleterious institution of private property.

Both of them should be distinguished from the positive, rationalist and materialist humanism of Feuerbach, which placed man at the centre of the world ('men make history', 'truth is religion reversed'), contrasted the human being with Logos and Nature, implied the idea of labour as the human essence and acknowledged man's capacity to control the course of his life.

Furthermore, there is J.P. Sartre's type of humanism, which posed existence before essence. Sartre identified humanism with existentialism. His conception of humanism ultimately led to a pessimistic vision of life (a philosophy of crisis).

Let us mention also E. Fromm's inter-classist relational humanism, sensible to ideals of human solidarity and social justice, and conceived as a fight against human alienation undertaken to realize the natural essence of man. And an utopian libertarian humanism, that of a postmodern Kierkegaardan anarchist tendency (A. Badiou, N. Chomsky, W. Quine, P. Feyerabend). It is a humanism of liberty, which pursues a deconstruction of systemic complexity, refuses statism and State capitalism and promotes the improvement of humankind without relying on religious sentiments which impose ethical standards.

Then there is the variegated set of the Marxist kinds of humanism, which pursue the end of production for profit and advocate the establishment of new social relations. They are against all forms of capitalism, including State capitalism.

³ On this point, see A. Campana, 1946.

There is, first of all, the 'young Marxian' theoretical and ethical humanism, a non-dogmatic philosophical conception, exclusively based on reason, which calls upon unity of theory and practice. It permeates most critical Marxist theories⁴.

Then there is the elder Marx's positive humanism, still evident in his doctrines of worker's alienation and commodity's fetishism. Marx's concept of man was that of a social being, not that of a utilitarian calculating man. Man's humanity was for him a synonymous of man's natural sociality. He had a radical and essentially ideological conception of humanism.

A controversial point concerns the alleged abandonment by the elder Marx of his previous philosophical humanism. Did he actually renounce in his mature works to a humanist perspective? Or did he rather substitute a 'scientific' humanism, that of historical materialism, to the philosophical humanism of Feuerbach? Is socialism a scientific humanism?

Personally, I would not describe the younger Marxian position as pseudo-Marxism and the elder Marxian position as true Marxism and scientific humanism. For both the younger and the elder Marx the human being was the subject of history.

What can be said with certainty is that in *The German Ideology* (1845) Marx undertook with Engels a strong critique of Feuerbach's abstract and idealized philosophical humanism. Together, Marx and Engels went so far to assert that Ludwig Feuerbach and Max Stirner had inverted the real relations between man and social history and had turned the historical process upside-down. It was maintained that these authors had abstracted from the course of history by reducing the real man to the pale fetish of the bourgeois individual of their own times.

⁴ The 'critical Marxist' type of positive humanism, as distinct from the 'scientific Marxist' one, refuses any form of dialectical materialism or 'theory of theoretical practice' and opposes economic determinism and economic fundamentalism. Among the leading exponents of Marxist humanism, we may mention Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Raya Dunayevskaya, Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, Adam Schaff, Karl Korsch, Geörgy Lukács, Ernst Bloch, Roger Garaudy, Jürgen Habermas and Karel Kosík. We may include in critical Marxist theories also some more recent conceptions, as Jon Elster's 'game theoretic Marxism', Gerald Cohen's Marxist functionalism, Mancur Olson's Marxist 'theory of collective actions' of social classes, Harry Cleaver's, Taylor Lance's and John Holloway's 'open Marxism' and Toni Negri's post-workerist Marxism. These critical Marxist theories reject a teleological view of social reality, refuse determinism and put particular emphasis on human essence and on living labour.

Finally, let us mention two other highly controversial forms of Marxist humanism. One of them is the so-called 'scientific' Marxist humanism, a form of anthropomorphic and non-philosophical naturalism, which rejected class struggle, in the name of a universal human inter-classist fellowship. The other one is Roger Garaudy's idealistic and transcendental kind of Marxist humanism, which in 1966 got the support of the Central Committee of the PCF, with the famous declaration that a Marxist humanist standpoint exists ("il y a un humanisme marxiste"). This position was not shared by Althusser, for whom there could not be much space for a theoretical humanism, as he conceived the historical process as governed by a structural causality of strict material nature.

As regards Italy, we may recall the Marxist scientific humanism of Galvano Della Volpe and neo-critical rationalist humanism of Ludovico Geymonat, both of which imply a creative anthropological conception (a philosophy of class emancipation and social revolution, but no theory of individual subject). They further entail a dialectical materialist view of the world, which culminates in the Marxian criticism of classical political economy, with its faith in the existence of natural and eternal economic laws.

Two other conceptions of neo-Marxist humanism worth to be mentioned are the historical realistic humanism of Enlightenment lineage of Antonio Banfi, Cesare Luporini and Giulio Preti, founded on the concept of 'praxis' (acting for necessity) and open to the values of positive humanism; and the ethical and 'non-economistic' humanism of a critical Marxist economist, Claudio Napoleoni, on which we shall turn more extensively in a while.

3. Religious and non-religious humanism.

Religion, a search for ethical values which provides a global view of life and afterlife, is not a natural exigency of all human minds. But it is a useful element for social integration, because it acts as a moral deterrent and offers human beings a possible delayed gratification for their good actions.

