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ROSMINI'S IDEA OF PROGRESS. REFLECTIONS WITH A GLANCE TOWARDS CONTEMPORARY EUROPE

The text addresses the central issues of Antonio Rosmini's philosophy of history. Rosmini sees the driving force of history in the human tendency to 'contentment'; this tendency, however, is understood in its necessary relationship with the bonum commune. Furthermore, the particular purposes of the different historical phases and the risks associated with the epochs of crisis and rapid transformation (such as moral and intellectual disorientation and possible social decline) are considered by Rosmini in constant reference to the compensatory and ordering action of the divine Providence. According to the philosopher, Providence works through, rather than behind, the concrete geopolitical conditions and the various sociological and cultural factors occurring in history.

Two preliminary observations would appear to be necessary: when we talk about Rosmini's concept of "progress", it is advisable to bear in mind the idea of "history in general" in the Roveretan's way of thinking. Progress must therefore be seen as a specific form of historical path, clearly ascending, and directed towards improvement. If one then wishes to link Rosmini's idea of progress with present day Europe, the question might be reformulated in this manner: do we find in Rosmini, a history scholar, some criteria of judgment, some indication that helps us to better understand today's Europe, the one in which we live? Or, in other words, is it possible to apply certain analyses of Rosmini to the present day?

The reflections that follow are based around these two points, starting with an investigation into the concept of history and progress in Rosmini, to see, in a second stage, what the teaching of Rosminian thought might mean for contemporary Europeans.

To attempt to answer the first question, it might be considered useful to broaden the range of themes, by casting a synthetic glance over some of the key points of Rosmini's interpretation of history – or History, we should add, which is omnipresent in the work of the Roveretan thinker, in the singular with a capital H, but also as an infinity of histories from the past in the plural, studied from an impressive variety of points of view.

Rosmini's interest in history had its foundation in the Roveretan's curiosity for the link between culture and politics, in his sensitivity to the plurality of civilisations and how they had



conditioned, (and continue, to the present, to condition), the political universe. For the very purpose of reflecting on politics, Rosmini considered history to be indispensable.

Naturally, we also need to remember that Rosmini was not a historian in the way that history is seen as a modern, academic discipline, but rather as a way of thinking, based on a historical argument to identify *meta*-historical laws and interdependencies. The search for traces of the divine saving work guaranteed history a first-rate place in Rosmini's studies.¹

Consequently, Rosmini's concept of History, was closely linked to *Theodicy*. The question par excellence of Rosmini's thought, that is, the justification of the existence of the divine creator – of a divine creator who aimed at the redemption of creatures and his creation as such – therefore gave History a prominent role as centre stage for salvific action and theodicy. As a result, it was necessary to involve the theological perspective to understand historical facts and to give them true meaning. In his *Theodicy*, Rosmini expounded his doctrine of the overall meaning of the universe as such, including the historical world. Following the *Theodicy* it was then necessary to answer the question about the meaning of history from its metaphysical scope. An exclusively immanent perspective would not have been able to confer on History, intended here as a great link between men and times, any sense, any coherence.

For Rosmini, as indeed for Immanuel Kant, history, without such a philosophical footing, remained 'blind', as the well-known statements in his essay on theodicy recall, in which the author confessed his own intellectual impotence, declaring himself unable to explain the secrets of history: a real answer could only come from the supernatural order.

In Rosmini, we therefore find a strong skepticism towards the claim of giving a meaning to History with the help of history alone, yet, at the same time, an immense interest in History, since the central question regarding the existence and justification of the Creator – intent on the redemption of his own creation – placed History, being the main stage of the divine saving work, at the centre of all reflections. History, interpreted from an eschatological perspective, offered, in Rosmini's eyes, the concrete, visible, didactic material of the pedagogical intention of Providence for the good of mankind, who was called to understand the salvific project and cooperate with it.

Although it is true that Rosmini's scientific interest did not aim at a thorough knowledge of a past and closed historical era, his method led him to study the trends and laws that had their own plausibility and rationality, even without the dominating architecture of theodicy, in theory. This does not mean that Rosmini's idea of history, had, almost unbeknown to him, become secularised, acquiring a historical autonomy against the author's wishes. On the contrary: it is part of the fascinating, distinctive features of the immense work of the Roveretan, who, among all the ramifications by way of meanders, diversions and long-winded digressions, curves, redundancies and exposures in his various 'Philosophies' (of Law, of Morality, of Politics etc.) never loses sight of the keystone of the entire construction. Nor, indeed, the theodicy, the end (even in the biographical sense) of all the intellectual and meditative efforts of Rosmini, given that the last (unfinished) work was dedicated to theodicy in an attempt to draw a kind of *summa* of the conferral of an apologetic sense to the relationship that linked the human world to divine power.

¹ A. ROSMINI, *Teodicea*, U. MURATORE (ed.), vol. 22, Città Nuova Editrice, Roma 1977

The Rosmini's research concerning the *vestigia Dei* the divine traces in the world of men, was based on the firm conviction of the very direct divine presence in earthly events, because God, in Rosmini's vision, offered man a very rich instructive material for the purpose of his intellectual and moral promotion.

