Intervista con Alain de Benoist

Claudio Gallo

Alain de Benoist is one of the most interesting among European critics of neoliberalism and its classical liberal roots. Born in the North of France, he is author of hundreds of books who describe and analize the decline of Western civilisation. Starting, in his youthness, from the far right, he has arrived to a conception that declare the end of the category of Left and Right in our post-modern world, dominated by Single Thought. He maintains, in the words of Italian marxian philosopher Costanzo Preve, values of right and ideas of left.

1) **C.G.** *In your recent "On the Edge of the Abyss" ("Au bord de gouffre") you speak about "the announced bankruptcy of money system". In our globalized world, however, the dissolution of modern political and economic forms seems to assume a paradoxical stability, as if the world system could hang in a state of permanent disintegration.*

1) **A.d.B.** "You are raising an interesting point. Some authors believe that the Capitalism feeds itself with its crises, that they reinforce it (every time they are triumphantly overcame), rather than weaken it. The deep cause of this paradox should lay in the "naturalness" of the logic of Capital, based on the automatic balance of supply and demand, costs and prices. The market should correct itself under the effect of Adam Smith's "Invisible Hand", merchant exchange should be considered the natural form of exchange, and so on.. You may conclude that that all the hurdles to free trade, any form of protection or regulation, should be suppressed. I don't share these views. I don't think that there is anything "natural" in the process of overaccumulation of Capital or in the wild leap forward that summarize the unlimited expansion of the market. Not only the market doesn't regulate itself, but it doesn't even appear spontaneously in history. It was established in the late Middle Age by public powers that were eager to monetize non-market exchanges that were eluding taxation. It gradually imposed itself at the expense of the old system of '*giving, receiving and returning*', starting from a Western matrix that you can perfectly position in space and time. About Capitalism, I think it is afflicted by internal contradictions that will lead faster and faster to its fall in so far as it will be given full freedom of movement. As Nietzsche said: 'What does not kill me, makes me stronger'. Until now the Capitalism adopted this slogan, but this attitude will have in the end a limited span. Even though its crises should keeping it in life for long time, what matters will be the last crisis.

The current financial and monetary crisis sprung precisely from the progressive destruction, since the days of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, of any form of

economy regulation. Left to themselves, the financial markets are obeying to their very logic. Today we are witnessing the result of this: rising inequality, implementation of unbearable austerity programs, the colossal debts of States, delocalisation, rising unemployment, destruction of ecosystems, etc… At the same time, what we may call the economic illusion is unveiled: goods are not considered if not in terms of market value and immediate utility. The capitalist world is a world voided of all qualities that characterise human nature. But they inevitably return. The 'paradoxical stability' you speak of is by definition fragile. Many people have not yet realized the full extent of the current crisis because they are not yet personally touched by it. But this crisis is just beginning. From the political and social point of view, we are living in a sub-chaotic situation. Actually, chaos has not arrived yet, the social bodies remain relatively controllable through surveillance and control systems that are constantly developping, but the general atmosphere is increasingly resemblimg that of a 'pre-civil war' (Eric Werner). What make me pessimistic is the persuasion that there are no global solutions within the current dominant system. The capitalist system is neither 'moralisable' nor reformable. It will not collapse under the blows of his opponents, but will collapse by itself."

2) **C.G.** *You are one of the few people today who criticize the principles of neo-liberalism, a practice implicitly prohibited in "democratic" systems where the horizon of freedom is limited by the dominance of the Economy. Do you see in our world social forces and a world vision that may become the subject and instrument of an alternative?*

2) **A.d.B.** "I am surely not the only one who criticizes neoliberalism, both in its praxis or in its theoretical foundations. Thank to the current crisis, it seems rather that such criticism is popping up everywhere. What is true, however, is that an economic criticism of liberalism is not enough, for me at least. I make also a philosophical criticism (whose roots date back to what Aristotle said about chrematistic!), and also an anthropological one. It would indeed be a serious mistake not to see that the liberal ideology also carries an implicit conception of man. This is the conception of *homo economicus*, the man reduced to its producer and consumer functions, whose only interest in life is continuously seeking to maximize his best material interest. Finally, beyond this very critique of liberalism, I also offer an economic criticism, that is, the way in which economic activity, which was once built – 'embedded', said Karl Polanyi - in the social body, gradually emancipated from all constraint to become hegemonic in the life of human societies. When all values are solely focused on market value, the symbolic imaginary is colonized by the axiomatics of interest. The economy become one's destiny, and the consumer replaces the citizen. Under these conditions, to talk about democracy hasn't much sense. Democracy is a political system based on the sovereignty of people. To function normally it requires that politics has a sovereign rule over the economy, that is to say the exact opposite of what we see today. It is not a coincidence that, thanks to the crisis, financiers and

bankers have already seized power in several countries. *Qui judicabit*?, who decides? The answer to this old question make you understand why States are today no longer sovereign.

