

Gino Barbieri: *Decline and economic ideals in Italy in the early modern age*. Edited by Sergio Noto and Maria Cristina Gatti. With an Introduction by David Colander

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A new and promising debate between social sciences and theology is taking off. Theology has been for centuries at the centre of the work of thinkers of economic and social matters. In particular, from the very beginning of Christianity up to modern political economy, a cross-fertilisation between theological and *oikonomia* has occurred. This publication in English language of the book of Gino Barbieri, originally written in Italian in 1940, represents an important historical contribution to this old-new debate.

Philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote in 1921 that “Capitalism is a religion, that is to say, capitalism essentially serves to satisfy the same worries, anguish, and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religion. Then, capitalism itself developed parasitically on Christianity in the West” (*Capitalism as Religion* 1985 [1921], p. 102). According to Benjamin, capitalism is a new form of religion that calls for an exclusive form of worship and aims at replacing Christianity (not any religion), because it spawned from Jewish-Christian humanism. According to this view (that is consistent with Marx’s vision of capitalism, less with Weber’s), modernity is not characterised by a disenchantment of the world, but instead by the affirmation of a new religion, i.e. by the transformation of the Christian spirit into the “spirit” of capitalism.

More in general, the intertwined relations between Christianity and capitalism run deep since their very origins. Capitalism borrowed from the vocabulary of the Bible (faith-trust, credit-belief...), and even the evangelists use the economic language of their time to make comparisons and compose parables. And we cannot understand the Middle Ages, the Reformation or Modernity unless we take into account the numerous intersections between grace and money. Furthermore, not only Christian theology has hugely influenced the first economic reflections during the Middle Age (Aquinas, Duns Scoto, Ockam...), but also the first theologians and

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the so-called fathers of the church of the first centuries of our era has recurred to the Greek concept of *oikonomia* for making important dogmas and concepts of Christian theology—as philosopher Giorgio Agamben, among others, is showing in the last two decades. In modern times, the deep and crucial links of capitalism to the protestant ethics was a classic locus in sociology, and the issue of Providence has been central not only in Adam Smith but also in the foundations of the whole modern political economy, from the Neapolitan G. Vico to the French Phisyocrates or la sect *de les économists*, as first underlined by Viner (1972) and Hirschman (1977). In the tradition of political economy after Smith, there have been economists with strong theological interests, i.e. the English H. P. Wicksteed or the Italian Emanuele Sella.

A key passage in the interconnections between theology and economy are the protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation (*Controriforma*) in the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries. Before this crucial crossroad of Western civilisation, market economy had growth as a unique European movement, from Sicily to London, from Lisbon to Kiev. Christian faith had represented the new *philia* (*fides*) that, as in the *polis* of Aristotle and Pericles, made possible trust and trading among different people belonging to different clans and villages. The *fayres* along the big rivers of Europe were the hubs of complex network of commercial, artistic and cultural relationships that sprung into the Civic Humanism and Rinascimento of fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The scholastic philosophers and theologians—Aquinas over all, for his huge influence over the second Middle Age synthesis—have built up a first ethics of the proto-market economy based on the pivotal idea of common good, namely the thesis that the good of the individual has to be seen in deep and necessary connection with the good of the community. From that vision came a conception of economy—money, usury, just price...—ontologically communitarian and hierarchical, because the mediators (priest, king, father...) were the basic mechanism to implement the harmonisation of public and private goods. Furthermore, in the late Middle Age, the cross-contamination between market and religion has reached a very huge dimension: indulgences, poor people paid by the rich ones for making prayers and penitence in their place, donation of bankers for buying reduction of years of purgatory, etc.

