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"The Party of the Dead", a Tale that Repeats Itself

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In this essay, the author discusses the condition of man in today's world, overwhelmed by a huge political, economic and cultural machinery, which entangle people in surreptitious and shrewd ways, encompassing different aspects of the individual and collective project of life.

Decades ago, Pierre Gripari, a French writer, became very popular among young people and adults for his novels, essays, plays, short stories and poems. His works became part of the collections of school libraries; he wrote also for children, "in order to help them understand the reality in which they lived" (Le Gentil Petit Diable et Autres Contes de la Rue Broca).

Despite his fame, Gripari lived a simple life. From childhood, he showed a love of reading (De Mérimée, Dickens, Jack London, Kipling) and would recite the short stories he wrote on festive occasions with his family. His parents, he Greek and she French, were politically radical and followers of spiritualism (his mother was said to be a "medium").

In order to read Grimm, Hoffmann, Richter, Afanassiev, Gogol in the original (authors he admired), he studied German and Russian; he received the Voltaire prize for his body of work (Contes de la Rue Broca; Lieutenant Tenant; Le Conte de Paris and others). Also interested in the works of theology, he published a philosophical anthology (L'Évangile du Rien).

Gripari was a prophet of our times. One of his short stories, "The Party of the Dead", is an invitation to reflect on the direction of the world today: an entire population is insensibly changing from the living to the dead, who, as wanderers, assume power and begin to determine the public policies that are most convenient for them (the expansion of cemeteries).

In this story, the "Prime Minister", when asked if he considered this situation normal, he replied: "Not only normal; the living are merely a minority, think of all the people who has died since the founding of the city! The President of the Republic was quick to react: from that moment on, it would be forbidden to die. However, it was too late to reverse the situation.

"You don't want to die, do you?" someone would ask. "No, no, of course not. You know it's forbidden, don't you?" He knew, he knew. They turned their backs for half a second and another one joined the procession of the dead. Outraged, the President of the Republic summoned the Prime Minister again (video cameras could not monitor everyone).

"You will yield by force," replied the Prime Minister. "By whose force?" "By ours, since we are the most numerous" And smiling vaguely, he pointed to the window. The President looked up and, surprised, realized that the Prime Minister was also a dead man. The party of the dead had sent him to power in order to dominate the entire country.

A procession of skeletons marched through the street in silence; some carried signs: "All Power to the Dead!" People, still alive, on the sidewalks, tried to speak to some dead person they knew, but the person looked at them with a vague, distracted look, then turned his head without slowing down. Could we make an analogy with the present times?

The affluent and organized "Party of the Dead"

Nowadays, the "dead" (alive) promote the "burial" of others, using everything from brute force to the most subtle forms of persuasion and manipulation to make their political, economic and cultural interests prevail. Masters of repression (or co-optation), "they are always ready to condemn the traps that catch them, but not themselves" (William Blake).

They constitute the affluent and organized "Party of the Dead", whose dominion extends over the entire Earth. Seizing key positions in communication, politics, the economy, culture, education, they trample on values associated with our natural and built heritage, decimate animal and plant species and progressively destroy the planet in view of financial gains.

Dispossessed of genuine freedom of choice by a system that offers us our own shroud, like "zombies" or "living dead", we participate in all sorts of evils, in a macabre dance, on the rhythm of the simultaneously orchestrated and intermingled "cultures of poverty" and "cultures of wealth", as manipulated and controlled by political and economic forces.

Are we victims or accomplices? Codes, structures and institutions, established rights and duties are tainted by the formidable game of rigged interests that the current world has become. Culture degradation is more serious than the absence of prescribed norms. Civil, political, economic or social rights will only be on paper without a culture to support them.

For centuries, humans have invented reasons to silence their consciences, to prove that "what I want" is in fact "what is right"; men who have fought against tyranny become worse tyrants than those they have crushed (in the famous allegorical fable (Orwell, G. 1945), the pigs, once in power, acted more brutally than the former human owner of the farm).

But the problems are not restricted to the rulers: Under the Soviets, peasants stopped feeding their animals, and the ground melted with their blood when they tried to escape from the stables. People vomited to eat more, so they would not pass anything into the hands of others: "busy remaking the world, man forgot to remake himself" (Platonov, A., 1978).

A movement for the restoration of values?

Decades ago, a controversial movement for the restoration of values asserted that a "material disarmament" would be inoperable without a "moral rearmament"; man cannot live crookedly and think straight: men incapable of saying "no" to their passions can hardly expect the crowds to say "yes" to their plaintive appeals (Campbell and Howard, 1957).

