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The Social Pathologies of Contemporary Civilization: Meaning-giving experiences and pathological expectations concerning health and suffering

by

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Paper prepared for the conference 'Social Pathologies of Contemporary Civilization', 28-9 October 2010, Aalborg, Denmark.

Draft version; please, do not quote without permission.

I know that suffering is the sole nobility
Which earth and hell shall never mar,
And that to weave my mystic crown,
You must tax every age and every universe.
Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, 'Benediction'

What does not kill one, makes one stronger.
Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 'Why I Am So Wise', 2

Is there, could there be, *any* miraculous suspension of the wearily historic, the dingily geographic, the dully drearily sensible beyond her faith, her charm, her love, to command? Yes, there could be, yes, alas, indeed yes, O there is, right here, right now before us, the situation present.
W.H. Auden, *The Sea and the Mirror: A commentary on Shakespeare's* The Tempest, 'Caliban to the Audience'

A passionate tumultuous age will *overthrow everything, pull everything down*; but a revolutionary age, that is at the same time reflective and passionless, transforms that expression of strength into *a feat of dialectics: it leaves everything standing but cunningly empties it of significance.*
Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, p.42.

Introduction

This paper will address the theme of the conference from a particular angle, rendered possible by its title. Notice that the title is not about 'The Social Pathologies *in* Contemporary Civilization', but 'The Social Pathologies *of* Contemporary Civilization'. This enables one not simply to address the pathological character of certain aspects of the civilisation in which we are living – and here I also want to note the importance of the word 'civilisation',[i] in contrast to 'society' or 'culture', much more frequently used in sociology, or the social sciences in general – but might pose the question of how an *entire* civilisation may show pathological features.

Such a way of approaching the problem might seem a sophistic play with words for some and almost indecently broad for others. I am painfully aware that such an idea is 'disturbing'; undermining the easy, comforting certainties of a deep belief in the progressive nature of our societies, of 'us moderns' (Latour 1991). Yet, this is a question that does not cease to preoccupy – even haunt – me since quite a long time, in fact the moment I started to work in the Centre for Value Sociology at the Institute of Sociology, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, guided by Elemér Hankiss, almost 30 years ago. Hankiss had an interest in the question of 'social pathology', and the term 'diagnosis' was even used as the title of a book of his that outright became a bestseller in Hungary,[ii] so in a way I'm still only following him. A similar terminology was developed by main contemporary social and political thinkers like Michel Foucault or Eric Voegelin.[iii]

Being concerned with the problem of a 'pathological civilisation' for me – just as for them – was not merely an intellectual endeavour, but part of my daily existence. Growing up on the other side of the Iron Curtain was an experience that literally

everyday made one face the situation that something is wrong in the world in which one happens to live. I was living in a world where everything that was not rooted in very local and very old traditions was simply turned upside down.

At the same time, and also since my university years, I increasingly gained the conviction that not only I'm living in a deeply pathological environment, but I am not being given the intellectual instruments that would enable me to understand the nature of the situation. The official Marxist ideology was evidently bankrupt, but I increasingly realised that the 'alternative' approaches, starting with 'critical' versions of Marxism, but including socialism, liberalism, or nationalism, thus the entire set of socio-political ideologies bequeathed to us by the French Revolution, were just as unacceptable as starting points. I had to keep searching.

Over the years, I managed to complement my more experiential than academic education in Hungary with a PhD in Austin, Texas, in the 1980s; a visiting fellowship in London in 1989/90; and teaching positions in Italy and Ireland since then. However, and in spite of all the many differences, I found that two basic aspects of the experiences I gained during Communism in Hungary were strangely generalisable: the pathological aspects of the civilisation to which we belong cannot be restricted to the countries under the sway of Communism – it is an upside down turned world that is being globalised; and the dominant intellectual discourses, strangely enough, far from addressing this problem, rather share a complicity in this pathology.

I am quite aware that at this point it would be easy to charge my position either with excessive gloom or rash overgeneralisation. At this moment I can only say that, far from following a gloomy, dualistic, Gnostic vision of the world as a realm of irresistible evil, my basic outlook is rather close to Plato's mature work, as expressed with particular clarity in the *Timaeus*; or, in a different terminology, it is inspired by the idea of the *Harmonia mundi*.[iv] The problem, as the Auden motto indicates, rather lies with the (modern) world in which we live, and in particular with the radical corruptness of the intellectual language which we came to inherit, and which – instead of helping us to retrieve harmony – manages to push us further away from the very possibility of leading a decent, meaningful, shared life, reconfirming and further leading us astray in the dark Dantesque forest of pathologies that have become, in the language of Max Weber, our fate.