Martin Luther's protest was against at least two elements of the southern Christianity: (a) the excessive and often insane mixture money grace, (b) the magnificence of Rome and Italy that were also the fruit of the wealth created by a new and positive attitude towards luxury and money during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Luther was deeply impressed and shocked by the mundane and market-based society he met in Italy, which considered far from the original message of austerity and poverty of the gospel. The strong reaction of Lutheran and later Calvinist Reformation was against not only the theology of the Roman church, but also the style of living of Italian Renaissance, its palaces, masterpieces of art, Michelangelo, Leonardo. Therefore, the protestant cultural programme was also a re-establishment of a more authentic and less money-oriented society; but, paradoxically, due to the elimination of the hierarchical mediation of the church, the protestant culture created an environment much more adapt to develop the capitalist economy. In fact, while in Southern Europe, the Counter-Reformation

stopped the process of freedom in commerce and politics started with the civic humanism; in the northern protestant countries, the individual freedom (produced by the elimination of hierarchy of the church) was the engine of capitalistic revolution. Then was the north protestant Europe where the civic humanism and renaissance continued, although in catholic countries, such as Italy or Spain, there was a re-feudalisation of the society that brought back those countries into a situation close to the Middle Age before Civic humanism.

This is the narrative of the birth of capitalism of the Italian catholic school of economic history, which started with Giuseppe Toniolo between nineteenth and twentieth centuries, continued by economic historian Amintore Fanfani and his disciple Gino Barbieri. A narrative, however, that is very little known among economists and historians of thought, even in Italy. For this reason, the initiative of the (humanist) Florentine Publisher Leo Olschki to publish an English translation and edition of Gino Barbieri's main work (*Gli ideali economici degli italiani all'inizio dell'età moderna*, Giuffrè, 1940) has to be welcomed with satisfaction and gratitude—a gratitude that goes also to Sergio Noto and Cristina Gatti who are the editors and main actors of this recent rediscovery and internationalisation of Barbieri.

Gino Barbieri (1913–1989) was the most talented assistant of Amintore Fanfani. Fanfani who is well known as an Italian key political figure of Italian Republic, five times prime minister (between 1954 and 1989). Fanfani's first half of his career as professor of economic history at the Milan's Catholic University of Sacro Cuore gave important and original contribution to the reconsideration of the genesis of modern capitalism, offering theses and interpretations that should deserve reconsideration and new attention, given its strength and originality. His major book, *Cattolicesimo e protestantesimo nella formazione storica del capitalismo* (1934; English edition 1939, New York), was composed parallel with Barbieri degree dissertation (*tesi di laurea*) under Fanfani's supervision, which few years later became *Gli ideali degli italiani*.

Barbieri's work has to be collocated in the same path of Fanfani. Barbieri, in fact, continued and developed Fanfani's research project on the “catholic spirit of capitalism” compared to the protestant one as emphasised in particular by Weber and the sociological German school (Sombart, Troeltsch). Toniolo was surely very influential in the Italian catholic tradition of his time, heir of the tradition of Rosmini, Romagnosi and Genovesi, philosophers and social scientists that all put at the centre of their intellectual investigations the hypothesis of the existence of a catholic/communitarian way to modernity different from (although not in opposition with) the protestant/individualist one.

Barbieri's main contribution to this issue, well embodied in this volume, leans in the exploration of the catholic economic thinking before and after the Lutheran Reformation, with a special and original contribution—both in terms of documents and interpretations—to the understanding of the economic and social thought that followed the Roman *Controriforma*. Barbieri, in fact, discovered and discussed a huge amount of texts of cardinal, catholic theologians and philosophers between sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, relevant and important for those who want to understand the historical and cultural reasons behind the different nature of