Systems, however perfect they may seem on paper, would not be able to change human selfishness; on the contrary, human selfishness is what would change systems. The fundamental message - to love one's neighbor as oneself was forgotten in the face of the slaughter from social, political and economic hegemonies, religious disputes and ethnic conflicts.

Hernan L. Villagran (2022) reminds that "all major responsibilities to, supposedly, solve those challenging disruptions, are given to the private sector as a savior to solve the myriad of problems created by itself, and are ready to convey science-based "fairy-tails", wishful thinking futures, technology-based magic thinking, and explicit and implicit denialism".

Neoliberal agents design all tools to preserve their supremacy: Tadhg O'Mahony (2022) remonstrates that "the system is embedded and entrenched in the intertwined structures of power in society, in institutions, politics and mindsets; think tanks and lobbies for vested interests have engaged political and institutional structures, hiding problems and solutions".

Holocausts, criminality, ethnic and religion persecutions

The current crisis resembles a complex tangled ball of threads; the more one tries to untangle them, the more intricate the skein becomes. The "problems" are reduced to fragmented bubbles on the surface, hiding serious anomalies in the midst of the boiling cauldron; there is an exclusion of principle. reductive diagnosis, segmented projects, worsening of the situation.

In the face of the holocausts and violent hecatombs that have marked (and continue to mark) the history of humanity, terrible examples of human evil would abound. The Turkish armies, which had a mandate of conquest and did not hesitate in the face of anything, retreated in disgust when they saw hundreds of people impaled in Count Dracula's domains.

Vasco da Gama, a Portuguese navigator, on a voyage to the Indies, set fire to a ship loaded with Muslim pilgrims returning from Mecca on the high seas (men, women and children), seizing 12,000 ducats and all the merchandise on board (according the history, upon arriving in Calicut, he demanded the immediate expulsion of all non-Christians people).

In the New World, conquerors decimated the native populations. In Latin American cities, an undeclared civil war claims daily victims, undermining mutual trust in society as a whole, due to increasing crime and all sorts of physical, mental and social harm. Widespread delinquency is also an expression of the deterioration of social and cultural values.

The prohibition of the sale of weapons (which can be smuggled) would not solve the basic problem: the lack of public safety would "force" people to individually assume a function that is the responsibility of the State. No one seeks to acquire an unnecessary product; what we need are integrated public policies that guarantee a dignified life for everyone.

In society's war against itself, the enemy becomes part of the system itself and escapes detection in any particular place. Mutual trust, as the structure that supports human relations, is indelibly shaken by the imposition, sometimes subtle, sometimes brutal, of the most varied interests, always very well camouflaged by different lobbies and propaganda.

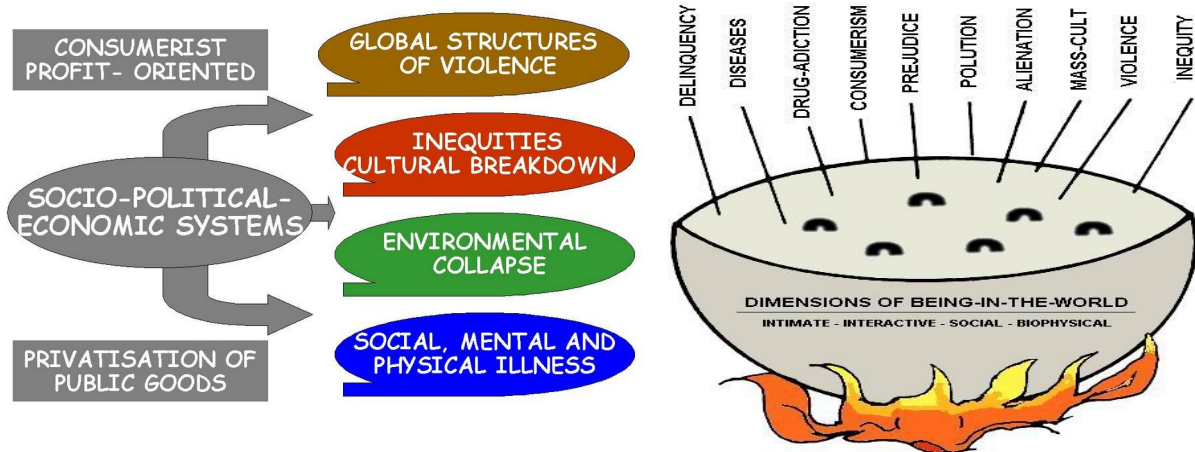
In this system, "inclusion" creates a vicious circle: the newly "included" believe they can enjoy the "benefits" offered by the very system that excluded them (without questioning the structures responsible for exclusion) and blame the less fortunate for the problems associated with inequality, clientelism and differences in origin and living circumstances.