The way I see it, an alternative vision of the world is mostly definitely possible. Many writers and theorists have already traced its outlines. But if the critical thinking has its merits, it also has its limitations, which are those of all thoughts. To define what should be is not enough to transform this 'must be' in concrete reality. The most difficult question is there. To put the question of 'social forces' which could embody a new practice is to assume again the issue of the historic subject of our time. In the era of Absolute Capital, both post-bourgeois and post-proletarian, which is that of the omnipotence of what I called the Capital-Form, this historical subject cannot be the old proletariat. The historical subject today are the peoples - not the peoples in the sense of ethnos or even the demos, but the peoples considered in terms of their cultural diversity, now threatened in their political and social dimension as well. You can see it in all countries that have been afflicted by the crisis: the main clash is between the people and the money system, represented by banks and financial markets. At the right moment, the new social forces will necessarily appear, because, in politics also, the nature fears the void!".

3) **C.G.** *First Kosovo then Libya and now may be Syria: the history of "humanitarian intervention" is the preamble of a new world order that emerges from the decline of national states, is it really a more human world?*

3) **A.d.B.** "The current wars are mostly ideological wars, as such, reminiscent of the old religious wars. Presented as 'humanitarian interventions' or international police operations, undertaken in the name of 'human rights' defence are also wars which are essentially intended as 'moral' wars when in fact their only purpose is to defend certain interests, expand areas of influence, control territories or energy resources. In this sense, they represent a return to the 'just war', as conceived by the theologians in the Middle Ages. Just war, or war 'with just cause' (*justa causa*) is a war that criminalizes the enemy, because he is considered the defender of a bad cause, and therefore unjust. This conception of the war led to the old religious wars that ravaged Europe in the Seventeenth century. Since the Westphalia Treaty (1648), this conception of war was replaced by a new one, associated itself to a new form of international law (*jus publicum europaeum*) which sought to replace the notion of *justa causa* with the one of *justus hostis*, just enemy. The enemy was defined as an opponent who might as well become later an ally. It was believed that each belligerent party had his reasons. The 'humanitarian wars' put an end to this more human kind of war. Freed from the limitations that the ancient theologians still assigned to *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, they went along with the virtual disappearance of any form international law. Indeed legitimized by the ideology of human rights, they consecrate in fact the power of the stronger, starting with the one of eternal North American imperialism. Tragically the new world order they are

establishing is not pacific in any way. We can see it today in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and may be tomorrow in Syria or Iran. These wars merely lead to civil war and chaos. It is not a more human world the one they announce, but a truly inhuman world, from the very image of inhumanity inherent to wars which criminalize the enemy opening the way to all kind of violences against him".

4) **C.G.** *You like the economy of degrowth and at the same time you defend the concept of sovereignty in a multipolar world, a pluriverse in the words of Carl Schmitt: don't you believe that in our world the two things cannot be together?*

4) **A.d.B.** "My sympathy for the theory of degrowth is inscribed inside the critics of economism which I have already mentioned. The degrowth is neither zero growth nor does it mean going backwards – rather it is better to speak of "frugal abundance," as Serge Latouche does –, but it springs from the conscience that our natural reserves are not endless and that in a finite space it is not possible to achieve an infinite material growth: no tree grows to the sky! This theory would be incompatible with the sovereignty of peoples and nations if its course would result in their weakening. But is this really the case? Power today is measured no more simply in the ability to produce steel or heavy industry. It also is technological, informational and immaterial. Today a powerful state is not necessarily the one capable of aligning the largest number of warplanes and tanks. How long has it been since the United States, whose military budget alone exceeds all other military budgets in the world (it is expected to reach 525.4 billion dollars in 2013), achived a real military victory? In my opinion a powerful and sovereign State is first of all able to cope with the challenges of its historical moment, and its ability to cope depends not essentially by the rate of growth of GDP. These challenges, of course, include the environmental one, but also those resulting from the onslaught of the financial markets. However, the States which are now in theory more powerful and more advanced, are also those which are more enslaved by the money system. The notion of power should be revisited.

Regarding sovereignty, it is clear that when purely nominal, it is only *flatus vocis*. A sovereign is someone who decides, as Carl Schmitt so aptly said. Most 'sovereign' States today are no longer able to decide, and still less able to make history (they become the subject of the history of others), this shows that they no longer have the means to exercise their sovereignty, whether in the political, economic, financial, monetary, fiscal or social field. Regaining their lost sovereignty has less to do with growth than with politics. Finally, I would like to point out that sovereignty can be understood in different ways, depending on whether we stick to a the doctrine like that of Jean Bodin, the sixteenth century's theorist of a single sovereignty, 'indivisible' and omnicompetent, or to the idea developed on the same period by Johannes Althusius, of a sovereignty divided at all levels starting from the base in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity. I am personally an Althusius' follower, and not a Bodin's one".