Rosmini studied history, convinced that the divine will for redemption was manifested and carried out. On this basis, his historical outlook expanded enormously, since he considered the whole of humanity to be a "collaborator" in the salvific project, without any chronological or geographical exclusion. Rosmini's approach, therefore, was universal – an approach that explains the amazing breadth and immense dimension of his historical investigations, especially in the *Philosophy of Politics* that ranges from the history of Egypt to the American Indians; from the ancient Romans to the States of the Ancient Regime before the French Revolution.

Rosmini's political-philosophical reflections are distinguished by an extraordinary balance between cultural historicism and the design of the possibility of progress under certain conditions. If the Christian factor was not to be included in historical analysis, according to the Roveretan, it would have been necessary to consider the many human events and just as many responses to the challenges posed by the varied circumstances in which peoples found themselves living, and vice versa: the specific qualities of a people conditioned by development. Indeed, a pillar of Antonio Rosmini's political philosophy was formed by the idea that the intellectual and moral "constitution" of a people represented the pre-eminent factor of its historical vicissitudes as well as of its political action. He was convinced that that specific quality called the "inner constitution" of a community, that is the mix of mentality and customs, was "the cause of all external events", and that consequently, there could not be a more important discipline for the politics of a history of such. It was therefore necessary to reconstruct the past as a history of cultural beliefs and attitudes, not in a folkloristic sense, but in order to demonstrate how the intellectual-moral disposition of a people influenced their habits, choices and decisions.² This very same attention to the "inner constitution" was to serve as an interpretative matrix, both with regard to the evolution of society itself, and with regard to the peaceful or violent exchange between states and peoples.

On closer inspection, historical analysis even seemed to offer proof of the hypothesis of a double interdependence: between the external, structural and institutional conditions of each community on the one hand, and the collective moral and intellectual qualities of the overall social body on the other, and between this connection of external and internal characteristics and the historical events of the same. The interest dedicated by the Roveretan to the correspondence between the feeling, thinking and acting of a society and the formal architecture that supported it with laws and regulations of all kinds, not only gave history in general, in his work, the function of being a testing ground for philosophical-theological hypotheses, as we have already mentioned, but it also gave space to broad and original reflections on cultural history, which appear as a by-product, albeit omnipresent and continuous, of the main philosophical work. Alt-

² Cfr. A. ROSMINI, *Filosofia della politica*, M. D'ADDIO (ed.), Città Nuova Editrice, Roma 1997 (Edizione nazionale, vol. 33), especially book III.

though they are marginal compared to his major arguments, and not elaborated in an autonomous and systematic way, they are nevertheless worthy of attention.

Due to the importance given to what could be called the Rosminian theorem of interdependence – as a kind of fundamental law for every society, regardless of the specific geographical, cultural or religious differences – Rosmini's political philosophy was largely declined in the form of cultural history for sociological purposes. The history of cultures and civilisations presented itself to him as the field in which the forces of man are deployed, aimed at the pursuit of happiness of individuals as well as groups. Studied from a sociological point of view, cultural history was therefore indispensable for political theory, since the object of the latter was the analysis of the multiple ways in which men, constituted in society, engaged in the pursuit of happiness and in the regulation of this research through legal systems and institutions. The leitmotif of the historical-cultural examination therefore had to be the question about the way in which men had organised their society in different times and places, and to which common good they had addressed it. Underlying this question was the Rosminian theorem of "fulfilment", according to which all man's actions were determined by the will to find happiness. Even as a group and as a society, men tended towards ends to which they attributed a capacity for generating happiness. The common good of a society could therefore be analysed as an expression of a collective will aimed at satisfying the desire for "fulfilment".

The particular aspect of this cultural history conducted with the pursuit of happiness guiding research, lay in the fact that Rosmini intertwined it with the examination of the stabilising factors of society. When analysed from this perspective, the multiple possible social ends that were placed under the name of *bonum commune*, revealed themselves to be unequal in their usefulness for social stability, in the eyes of the critical observer. According to Rosmini, a cultural history aimed at a political didactic had the task of demonstrating which ends served stability and which were not adequate for social coexistence. A history such as this made clear the relationship between where the state ends and the moral conscience of the individual citizen starts, decisive for the development of society. In this way, the reciprocal influence between the mental-moral habit of the "members" and the social constitution became more transparent, and it seemed possible to better identify the correspondence between structural conditions and social behaviours in the various stages of development and in the different political systems.³

To answer this question, Rosmini started from the hypothesis, relating to the history of culture and mentalities, that the stages in the history of human societies could be defined by referring to the respective "end", intended more precisely as the social good around which, as a fulcrum of the collectivity, their consensus and unity were formed. Thus he approached the historicist-dynamic Vico model of political philosophy, that is to consider society, for better or for worse, the expression and product of a constructive will, of an individual or of a group. It therefore seemed possible to him to reconstruct the "biographies" of societies and states, if one identified, for the various historical phases, this collective purpose considered as a common good, endowed with founding and integrative power for the community.

³ For the criteria chosen by Rosmini for the distinction of various historical phases, see also E. BOTTO, *Etica sociale e filosofia della politica in Rosmini*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1992, pp. 103 sgg.

