

Foreword

by *Massimiliano Valerii** and *Francesco Maietta***

There are beliefs that are timeless. They endure, despite being rejected by the social behaviours of millions of people, especially when they take the form of moralistic epithets. The demonization of consumption is one such belief, often relegated to a pathological practice where material objects reign over man through perverse commodification.

However, the economic crisis of 2008 brought changes to the age of compulsive consumerism. Today, the relentless drive for ever-greater growth according to the logic that “more is always better,” allows us to look at the profound relationship we have with consumption with a fresh perspective, and discover its true social and collective meaning.

This book by Francesco Morace offers a powerful contribution to such a pertinent theme, primarily because it chooses an approach – that of the generational nuclei – that places us in a privileged position to analyse and interpret the processes. The fact that, today, different generations are no longer in open conflict, allows us to retrace the essential components of our social behaviours.

The classification of generational nuclei is not a marketing gimmick, but a vital interpretative tool that allows us to focus on the dynamics destined to shape the future. It is a courageous piece of social research that allows us to find a tangible reference point in a reality that has become fluid, elusive and non-compliant to pre-established patterns. The methodological choice also allows us to follow the flow of phenomenology with-

* Director General Fondazione Censis.

** Responsible Social Policies Fondazione Censis.

out being trampled upon, to form interpretations standing on the crest of the waves; for this reading the text proves the best option.

The generational and phenomenological approach are essential to interpret a context in which the power of subjectivity rules. This push towards individual freedom has choice as its primary form of expression. From food and clothing to holidays, what Morace calls “personal and family networks [...] the creative diversity of each and everyone” dominates.

In this way, consumption is freed from its negative pathological connotations of compulsion and excess with overflowing pantries and wardrobes. Instead, it becomes re-defined as a vehicle of wellbeing, values and relations; sobriety marks the new paradigm of choices and consumption patterns geared towards discernment, selection and sustainability.

The rhetoric of impersonal consumerism, that undermines values and controls minds, gives way to consumption as an expression of individuality in the broadest sense, of values and expectations, of people in relation to others and the context in which they live. By fighting against clichés and false prophecies, Morace helps us to understand that consumption in the era of neo-sobriety can be a ‘good growth’ and the only alternative to degrowth.

The strength of mature subjectivity generates new opportunities and is also likely to define the sense of place, with smart and individual use of contexts. Morace cleverly demonstrates the fate of these so-called non-places that for too long have been seen as depersonalizing contexts, devoted to turning individuals into clones of compulsive consumers. Instead they are increasingly the scenes of a multiple uses by different generations that fill them with their original, subjective meaning: relationships between adolescents, the location of family leisure time, or the everyday life of many elderly individuals. Indeed, the idea of shopping malls that some naively imagine as sterile places, emptied of humanity and only spaces for consumption junkies, is disproved.

On the other hand, people’s attention to the distinctiveness of local products and places increases. For food, this reaches its highest point with the demand for traceability. However, it is a constitutive component in purchasing and consumption choices in all sectors. We want to learn the history of what we consume: the real origin, the stories of the communities involved, the environmental and social trace left in its path. If such information is not provided we search for it with dogged stubbornness. We no longer want to be anonymous consumers of ever cheaper, homogenised

and interchangeable products without history, but mature and aware individuals able to bend consumption to our constellation of values, tastes and preferences.

Although not yet the materialization of ‘power to the people’, this is proof that some of the structural factors of Italian development are far from obsolete. It can start from the idea that change can only come from the grassroots, an intentional expression of millions of people who explain their own subjectivity and transform actions in the direction of improving their condition.

If this unleashing of these forces that generated the great saga of Italian development; that extraordinary journey to wealth and prosperity that marked Italy’s post war history until the recent economic crisis. Today we need to take advantage of the new signs of potential growth, a growth that is able to make people happy by empowering them to change their lives for the better.

The reading of the phenomena and the unveiling of commonplaces perhaps paves the way for the book’s most valuable contribution: the strength of individuals, and their ability to penetrate objects and contexts, and so indelibly marking the course of growth completed in relational value. It is in relationships with others that we express our individual identity, the true alternative to traditional hierarchical communities, open to those who escape from traditional bonds, and that stand as the “great protagonists of a large number of hopefully satisfactory relations [...where] personal happiness is also a direct consequence of the nature and quality of these relations.”

Here we see the true value of Francesco Morace’s analysis: the strength of subjectivity has historically changed the lives of Italians and has established itself in every sphere as the enzyme of growth and change, followed by pathological twists – from consumption to the deregulation of individual behaviours –, but able to take note of degeneration and limits, transforming the latter into a new strength, taking on behaviours based on values and practices of social and environmental sustainability. This mature and conscious subjectivity perceived in a relational nature at every level, is an unavoidable mechanism of self-realization. Thus, the multiplication of platforms and networks of relationships becomes the most formidable tool for growth and a higher quality of individual and community life.

In this guise, the Internet is not a tool that crystallizes distance between isolated monads, but a vehicle for a new sociality, that brings together,

combines, generates, exchanges and creates new combinations, and, as a result, stimulates and promotes change.

Perhaps the secret to a new happy growth is here: following the era of the erosion of social and cultural ties operating as boulders of containment for individual freedom, we are now in an era of relationships between people and communities, which facilitates and completes individual freedom, becoming a multiplier of the strength of the individual.

From this perspective, the book is a pleasant and surprising guided tour to a future that is already here.