Over the years I also encountered with the work of a number of important thinkers who found themselves in a similar positions. They were either historically oriented social theorists, who realised that they have to find their own path, outside the intellectual environment which surrounded them, trying to develop their own intellectual tools in order to escape the dominant intellectual currents of neo-Kantianism, positivism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis. Such figures include, most prominently, Max Weber, Norbert Elias, Eric Voegelin, and Michel Foucault, much influenced by the philosophies of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Alternatively, they were anthropologists who also and similarly discovered, at the field, that the tools they were given by the Durkheim or Marx-inspired teachers were deeply defective; these include Paul Radin, Gregory Bateson, or Victor Turner; and who developed a number of crucial tools necessary to diagnose, clinically, the pathological features of contemporary civilisation, like liminality, the trickster, and schismogenesis. One could also add here Marcel Mauss with his discovery of gift relations as being the foundations of social order, and the work of Tarde, Girard and Latour on the role of imitation.

In this paper, through historical and conceptual clarification related to health, pathology and illness, I'll investigate the question of the extent to which the pathological character of contemporary civilisation is related to the way these concerns are approached in our times; revealing an ever more deeper, and even more troubling,

suspicion concerning human experience itself – a deep mistrust in the capacities of human beings, even a hostility to life, which Nietzsche diagnosed as being at the heart of nihilism.

Meanings of health and pathology

Let me start with some clarifications of meaning, related to the terms 'health' and 'pathology'. Concerning 'health', an idea that seems difficult enough, the linguistic results will be simple, almost trivial; while concerning 'pathology', which on a first instance looks a quite straightforward technical word, the results will be rather the opposite. Such conceptual clarification is necessary in order to distinguish my approach from the kind of functionalist-organic analysis that was used by sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s. From this perspective, social life represents a functioning whole, comparable to a watch (using the famous metaphor of Steuart which would be taken over by Adam Smith, among others), or to an organic body.[v] This metaphor clearly has very limited value, and became attacked from the 1960s onwards, though almost exclusively from the perspective that it fails to explain the presence of conflict in social life, and even the positive – meaning revolutionary – role it might play there.

Far from taking up one or other of the sides in this controversy, I consider this entire thematisation, or 'problematisation', in the sense of Foucault, as fundamentally mistaken; part of the problem, and not the solution. In the language of Bateson, it is the result of schismogenic developments within modern thought, that merely mimic schismogenic social processes, instead of explaining them and helping to move beyond. The reason is that social life *cannot* and *should not* be analysed through merely mechanical or organic analogies, as – following the perspective of classical political philosophy – the aim of social life in not simply 'order' or 'function', but *meaningful* social order, or the 'good society', informed by ideas of harmony or the overall beauty of the world. The idea of a 'good society' does not mean the realisation of some kind of abstract, lifeless utopia, but simply maintaining the searching and striving for the joint realisation of inseparable ethical and aesthetical values. In this sense, the problems with European social and political thought started not with modernity, or even the Enlightenment, but much earlier, of which the thinking of Hobbes and even Machiavelli were crucial symptom: with the idea that the aim of politics is simply to establish a stable order, without any concern with meaning (Voegelin 1999: 153-5). This identifies the period of the collapse of the Renaissance as the crucial moment in which European civilisation took a pathological turn.[vi]

A 'pathological civilisation' is one which gives up the pursuit of a meaningful life and of the realisation of beauty at the level of the community, which parallels the overriding beauty that characterises the world of nature, the plants and animals, seas, rivers and mountains that surround us, and which was the aim of human existence at least since the Upper Palaeolithic.

Terms related to health in most languages have a singular etymological origin, which in English 'health' is still full visible: they are related to a state of wholeness, or integrity. Further examples include Italian *salute*, rooted – together with words related to 'salvation' – in a Sanskrit term capturing integrity (*sarva*); German *Gesundheit*, rooted similarly in integrity or soundness; the term 'sanity', going back to terms signifying a certainty of oneself, and even the force to resist (see Sanskrit *sakami*, even connected to the root of 'salvation'); or even Hungarian *egészség*, which literally means 'whole-ness', and *ép* (a very basic and short root), which means something not broken, or possessing integrity. We must also add that these terms usually also imply aesthetic qualities.

Pathology seems a simple technical term, but its lingustic analysis opens up a new horizon. The word shares etymology with a number of terms in modern languages that altogether map a very distinct and even striking semantic field. It includes words like 'pathetic' and 'pathos', but also 'passion' and 'passive'. The etymological source of all these terms is the Greek verb *paskho*, which means 'to suffer', but at the same time also 'to experience'. This brings into our analysis the quite stunning fact that for the Greeks experience was a passive event, which human beings had to undergo or 'suffer', and which in this manner exerted a formative impact on their personality.[vii] It was therefore not considered as something humans should be actively searching for; something very close to the way in which in some of his last writings Foucault thematised the connection between 'subject' and 'experience'.[viii]

It also implies something further – and here we arrive, from a seemingly minor technical point, into the heart of our analysis. Such an intimate connection between suffering and experience implies not only that an exclusively positive, activist, and subjective conception of experience is untenable, but that similar kind of considerations apply to suffering as well. Eliminating suffering from the world is impossible, at least in so far as one does not eliminate at the same time the possibility of genuine human experience. This renders evident the pathological character of modern ideologies, and of the civilisation that is producing them, because promoting happiness through the elimination of all suffering from human life is perhaps the most important legitimating ideology of modernity.