The shift of research interest from the normative postulate (of Rousseau) to the historical-sociological demonstration (of Vico) highlighted that the collective will and the orientation towards the common good were universally the engine of social progress, but they were also variable and plural in their tendency. Nevertheless, it seemed to Rosmini that it was possible to reduce this plurality to a unifying law by elaborating a history of customs that focused its attention on the idea of the common good present in the *masses*. According to Rosmini, such a cultural sociology, focused on the masses as the effective power in society, brought to light an almost obligatory path of degeneration that took place in four more or less distinct phases. Let us say, in parentheses, that the path chosen by the Roveretan represented a lucid alternative to both conservative-counter-revolutionary sociological approaches and democratic solutions. It distanced itself from the idea (of De Maistre) about the full heteronomy of the multitude, a powerful but passive instrument in the hands of providence;⁴ but also from the democratic elevation of the masses to the new and autonomous sovereign of history.⁵ The Rosminian starting point was rather in the attention to the dimension of the effective dynamics of that social element, more precisely called “the mass”, whose laws of functioning and development had to be studied. Regardless of whether the multitude represented a means of divine governance of human affairs, or whether it was a subject endowed with autonomous power, it was necessary to investigate the consequences for politics resulting from its immense effective weight in social and political processes, and therefore also in the consolidation or deterioration of society.

But in his eyes, the world of politics as a field of interaction of heterogeneous forces, had to be observed objectively, so the “mass” factor was not to be seen either as a good or an evil, but rather as a real power for the stability or instability of the system, that is, for the progress as well as for the decline of societies.

The history of customs was therefore declined as a history of the transformations of the behaviours and beliefs of the majority of citizens, obviously not understood in a democratic sense, but in the balance of forces endowed with the ability to affect social equilibrium. With the help of some of his favourite authors, Xenophon, Livy, Cicero and Sallust, Rosmini searched in the history of the ancient civilisations of the Greeks, Romans and Persians for indicators of the shifts in social architecture of moral ideas and ethical values. From an historical-sociological examination of the cultures of antiquity, the Roveretan deduced a model of a historical path in four stages – from foundation to flourishing and then towards corruption and decline – using, as a hermeneutic key, the respective “social ends” which in each of those passages presented themselves in a specific form and with different effects on the stability of the political organism. The first “social age” was that in which society was constituted and organised with laws and regulations, with the existence of the community itself as a binding social goal. The second social

⁴ Cfr. J. DE MAISTRE, *Considérations sur la France*, in ID. *Oeuvres complètes*, Vitte et Perrussel, Lyon 1884, vol. IV, p. 107.

⁵ Cfr. D. FARIAS, *La crisi dello Stato e il valore costituzionale dell'eguaglianza*, in P. PELLEGRINO (ed.), *Rosmini: etica e politica. Filosofia pratica o filosofia della pratica?*, Soliditas-Spes, Stresa, Milazzo 1991, pp. 133-160.

age preserved this substance by adding further assets and increasing social benefits. During the third stage, the moral priorities shifted in the public consciousness, the identification of the partners with the founding law was attenuated. In the perception of most people, the *raison d'être* of society then passed to more individualistic ends, at the service of the interests of the individual. An existential crisis of society ensued which necessarily led to its destruction.

His criticism of the social philosophy of liberalism of a sensist type (think of his polemic against Melchiorre Gioia)⁶ found substantial arguments here. Not only from the moral point of view, but from a historical-sociological perspective – which, in his opinion, should have been the principle one in the service of politics, always keeping his eyes focused on the main question, that is the challenge of the stability/instability of the political system – to Rosmini the theory that the desire for consumption and pleasure could stimulate a collective ethos aimed at stabilising society seemed unsustainable. The *exempla* found in the history of antiquity showed him that, on the contrary, the enjoyment of pleasures, which had become the main purpose for taking action, was unable either to release creative and productive forces, or to found an orientation towards the common good. Indeed, historical-cultural sociology – in the eyes of the Roveretan – taught, without a margin of doubt, that a civil society made up of individuals aimed at increasing their own well-being, fell into a kind of *delirium* caused by the loss of the common ethical canon.⁷ As evidence of this form of collective “madness” he identified the loss of orientation in religious matters, the waves of idolatry and the birth of the most varied sects. Such moral-intellectual disorientation threatened the foundations of society. Relying on the diagnosis given by Saint Augustine, Rosmini interpreted the final phase of the history of Rome as a paradigmatic case of a society aimed exclusively at the pleasures of individuals at the expense of social bonds, of the commitment to the common cause of the republic,⁸ and, consequently, to the stability of the system.

The law that determined this development until the collapse and destruction of society, according to Rosmini, and in agreement on this point with Machiavelli and Rousseau, knew no exceptions or political remedies.⁹ It was not in the political field that the key to escape from this historical necessity had to be sought. The fact that the journey of humanity did not constitute an eternal repetitive cycle oriented towards decadence was rather due to an external, meta-political cause, identified by the Roveretan (as well as by the intellectuals of the ‘Guelph’ matrix) in

⁶ Cfr. F. TRANIELLO, *Società religiosa e società civile in Rosmini*, with new afterword by the author and bibliographic update by P. Marangon, Morcelliana, Brescia 2019, cit., pp. 78 sgg.