5) **C.G.** *The fact that the center of gravity of economic power is shifting from West to East has become something of a cliché: do you think that this paradigm is really describing the reality?*

5) **A.d.B.** "This stereotype is often associated with the idea that the geopolitical center of the world has moved from the Atlantic to the Pacific, an idea that I don't share.The geopolitical center of the world remains the Eurasian continent, with its heartland corresponding to Germany and Russia. This is the reason why the United States, which today represent the biggest 'maritime' power in the world – a role played by the British before them – are trying more than ever to control the power of the Earth, that is to say, Eurasia, to surround Russia and China, to expand the role of NATO as far as possible, to prevent Europe from developing its self autonomous defense, etc. To claim that the center of economic gravity has shifted towards the East also seems questionable. They were saying this at the time when Japan and other Asian 'tigers' were undergoing dramatic growth, while the rest of Third World appeared permanently stalled. This is no longer true now. The situation in Japan has greatly deteriorated. China is growing fast, but also faces new challenges, which are precisely the consequences of its growth. And above all, the globalization has encouraged the rise of emerging powers such as Brazil that doesn't necessarily lie in the East".

6) **C.G.** *In Western societies, immigrants are perceived by large sections of population as a social danger, but at the same time they are a reserve army of workers which are lowering the overall cost of labor, a situation that seems hopeless.*

6) **A.d.B**. "It is very difficult today to talk about immigration, as this phenomenon always give rise to an increasingly violent and widespread controversy. I believe we need an approach that avoids irenicism and xenophobia, but without being abstract. Immigration situation vary according to the number and the rate of immigrants' arrivals, and depending on whether the capacity of integration in host countries is great or limited. In today's Western societies it cannot be denied that the mass immigration which we have seen since the last thirty years has resulted in a wide range of social pathologies of wich popular classes are the first victims. In economic terms, we can say that immigration benefits the private sector, but costs more and more to public sector. There is no doubt, then, that from the beginning the use of immigration allowed the employers to exert a downward pressure on the wages of native workers. Immigration, from this point of view, is the the reserve army of Capital. The paradox is that those who are more favorable to immigrants are often those who are more critical of capitalism. There is a contradiction here. We cannot claim the abolition of borders in favor of 'sans papiers' and at the same time condemn the free trade, which involves the free movement of goods and people. Such a paradox has at least the merit of reminding us that capitalism has always been much more 'no-frontierist' than any other doctrine. Adam Smith already recalled that the

merchant's only country is the place where he can achieve the greatest profit. The reason is that politics cannot exist without borders. A 'global governanc' is a contradiction in terms. Borders, moreover, are not barriers but lock-gates. At the time of globalization, their role is to protect the weakest and those most threatened by relocation, unemployment, financial flows of all kinds. The tragedy is that immigration is now developing more and more into a context of economic and financial crisis, which explains the rise of populist and xenophobic parties. You said that the situation seems hopeless. For the moment, this is also my feeling".

7) **C.G.** *The American mythologist Joseph Campbell observed that today's pace of life is way too fast to possibly allow the new myths to crystallize. Don't you think that the centrality of the sacred that you consider as one of the cornerstones of society is now almost unworkable?*

7) **A.d.B.** "I have no a definitive answer to this question, but I have some reservations about Joseph Campbell's statement. The acceleration of social life, which was remarkably described by Hartmut Rosa, is an undeniable fact. However, what seems to me more incompatible with the crystallization of the myths is rather to be found in the exacerbation of the drive to individualism and in the current 'presentism'. The dominant ideology has consecrated the rise of narcissistic individualism, which is consistent with the eradication of the dimensions of past and future, now completely flattened into the present moment. New myths have obviously difficult to develop if they cannot open a perspective. One should also take into account the process of individualization of faith. People are creating religions '*à la carte*' for themselves, they want 'believing without belonging'. Under such conditions, collective myths do not become non-existent, but ephemeral (in the 'Jacksonmania' style). On the other hand, if we assume that the taboo is the negative form of the sacred, you have to admit that there are still taboos. But they are not the same as once where. One may ask, for example, if the ideology of human rights has not become a new form of civil religion, whose roots cannot be questioned without appearing blasphemous. The blasphemous, moreover, always appears intolerable to certain categories of believers as the news constantly remind to us. The sociologist Michel Maffesoli say that it is possible to interpret certain postmodern trends in the frame of a 're-enchantment' that would put an end to *Entzauberung*, the Disenchantment as defined by MaxWeber. Ernst Jünger described the coming times as those of the confrontation between Gods and Titans. You see, the issue is complex. In my opinion, in all cases it would be very unwise to say that the era of the sacred is finally over!".