If the ideal is impossible, we need to make a further step and realise that this ideal then must be mistaken. Here one must tread carefully, striking the right tone and make the right kind of circles in the right direction in the argument, as otherwise it can easily be misconstrued. It is evident that in order to become a healthy adult, a child must go through a number of unpleasant experiences and disappointments; but this does not mean that a well-wishing parent must actively procure suffering and disappointments for his child. The reason why eliminating suffering as the central aim of 'social politics' is wrong is that it pursues an Aristotelian logic of double negation, without realising that is so far as the meaning of human and social life is concerned, two negations do *not* easily add up to something positive. By 'eliminating suffering', we do not directly and 'logically' gain something positive; if we promote physical health and longevity as aims on their own, this does not necessarily mean that people live a *better* life, in a 'good society'. It might simply procure boredom, ennui, melancholy, and spleen; which can be explained through the etymology of 'pathology'. The statistical logic of 'proxy variables' ignores the problem of meaning, and is therefore of extremely limited value in human life. To give an example, 'consumption' is supposed to be a 'proxy variable' to measure happiness, in a Benthamite perspective, though by now it is evident that a 'consumer society' does not bring about overall happiness. The meaning of the term could have been taken as a good indicator even here, as 'consumption' originally had a medical and pathological sense, meaning 'wasting of the body by disease; wasting disease'.

The radically problematic nature of the way in which modern ideologies, both liberal and socialist, systematically confuse positive aims and meanings with the mere elimination of negative experiences can be demonstrated through the ideas of John Rawls – widely considered as one of the most influential political philosophers of the 20th century. I would like to claim that the central argument of his most famous work, *A Theory of Justice* is simply wrong – though it 'seems' or 'sounds' right, being most 'attractive', just as the voice of the Sirens. Rawls argues that the basic standard by which any public policy should be measured is the benefit it brings to the well-being of the 'least advantaged' member of society. The idea 'sounds' plainly right, in conformity with our basic values of justice, charity and pity. Certainly politics must do something not just

for the majority, but also for those who are emarginated. Yet, something with it clearly is not right – and actually helps us understand why Nietzsche, the greatest thinker of the modern age, placed such an emphasis in his critique of Christianity on the problematic nature of 'pity' or 'compassion' (*Mitleid*). If we accept that politics is 'basically' about helping the least well off members of society, then politics becomes – as it indeed has become, with frightening consequences, in the modern world – deprived of any positive value, thus of any meaning. There is no common good, no community, no pursuit of beauty at the level of the whole, except the promotion of the 'interests' of individuals. Quite strikingly, through the ideas of Rawls, liberalism became all but identical with radical Marxism: once everybody will be equal with everybody else, there will be no 'least well off' members of society, politics will cease to exist, just as the state, classes, philosophy, economics, and everything else, and we'll enter a universal state of bliss.

Starting by trying to understand the meaning of pathology, beyond the functionalist-organic paradigm, and taking some cues from etymology, we arrived at a first diagnosis of the pathology of modernity. The problem of modernity lies not at the level of means – the scarcity of resources, the impossibility of satisfying the inspiration of everybody – but at the level of ends.

This is where the meaning of health must be analysed in more detail.

Canguilhem on health and the pathological

In order to gain a more in-depth conceptual and historical understanding of 'health' and 'pathology', I now turn to the French historian and philosopher of science Georges Canguilhem, in particular his classic book *Le normal et le pathologique*.[ix] Michel Foucault repeatedly stated that – together with Georges Dumézil – Canguilhem was the most important thinker having an impact on his work (and not Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, or Sartre);[x] and he wrote the Introduction to the 1978 English edition of the book. In this piece Foucault argues that the central value of the particularly French interest in the history of science – an approach to which also belong Gaston Bachelard, another thinker held in the highest esteem by Foucault, and Bruno Latour, one of the most important contemporary social theorists – is that it represents a self-overcoming of French Cartesian rationalism, which implies the recognition that rationalism 'has its own history of dogmatisms and despotisms', and that therefore it can 'only have a liberating effect [*effet d'affranchissement*] if it manages to free itself of itself [*se libérer d'elle-même*]' (Foucault 1994, III: 433).

For Canguilhem pathology, just as health, is a function of the whole organism, and it cannot be broken down into pieces (Canguilhem 1978: 7). The 'normal' state is being healthy exactly in the sense of living according to certain norms. The crucial question concerns the exact status of the organism with respect to these norms – which goes at the heart of the meaning of 'life', or living.