⁷ A classic place regarding the ruin of the state due to “luxury” is found, for example, also in *Contratto sociale* by J.J. Rousseau, book 3, chapter 15.

⁸ Cfr. *De Civitate Dei*, vol. 1, book 4, chapter 4.

⁹ Rousseau - like Machiavelli - was convinced of the inevitability of the decline and collapse of the political community considered, indeed, “deadly”; cfr. J. MITTELSTRAß, *Politik und praktische Vernunft bei Machiavelli*, in O. HÖFFE (ed.), *Der Mensch - ein politisches Tier? Essays zur politischen Anthropologie*, Reclam, Stuttgart 1992, pp. 43-67.

the Christian religion. From the sociological-cultural point of view, Christianity acquired the significance of a fundamental revision of certain natural needs, without however completely removing them from the historical trend. The history of societies "under Christianity" continued to go through the phases of construction, flourishing and decline, but did not end with annihilation, thanks to the regenerative forces that reached civil society from religion. With great care, Rosmini then insisted on the complexity of this salutary effect of religion for society. Only by indirect, non-instrumental ways could the Christian faith of the individual, supported by the Church, be beneficial to civil coexistence.

But let us take another look at Rosmini's analysis of the causes of social decline and the instability of the political system which, as has been said, continued to occur even in the presence of Christianity. An important point of reference for the cultural concept of the Roveretan was clearly given by the liberal doctrine of the social advantage produced by the selfish calculation of utility, elaborated in the 'classic' version by authors such as Adam Smith and Bernard de Mandeville. Rosmini was fascinated by their idea that the common good was the almost automatic result of the individual's tendency to his own advantage on condition that the competition of multiple tendencies was regulated peacefully. He shared the liberal premise that man, in his actions, actually operated a rational choice when he opted for that object that appeared to him as an asset and from which he expected an increase in his happiness. The same could be said, in agreement with Hegel, of civil society as a whole. But Rosmini distanced himself from the liberals with historicist arguments: the criteria for judging whether something was good, useful or advantageous and therefore an object of desire, did not appear natural and immutable to man's judgment, but in a variable and contingent way. They were constituted as the results of a complicated process involving free will along with the social pressure towards assimilation. The historical and sociological analysis confirmed the instability, implied by Hegel himself, and the plurality, but above all (which particularly interested Rosmini) the manipulability of ideas around what was advantageous and palatable. Consequently it seemed impossible to him that the pursuit of private interest could constitute – as a general rule – an adequate condition for social and political stability.

The reconstruction of the historical path of societies seemed, in actual fact, to highlight an evolution of every human aggregate, that led from proto-communist-community beginnings, endowed with high stability, towards phases of disintegration characterised by the coincidence between private interests and social instability. The threat of a growing dependence on selfishness to the detriment of the solidarity and patriotic virtues concerned, first and foremost, pagan societies, according to Rosmini, in this regard in consensus with Hegel, and again, the fall of the Roman Empire offered him material par excellence for his thesis. In the Christian religion, on the other hand, he found the conditions for a greater balance between individualistic dynamics and community values.

For Rosmini, the reasons for the civilisation process were found in genetic, geopolitical and sociological-cultural laws, considered as instruments of divine providence in the education of mankind. The saving work of providence acted as the real engine of all historical processes, which, thanks to these laws of historical development, made itself at least partially comprehensible and plausible in the eyes of man. Certainly the Roveretan was aware that such a 'scientific'

exposition of the rules of operation risked profaning divine providence and diminishing its transcendent quality. As a counterweight to this secularising drive, Rosmini was careful to highlight the educational intention behind the management of human affairs, and therefore to try to hold together the two great strands of the historical narrative: that of the remote motives of the divine will, which aimed at the education and salvation of humanity; and that of the cultural history of humanity, according to which it presented itself as a history of immense efforts made by men to adapt to the external conditions in which they found themselves living.

The superimposition, in Rosmini's political theory, of cultural history and sociology on the one hand, and the reconstruction of the providential work on the other, is found in an original way where the author deals with the problem much discussed – even by contemporaries – of the vitality of a collectivity and its duration. Following an authoritative theological and juridical tradition, Rosmini made his own the biblical doctrine of the “immortality of peoples”. He included it in his own political philosophy, justifying it on the one hand, as we have mentioned, with recourse to the objectives of divine providence, and on the other hand, within his political-sociological hypothesis concerning the continuity of human history.

In the providential perspective it was necessary that the nations did not die to demonstrate the superiority of the divine work: abandoned to themselves, the societies would perish, while the “wise law” that governed the destinies of humanity not only saved them, but also ensured that they (even unconsciously) contributed to the great universal process of civilisation. In this way, the destinies of all peoples converged willy-nilly, serving the universal good of mankind.

