

Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: the complexity of a triad

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On reaffirming the notion of the revolutionary triad, there is a risk that this might become a rhetorical exercise. More than two hundred years of history, (from the time of their celebration during the French Revolution) show the incompatibility of those terms with the violent and demystifying present and past. However, when taken together, they delineate a model of perfection, and the aspiration for universality and peace in mankind, an aspiration that has not become a reality. Each one, on its own, expresses – depending on one's personal point of view and interpretation – concrete historical facts which are very remote from the realization of the Promised land, and besides, utopia is not concerned with specific historical notions in which one wants to observe the manifestation of each principle, but the synthesis of the actual panorama in which these principles did not materialize.

One, can therefore, affirm that liberty, equality and fraternity, are still waiting to become a reality or are, in my humble opinion, either an aspiration for a world that is an expression or, at least a critical point of reference, for the unity which it implies. In fact, the analysis of their historical past can only deal with their fragmentary realization or with the realization of one or two principles at the expense of the others or of the remaining one, but never of all three.

Liberty has been sacrificed for equality, or vice versa. Or else, both have been understood, as is evident in the scenario of democracy, to the detriment of fraternity. Of the three terms, the latter remains the great absentee up to the present day. The hypothesis put forward here is that the absence of fraternity is not only at the origin of this lost synthesis of thought and of the reality of today's world, but that, in reality, there cannot be liberty and equality as a measure of human dignity in its absence. Fraternity is the keyword to rediscover the meaning of unity, the principle that can make room for the re-interpretation of the triad in all its complexity, thereby, promoting hope for the future. Its absence could explain the 'ferocity' of the world, the idea that liberty and equality are not sufficient for the progress of mankind, neither when taken singularly nor when taken in their 'democratic' synthesis. A mention has already appeared in an article by Stefano Rodotà' (La Repubblica 15.02.2005). In fact, it is from this article that I have begun to consider this triad and its role in fraternity.

When one considers liberty in its modern sense, as expressed in modern revolutions, and speaks solely of liberty, one can observe its prevalent 'negative' nature. If one regards liberty as an achievement that can be generated for oneself and for others, one automatically deviates from the required notion of liberty. The 'negative' aspect, in fact, includes the non-external obligation as the positive aspect of liberty conditions the behavior of others, and changes, in turn, the perception of a reality in which one finds oneself alone to act without any coercions, of any kind. In these terms, liberty is meaningless. However, when one begins to conceive it as a principle of conservation, in respect of a positive

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liberty that redefines the role of persons in society, it thereby becomes fully understood as its alleged opposite, namely, positive liberty. On the outside, one finds the political sphere, the kingdom of possibilities; on the inside one finds the private sphere with which the 'negative' meaning of liberty is linked. Also, if the 'positive' component includes maintaining social rights in which this same liberty, in its entirety, is expressed, then the negative component, very often, includes that which one does not want to renounce to, to be able to change a presumably natural order in which one is always free to act, individually, privately, and exclusively. Liberty, in isolation, can be nothing but 'negative' because the 'positive' meaning can get contaminated by equality and thus, it becomes a complex liberty. The sphere of social rights widens the chances of liberty, requires greater equality for the disadvantaged – the equality that allows one to be able to exercise a new liberty, or one that exists only for others. This requires that in order to be free one has to achieve equality to be able to express one's talents, income and prerogatives without reducing one's possibility to be free. It is not true that liberty is not conditioned, or that one can remain 'free' even without possessing those means which equality permits, as even if one is free without having any possessions, this is not the only type of liberty with which one is concerned (in this sense 'positive' liberty combines itself with equality in respect of antiliberal and conservative positions). On the other hand, equality, as a means for the exercise of liberty otherwise precluded, calls for the re-organization of pre-existent liberties, of the democratic balance, of positive coercion as an equivalent aspect of natural law, confirming action taken liberally. In other words, equality calls for the compromise of the model of negative liberty with the component of equality, in terms of rights and options.

When confronting these two models of liberty and each one respectively with equality, the ideological scenario of liberty becomes clearer than its falsely prescribed component, its 'negativity'. The latter is evident in the false theories (particularly of Hayek), and consequently, one notices the parallel confrontation with the historic context in which it occurred: England in the second half of the 17th Century, the 18th Century, the time of Thatcherism, liberal imperialism and, in recent times, the reality of today.

It is now, evident that 'negative' liberty cannot be relied upon in order to bring about the realization of the synthesis of the remaining principles. It can, very easily, do without the other two. However, neither can equality nor liberty, as far as equality modifies the significance of liberty itself (or does not include also and above all, the 'positive' aspect) come out in defense of a unitary vision. If the link with equality weakens and thereby transforms liberty, its new identity moves to a 'positive' level. If it becomes liberty for oneself and for others, it is a responsible liberty. Equality becomes totally another thing if fraternity is taken as its sister: responsible liberty, ethically addressed. Responsible liberty recognizes the importance of institutions and the role of laws, and not only prescribed law. When liberty is conceived in this way one's ideals are widened and kept within limits in relation to others who should not or must not be tormented or have their rights and liberty suppressed (hence the growth of the democratic union of liberty and equality). Responsible liberty, when morally assumed, comprises the

synthesis of body and soul, in which the individual acts responsibly and 'conventionally'; and the individual's desire to love oneself and others. Liberty that includes equality and fraternity is in radical antithesis to negative liberty as seen in modern, English, American and constituent French Revolutions, and which, in its absolute western centrality, visibly appears as the deformation of a vast project of civilization and of humanity.

However, the fact remains that liberty does not build itself in a multifaceted way in relation to the other two terms, but fraternity does so. The case of criminal law is emblematic. In order to be able to preserve the liberty to punish (even extreme punishment), equality justifies the principle that punishment is the consequence of crime and can cause the death of the assassin. Fraternity, on the other hand, leads one to respect the liberty of the other, and to respect the sentiment of equality, thereby suppressing the pride of the victim and the arrogance of the judge and of the law. Fraternity is the just means, and not a rhetorical infatuation.

The appeal for clemency to prisoners, expressed by the Pope in the year of the Jubilee 2000, must not therefore be interpreted only as a request for an exceptional and necessary measure. It is rather, an appeal to grasp the profound sense of human dignity, in a world that is globally dehumanized. It is an invitation to reflect on the essence of the nature of fraternity, as equality and liberty alone are not sufficient to promote dignity. On their own, they can 'inflict suffering'; produce cruelty and horrors in full conflict with the original intention of arriving at a just and enlightened society.