

A now in despair

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There are times of hope, even if only that which comes from those who have none, as Herbert Marcuse (1) said, quoting Walter Benjamin. And there are times of despair, like the present time in which we find ourselves. And yet hope comes from instinct, as Vasili Grossman observed in his absolutely necessary novel *Life and Fate* (2). How do we live, then, so that all of nature bows down and we are in despair? "We wanted to change the world and the world changed us", says Nino Manfredi in Ettore Scola's film, *C'eravamo tanto amati*, something so expressive of this vital mode that dominates us. But to try not to be transformed by what we live seems impossible, even unfortunate, because a man always lives in his present, and in doing so lives with his fellow men. Only in this way is it possible to live in a political society, to create a public sphere. Politics is born of sharing together, of words and deeds, as Hannah Arendt reminds us (3).

The difference with the past is that characteristic feeling that we cannot control history. Perhaps this is because capitalism is the triumphant system, present virtually everywhere on the planet, as Branko Milanovic (4) points out. Wherever we travel, we find the same profit economy, wage labor, private capital, decentralized coordination, features that Milanovic highlights from the classic works of Max Weber and Karl Marx.

As Angus Deaton (5) points out, modernity (industrialization, the medical revolution, science, etc.) has produced some impressive results in terms of improved living standards and a much higher life expectancy. It is true, he adds, that it has done so at the cost of great inequalities that condemn a significant part of humanity to poverty. Moreover, we are in the midst of a global ecological crisis, with problems as serious as global warming. In our liberal societies, those that have reached this point, individual and collective rights are respected and guaranteed. Although the elites control the democratic process through the financing of parties and election campaigns, Milanovic points out (4).

In reality, no one has ever really controlled history. As Arendt (3) noted, we are perplexed by the fact that we do not know who produces it and how. Who is the actor? And yet, utopia and revolution, signs modernity to this day, in one way or another, set out to achieve an outcome of freedom and justice.

Utopia? Marx rejected the term (6), claiming that his theory was a scientific prediction. But the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 radically challenged this idea.

Revolutions? Nothing could be more modern than the theory and practice of revolution to establish a new order of things. But there is nothing more modern than the fact that the revolutions of the 19th and 20th centuries failed, Arendt points out (7). She included the French Revolution in this sad history. Because, this philosopher rightly believes, the new elites did not allow the people as a people to take political life into their own hands and to participate in public affairs. Broad freedom, understood as this participation, was not achieved.

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If history seems to be out of our control, as if it were moving on its own. If we have lost faith in projects for a better world... And then? This is the source of the deep disillusionment that seems to be gripping us.

However, *Eppur si muove*, it is moving, as the legend has it that Galileo Galilei proclaimed (8). History has not stopped, far from it. On the contrary, technological change is accelerating and global political and social issues, through crises and wars, present an urgent need for new solutions to a world of the past that is rapidly coming to an end. As before, as always, it is the set of collective, political actions that shape the world we make together. We have just seen an example: the Spanish Congress (9) has decided by a large majority to consider the popular legislative initiative, supported by more than 500,000 signatures, as required by law, for an extraordinary regularization of foreigners in Spain. This would allow progress to be made in reducing inequalities and guaranteeing labor rights.

Ultimately, we may not know where we are going, but we do know what goals and values we are pursuing for the future. The discourse and action in the public sphere that we share as individuals allow us to move towards a freer and more just reality. And they continue to be as powerful as our belief in progress.

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- (8) See, for example: https://historia.nationalgeographic.com.es/foto-del-dia/y-sin-embargo-se-mueve_20788 (Accessed 16/04/2024).
- (9) Data from: https://www.congreso.es/es/notas-de-prensa?p_p_id=notasprensa&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_state=normal&p_p_mode=view&_notasprensa_mvcPath=detalle&_notasprensa_notald=46633 (Accessed 16/04/2024).