The capacity for choice and decision is doubly affected: in the face of "demands", by cultural impoverishment, by the loss of sensitivity and critical capacity to distinguish, beyond consumer goods, what would be best for life; in the face of "offers", by a pre-established framework of options, orchestrated by "marketing" and advertising strategies.

Knowledge, technology and the state of the world

Nowadays, the definition of problems is hampered by fragmented representations of reality and controlled by powerful economic and political interests; it ignores the general phenomenon at the heart of the "boiling cauldron" and fixes on the "bubbles" of the surface, as they appear in newspaper headlines, political speeches and reduced academic formats.

It is not the "efficient" exploitation of knowledge that matters, but the process by which it is developed and applied (whom, when, where). By trying to patch up torn fabrics, one leaves intact a system in which power is "dominance and exploitation", wealth, "predatory exploitation", growth, "unlimited expansion", work, "technical specialization" (O'Sullivan, 1987).



As technological “development” proceeds, quality of life deteriorates, public spaces, citizenship, work, education, coexistence, the natural and built environment are at the mercy of the interests that exploit them, deficiencies of all kinds are "replaced" by simulacra of consumerism, and specific security is sought at the expense of general insecurity (fig. 1).

Under the label of "progress" values deteriorate, quality of life is being besieged by a devastating network of "egocentric producers and consumers" (Chermayeff & Tzonis, 1981), who seek to legitimize the immediate and exclusive enjoyment of resources, positions and rewards, reserving all rights for themselves and all obligations for others.

Principles and ideas, values and genuine communication are replaced by jargon, slogans and self-interested propaganda. Cultural decline is evident in the loss of sensitivity and critical capacity to discern and implement aesthetic, ethical and cultural values that would make life better if integrated into different aspects of human endeavors.

The concept of quality of life depends on etic (universal) and emic (cultural) components. The myth of power and the conflicts resulting from it - man versus environment, nation versus nation, classes versus classes, man versus “God” ignore the fact that in complex (nonlinear) systems, the parts cannot control the whole or any other part separately.

The world, as a complex configuration, depends on a dynamic equilibrium; it cannot be classified in terms of different types of objects; it is a whole, a process in which different types of connections are intertwined, in which each region of space and time contains and is in relation to the whole (Heisenberg, 1958; Morin, 1965; Prigogine, 1980; Capra, 2002).

Problems are in the “boiling pot”, not in the bubbles of the surface (fig. 2). They depend on the synergic and combined interaction of all dimensions of being in the world (intimate, interactive, social and biophysical), a complex relationship between subjects, groups and peers, social, political and economic systems and the natural and built environment (Pilon, 2024).

Neoliberalism, anarchism, richness and poverty

Quality of life, human rights, physical and social environment transcend merely economic factors, they require an ethical and cultural universe, without which no legislation guarantees quality of life, access to

the best that humanity has still to offer through history in terms of education, culture, art, beauty, creativity, coexistence and peace.

In this context, neoliberalism falsifies the essential values of anarchism; while the latter advocated political and economic decentralization, respect for the natural and built environment, the production of goods on a human scale, cooperation between people, the current hegemonic political-economic currents strive for plunder and domination in all realms of life.

The growing poverty has its backdrop on a disastrous and unjust "modus vivendi", which has a cruel impact on the disadvantaged segments of the population, who are restricted in their development and encouraged to seek, at any price, the simulacra offered by the market and mass culture, in an illusory attempt to equal themselves with the most privileged.

The fight against corruption, inequities and injustices (not leaving those who practice them or condone them in peace) implies the recognition that they are consequences of the system that gives them shelter and do not result only from individual peculiarities, as the dramatic-narrative contexts of the "mass media" might lead one to believe (Macé, 2001)

Human rights cannot simply be "stuck" onto unfavorable life contexts to miraculously make them favorable; it is necessary to take care of the inequities and abandonments; caring for others transcends pacts of interests, self-defense or simple solidarity, it goes beyond the fear of death, such as the fear of hurting or killing someone (Lévinas, 1987).