Religious humanism acknowledges the sacredness of human life. It recognizes in the human person a divine creation and a possible *imago Dei*⁵. And it rejects irrationalism and pragmatism. Though it does not conceive humanism as a conceptual alternative to capitalism, it regards

⁵ This is however a rather controversial point, which, according to some interpretations, concerns human beings only before the alleged original sin and after the redemption of mankind.

humanism with favour, as something which could fill the lack of solidarity values of the capitalist system and could therefore contribute to humanize a market economy .

Christian faith is a specific form of religious humanism, implying a dogmatic belief in a set of exceptional events, such as the three in one nature of God, the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, the human incarnation of God's son, his sacrifice for the redemption of mankind by an original sin, his crucifixion and his later resurrection.

In the Christian faith in the human incarnation of Jesus Christ an important conception may be recognized: that of the infinity which becomes finiteness. With the incarnation of Christ, divinity takes human form. There is an evident change of perspective, in a laic direction. Transcendence turns into history.

Among various modern instances of Christian religious humanism, we may mention those provided by the existentialist philosophers Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Jaspers; by neo-Thomism, a neo-scholastic theological doctrine which aims at reconciling nature and grace; by a 'personalist' catholic movement which translates faith into an active social practice of evangelization and ecumenical life (C. Renouvier, É. Boutroux); by the "Nouvelle Théologie" of the Lion Jesuitic school (H. De Lubac, J. Daniélou), which does not trace a net distinction between religion and reason⁶; and by the 'new theologies of liberation', an outcome of the 'anthropological turning' of Vatican II.

All forms of religious humanism aim at making the economy more human, by contrasting the excesses of the technological society, which dissolves many positive spiritual values. Some of them are practiced by French and Italian scholars⁷.

⁶ The "Nouvelle Théologie" shares the critical realism of the Thomistic and the Dominican gnoseological systems of thought and the idea of a natural order and of an uncorrupted human being. It differs from the monastic spiritualism of other religious orders (the Augustinians, the Franciscans) which have a cosmocentric rather than an anthropocentric view of the world and take for granted the irreconcilability of nature and grace and the necessity of the latter for the salvation of mankind.

⁷ As concerns France, let us mention Jacques Maritain (the neo-Thomist author of *Humanisme intégral* and the deviser of the "city of man"), the medievalist Etienne Gilson (another neo-Thomist, who introduced the concept of *philosophia christiana*), Emmanuel Mounier (the founder of the 'social personalism' or 'relational humanisme' movement, which opposes individualism, and of the journal *Esprit*), Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (a Jesuit, upholder of an evolutionist cosmological conception) and Maurice Blondel (a pragmatist philosopher and a leading exponent of the modernist branch of laic theology which refutes metaphysics and includes faith in the sphere of irrational and supernatural). The ideas of these authors were initially seen with suspect by the Church (see Pius XII's 1950 encyclical *Humani generis*). Three important Italian exponents of the neo-Scholastic

The non-religious kind of humanism, on the other hand, may be considered the modern expression of a laic, philanthropic and anti-authoritarian philosophy of immanence and finiteness, practiced by Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Rousseau, J.S. Mill and Comte. It rejects all metaphysics of absoluteness, acknowledges a natural primacy of human beings and derives its moral laws from reason and science, rather than from a religious faith. It proceeds from the bottom to the top, not by revelation, but by observation and introspection, and implies freedom of choice and human responsibility. It sets reason against faith, counters nature to grace, opposes natural right to Christian morality. As a positive and ethical 'religion of humanity' (Mill, Comte), it takes science as the only reliable source of knowledge, refuses the idea of supernatural religious experiences, such as miracles, and denies the existence of sacramental opportunities of salvation.

Both religious and non-religious humanism try to reconnect human essence and human existence. That is necessity and freedom. But they do not agree on the logical priority of these concepts. Positive humanists conceive reality as action and place existence before essence. Religious humanists do the contrary. They meet a logical limit in the idea of a natural insufficiency of human reason.

These kinds of humanism conceive the social history of man as a history of salvation. Though salvation from different things. One of them from an alleged original sin, which configures a culpable past and a redeeming future. The other one from the dominance conditions imposed on human beings by authoritarian regimes, or by capital, in its unceasing pursuit of an increase in value. This is an unnatural goal. Economic activity was not originated by the search for profit, but by the need to satisfy the natural instinct of human preservation, the only general regulative principle of economic activity that may be found in primitive communities⁸.

theoretical school have been Bontadini, Pareyson and Del Noce. Gustavo Bontadini, who thought at the Catholic University of Milan, proposed a non-dogmatic synthesis of idealism and neo-Thomism, which aimed at reinterpreting classical metaphysics in Christian terms and at validating the intuitions of faith by the force of reason. Luigi Pareyson, who thought at the University of Turin, had a spiritualist view of existentialism. Augusto Del Noce's original conception of humanism combined Augustinian and Thomistic elements.

⁸ The typical figures of pre-capitalistic societies – the shepherd, the peasant, the handicraftsman – did not exhibit an acquisitive mentality. They did not work to get a profit and to accumulate wealth, but to obtain the necessities for life. They were content to live with very little and were therefore in consonance with themselves.

4. Post-modern anti-humanism.

In the cultural history of human society the modern period is generally taken to denote in Western countries an age of scientific and economic progress, political emancipation and extended individual freedom, in which human beings rediscovered their subjectivity and were gradually liberated from prejudice and superstition.