In this “provident law” of divine wisdom, Rosmini saw a mechanism of compensation between peoples inscribed, thanks to which the cultural qualities of a society could counterbalance other less favourable conditions of life, for example environmental or climatic challenges. (Let it be added in parentheses that we find a similar concept of “compensation” as a fundamental engine in the histories of peoples even in a ‘secular’ thinker such as Jacob Burckhardt).¹⁰

Rosmini's hypothesis of historical continuity, considered almost to be the secularised face of a providential history, unfolded in multiple directions: in the political-symbolic sense of the *translatio*, that is, of a symbolic passage of values, a guarantee that at the death of the king neither the kingdom nor monarchy perished; in the historical-sociological sense with the identification of a tradition that represented the persistence of the collective subject – the State, the nation, the people, the class, etc. – through all the ruptures and transformations (as indeed all the great historical schools of the nineteenth century supported and as it served as a basic argument for the discourse on the continuity of the Italian people to legitimise their resurgence).

In Rosmini's political philosophy we find a third variant with decidedly modern aspects which is that of the global history of the civilisation process: peoples and cultures survive thanks to their specific contribution to universal civilisation. They are transformed, often to the point of being unrecognisable, but they are not completely lost, as is proven by the simple reason that

¹⁰ Cfr. J. BURCKHARDT, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*. Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe, mit einer Einleitung und textkritischem Anhang von R. STADELMANN, Neske, Pfullingen 1949, p. 116.

otherwise no memory would remain of their existence. The historical *exempla* therefore also served to demonstrate that, even in the case of devastating defeats and destruction of civil societies and states, residues of their cultural and ideal substance were saved. Peoples and cultures did not simply disappear, but left traces in the memory of humanity, and vice versa: no single population could claim an exclusive right as the protagonist of civil progress which, on the contrary, resulted from the continuous interaction of peoples.

However, such a harmony between profane sociology and sociology in a salvific perspective depended, in Rosmini's eyes, on the possibility of an apology for providential work without recourse to direct divine interventions in history – through miracles, for example –, but with exclusive recourse to the rationality of the link between cause and effect. For the philosophy of politics this meant that the construction of a well-organised civil society was not to be attributed to miraculous political talents on the part of the citizens, but to a “natural” law identified by Rosmini with the need to adapt to external life circumstances.

From here the way for the Roveretan opened up towards an examination of cultural sociology in the proper sense, with the process of assimilation as the dominant dynamic to be studied. The history of civilisation and cultures was therefore to be read as a path of adaptations and compensations. Being an inadequate creature by nature, man had to invent the tools of his own physical and moral survival, and civilisations represented the sum of these ingenious means, among which the political organisation of coexistence stood out, according to Rosmini the noblest product of human culture.

The fact of assimilation as a key to understanding, helped to understand why certain communities constituted authentic “civil societies”, while in some others the process of concentration of government functions, an indispensable element of coexistence in the form of *civil society*, did not occur. The grandiose chapter 6 of the third book of *La società e I suoi fini (Of a provident law that governs the dispersion and vicissitudes of peoples, in translation)* deals with these heterogeneous effects for the various constitutions of societies.¹¹

It was therefore the urgency of the necessity exerted by the conditions of life that was responsible for the ‘invention’ of specific political forms or the lack of them. From here Rosmini drew an important critical argument against contractualistic theories: if it was true that the different social groups represented so many responses to the innumerable challenges (environmental, climatic, social etc.) that men were forced to face, then it was necessary to renounce the hypothesis of a universal model of foundation and legitimation of society in the abstract. Adaptation, understood as a specific way of reacting to given circumstances, therefore not only constituted the fulcrum of cultural history but also legitimised a multitude of civil configurations. However, as was his wont, the Roveretan also sought a plausible balance in this delicate and decisive context of political theory: while granting the variety of social organisations their “natural” legitimacy, he insisted on the exemplary qualities of the “civil” model of society, distinguished by its forms of distributed sovereignty and the maximum participation in public affairs and the common good. “Civilisation” in this sense indicated the constitution of “civil” governments, basically republican, i.e. broad. Where this process had not occurred, as in the East, or in

¹¹ Cfr. ROSMINI, *Filosofia della politica*, cit., p. 288, note 63.

China, dynastic power structures were to be formed, to be distinguished however, from the rule of a sovereign *legibus absolutus*, considered a dated and decayed phenomenon in the history of the West.

In Rosmini, the affirmation of the legitimacy of a plurality in the forms of organisation of the various communities, corresponded with his admiration for the very fact of the foundation of society. In his eyes, the transition from the beginnings towards forms of civil coexistence, represented such a merit, that in many ways, posterity appeared to him as dwarves on the shoulders of giants. Their inability and unwillingness to remain faithful to the wisdom of their ancestors around the necessary foundations of society seemed, to him, the main reason for all political crises. All of them followed the universal law according to which the instability of society was the consequence of the abandonment by the partners of the identification with once shared founding principles. Christian and non-Christian societies were exposed to this same risk of instability due to the departure from common bases, made inevitable simply by the passage of time. In an attempt to reconcile the spirit of community, necessary for collective survival, with the centrifugal dynamics of equally legitimate private interests and rights, Rosmini identified the great and ever new challenge of modern civilisation to which, therefore, the law of unlimited growth, the dominant model of modern thinking, was unable to give an adequate answer.