Anglo-Saxon (USA in particular) capitalism and the European one (Latin especially). Southern or “catholic” Europe, in fact, has produced its own version of capitalism, which represents the culmination of a conception of economics and society that was born at the heart of the Franciscan and Dominican monastic movements, with a special role of the Dominican Thomas Aquinas, the *Doctor Angelicum*. But soon after the Luther-Calvin’s revolution, the Controriforma put something new in the process initiated in the Middle Age. Here, the contribution of Barbieri is important. He discusses (ch. 1) the economic ideas of the Cardinal Caietano who, between fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in commenting Aquinas’ *Summa* stated the ethical legitimacy of searching wealth beyond the conservation of the individual’s status in the social and economic hierarchy. This attitude was a discontinuity with respect to the Scholastic school of the Aquinas that recommended the “contentment with his own social status”, and more in continuity with the Franciscans Bernardino da Siena (first half of fifteenth century) or the Dominican Antonino bishop of Florence (second half of the century), or the humanists Alberti, Coluccio Salutati and Poggio Bracciolini, who all encouraged commercial activity and commerce, major interpreters of the spirit of civic humanism. Moralists of that time like De Vio or Garimberto used all their hermeneutical capacity for making legitimate interest rate over loans (that was still dominant in the church, given the biblical test) using all theoretical tools available at that time: *lucrum cessans*, *damnum emergens*, or the distinction between usury (excessive interest rate or speculation over money) and fair interest rate over loans asked to merchants for complex and risky enterprises. These analytical distinctions made commerce and economic activity in civil humanism and Rinascimento much more accepted in the Church then in the previous centuries.

The turning point, however, arrived with the Reformation and, in Italy and south Europe, with the Controriforma. Stefano Menochio (first half of sixteenth century) was an exception in the Controriforma authors, and closer to the early XVI moralists such as Caietano for his openness to market and commerce. In fact, the Controriforma brought back the moral evaluation of economic activity to the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries scholastic vision. The Controriforma authors—Castiglione, Bartolomeo da Salutio, Carmelitano, Gattioli, Segneri and many others—declare in “mortal sinners” who are “not content with their condition and status” (Castiglione, quoted in Barbieri, p. 12).

Segneri is considered by Barbieri “a representative example of Church social doctrine during the Counter Reformation” (p. 16). In his huge theological and pastoral activity, great attention is given to economic and social issues. The diffidence towards the merchant’s operations was strong, because his gains are considered by Segneri to be fruits of usury in disguise. And for discerning properly in which cases commerce is moral and possible and in which isn’t, Segneri recommend that “people who negotiate, before stipulating any kind of agreement, should go to a learned confessor and understand what is lawful and what is not” (quoted in Barbieri, p. 19).

The mediation of the catholic church is a very key point here. Unlike the protestant world, in the Roman context, the church and its institutions played a central role in the legislation upon commerce and money, using a theological

vision—that of the Scholastic, of Aquinas in a special way—written in a different historical period (centuries thirteenth–early fourteenth) more static and based upon Aristotelian categories (sterility of money, ...) that in the Rinascimento were not anymore able to encompass the new economic reality after commercial revolution of the Italian and European cities. As underlined in the early eighteenth century also by Scipione Maffei, the mediation and control of the institutions of the catholic church upon individual economic activity, and the strong tools of implementation of this control (i.e. *Inquisitione*), made the countries of South Europe (Italy, Spain, Portugal, part of the France) in a condition of economic and financial disadvantage with respect to Northern Europe. In fact, due also to a lack of religious hierarchy in Holland and in the other protestant countries, financial and money landing were allowed, and so commerce and wealth growth. Parallel to this, whereas in the North Europe and later in USA, thanks to Calvinist ethics, labour and business were considered to be moral ways of engaging in ordinary life, in Italy after the Controriforma, there was a re-feudalisation of the culture, with a new praise for rural life and diffidence towards urban life (and its commerce). Also the condemnation of money landing and usury knew a new season in Italy in the *Seicento*, and Barbieri dedicates many pages of chapter II to the strict and severe attitude of the church (Carlo Borromeo in Milan is one of the main protagonist), which contrasts with what was going on in Northern part of Europe—Bentham “defence of usury” is a radicalisation of a widely shared idea in this context. As underlined by Barbieri, it is true that most ecclesiastic, political thinkers, theologians of the post-Controriforma season were *laudatores* of labour: but the praised labour was agricultural and intellectual work, whereas the manual or artisan’s activity in the cities (smiths, carpenters, shoemakers, ...) were considered to be not noble and servile.