In the modern age we may distinguish two sub-periods with distinct characteristics. They are sometimes referred as 'early' and 'late' modernism. In economics, early modernism was an age of scientific rationality. It began with classical political economy and included utilitarianism, positivism and the marginalist revolution. Economics came to be considered a scientific discipline: at first the classical analysis of formation, distribution and use of social product during the various stages of development of human society; later on, the theory of choice of how to use scarce means to achieve given ends.

The modernist trend was not confronted in economics with an easy task. It had to overthrow the lasting dominance of the 'received view', a traditional mix of positivism, operationalism and scientism, entailing the assumption of full rationality of economic agents and absolute faith in scientific and economic progress. It brought the substitution of a rigid principle of causality with the idea of functional interdependence. And a legitimating view of the capitalist society.

Late-modernism was in economics a phase of historical transition. It saw important changes in the previous roles of capital and labour, together with the decline of industrial capitalism and of neoclassical theories based on rationality and equilibrium. It witnessed the rise of Keynesism and of a variety of post-Keynesian macroeconomic equilibrium and disequilibrium approaches. But it did not succeed in providing a widely accepted theoretical paradigm for economic explanation and prediction. And a new comprehensive vision of the working of the capitalist economy did not emerge⁹.

In the philosophy of science, late modernism brought a significant parting from utilitarianism and from methodological individualism, together with the decay of the neo-positivistic idea of the existence of objective

⁹ As noticed by two careful observers, Arnold Gehlen and Jürgen Habermas, modernity remained in some sense an unfinished project, an incompletely realized innovative model of life. Half the mankind did not benefit of it.

knowledge and the rise of critical rationalism and of Karl Popper's methodology of empirical falsificationism¹⁰.

The post-modern age, which started in the late 1970s, was a disordered reaction to modernism. It was several things at once: a departure from ideologisms, an eclectic and non-systemic cultural age characterized by epistemic relativism and a nihilistic view of the world, and an anti-methodologist, anti-humanist and anti-historicist approach. Human beings ceased to be regarded as active and conscious protagonists of history and began to be seen as the results of underlying physical and psychical structures¹¹.

According to a well known definition given by a literary critic, Fredric Jameson, post-modernism was the dominant cultural logic of the late-capitalist age of multinational capital, information technology and artificial intelligence. It rejected the identification of rational behaviour with the pursuit of self-interest maximization, acknowledged the existence of a number of heuristic and predictive paradigms, denied the applicability of objective criteria of knowledge, pointed out the importance of multiplicity and uncertainty and recognized complexity and propositional undecidability.

Critics of post-modernism took its epistemic relativism and its refusal of any ideology as implying theoretical and practical disengagement. And some of them dismissed post-modernism as a fashionable nonsense, a pseudo-intellectual celebration of incoherence, which went far beyond normal people's comprehension.

Many post-modern thinkers were anti-humanist. They opposed any humanist philosophy of the subject. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger, formerly an existentialist, after his post-war 'turning' in the direction of the refusal of a human society entirely dominated by technology, rejected humanism, which he considered an ideology, a metaphysics of man¹². And in his 1946 *Letter on Humanism* he denounced the ontological identification by humanists of being and existing.

¹⁰ According to Milton Friedman's *Methodology of Positive Economics* (1953), the significance of any economic theory had to be appraised on the basis of the realism of its predictions, and not of its assumptions. The idea that an argument based on true premises may ultimately lead to false conclusions was regarded by some critics as a reductionist position.

¹¹ Something similar had already happened in the ancient times of Leucippus, Democritus and Epicurus, who many centuries before the Christian era discovered the atomistic nature of the material structure of the world, only by reasoning, without disposing of a microscope.

¹² By humanism (*humanismus*) Heidegger meant an endeavour to allow human beings to become "free for their humanity" and to find in this their value.

Louis Althusser, a critical Marxist, did not consider Marxism a form of humanism, in spite of its emphasis on human alienation, and regarded Marxist humanism as a form of revisionism and Feuerbach's positive conception of humanism as 'absolute anthropologism', or absolute materialism of man¹³. His theory of "aleatory materialism" – proposed in the 1980s, a dramatic and psychologically unstable period of his life – was a tool to interpret the complex relational structure of a world which obeyed no definite rules¹⁴. But after a fortunate period in which the Althusserian *philosophie à l'état pratique* became intellectually fashionable, there was a fall of interest in it, when its anti-Hegelian bias and its dichotomous interpretation of Marx's theoretical work – the thesis of an alleged *coupure épistémologique* between the young and the elder Marx – were considered insufficiently motivated and too radical by an increasing number of Marxists.

Althusser's philosophy was based on a theory of knowledge that recognized a material structure to the finite world and on a theory of social history which refused subjectivism (regarded as a bourgeois philosophical conception) and where the fundamental category of determination was chance. He denied the existence of universal laws of historical change and did not accept the vulgar-Marxist conception of an historical process exclusively governed by the structural dynamics of the economy. He acknowledged the existence of a reciprocal interaction between the economic structure and the relatively autonomous political and ideological superstructure. Recognizing that structure and superstructure exert a reciprocal but unequal action, he admitted the possibility of feedback effects of the superstructure on the economic structure. But he saw a "theoretical lacuna" in the Marxian treatment of their dialectical relation, because the Hegelian dialectic had been accepted by Marx in its "rational kernel", but had been reversed in its "mystical shell"¹⁵.

¹³ "Feuerbach replaces Hegel's absolute objective idealism with humanism or absolute anthropologism, and substitutes to the absolute idealism of the Idea an absolute materialism of man" (*On Feuerbach*).