Health, for Canguilhem, is not identical with the absence of disease and the ensuing suffering – just as life, in extremis, cannot be defined as the opposite of death; it cannot even be reduced to the 'meeting of needs' or the 'satisfaction of desires', other standard terms from the dictionary of the social sciences. Life is rather a quantum of energy at the disposal of an organism, which is always in excess of its needs (Canguilhem 1966: 177); in fact, Canguilhem defines a healthy human being as a living organism that is *exceeding* its needs; who is literally insatiable (Canguilhem 1978: 95; Canguilhem 1966: 109).[xi] It is exactly this basic feature of human nature which requires that some choices be made concerning the actions to be pursued; it is in order to curtail their excesses –

necessary for health – that human beings need to give themselves norms which would delimit and structure their experiences (Canguilhem 1966: 177).

The central question now concerns the nature of these norms, and the individuals' relations to these norms. Here Canguilhem offers a radical critique of the 19th century positivist version of 'objective' and 'scientific' medicine, as championed by Comte, Claude Bernard and Virchow (Canguilhem 1978: 13, 125). According to Canguilhem, the norms that render a healthy human life possible cannot be imposed from the outside, by following a type of thinking that combines a reduction of norms to positive laws, characteristic of Kelsenian legal theory, with a similar positivistic reductionism of medicine to technology (Ibid.: 13, 69-70).[xii] Health implies the capacity of an organism to establish or create norms (Canguilhem 1966: 115-7), which must be a spontaneous effort of the living being, not imposed from the outside. Quêtelet's famous idea concerning the 'average' as normal views processes from the wrong end. Rather the opposite is true: the *fact* that there is an average should be considered as the *sign* that a norm exists (Canguilhem 1978: 86). In other terms, the norm has originality with respect to the statistical average (Ibid.: 103). It cannot be defined 'objectively', from the outside, rather life itself has a normative character (Ibid.: 104). The central issue therefore concerns not external evaluation, but the ability of an organism to establish norms, and live accordingly (Ibid.: 70).

This, of course, does not mean that individual human beings are monads following their own purely internal motivations or norms; rather, living organisms establish such norms in reactions to the environment in which they live (Ibid.: 72). Healthy, normal – meaning norm-setting – life is therefore always reactive, or re-acting. It is in this context that we can understand the meaning of illness, and the true nature of the challenge that it represents. Pathological organisms also live; and in so far as they live, they must follow certain norms. Disease does not mean the absence of norms, but the following of *inferior* norms: norms that do not tolerate a change in the external conditions, rendering the organism non-reacting (Canguilhem 1966: 106). A pathological organism simply becomes unable to respond to the external environment by the setting up of new norms, or by restoring the norms that it lost, due to illness (Canguilhem 1978: 8). For any healthy human being a disease can be considered as a *testing*, which it can win, and by this demonstrate its own health; while in the absence of such challenges it will be assailed by boredom and anxiety (Canguilhem 1966: 177; see also Csikszentmihályi 1975). This helps us understand the true significance of illness, and thus realise that a society where illness would be eradicated is not simply a utopian ideal in the sense that, unfortunately, it cannot be realised, but positively a nightmare.

From this perspective disease is a bad response, or an error; though at the next cycle in the wonders of life, even a bad response, like a genetic mutation – which originally is a *particularly* bad response, a monstrosity – can end up producing a new type of organism, which can establish a new norm. Disease is thus fundamentally a question of biological value, and not of objective science (125).

From organic health to social wellbeing

Canguilhem's work helps us to overcome jointly both sides of the schismogenic intellectual field of contemporary social thinking, with rationalism, exteriority, objectivism and positivism on the one hand, and utopian idealism, social critique and the cult of suffering on the other. The question now concerns the way in which his ideas could be transplanted at the level of social life.

The first point to consider here is that in the social sense as well a human being can only be healthy if one is able to posit, or pose in front of oneself, one's own positive

goals.[xiii] Apart from being irreducible to the mere absence of negative considerations, it is also different from the perspective of economic theory with its utility maximisation principle. This theory assumes as a *fact* the highly peculiar *norm* that an individual must always exist on its limits, thus eliminating that cushion of excess which is a precondition of health, and actually pushes, in the manner of a performative speech act, all individuals within such an 'economic society' onto the limit. In contrast to this, and in plain language, a healthy life implies a *meaningful* life, as it is only those acts which a human being can accept as meaningful, in which he participates with his own being, instead of simply 'going through the motions', that can give the kind of satisfaction that is necessary for health and happiness.

