

The Colornian Foundations¹

For Eugenio Colorni², knowing a certain object meant knowing how to master it through processes of de-composition and re-composition. The object cannot be separated from the subject, who creates an interpretation of the encompassing world that includes the “deeds and misdeeds” encountered in his day-to-day experience.

This representation is thus defined by a series of concepts held by the subject. If we say that time goes by, we are obviously talking about the passing of the hours as marked by our cuckoo clock. If we say that the size of an apartment is a certain number of square meters, it’s because it has been accurately measured. In both cases the idea we have is of an exact quantity that can easily be checked³. Einstein and his theory of relativity—the “curvature” of time and space by gravitational forces—doesn’t even cross our minds.

For Eugenio, however, Einstein demonstrated the thesis of human attribution—that is, anthropomorphism—the set of concepts initially put forward by Kant (along with causality, substance, quantity, etc.). From this sprang the need for a close dialogue between literary-philosophical knowledge, on one hand, and mathematical-scientific on the other, that would allow the pursuit of this promising path to continue.

The fact is, Colorni explains, every time humanity manages to identify the anthropomorphic aspect of a part of its representation of reality and to truly master it, the benefits are enormous. This is the often implicit rationale behind numerous discoveries. Hence his need—omnipresent in the last years of his life—to be constantly on the lookout for anthropomorphism (as well as auto-morphism). Hence his advice to restrain our own senses (keep them in a state of watchful waiting) in order to try as far as possible to capture how things really are, and to commit to an internal struggle to break free of this or that point of view, conception, way of thinking, etc. which, initially acquired to make sense of some aspect of the world, eventually become a series of impediments to its comprehension...

Eugenio thus believed that human beings from all over the world, starting with those who were most enterprising, by intelligently and wisely implementing their wide-ranging yet interactive knowledge, would be able to open the way to an era of

¹ This text is taken from Luca Meldolesi's Introduction to Eugenio Colorni, "The philosophical disease" and other essays, Rubbettino 2020; soon to be published in English at the Bordighera Press in New York).

² Eugenio Colorni (Milan 1909 - Rome 1944), best friend of Albert Hirschman, was six years his senior. Colorni was Hirschman's mentor: the person who had the greatest influence on his work.

³ Just as, before Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler, it was thought (following Ptolemy) that the earth was flat and that the sun revolved around it. Such ideas are still with us as figures of speech—for example when Pope Francis claimed to "come from the end of the earth", or when, in meteorological language, we speak of the rising or setting of the sun ... Not to to speak of the Aristotelian-Christian vision of the late Middle Ages, which has left us still saying "I'm in seventh heaven" or using expressions such as "prime mover", "heavenly vault", "empyrean" etc ...

invention and accelerated technological progress—with important consequences for their concrete conditions, and their own prospects (and vice versa).

It is a point of view in a certain sense analogous to Carlo Cattaneo's civilizing process, which also shows up in Colorni's political theses and which today strikes us as incredibly topical.

Indeed, all it takes is a moment's reflection to see its meaning for the conflicted world we live in today. The great revival of nationalisms and their rivalries, although dangerously present in various areas of the world, has not yet degenerated into open conflicts; up to now, autocratic pressures (whether reactionary, or communist and fundamentalist dictatorial) have not succeeded in overwhelming liberal market-economy democracies; the ongoing re-establishment of hierarchies in many areas and dimensions of life faces various stumbling blocks; it appears that economic, military, civil and religious oppression, though widespread, is being held back by important counter-trends...

In other words, the negative pressures, reminiscent of humanity's violent past, coexist today with tendencies that oppose them: from Open Innovation research in every field to interest in the environment and the liberation of individual and social energy, from processes of development to those of justice and democratization that now come close to touching all of humanity, from the vast connectivity and shrinking of distances to the immense desire to know and be known, country by country, etc.

If we make a great memory leap back to the conditions of the war and the post-war period, we get an idea of the huge change that has taken place and we can bring into focus the Colornian problem we still face—that of bringing to bear a series of possibilist imbalances, even seemingly incredible ones (small and large, local and general), which at the technological, cultural, political and social level will invert negative trends, encourage in actors of every kind the civilizing impulse (spontaneous and cultivated), create hope and perspective, facilitate progress, draw the interest of others (the famous “magnet effect”) and thus begin to master and gradually tame the dangerous tendencies of the times in which we live.

And open the doors to the future.