The secret plan of divine providence used the social antagonism caused by individual egoisms as the engine of historical progress: a negative disposition was thus transformed into positive effects. Kant had spoken of “antagonism in society”, defined as the asocial sociality of man. Such antagonism was, for Kant, the very tool that nature used to ensure the deployment of all her talents, so that in the end, it would be the origin of an order governed by laws.¹²

To the doctrine of social antagonism – as a push towards ordered forms of coexistence, Rosmini added other bipolar dynamics responsible for the evolution of history. In his reflections, we find broad and acute observations on the relationship between the masses and the great leaders, or between the cultural inclination of certain societies or parts of society towards conservation (“resistance”) as opposed to that towards “movement”. Another important engine of human affairs, in his eyes, was represented by the permanent tension between the processes of concentration of political power and tendencies towards its democratic distribution. All these bipolarisms constituted so many “laws” of the continuous progress of history without indicating an orientation or an end in the teleological sense.

According to Rosmini, the French Revolution was to be considered an extraordinary verification of these laws and a powerful philosophical demonstration of the fact that even the societies of the Christian era were subject to crises and phases of decline. Or, to reverse the argument: the effect of Christianity did not consist of overcoming the inevitable link between rise and decline. What instead, in Rosmini’s eyes, distinguished Christian societies from non-Christian ones (and which allowed an interpretation of the revolution as true renewal), was the fact that under Christianity, the historical process was no longer driven exclusively by the popular masses, with their interests inevitably turned towards a growing and destructive selfishness, but

¹² I. KANT, *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (1784), in: Akademie-Ausgabe, W. de Gruyter, Berlin-Leipzig 1923, vol. VIII, p. 15-31.

from the action of rational factors nourished by the Christian faith in history. And to them, it was necessary to attribute those “windings” of historical evolution, that is, that spiral-shaped ascending path – a model used by Rosmini in the footsteps of the German philosopher, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, to indicate the overall path of history “under Christianity”.¹³

In the essay *La società e I suoi fini*, Rosmini had declared that he wanted to talk about «social progress, pointing out the legitimate and safe ways which he must take to avoid getting lost or waylaid without reaching his goal». ¹⁴ In this context, in the chapter entitled *According to what law does human gender progress*, the Roveretan introduced the formula of the “social omnipotence of Christianity”, in the context of a comparison with three philosophical concepts of history represented by Giambattista Vico, Antoine de Condorcet and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, but where he had rejected the first two, whilst accrediting some merit to the Fichtian model.

Rosmini categorically excluded an *à la* Condorcet idea of progress, in the sense of a linear ascent as claimed, according to him, also by Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon, Melchiorre Gioia and Gian Domenico Romagnosi. In these thinkers he saw a deterministic vision of history understood as unstoppable progress, directed towards a heavenly state that was measurable with the help of the quantity of goods and comforts, expressed in the greater happiness of the greatest number of people. According to the Roveretan, these concepts attributed divine qualities to secular power or civil society, which consequently posed themselves as absolute power, the redeemer, the benefactor, the distributor of grace and happiness. As we well know, studies on Rosminian thought have largely dealt with the Roveretan’s criticism of the despotic or tyrannical consequences of this phenomenon of the deification of power that modern societies had not been able to overcome, having, indeed, forms of “civil tyranny” claiming unlimited power for itself.

Even Vico’s cyclical model, in Rosmini’s view, proved insufficient, since the Neapolitan thinker had exclusively examined the history of antiquity without taking into consideration the “social omnipotence of Christianity”. If one abstracted himself from this “omnipotence” that came from outside of societies, then they went through predetermined phases of birth, rise, periods of splendour and flourishing, followed by weakening, decline, fall and death. Like Machiavelli, Vico too was convinced that states and societies were dying and disappearing.

Against such a philosophical-historical doctrine, Rosmini hypothesised the presence of a perpetual movement that acted as the law of the existence of societies, making the idea of the “immortality” of the social body its own, an idea that was famously based on biblical writings, to be taken up in political-philosophical concepts starting from the Middle Ages (think for example of a famous treatise, such as James Harrington’s *Commonwealth of Oceana*).

It seemed impossible and senseless to Rosmini to consider any response to a crisis situation that intended to return to the political and legislative means of the past, of the *Ancien Régime*. It was precisely the great transformations taking place before his eyes that convinced him of the need to renew the very pillars of social architecture, since otherwise, those very same tools

¹³ J.G. FICHTE, *Die Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters* (1804/5), hg. von A. DIEMER, Felix Meiner, Hamburg 1978.

¹⁴ ROSMINI, *Filosofia della politica*, cit., p. 450, chapter 21 of book IV; translation mine.

which had proved fragile, would have been restored, unsuitable for anti-crisis resistance, and which perhaps had even caused the crisis itself – or at least contributed towards triggering it.

A second guiding idea arose from these reflections: that a new order first required recognition of the limitations of the state. The Roveretan was convinced of the vital need, on the part of political society, of a foundation that it was not able to build durably by itself. With regard to this argument, we find, in Rosmini, ideas that are consonant with the famous thesis formulated by the German jurist Ernst Wolfgang Böckenförde (1930-2019) concerning the fact that the secularised liberal state lives on presuppositions that it is unable to guarantee. Similarly, Rosmini believed that the stability of civil society depended on factors belonging to a sphere beyond its ability to create and guarantee public order. It did not seem possible to compensate for the lack of such a *sui generis* basis with para-religious ideologies (as in his opinion Rousseau and Saint-Simon had tried).