¹⁴ The state of the world was taken by Althusser to be the casual expression of various interacting and synchronic atomistic forces. He thought that social history was moved by class conflict and had neither a definite subject nor a definite object.

¹⁵ Economic theory, for Althusser, was not an autonomous scientific subject, but a "subordinated region of the theory of history", itself a part of the global theory of social totality. Yet Althusser was prepared to concede that the economic process, differently from the historical one, had a definite subject and a definite object, expressed by structural and impersonal economic functions. Althusser did not believe in Hegel's dialectic of contradiction. He wanted to come back to Spinoza's materialist ontology, a non-dialectical philosophy of the constitution of political practice. He was a declared antagonist of the French historical school of "Les Annales" and refused Braudel's paradigm of an *histoire*

An anti-humanist position was taken also by Michel Foucault, the author of a manifest departure from the conventional 'economic man' interpretation of human subjectivity. But in his micro-analysis of social structure, which stressed the importance of unconscious and irrationality, he did not abandon an anthropocentric perspective. In his "archaeology of knowledge" he denounced the dangers of 'bio-politics' and the massive presence of repressive power and social exclusion in capitalist societies.

Foucault's peculiar position influenced two post-modern philosophers: Jacques Derrida, the father of deconstructionism¹⁶, and Paul Feyerabend, whose anarchist hermeneutics of "anything goes" denied the existence of absolute and permanent truths¹⁷.

Since then, much has been deconstructed, or overturned, in the field of economic and social sciences. But little was done to reconstruct a sufficiently unitary system of knowledge¹⁸.

5. Economics, structuralism and psychologism.

matérielle de la longue durée. He thought that the end of capitalism and the advent of communism predicted by Marx should not be conceived as historical necessities originated by the internal contradictions of the capitalist system, but as simple uncertain and fortuitous possibilities. But no strategic political perspective was implied in his conception of the world. In 1972, in the course of a famous self-criticism, he reversed his previous position on the controversial question of Marxist humanism and on the theory of theoretical praxis and denounced it as a 'theorist deviation' (*Éléments d'autocritique*, Paris, 1974).

¹⁶ Derrida was a critic of logo-centrism, that is of the privileging of speeches over writings, and particularly of speeches with binary pairs in opposition. His deconstructionism is a technique for multiple competing interpretations of a text. It results from a combination of an outdated disciplinary system, whose basic rules have come in contradiction with their own structural logic and need to be destroyed, and the new structural system of knowledge which has to be constructed.

¹⁷ As a result there was a gradual shift of philosophical and theoretical economic emphasis from a context of systematic order and structural stability to a different one of permanent disequilibrium and creative destruction. This was a significant change of perspective which favoured a dismissal of methodological certainties and opened the way to a rather contradictory paradoxical mix of theoretical structuralism and practical humanism.

¹⁸ Some endeavours made in this direction, though questionable, may however be worth mentioning. Two of these are G. Duménil's and D.K. Foley's 'new solution' to the Marxian 'transformation problem' and the re-interpretation of the Marxian theory of value as a 'single' system, made by A. Kliman and others. Another neo-Marxist endeavour is the 'post-structuralist Marxian theory' of Stephen A. Resnick and Richard D. Wolff, editors of the journal "Rethinking Marxism". It is an anti-humanist theory of the generation, appropriation and class distribution of the social surplus, where humanism is regarded as a moralistic bourgeois phenomenon, offering an ideological covering to privilege and exploitation.

Any intellectual or philosophical system presupposes the presence of a reference centre. Religion posits the existence of God, humanism that of the human being, structuralism that of underlying material structures. Psychoanalysis the presence of an underlying psychical structure: *es*, the unconscious.

An interesting point in the history of philosophical anthropology, which can help to clarify the relations between economics, humanism and religion, may be evoked by recalling a debate between structuralists and psychologists on the logical primacy of either the material structure of the natural world or of the subjective conscience of man. For Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysts subjectivity comes first and does not exhaust itself in individual self-consciousness. The *ego* is conceived as a product of the unconscious, a psychical structure.

The influence of this debate on the recent history economic science may be appraised by considering some post-structural views on the nature this science. We may start by the political economy of sign and symbolic values of Jacques Baudrillard, which provides a naturalistic criticism of the semiotic nature of commodities in mature capitalism. Super-structural elements – as advertising, marketing and commodity value forms – are present in an important position and virtual entities, images and representations replace material production. As a consequence, human subjects lose contact with reality. In this post-modern context, consumption goods are no longer linked to specific functions or needs, but become symbols of impulses and desires (of wealth, power and social prestige). And firms have an obvious interest to arise specific needs, by mass advertising which plunge individuals in a ‘mediatic’ bath, to satisfy them.

People rely on models and symbols, they live in a virtual world, a cyberspace filled of hyper-realities: the world of TVs and computers, which capture people with their images. The outcome is an increasing gap between the sign, a void structural form, and reality, its empirical content. That is between the signifier and the signified¹⁹.

Other criticisms of classical anthropocentric humanism were made by Claude Levy-Strauss (*la pensée sauvage*) and by Georges Bataille, an advocate of a natural economy and a critic of the logic of business, based on the unnatural search for profit (*la rage puritaine des affaires*). They regarded as unnatural the categorical imperatives of the capitalist society,

¹⁹ The distinction between the signifier and the signified expresses in structural linguistics a binary conception of sign (M. Merleau-Ponty). Signifiers are signs, the structural forms, which in political economy correspond to *value forms*. Signified are the real contents of the discourse, including the *commodity forms*. But the sign may be also seen as unity of signifier and signified, of formal expression and real content.

which force everybody to work, to consume and to save, in a non-transgressive “restricted economy” (Bataille) exclusively oriented to the search of utility and productivity.