The second question concerns now the social aspect of a meaningful life. One might argue that while living organisms might be able to set their own norms, for human beings it is necessary that such norms be harmonised through external constraint. This is the very definition of a 'social fact' as offered by Durkheim in his – neo-Kantian, legalistic – social theory. The argument, however, is wrong again, as it is formulated from a presumed 'external' perspective, which also means *from inside* the rationalistic/ utilitarian/ individualist paradigm. This assumes that the life-goals of individuals only incorporate the goals of others as if from the outside, as external 'conditions' that must be taken into account. However, the social dimension was already incorporated in the term *meaning*, and in two different ways: first, because meaning assumes language, and language is already social; and second, because any aspect of life and activity can only become meaningful if it is *recognised* as such, in the sense of Pizzorno (1987, 1991, 2000), by those who matter for the individual human being, and who therefore constitute that 'circle of recognition' which defines one's own identity.[xiv] Without recognition, there is no identity, whether at the individual or social level. Whatever a human being thinks about oneself, which is not recognised by significant other persons, is as meaningful, and effective, as if we declare ourselves the sovereign state of Freedonia. The norms of any decent human community were not the results of a deliberative legislation which was then imposed from above and the outside on everyone, but grew out – *not* 'organically' – of those aspects of social life that were considered as meaningful, and thus became as norms the conditions of possibility of meaningful human life.

The argument can be further supported from a most surprising perspective, the question of pleasure. From the perspective of 'rational choice' or philosophical liberalism, any concern with meaningful life is usually brushed aside by claims that 'rational' human beings simply aim to satisfy their own interests; something which is connected – since the classical utilitarianism of Bentham – to the search for pleasure and the avoiding of pain. However, etymology, this central auxiliary science of social thinking, again helps us by offering a different perspective. The PIE root **ger* means pleasure, source of the Greek word *charis*, which itself is at the origin of modern terms like grace or gratitude. This meaning has two main characteristics that are radically different from the Benthamite one: pleasure as *charis* is inherently social, as it presumes the company of others who are also pleased; and it is just as inherently aesthetic, as it assumes beauty, or aesthetically pleasing qualities. In the world of classical Greece, socio-political, ethical and aesthetic considerations could not be separated from each other in so far as a healthy social life was concerned; they were part of a whole. Thanks to Plato, we also know who were the figures of the ancient world who effectively, and successfully, worked on such a separation: the Sophists.

Now we are in a better position to understand what is wrong with Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, and the entire 'politics of suffering' of which it is a part. The theory represents a peculiar collusion between radical liberalism and radical democracy (or socialism), which concerns

the ignoring of the positive and meaningful *aims* of human life. In spite of all differences, both philosophical positions assume that the aims of human life are trivial, and at any rate beyond the possibility of a rational discourse. For liberal economists, as formulated with particular, ruthless clarity in a famous piece by two Noble price winners, ends are a matter of pure taste; they cannot be disputed (Becker and Stigler 1977). Human beings have so many different goals that all these certainly cannot be satisfied at the same time. Political or social questions can be reduced to the allocation of scarce resources that are at our disposal to satisfy various needs, aim, goals or desires, following the well-known logic of the happiness of the greatest numbers, and the freedom to pursue one's own 'autonomous desires'. Radical democrats think in exactly the same manner concerning the ends, but they either consider that therefore – following the principle of equal rights and justice – all resources should be completely equally distributed; or, following a more 'realistic' perspective, they take up the plight of those who currently receive less, and thus suffer more, and try to alleviate this injustice. Both positions formulate extremely appealing and attractive arguments – in fact, it is safe to say that at the level of pure arguments neither radical liberalism, nor radical socialism can be defeated, as there are no totally convincing arguments against them (who could oppose freedom or fairness?). One might only point to the disasters to which they lead, whenever put into practice; though ideologues would always say that it was not tried well, or hard enough. Yet, both simply fail to consider the question of how positive aims, norms or values can actually be formulated and put into practice in a community, which would produce jointly a much more pleasurable and meaningful life for everybody. In my view, *this* is the central question concerning health and pathology in contemporary civilisation; and it is due to the failure of posing such questions that this our civilisation not only contains pathological aspects, but is thoroughly pathological.

But what is the way in which the discussion of ends is formulated in contemporary social theory? Let me refer here to the ideas of two of the most important social thinkers of the past century, who – though rarely discussed together – share a number of common features. Both of them are considered among the most famous figures in their respective fields, sociology and economics; in fact, it is easy to argue that they were *the* single most important sociologist and economist of the past century. Yet, both are not only widely and doggedly criticised, from the left as from the right, but arguably the mainstream perspective of their respective disciplines seriously misrepresented their ideas, and proclaimed this travesty as the 'official' canon. By now I guess everybody realised that I'm talking about Max Weber and John Maynard Keynes. Here I will focus on one aspect of their work, though easily a most important one: the *social* nature of a crucial aspect of individual 'rational' action, *expectations*.