But there was more: only with the programmatic and conscious recognition by the civil authority of the boundaries of its own competence could it be possible to conceive a social structure that would not reduce man to a partial role (of citizen or consumer, etc.), but one in which it places itself entirely at the service of the human person. However, societies whose survival was ensured by Christianity also went through crises and setbacks. In this regard, Rosmini sketched a sort of ‘sociology of generations’ to describe the succession of the respective evolutionary stages, with the third generation always able to overcome the extremes of the first and second generations. According to this scheme, the third generation proved capable of finding an integral system by harmonising traditions and innovations.¹⁵

The first generation, on the other hand, acted in a destructive way as, over time, they were to forget and neglect the founding values of society; whereas the second generation, dominated by skepticism and insecurity after periods of social upheavals, were to realise the risks for the very existence of civil coexistence and returned to the foundations of values, almost re-founding society. But it was the third generation in Rosmini’s eyes that was the “happy” one, capable of a synthesis of old and new. For the Roveretan, such triadic progress represented the revolution under the banner of Christianity: an «ineluctable and very happy necessity».¹⁶ These were the conditions for possible “progress”, an educational tool of divine providence thanks to the demonstration that without the transcendent point of reference, man was unable to proceed towards greater perfection.

In the historical reconstruction of the modern age, Rosmini highlighted man’s increased ability to recognise the socially destructive dynamics of unbridled egoism (kept under control by religion in previous times). To resist self-destruction, humanity had developed binding, universal moral principles, propagated first by the Revolution, then modified, improved and transformed into a political regulation that culminated in the declaration of the Holy Alliance, which was intended to bring about peace and solidarity. This interpretation of the alliance between principles by Rosmini was not lacking in audacity, but led him to a synthesis that overcame the

¹⁵ A. ROSMINI, *Della sommaria cagione*, in ID. *Filosofia della politica*, cit., p. 108.

¹⁶ Cfr. chapter 16 of *Della sommaria cagione*.

antithesis between revolution and restoration. His attempt to build a bridge between those two opposing moments had its justification in the structural analogy of the two “declarations”.¹⁷ It wasn't so much their political content that counted as the fact that they had elevated universal principles to the norm of political action.¹⁸ And for Rosmini, the appeal of the Revolution lay not so much in the effects of the new, unprecedented legitimation of political power, as in the explicit reference to the universal values of justice, solidarity and peace, later relaunched by the Holy Alliance. This willingness to bind on the part of power would act as a driving force and determine the political standards of the future.

Such progress coincided with the plan of divine providence whose work, according to Rosmini, consisted in making men believe they were pursuing their own interests (and indeed they did pursue them!) While a deeper look revealed their cooperation in the providential logic of achieving the Good: «Men are chased away by the excellent Supreme Provider who established laws for all entities, towards the truth»,¹⁹ states a famous phrase by the Roveretan in the *Philosophy of Politics*.

For the civil, secular order, the recognition of the limits of power certainly did not imply a single standard model of social organisation. On the contrary, Rosmini has always insisted on the legitimacy of a plurality of political forms, applying – as the only criterion with which to judge their quality – their ability to restrict and moderate power, to give it a constitution, regardless of the question of to whom it was entrusted and by whom it was exercised. It was precisely the recognition of the superiority of divine law that justified the rejection of the relationship of “domination” between men. God reserved “domination” for himself, and this monopoly should have excluded “domination” from social relations. Rosmini overturned the idea that political power represented a kind of analogy with divine power, or was its mirror or derivation. The opposite was true: it was necessary to recognise the fundamental opposition between the absolute Divine and the ever-contingent secular spheres, the highlighting of which allowed the Roveretan to draw important conclusions regarding other factors of a progress, not linear but constant, made possible by arrival of Christ's message. Since then, that process of “civilisation” began which freed humanity from the cyclical law of the historical path. The refinement of Rosmini's psychological and theological-historical concept, in my opinion, consisted of his exposition of what might seem a paradox: that we owed the stability, progress and “immortality” of impregnated Christian societies to the renunciation of their claim as absolute.

Modern civil societies conditioned by Christianity would have been able to realise the very

¹⁷ Cfr. for ‘la Santa Alleanza’ W. PYTA, *Idee und Wirklichkeit der “Heiligen Allianz”*, in F.L. KROLL (ed.), *Neue Wege der Ideengeschichte*, Schöningh, Paderborn 1996, p. 315-345; for Rosmini the alliance is certainly not the realisation of a conservative federal theocracy, cfr. also BOTTO, *Etica sociale*, cit., S. 115.

¹⁸ Cfr. for a more general context L. CANFORA, *Cattolici, liberali, democratici nel Risorgimento italiano: la polemica sulla Rivoluzione francese*, in ACCADEMIA ROVERETANA DEGLI AGIATI (ed.), *L'opera e il tempo di Antonio Rosmini nel bicentenario della nascita*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1999, pp. 125-142.