The awareness of the acquired pre-eminence of symbolic values²⁰ over reality induced Baudrillard to deny a primacy of economics and to forecast the end of the age of organized production. And thus also the end of political economy, the science which explains that social reality and which has little to do with the valorization of signs. As a result, the superstructure, a simulation of reality, dominates the economic structure, the basis of reality. Just the opposite of what is postulated by the Marxist orthodoxy.

Jacques Derrida, a post-structuralist critic of conventional psychoanalysis, proposed a hermeneutical methodology of textual deconstruction and fragmentation. A linguistic methodology which implies a reject of the traditional logo-centrism, that is of the privileging of speeches over writings, motivated by the fact that speeches are necessarily associated with the speaker’s presence, whereas writing is not. Thus the dominant “logo-centric metaphysics of the presence” should be rejected.

Another leading exponent of post-structuralism, Jean-François Lyotard, a critical Marxist, used to speak of “libidinal economics”, an expression with an evident Freudian reminiscence. ‘Libido’ is the psychical energy of the sexual instinct required to perpetuate the human species. Lyotard thought that all structures contain a libidinal energy waiting to be released and transferred to other structures and that political economy is libidinal (*toute économie politique est libidinale*) because is charged with passions and subject to value judgments. He conceived post-modernism as a reaction to the grand historical meta-narratives of modernity and as an endeavour to build a new morality²¹.

A further post-structural philosophical conception which dealt with unconscious impulses, feelings and desires, and with their instinctual satisfaction, was that of Wilhelm Reich, an Austrian psychoanalyst and a leader in the fight against political repression and for sexual liberation. It was based on the. By extending the Freudian concept of libido (conceived

²⁰ Baudrillard’s symbolic values include advertising, which reifies desire and pleasure, and the death principle which characterizes Sigmund Freud’s “psychical economy”. See Freud’s *The Economic Problem of Masochism*, 1924, where the death impulse – the ‘nirvana principle’, that refers to a state of salvation in which any pain ceases – is contrasted to the hedonistic principle of pleasure (a libido, which may be appeased by satisfying the need). On this point, see also another work of Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

²¹ Lyotard’s libidinal economics was regarded by another critical Marxist, Alain Badiou, as being not a mix of Marx’s conscious and Freud’s unconscious dimensions of human existence, but as an unfortunate mix of French post-structuralist Maoism and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

as a primordial cosmic energy, and renamed “orgone”) from individuals to society, Reich coined the notion of ‘sexual economy’ and studied the biological and psychological mechanisms by which sublimation and repression of the libidinal impulses of sensual experience produce and maintain the political economy of capitalism²².

A variant of Lyotard’s libidinal economics may be considered Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s “schizo-analysis of desiring production”, made in the context of their unsystematic and non-dialectical philosophy of difference and repetition. For them – a philosopher and a psychoanalyst – men are “desiring machines” (*L’Anti-Oedipe*). Desire, a real productive force which moves the world economy, is the foundation stone of a theory of spending (‘sex sells’) and two specific elements of desire, sex and money, are regarded as the basic structural ingredients of the schizophrenic capitalist modes of reproduction.

An atypical post-structuralist was Pierre Bourdieu, a radical leftist philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist, and a critic of modernism, utilitarianism and rational choice theory, who used to define himself a “constructivist structuralist”. He analyzed a virtual “economy of symbolic goods”, where imaginary commodities prevail over real ones.

Let us mention also Zygmunt Bauman’s “political economy of uncertainty”, devised to put an end to the deregulation imposed by capital, business and finance to local political authorities²³.

According to these authors, economic activity has much to do with the mental mechanisms which regulate the projection, inhibition and repression of mankind’s impulses. They maintain that there is a phase of human life in which primitive unconscious psychological processes are substituted by more organized and unified processes and that it is in that phase that economic activity comes to the forefront.

Times had changed in an anti-fundamentalist direction which rejected formalism and determinism. Structuralism came to be regarded as an outdated methodology and scientific practice²⁴. Even Marxist structuralism experienced a phase of rapid decadence.

²² A socialist thinker, persecuted for his ideas, Reich spoke of a “sex-economic revolution”. He was one of the first scholars who tried to reconcile psychoanalysis and Marxism, by abandoning a dialectical materialist interpretation of the economic and social reality. He thought that there is an evident nexus between social repression of sexual desires and authoritarian logic of power.

²³ For Bauman, a post-modernist scholar, deregulation stimulates business flexibility and speculative activities. But it makes politicians powerless and generates in the layman a sense of insecurity and a lack of confidence in the future.

²⁴ An anti-humanist structuralism can be ascribed to the philosophers L. Althusser, E. Balibar and H. Lefebvre, the Freudian psychoanalyst J. Lacan, the semiologist and literary

They were gradually overcome by post-structuralism, an anti-humanist and anti-historicist intellectual movement which aimed at re-establishing a primacy of the object of knowledge over the subject. It wanted to do this by a genetic analysis accounting for discontinuous and largely unpredictable structural changes, which would prevent any possibility to predetermine individual and social behaviour and to construct a general theory²⁵.