Max Weber

Concerning Max Weber, I will restrict my attention to two of his best known passages from the start of *Economy and Society* that are – I very much hope – taught in every sociology course anywhere. These define sociology, social action, and the rationality of a social action. First of all, Weber defines sociology as a science that deals with the *meaning* of social action (Weber 1978: 4). Though Weber uses the unfortunate neo-Kantian adjective 'subjective', I would argue that what Weber really has in mind, through DIlthey and Nietzsche, is something very close to Canguilhem's definition of health: a *participatory* and *energetic* involvement of the human being, which therefore is not fully accessible from a purely 'external' and 'objective' perspective.[xv] Now the question, especially given the language of 'subjective', is how such an action can be social – and here Weber uses, at

first only implicitly, and then explicitly and repeatedly, the term 'expectation' [*Erwartung*] (Weber 1978: 4, 24; 1972: 1, 8). An action is 'social' in the sense that it must take into account – in order to be meaningful – the action of the others, thus implying certain *expectations* about their behaviour, which therefore would *orient* one's actions. In the definition of the types of social action, Weber explicitly uses the word 'expectation' in order to characterise 'instrumentally rational' [*zweckrational*] action, which means that the acts of others become pure 'conditions' or 'means' for attaining one's own 'rationally calculated' ends.

The question of the 'rationality' of ends, however, involves huge question marks, partly reflected in the well-known fact that *zweckrational* was translated as 'instrumentally rational', instead of 'end-rational', as this does not seem to have a meaning in English – a huge paradox in itself. It alludes to the fact that Weber was trying, as always, to incorporate the problem of the posing of ends into his sociology, as leaving it out would have made his work a new exercise in sophistry; yet, he was not able to fully leave behind the 'rationalist' neo-Kantian philosophical perspective into which he was trained, even though he knew it only to well that the problem of ends cannot be 'rationally' solved.

The questions of expectations and rationality also return at the heart of the work of Keynes.

John Maynard Keynes

I will shortly resume here the main ideas of the *General Theory* (Keynes 1964[1936]), as related to the role of expectations, with the help of an article Keynes wrote shortly after the publication of his book in response to his critics Keynes (1937). The similarities with Weber's argument, and framework, are striking. First of all, Keynes starts his argument by alluding to a basic distinction between ordinary situations – which classical economic theory assumes *always* apply – and situations of crisis (Keynes 1937: 209), which was the *current* situation, then as now, recalling Weber's fundamental distinction between the 'ordinary' and the 'out-of-ordinary' [*außeralltägliche*] (Weber 1978: 400-1; 1972: 245-6). A 'general theory' means nothing else for Keynes than a kind of theoretical framework that applies for both types of situations; in the analogy of non-linear programming, of which linear programming is just a special case.[xvi] This distinction is especially important with respect to the possibility of foreseeing the future, concerning both the consequences of our acts (recalling Weber's basic preoccupation about the unintended consequences of social actions); and expectations about what is going to happen, or how others will act (Keynes 1937: 213-4). As such uncertainties concerning the future constitute the very bases of our expectations, these expectations can change, and even quite violently, which might produce a situation of crisis (Ibid.: 204-5). According to Keynes, *this* constitutes the key issue in economic theory (Ibid.: 205).

Going into some details, expectations concerning the future in economic terms mean the expected return of investment, which depend on general expectations concerning the future (1964: 136, 141). If such expectations change from confidence to precariousness (Ibid.: 148-53), relatively minor displacements could escalate into major changes, due to the impact on the market for investment goods (Ibid.: 156). Expectations about the future always contain a great deal of irrational components; but such uncertainty has increased in the then recent past, due to the separation of ownership and control, which led to increased speculation, thus provoking phenomena that can only be understood in terms of mass psychology (Ibid.: 154, 170). Ignorance and facing unexpected situations can lead to sudden and violent reactions (Ibid.: 154). Keynes makes particularly strong claims against speculation, so it is important to add here that

'expectation' (*ex-spectare*) and 'speculation' (*speculatio*) share the same etymological root, which is to visualise or envision, recalling also the term 'spectator', so fundamental both for Descartes and Adam Smith. This is important for two reasons: first, because it establishes a contrast between participation and merely external 'observation' or 'watching'; and second, due to the implied emphasis on the visual as opposed to the verbal-rational component. Modern economics, and the modern economic system itself, boasts itself of being 'rational'; yet, its description amply uses terms more applicable to crowd spectacles, like vulgar comedies or even fair-ground entertainment. From such a perspective, it is particularly striking that Keynes outright uses the metaphor of marriage as model for a proper attitude to investment: 'The spectacle of modern investment markets has sometimes moved me towards the conclusions that to make the purchase of an investment permanent and indissoluble, like marriage, except by reason of death or other grave cause, might be a useful remedy for our contemporary evils' (Keynes 1964: 160).[xvii]