The granting of rights is not enough: there is little point in giving everyone the "right to play the piano" if no one has learned how to play it and if the piano does not exist. Freedom is not just the absence of external coercion (freedom "from"), but it is the possibility of acting, choosing what is best for oneself and for others (freedom "for") (Fromm, 1966).

Living as a fatality, a choice or a responsibility?

Human existence depends on a dynamic field, configured by a subjective world (subjects), a world of relationships (primary groups), a world of men (society) and a surrounding world (environment) (Biswanger, 1973). Being-in-the-world means existing in different dimensions, which imply each other: intimate, interactive, social and biophysical (Pilon, 2024).

Living is not a simple circumstance, nor a fatality, it implies possibilities of feeling, thinking and acting; it is a capacity for empathy, even with those considered strange or hostile (Znaniecki, 1935): when one makes a choice, it validates it for all others, values are created through actions likely to modify not only one's life but also of others (Sartre, J. P., 1946).

The relationship with the "other" implies the recognition of similarities and differences; similar as human beings, with common needs that must be met, but different in terms of subjectivity and the different aptitudes and interests that enrich both the personal and the collective life: "the other is the one who calls me to responsibility" (Lévinas, 1987).

The solidarity that today's world demands is not that of blood ties, of cronyism, of interests: individuals can only emancipate themselves if they are willing to work and cooperate for the emancipation of humanity; this, in turn, cannot emancipate itself without also promoting the emancipation of the individuals that compose it (Radnitzky, 1970).

Constructive pluralism (Unesco, 1999) does not ignore, level or suppress differences, but accepts diversity, transforms it and enriches it, giving a moral and cultural meaning to existence; the development of phenomenal conditions in the socio-cultural niches of teaching and learning, can favor the appropriate relationship between people, groups, society and the environment;

What is at stake is the ability to respond adequately to the challenges posed by the mission of being in the world. The human community cannot remain closed in on itself. The solution to problems may not depend solely on it, but on the web of relationships with nature, with the cosmos, with forces that we cannot understand or control (Wood, 2000).

Normative planning and transformative visions

Normative planning projects today's trends for tomorrow, while exploratory planning defines objectives in advance and explores new ways to achieve them (Jungk, 1974). New ways of being, feeling and being in the world depend on the construction of new ways of being in the world, in different circumstances and situations, which allow for the revision of paradigms.

Transformative visions go beyond a technical or instrumental repertoire, alternative futures require a new concept of "normality", beyond the "repair" or "fixing" of things or manipulate people (Miah, 2003). It is not about a technological "upgrade", but about a new level, new paradigms and shared ways of understanding things and of being-in-the-world.

In this sense, the "politics of the womb" (Bayard, J.-F., 1989), would characterize a governance by the interdependence of the public and private spheres, by the fusion of private and public interests, with the consequence of not distinguishing between legal and illegal markets, the proliferation of bribery and the use of one's position for self-enrichment

Global governance should be legitimized from ethical principles (the character of people and organizations constitutes the fundamental element for the changes), not just by the development of capabilities, knowledge and skills, as many of the influential elites openly advocate (economic, political, educational, cultural, military, artistic, media, entertainment).

We cannot regenerate the biophysical environment without regenerate humankind. There is a dissonance between the legal framework, international conventions and the practices of political and economic groups that endorse the abuse of nature, devastating huge areas through logging, mining, industrial chemical production and industrial agriculture.

The evils attributed to the "Anthropocene" are not the responsibility of all humanity; the main culprits, who have the political and economic power to shape the forms of production and consumption and define lifestyles through the media, must be distinguished from the majority of the population, whose power to change things cannot be compared with those.

The "Anthropocene" circumvention may obscure the role and effective action of groups that control economics and politics in today's world, who thus find an excuse to decline their responsibilities and shrewdly disguise their clandestine agendas of dominium. Does the Anthropocene narrative is adequate to explain the environmental destruction?

Brutally affected by wars, disasters and scourges, mankind have only two options: either they join the procession of the dead, as in Pierre Gripari's story, or they rescue the human condition, which implies a critical conscience and a collective transformative action in the face of the immense political, economic and cultural machinery that involves the world.

Otherwise, we will continue to be unresponsive co-participants of all sorts of evils, in a dance macabre, like zombies or "living dead" of systems that seek to manipulate and control us and surreptitiously weave our own shroud, with the fatalities we all know about: social unrest, environmental devastation, criminality, general negligence and irresponsibility.

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