Most of the present-day differences in labour culture, public debt, private and public ethics, in welfare states, individual rights and the idea of market lay in the two different ways that Europe took after the Reform and *Controriforma* era. These aspects, however, are not present in Barbieri’s book, where no comparison between protestant and catholic capitalisms is made, although in his generation works of Weber, Sombart and his master Fanfani on these topics were very popular and alive.

The following chapters of the book are dedicated to other aspects of Italian ideals and decline: the analyses of political and historical writers (ch. 3), poets and social reformers (ch. 4), lawyers (ch. 5 and 6), and finally practical people (ch. 7), in search of other elements for the understanding the Italian economic ideals and decline. Reading through this chapters, the idea of the first chapters of the book is corroborated and fostered: the Controriforma age produced an involution on commercial and financial activity of Italy, an idealisation of rural life (es. in Torquato Tasso’s literary works or in Paolo Caggio’s *Iconomica* of 1553), a disesteem of manual and artisan activities, and as a consequence economic and social decline. Interesting—although not new—is the discussion of Tommaso Campanella’s *Civitas solis* that presents an ideal state without money, where all things are in common, and where the inhabitants hate the conspicuous consumption and idleness of the leisure class: a strong moral criticism towards the ethical condition of the elites of his time, the corruption of politicians (the Spanish of South

of Italy), and a call for a reform also economic and social, much more radical than the one actuated by the Controriforma.

In conclusion, Barbieri presents an interpretation of Italian early age of Controriforma expressed in these main points. First, the Cinquecento and Seicento were a return to Middle Age (Aquinas) as far as economic ethics is concerned. The modernisation and openness to market of Quattrocento, with the key role of figures such as Bernardino da Siena or Leon Battista Alberti, were not able to flourish in Italy. Second, the age of Controriforma was—with few exception, such as Menocchio—a praise of agriculture and rural life and a criticism to urban and civic activities (i.e. commerce). As a consequence, starting with the second half of sixteenth century, Latin Europe knew a re-feudalisation of society, and a centrality of rent over profit of merchants and salary of workers. Third, after Reformation, neo-Platonic thought replaced the Aristotelian one of the Quattrocento; then solitude, esoteric and magic practices took the place of social and political activities of the Aristotelian vision of Leonardo Bruni and other civil humanists of the previous century. A thesis consistent with that of the historians Eugenio Garin and Hans Baron, who almost in the same period of Barbieri invented the expression of Civic Humanism in order to distinguish the (first half) of Quattrocento from the Rinascimento.

Conclusion: The Southern Europe, its long history characterised by a huge biodiversity, at the apex of Middle Age had generated a market economy based on catholic paradigm and then expression of a communitarian and institutionally “mediated” idea of society. The northern Protestant gave life to an idea of society of individuals without the mediation of intermediate institutions, i.e. the humanism of the “invisible hand” and of the Leviathan: within the space of freedom of the State-Leviathan created by the social contract, the common good is not entrusted to the mediation of the institutions but is the non-intentional result of the actions of separated and independent individuals. The Reformation and the Controriforma has been a turning point in the modern Europe, and the contemporary gaps in economic and social terms between North and South Italy are fruits of an interrupted path. The social pathologies, the “amoral familism” and the corruption of “mediated society” of the Italian and Mediterranean societies are well known and serious. At the same time, also the Protestant humanism, think at the erosion of social and relational capitalism or the paradox of happiness, is facing a different but not less relevant crisis, which calls for something new too. In this transition age, the historical analysis of Barbieri on the cultural roots of Modern Europe can have something important to say. Finally, the reader have to forget to the young Gino Barbieri a tiny anti-Judaic flavour in some passages of the book, a “sin” that he shared with most of the economists and professors of the fascist Italy at the end of the 1930s of twentieth century.

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