Given such uncertainty about the future, the crucial question of economics concerns the manner in which the future is mediated, in monetary terms, towards the present. This is where the significance of the interest rate lies. The etymology of this word is again most important, as *inter-esse* means 'being in between', i.e. between the future and the present. The size of the interest rate calculates the size of the risk – the higher the risk concerning future earnings, the greater is the rate of interest. But it also has a mediating influence concerning the past. The results of past earnings are accumulated in wealth, including various assets and liquid money. It is this liquid money that can be invested with an eye towards future earnings – but which, in the case of worsening expectations, might simply be hoarded. In this sense, argues Keynes, the rate of interest rewards not so much not-spending (i.e. not-consuming), as not-hoarding (Keynes 1964: 174). Once speculation starts to play an excessive role in the markets, expectations concerning the future might shift violently, leading to an increased willingness to hoard, especially at the margins (Keynes 1937: 209, 217), which could have deleterious consequences for the economy. The role of the government is to maintain, at all costs, stability at the level of investments, assuring overall responsibility (Keynes 1964: 164).

We can now see how tragically – or, if you like, comically – wrong 'rational expectations theory' is, both in its critique of Keynes and the role of the government or the state, and in its own self-contradictory central idea, which became a cornerstone of 'rational choice theory'. Expectations simply are not 'rational' – just as strictly speaking 'rational choice' is an expression that makes no sense, confusing the inside and the outside perspectives, the question of ends and means, the origins of tastes and the power of reason to limit and shape desires – and are especially not rational in a state of crisis. The rule of 'rational expectations theory' over the past decades in economics represents not so much the 'return of the repressed', but the 'return of the refuted'; just as the same applies true for the combination of evolutionist positivism and Marxist criticism that returned to rule sociology after Weber. Apart from misleading, and in a serious manner, economic policy, the economists of the 'Chicago' and 'Minnesota' schools created an oblivion about the fact – which even Weber and Keynes failed to emphasise sufficiently – that expectations in a society are fundamentally not about economic calculations and profits, but rather about the general structure of social conduct, at a level that is much more basic, and much more important, than the level of law. Most importantly, such expectations are related to the *norms* in vigour in a particular society, which – we have seen this – are the most important elements for healthy living. The central issue concerns the extent to which members of that society can be expected behave according to such norms. Normality or normativity is thus not about rewards and punishments concerning

certain acts, but about the conditions of possibility of meaningful life, thus the foundations of a community. It is in this sense that Georg Simmel considered sociability, and Marcel Mauss gift relations, as foundational for social life.

In order to better investigate the social significance of expectations, I now turn to an essay by Reinhart Koselleck, a German political historian and theorist who – apart from Foucault – made the most important contribution to the historical analysis of systems of thinking – thus, a historisation of Kantian categories – in recent decades.[xviii] It will also help us return to our starting point and central question, the problem of health and experience.

Koselleck on experience and expectations

Koselleck's essay studies jointly 'experience' and 'expectations' (Koselleck 1985). For Koselleck, these two concepts are fundamental for historical understanding, as they constitute a conceptual pair that captures, in its full asymmetry, the relationship between the past and the future, through the present. Experiences, as remains or memories of lived reality, are 'present past' (Ibid.: 272), as they bring the past into presence; while expectations are 'future made present' (Ibid.), thus bringing the future into the present through imagination.[xix] The asymmetry between the two is thus evident, as the two presences are distinct (Ibid.: 273). Expectations can also be defined as 'anticipated forms of experiences' (Ibid.: 272); and Koselleck even calls this asymmetry as a 'fundamental anthropological supposition' (Ibid.: 288). It is perhaps best visible through the difference between 'memory' and 'imagination': memories are traces of what one has lived through, but what has now passed, and which implies a fair bit of hardship and suffering; while images are pure figments of fantasy, they have no weight, and so easy can carry one away. What the two share, however, and again, is the overwhelming importance of the visual element. Our lived memories are stored away in our mind in the forms of images, and so they can be easily interfered with by other kind of images, like mechanical reproductions (especially photographs), or attractive fantasies sketched about a supposedly bright future.

This distinction has a crucial significance concerning the self-understanding of modernity as a distinctly new kind of historical moment, where – so it is argued – all past experiences suddenly lose their relevance and value.[xx] Given the imbalance between the presence of the past – lived and 'suffered' as an experience – and of the future – 'imagined' as expectation of a blissful state to come – in any contemporary/ present moment, the shift of focus from the past to the future, following an ideology of a progress, can be identified as a par excellence Sophist trick: operating through 'image-magic' (Szakolczai 2007b), or the flipping of attractive visions of the future, through rhetorical discourse.[xxi] The trick works perfectly, at least for a time, until the past is reduced to an 'image' of pure suffering, and in contrast the future can be presented as a flawless realm of utopian purity, where all the sufferers of the past will be redeemed for their sufferings. The problem is that, after a time, people start to get worried and demand the promised land of happiness, or at least a piece of the pie, right here and right now. This is when they will have to realise that they have been taken in for a ride in the name of progress, and that much of the life they could have lived is already gone. This is what happened in the 'East' by about the 1980s; and this is perhaps what is happening, *mutatis mutandis*, now in the 'West'.