¹⁹ ROSMINI, *Della sommaria cagione*, cit., p. 128.

essence of “society” in ever purer forms. Each consortium built on agreements was born with the aim of achieving a good to be shared by its members, which is why, in the eyes of Rosmini, (who, with this thesis, followed the well-known doctrines of Plato and Saint Augustine) all communities, even a band of thieves, carried within themselves a “spark” of justice.²⁰ But only in a civil society protected by Christianity the maximum right of the person (the right to fulfilment) and all the rights that derive from it would have formed the foundation and the very end of this specific type of consortium.

I would like to conclude the reflections presented so far on Antonio Rosmini’s political thought with a look at contemporary Europe. Does Rosminian philosophy of politics have something to say from a contemporary European perspective? It is a very difficult undertaking to want to indicate some “teaching” coming from the past for the present time and the future, which is why I would just like to mention very briefly certain aspects, underlining that such an operation, in my opinion, is not so much about the concrete contents, that is, practical recipes to be applied, as the methodological approaches that are worthy of being taken into consideration.

Rosmini’s essay *La sommaria cagione per la quale stanno o rovinano le umane società*, a component of his “Philosophy of politics”, right from the very title shows surprising consonances with a 2012 book which enjoyed global success, written by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson *Why nations fail. The origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*. “Why nations fail?” was precisely the core question in Rosmini’s philosophy of politics. One of the main conclusions of Acemoglu/Robinson’s comparative study, conducted on a global scale, is that the material poverty of societies and the “failure” of states are usually due to the predominance of a narrow elite with selfish attitudes, often corrupt, and to the weakness of structures that make the state a “state of law”. It seems to me that no other historical process had encountered such a severe negative judgment in Rosmini as the formation of an elite with exclusive possession of powers and wealth.²¹ He denounced the extinction of what he considered an original political conscience of the citizen in exchange for the introduction of hierarchical degrees reserved for the few. Such a restriction of power had to be stripped of the propaganda on which it was based, in order to make clear the interests that benefited from it. Political philosophy, in Rosmini’s eyes, had to act in this context as an instance of radical criticism, regardless of the fact that the mass of citizens often seemed to consent to the abolition of the democratic dimension of politics.

In failing states, Acemoglu & Robinson argue, there is also usually a lack of a widespread and shared notion of the common good. On the basis of their investigations, the authors affirm that it is the cultural value context that has a pre-eminent role for the positive or negative de-

²⁰ ROSMINI, *Filosofia della politica*, cit., p. 131 passim.

²¹ I dare say that this criticism brings him closer to the authors of the Enlightenment than his polemic against some of them such as Condorcet would suggest, when the very author of *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain* had identified the stages of decline of the Christian religion with the rise of the esoteric mysteries and idolatry.

velopment of a nation or a people – a hypothesis that I would dare to define very close to Rosmini's ideas regarding the reasons for the progress or regression of societies. According to the Roveretan, a political community (and therefore also Europe as a union) could only progress and flourish if it cultivated an awareness of its own limits by recognising that it did not have the power to heal the existential evils inherent in the world. Among these, for Rosmini, must also be counted the many inequalities among men that no political power should have claimed to eliminate entirely if not on condition of transforming itself into a dictatorship (perhaps even with a benevolent face). Conversely, he considered an important quality of the civil consortium that guaranteed its stability (applicable, I would say, to today's Europe) the fact that it gave itself an elastic, open constitution, adaptable to new social developments, capable of self-revision. The constant search for a balance between stability and flexibility was, for the Roveretan, the distinctive trait of a good architecture of the state and a wise policy, as well as the permanent attempt to harmonise the (legitimate) interests of the individual components of the social union with the common good of all. A second aspect of Rosminian thought, that I would consider relevant for a philosophical-political reflection on today's Europe consists in its belief that no political form would have represented the 'end of history'. Human history is, according to Rosmini, in constant motion, and the political order must be considered a (temporal) tool invented to respond to concrete needs and circumstances of the moment or era. Such an interpretation of constitutional contingencies could act as a bulwark against what Rosmini considered a dangerous sacralisation of politics and the state, and also, one might add, of the Union of Europeans.

Two further guiding ideas of Rosmini's work can, as I see it, offer interesting ideas for a European discussion today: he was very attentive to the factor of identifying "members" with the purposes of their association. Without such a sense of belonging and participation of the individual members, a consortium of any kind would never have been born in the first place, and once built it would have necessarily crumbled if it had lost the convinced and emotional solidarity of its members. Perhaps the Roveretan would have reminded today's Europeans how much the union of peoples at a European level needs a collective value and cultural identity to allow citizens to share not only "formal" rights, but also ethical and civil purposes. And finally: the Rosmini's ideal of human progress aimed for two goals which he considered interdependent, the integration and the enlargement of society. Europeans have had to learn – with some serious disappointment – how difficult (if not impossible) it is to achieve these two objectives at the same time. Nonetheless, that teaching of our Roveretan remains the European challenge, without having a ready solution, but as a way of thinking about a common future.

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