6. On the philosophical anthropology of “La Rivista Trimestrale”.

A dislike for today hyper-technocratic affluent and consumerist societies is shared by laic and religious humanism, both of which are critical of ‘wild capitalism’, an economic system which sets off brutal and unregulated market forces. They distrust the systematic tendency of capitalism to accumulate wealth and to disregard distributive equity.

Emblematic in this regard may be considered the case of “La Rivista Trimestrale”, a quarterly cultural journal edited in Rome in the 1960s by two catholic and communist intellectuals, Claudio Napoleoni and Franco Rodano. The editors of the journal wished to reconsider the role of politics in the Italian social reality of that period. Their purpose was a twofold one: to make a critical revision of the rigidly deterministic schemes of dialectical materialism and to re-examine in the light of the original Christian message of the Gospel (Christianity *sine glossa*) the ‘established’ doctrine of the Roman Church²⁶.

critic R. Barthes, the anthropologists C. Lévi-Strauss and M. Godelier, and others. In economics a non-humanist structuralist or post-structuralist tendency is less evident. F. Quesnay’s *Tableau économique*, K. Marx’s reproduction schemes and W. Leontief’s input-output or inter-industry analysis – *ante litteram* examples of structural analysis in which the economic system consists of a set of interdependent productive sectors linked together by structural relations – are neither humanist nor anti-humanist. And so are some recent theoretical approaches which pay a particular attention to the structural features of the economy, such as those of Sraffa and Pasinetti.

²⁵ Another differential feature between structuralism and post-structuralism is worth noting. Structuralism was a method of search which took economic and social structures as given realities, already formed and designed to perform specific functions. Post-structuralism, on the contrary, paid attention to the origins of the modes of production and to the causes of their incessant historical evolution. It rejected essentialism and fundamentalism and allowed for the existence of residual autonomous spaces. It did not conceive the economic structure as a totalizing entity which flattened the role of human subjects.

²⁶ Kierkegaard’s “established” and “wordly” Christianity, which pertains to the temporal order.

The publication of the journal started in 1962, in the uncertain political climate of the first Italian experiences of a center-left government, by initiative of a small group of intellectuals, after a long period of preparatory meetings²⁷. Financial support was provided by Raffaele Mattioli, a man of letters and a friend of Rodano, chairman of an important Italian Bank.

In spite of its rather inexpressive title, the “*Rivista Trimestrale*” was not a mere container inspired by methodological pluralism and open to any contribution. It was a cultural magazine which dealt with some of the basic themes of our epoch: the uncertain and problematic nature of the human condition, the catholic question, the support of laicism, the internal contradictions of historical capitalism and the fight for the emancipation of human beings from the dominance of capital. The purpose of the editors was to build a cultural and political platform for a New Left. One based on a neo-Ricardian criticism of Marxism.

The editorial line of the journal was that of a positive humanism. It aimed at reaffirming the intrinsic nature of human subjectivity and the social character of labour.

Among the themes treated in the journal there were those typical of the left-wing catholic reflection: the relation of Catholicism with communism, the theoretical difficulties of scientific Marxism due to the abandonment of the ‘pure’ labour theory of value and the ways to overcome the ‘negativity of finiteness’.

The ambitious purpose of the editors was to found a new philosophical anthropology: a laic and humanist one, of Marxian and catholic lineage, with structural and historical connotations. As such, it had to be distant both from the ‘workerist’ movement, which tried to give a political outlet in Italy to wage claims, and from the revolutionary ideology of the autonomous leftist groups committed to start a season of great social struggles.

There was in the journal an explicit refusal of the post-industrial capitalist society where people are forced to work hard only to be able to consume more. An unsocial society, which does not provide everybody with a job and an income. And there was also another refusal: that of a ‘neutral’ economic science, free from value judgments.

Rodano and Napoleoni were both communist and catholic. They looked at communism as a great philosophical and ethical instance of transformation: the project of a different mode of staying in the world, in accordance with a natural scale of values. They had a sense of cosmic religiousness which perceived a substantial identity of God and Nature.

²⁷ On this point, see M. Mustè, 1993, pp. 119-51.

And they regarded the Christian faith as a great spiritual force, philanthropic and humanitarian, whose value may be recognized even by unbelievers.

They did not want to oppose man and God, but their search for truth started from the human being. It was not a theocratic philosophical conception, but an anthropocentric one, grounded on solidarity and equality principles. They regarded the human essence as a non predetermined entity: a multidimensional reality open to any type of creative development.

Their ethic was laic and based on deep respect for those moral values which were founded on the very nature of man and on the social obligations suggested by reason and experience. From this point of view, their ethical vision might recall the neo-Kantian kind of socialism and the neo-criticist philosophy of values of the Marburg school, which was more similar to Protagora's skepticism and moral relativism than to Plato's ethical absolutism²⁸.

In 1962 Napoleoni was 38 years old. He was engaged in cultural and political activities, but was not yet a university professor and a member of the Italian Parliament. After an active political militancy of eight years in the Communist Party, he had edited an innovative *Dictionary of Political Economy* and was the headmaster in Rome of a post-graduate school on the theory and policy of economic development²⁹.