The question is, whether at that moment they will be searching for an even shrewder illusionist, believing in an even more thorough elimination of all sufferings from the world – in the future that is always receding at the horizon, as Koselleck reminds us of the old joke about Comrade Khrushchev (Koselleck 273); trading in their

vision of progress for a supposedly necessary and ever accelerating spiral of change (Ibid.: 184); or finally deciding to live a healthy and meaningful life.

Concluding remarks

I can only offer here a few provisional concluding remarks.

1. There is no objective science of health; such an idea is itself pathological, and is very much part of the pathological nature of the civilisation in which we live.

2. This fact is hidden through the mobilising value of expectations about the future, the central technique of social image-magic both in liberal and socialist ideologies, whether in the form of individualised images about the future (the 'American dream'), or through collective, socialist utopia-visions, which systematically devalue the past and community traditions, rendering individuals alienated from their own home-world.

3. Human beings can only be healthy in healthy societies, which implies a life focused on the concrete and personal, driven by inner energy and not the elimination of real or imagined negative situations, saturated with meaning that can only emerge through participation in communities, or 'circles of recognition', which are stable over time – stability being a function of experienced life, and not externally imposed ideologies or standards.

Notes

[i] For the recent interest in civilisational analysis, see Arjomand and Tiryakian (2004), Arnason (2003), Arnason, Eisenstadt and Wittrock (2005).
[ii] The book came out first in 1982, and already by 1983 a third edition was published.
[iii] Foucault frequently used the word 'diagnosis' in the interviews he gave in the 1970s (see Foucault 1980); while Voegelin coined to expression 'pneumapathology' in order to characterise certain aspects of modern life and thought (see Voegelin 1978).
[iv] About a recent version of such a position, see the writings of Karen Blixen.
[v] About this, see in particular the ideas of Saint-Simon and Cabanis (Procacci and Szakolczai 2003).
[vi] I try to reconstruct this dynamics in two book projects, one published about the Renaissance (Szakolczai 2007a), and an ongoing project about the geneaology of comedy, which – taking another guiding idea from Nietzsche, which follows the motto used in this paper, stating that "Not by wrath does one kill, but by laughter" (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part I, 'On Reading and Writing') – will argue that the European Renaissance was literally killed off by low-level comedy, in the form of *Commedia dell'Arte*, which was brought into Europe through Venice after the sack of Constantinople in 1453; just as something similar happened with classical Athens and Rome.
[vii] See also Hungarian, with the close similaritities between 'suffering' (*szenvedés*) and 'passion' (*szenvedély*).
[viii] About this, see in particular the Introduction to the second volume of the *History of Sexuality* series, and a series of late interviews.
[ix] First edition 1943; second, expanded edition 1966; English translation 1978; republished 1989.
[x] The influence of Canguilhem on Foucault was always emphasised by Paul Rabinow.

[xi] See also Kerényi's ideas about indestructible life (Kerényi 1976).
[xii] About Kelsen and neo-Kantianism, see Szakolczai (forthcoming).
[xiii] Interestingly, etymology again guides us in the way, as the etymology of 'positive' is exactly to 'pose' or 'posit' something, in the sense of 'placing' or 'putting'.
[xiv] Pizzorno's work is also fundamental both in its critique of the 'rational choice' perspective (Pizzorno 1986, 1991, 2006), and in its emphasis on the importance of a participating component in order to asses the question of the 'rationality' of a particular social phenomenon (Pizzorno 2007).
[xv] On the dynamics of involvement and detachment, see also the basic work of Norbert Elias (1987).
[xvi] Or, as Keynes argues at the end of Chapter 3, '[i]t may well be that the classical theory represents the way in which we should like our Economy to behave. But to assume that it actually does so is to assume our difficulties away' (Keynes 1964: 34).
[xvii] Notice here also the term 'spectacle', to round up the previous argument. I might also argue that our civilisation turned in the exact opposite manner: instead of modelling economic investment on marriage, it is rather modelling marriage on economic investment – of course, in the name of individual freedom, autonomy, the right to escape suffering, and rational choice.
[xviii] Note also the term 'pathogenesis' in the subtitle of Koselleck's most famous work – which in its title, by the way, has 'critique' and 'crisis'.
[xix] Interestingly enough, Koselleck does not use the word 'image', so I had to complement his analysis here with the results of the previous conceptual and etymological analysis of 'expectation'.
[xx] See Koselleck's chapter on *Neuzeit* (modernity) in the same volume, just before the chapter on experiences and expectations.
[xxi] Plato's work, through its emphasis on the combination of images, theatrical devices, and rhetorical discourse by the Sophists is fundamental here. One should also add here that the title of what is considered as Dickens's most perfect novel, comparable to Dostoevsky's *Demons*, is *Great Expectations*.

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