Rodano was 42 years old. In his young years, he had attended a Jesuitic college and got a Thomistic culture. Formerly a member of the Catholic Action movement, he had taken an active part in the Italian Resistance to fascism, as member of a small underground group of catholic communists, who later converged in a Christian leftist party. After the liberation of Italy, Rodano had an intense political activity and wrote on various newspapers, including the Vatican daily *L'Osservatore Romano*. In 1947, when he was 27, he was excommunicated *ad personam* by the Holy Office for his communist ideology, a measure (later disavowed by Pope John XXII)

²⁸ Napoleoni's ethic was closer to the classical ethic of ends and ideals than to the utilitarian ethic of motivations and desires, which inspired philosophical radicalism and liberalism. But he did not consider them two different languages, for he did not regard a sense of humanity and the power of reason as separable.

²⁹ Later on, Napoleoni published other important works, such as *Il pensiero economico del '900* (1961), *L'equilibrio economico generale* (1965), *Smith, Ricardo, Marx* (1970), *Lezioni sul capitolo sesto inedito di Marx* (1972), *Il valore* (1976), *Discorso sull'economia politica* (1985) and, posthumous, *Cercate ancora: lettera sulla laicità e ultimi scritti* (1990, R. La Valle ed.) and *Dalla scienza all'utopia* (1992, G.L. Vaccarino, ed). On Napoleoni, see the monographs by R. Bellofiore (1991) and the present writer (Cavalieri, 2006).

which did not induce him to abandon his catholic faith and his activity as a communist political columnist³⁰.

The “Trimestrale” reaffirmed the centrality and autonomy of politics. Political activity was interpreted in its highest sense: as an opportunity of critical and disinterested search for truth and of civil comparison of different opinions, to get a democratic definition of social choices. The journal rejected any form of religious and political fundamentalism, denounced the repressive logic of the capitalist system and invited people to reconsider critically the performance of affluent societies.

The political aim of the journal was to build an ideal bridge between two different humanist conceptions of life: the catholic and the communist one. By so doing, the “Trimestrale” forestalled Berlinguer’s political objective of realizing an “historic compromise”³¹. And it anticipated the governmental formula of “national solidarity”.

7. Humanism as an alternative to the ideology of capital.

Communism and humanism were for Napoleoni and Rodano an indissoluble binomial. In communism they saw an ethical plea for transforming the world in a humanist direction and for getting an equalitarian and participating form of social organization. In Christianity they recognized a great spiritual force, one which did not intend to offer an alternative to capitalism, or to the ruling ideology of capital, but was prepared to fill its lack of ethical values and to give its victims a consolatory hope, that of a further and better life.

Napoleoni and Rodano were not true Keynesians. They regarded Keynesian reformism as objectively functional to the dominance logic of capital. They thought that Keynesism was not ultimately aimed at overcoming the capitalistic system, but at making it more stable and more

³⁰ Rodano’s most important articles are now collected in volumes: *Sulla politica dei comunisti* (1975), *Questione democristiana e compromesso storico* (1977), *Il pensiero di Lenin: da ideologia a lezione* (1980), *Lettere dalla Valnerina* (1986), *Lezioni di una storia “possibile”* (1986, G. Tassani and V. Tranquilli, eds.), *Lezioni su servo e signore: per una storia post-marxiana* (1990, V. Tranquilli, ed.) and *Cattolici e laicità della politica* (1992, V. Tranquilli, ed.). On Rodano, see: A. Del Noce (1981) and M. Musté, 1993 and 2000.

³¹ “Historic compromise” was the name given in Italy to an innovative reformist political endeavour committing catholics, communists and socialists to renew their anti-fascist unity and to reconcile the market economy with the Welfare State. With no detriment for the laity of policy. The devised encounter of the Catholic and communist morals was however prematurely cut off by the murder of Aldo Moro and by the sudden death of Enrico Berlinguer.

democratic (more palatable). And they wished to avoid the risk of a social-democratic or liberal drift of the Italian communist party.

Their purpose was to overthrow the capitalist system, which they regarded as basically inconsistent with democracy. In their opinion, the market economy was not democratic. It did not assign a right to vote to every person, but to every dollar a person could spend. But they did not propose to give up with the market, which they considered a useful social institution. While objecting to the market autonomy, they wanted to keep intact the market functionality and to reconcile its allocation mechanism with democratic planning.

Yet they intended to achieve this objective in different ways. Rodano cherished the radical perspective of a revolution, conceived as an ontological 'drop in the absolute', whereas Napoleoni, who believed in the efficacy of policy, sponsored (but later abandoned) the idea of a structural reform of the economic system realized in the socially agreed framework of a democratic planning and a comprehensive incomes policy. He conceived the revolution only in the sense of a fight for recovering the 'positiveness of finiteness' (that is, of human labour), undermined by capitalism.

They saw the natural solution of the Marxian 'enigma of history' in a communist-and-Christian society, an utopian kingdom of liberty, free from any form of constriction. Including those resulting from religious superstitions and from the subordination of labour to capital, typical of a society where the capacity to work was everything and workers were nothing. They recognized in labour the substance of value, but rejected the Marxian version of the labour theory of value, which assumed a direct proportionality relation between labour values and the prices of production of commodities.

The "Trimestrale" acknowledged the difference between the medieval anthropological conception which identified the worker in the slave or serf figure and the present progressive vision of the problem, which recognizes equal natural rights and equal duties to all human beings, independently of their social position.

Napoleoni and Rodano were both attracted by ontology, the philosophical reflection on human essence. They wanted to free the subject from a subjectivist perspective and to reaffirm the ontological difference between the subject and the object. And, ultimately, to strengthen the positive meaning of human finiteness. In Napoleoni and Rodano there was possibly a mild propensity to an utopian way of thinking. But there was no trace of an escape from the daily reality and of the search for a comfortable shelter in metaphysics.

8. A laic way to liberation.

The journal used to afford also some important theological problems. First of all, the question of the necessity of grace for salvation, which confronted humanity with a difficult dilemma, as human beings had either to submit to a divine will that imposed to renounce to be themselves and to pay for an alleged original sin, or to refuse to do this and to reaffirm their natural essence, saving their human dignity, but refusing the religion precepts.

As concerned the fundamental question of the essence or natural dimension of human beings, the choice was between the pragmatic Thomistic line which reconciled the omnipotence of God with the natural freedom of human beings, a line supported by the Dominicans and the Jesuits, and the Augustinian thesis of an uncorrupted pureness of the human nature, which persisted after and in spite of the original sin. For Napoleoni nature and grace, finiteness and infiniteness, reason and faith, could not be separated. He did not share what had been done in the 16th century by the Molinist separatist movement, which tried to reconcile God's almightiness and the natural freedom of man by separating grace and nature.

Rodano was critical of the Thomistic line, to which he attributed an anthropocentric but rather conservative position, that had given a historical justification to servile work. Napoleoni was more indulgent. He regarded Thomism as a possible point of contact between the neo-Platonic Christian spiritualism, which places the fundamental spiritual needs before the results of science, and the Aristotelian naturalism and rationalism, which regards scientific and technical progress in a more positive perspective.

There were also other important reasons that induced Napoleoni to put an end in 1970 to his intellectual partnership with Rodano and to conclude eight years of common editorial experience in the "Rivista Trimestrale"³². One of them concerned the validity of the thesis that a capitalist society is necessarily founded on the exploitation of wage labour, concealed by a seemingly fair exchange relationship.

Napoleoni thought that in modern societies the main source of exchange value was not the productivity of labour, but that of capital. And that in a hypothetical 'pure' capitalist economy, which would maximize the accumulation of capital and abstain from unproductive consumption, there would not be labour exploitation, though alienation would be general and

³² They were recalled by Napoleoni in an article published in a communist journal, "Rinascita", two years later (on October 6, 1972).

would affect both wage earners and capitalists. This opinion was not shared by Rodano.

A second reason of dissent was due to their different mental attitude towards work. For Rodano, human work was the expression of the negativity of finiteness, by which humanity could get out only by a revolution, intended as an ontological drop in the absolute. Whereas for Napoleoni this could only be true for wage-earning labour, for which the revolution had to be regarded as a re-appropriation of the lost subjectivity of labour. Independent work, for Napoleoni, was a kind of activity that had in itself nothing of negative or alienating.

A third reason of dissent concerned the appropriateness of a reformist economic policy. On this point Napoleoni had changed his mind. Now he thought that reformism implied an acceptance of the fundamental values of the capitalist society. And that his previous intention to modify the resource allocation in the system by means of the usual tools of economic and financial policy, sponsored by the “Trimestrale”, was a dangerous reformist illusion and had to be abandoned³³. He asked for a radical change of attitude in this regard. In his opinion, it was no longer possible to limit the policy measures to the domain of economic rent and unproductive consumption. Government intervention had to be made directly on the sphere of production activity, where the exploitation of wage labour and the split between work and needs which caused labour alienation had its origin.

A further reason of dissent, not mentioned by Napoleoni, was probably related with Rodano’s idea that the political problem of defending the natural liberty of man could be afforded separately from the religious problem of God’s grace. Napoleoni maintained that there could be no separation between nature and grace. He believed that man was created in God’s grace. But he added that he did not know whether human subjectivity had to be regarded as the determination of the original essence of man, or as the result of a predetermined historical destiny.

Unfortunately, a parallel reconstruction made by Rodano of the reasons of their dissent is not available. He believed in a revolution as the only way to realize the natural essence of human beings. But he was not insensible to

³³ It should perhaps be added that Napoleoni believed that Rodano conceived value as a technical and natural relation, following Sraffa, who had argued that the production prices of commodities could be determined without any reference to labour values. For Napoleoni, who in those years had definitely changed its mind on the relevance of Sraffa’s 1960 book on *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities*, Sraffa had reduced to a mere equilibrium theoretical construction the theory of value, a historical and social relation based on the Marxian concept of abstract labour.

the medieval scholastic anthropology which regarded human work in a negative light, as a sacrifice required to expiate the original sin.

Napoleoni, who did not share this view, wished to recover the positive character of labour and thought that for this purpose it would not be sufficient to dismiss the pervasive cult of productivity and to adverse unnecessary consumption. It was necessary to get out the capitalist society.

It should be noticed that Napoleoni and Rodano were both in favour of a libertarian and humanitarian ethic of laic commitment and responsibility. As open-minded Christian communists, they respected positive atheism, a laic religion of immanence.

The laity of politics was a liberal achievement that both of them were prepared to defend. But Napoleoni did not want to emphasize it too much. He feared that as a reaction this attitude could promote religious fundamentalism and generate a climate which would prevent the attainment of their main objective: the devised political convergence of Catholics and communists³⁴.

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³⁴ Rodano died at 63, in 1983. Napoleoni at 64, in 1988. Both of them died as laic persons, but with the comforts of religion. Napoleoni's last suggestion to his friends was to keep on in the search for truth ('*Cercate ancora*'). He said that he was at last going to see "how things really stand".

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