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Round Table

The role of the EU and civil society for social inclusion:
Towards 2010, European year for the fight against poverty and for social inclusion

In presenting these days, the role of civil society in European construction has been emphasized. This is an indisputable fact. Participation from the bottom up and shared responsibility are truly powerful factors of social cohesion, guaranteeing growth and widespread well-being. In his beautiful essay “The Dignity of Difference”, Jonathan Sacks talks about growing awareness of this role when he observes that the market and the State “have weakened the institutions that create confidence”. There may be various terms – “non-profit sector”, “indirect institutions”, “civil society” or “social capital” - but, Sacks argues, “what they have in common is the importance they give to non-contractual relationships ... without which not only markets and states begin to vacillate, but social life itself loses grace and civility”.¹

The role of civil society in the fight against poverty can be truly important and decisive. Not by chance, last 21 November the National Voluntary Centre decided to dedicate an important moment of reflection to the themes of “A network against poverty”, gathering together and re-launching the theme of responsibility for various expressions of civil society to consider, warning that this may be more feasible today than in the past. These organizations have written into their genetic code a concern for those who experience difficulty or discomfort.

Some years ago, in a courageous book Jeffrey D. Sachs spoke of “the end of poverty”.² The end of poverty, according to this expert on hunger, was presented, and is presented today, as a reasonable objective, possible, realistic and within range of this generation, our generation. It is a question that appears in its urgency and that calls for courageous and decisive social policies.

Social policies, therefore, aim to remove those obstacles, as our constitutional charter describes them: “economic and social in nature, which, effectively limiting citizens’ liberty and equality, impede the full development of the human being...”.³

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² Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The End of Poverty, how rich countries might definitively end the planet’s misery*, Mondadori, Milan 2005. See also Marco Zupi, *Can Poverty Be Defeated?*, Laterza Editors, Rome – Bari 2003, besides the volume re-published several times, Ernesto Rossi, *To Abolish Rome’s Misery*, - Bari, Laterza, 2002, pp. 244.

³ Italian Constitution, Art. 3. All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinions, personal and social conditions. It is the role of the Republic to remove economic and social obstacles which, effectively limiting citizens’ freedom and equality, impede the full development of the human being and effective participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organization of the Country.

When we speak of social policies, we cannot fail to recall, even if only with a word of mention, to what degree these policies have sustained, promoted and facilitated the process of democratization, of economic and social development in our country and in the rest of Europe after the Second World War. Only a brief mention to say how much our European democracies owe not only to the courageous visions of the protagonists of those years but also for a reconstruction that had a decisive role in offering assistance, for the return to good health.

Social inclusion/ social exclusion. Recently these terms seem not to have the same significance as just a short time ago: concerning poverty and more generally, concerning social themes the language has changed, the culture has changed, attitudes and judgements have changed.

What is meant by social inclusion? We all agree if by inclusive processes promoted by social policies we mean guaranteeing the participation of all in widespread well-being, participation in good fortunes and possibilities without inequalities, guaranteeing and favouring access to instruction, to health and social services, to the world of work, etc. But increasingly we see a modification of meanings. Dangerously, the shared and reasonable objective of putting an end to poverty is being transformed into an aberration: not to abolish poverty, but to distance or erase the poor.

So it seems that the paths towards inclusion are a problem that concerns the “excluded” and those who work to include them. But the fight against poverty is not a fact that concerns only those who benefit from it and who works towards it. It was not this way in the past and even less so is it today. This is a reductive vision that seeks to marginalize in a residual corner a challenge that is instead central, directly involving every aspect of social life. Perhaps it is only a risk, but it seems to me that there is a tendency toward a division of “competencies” between public policies and civil society: politics has the task of protecting against, controlling, containing poverty. Then there is the role of civil society, intended as those particularly sensitive sectors that are “specialized” in lost causes. As someone once said: “dissociating social discomfort from public safety thus creates an interesting division of labour between civil society and the State: the first is concerned with discomfort, the second with public safety”.⁴

An emblematic example of this change of approaches and discourse in Italy is observed regarding the important subject of immigration. An important subject, decisive for our future, but that political and social debate reduce and crush into its negative aspects. There is a major problem with this in Italy, which is also one of language: of foreigners one speaks badly and only badly. Political, cultural, institutional managers should begin to speak in a precise, realistic, true way about immigrants, begin to say, for example, that they are fundamental for our country.

In speaking about social policies, for example, often an essential aspect is ignored: the remarkable contribution, in terms of human and economic resources, that the presence of foreigners brings to our Welfare system. Beyond fiscal contributions and withdrawals, in fact, foreign labour significantly reinforces the human capital which is the backbone of our social security system.⁵

⁴ Introduction by Nadia Urbinati to Jaume Curbet, *Insecurity, Justice and Public Order between Fears and Dangers*, Donzelli, Rome 2008.

⁵ The Centre for Studies of International Policy clarifies this aspect, using up-to-date data and statistics, referring to a substantial dependence of our Welfare on the labour force imported from abroad. CeSPI, *Migrations of cure: the impact on welfare and the responses of policies*: Working Paper 40/2008.

Unfortunately we all know the data and they always tell us the same thing: that without immigration, without the children of immigrants, Europe and especially Italy would lose population, grow old and go backwards economically; in a word, it would die.

The time available to us is brief; there is a necessity and urgency to pose the problem of the foreign presence in a realistic and reasonable way. It is opportune today that political leaders not follow fears, but rather make an effort so that the necessary co-existence is not undertaken with ill will, but rather that it becomes an opportunity for contentedness. Little effort is made towards integration and few acts of inclusion are carried out. Instead massive and disproportional efforts are made that exclude people from exercising their human and social rights, those rights that even Europe and Italy in previous decades contributed to affirming, with fatigue but also with enthusiastic conviction. Think for example about the right to vote, which in Italy is not even planned for administrative elections.

An aspect that must be dealt with, even though briefly, is that of citizenship, a decisive means of accessing social rights. Let's consider this fact: over 24% of immigrants in Italy are minors, more than 700,000. Of these more than 500,000 are born in Italy, are children that feel Italian, who are in fact Italian, but who are not citizens and only with much difficulty become so at 18 years of age. Since 2004 the Sant'Egidio Community, together with other Catholic associations, has insistently called for modifying the citizenship law, of adapting recognition by necessity and of making a necessary and just gesture, of welcoming those who are born and live in Italy.

Many affirm and believe that it is more useful to speak of social cohesion. The opposite of cohesion is not exclusion, but rather fragmentation, a product much more devastating and dangerous for our social structures. It is a sad spectacle that our fabric of relationships unfortunately offers: fractured, fragmented, angry. The important subject of the peripheries of our major cities, racism that seems to raise its head dangerously, intra-familial violence or, at least, an increasing barbarity in our relationships that reverberates even in the phenomenon of social isolation, which harms older generations of our European societies.

Social cohesion. Because in reality whenever inequalities and disparities in wealth are reduced, or to put it briefly, that a poor person is helped, the beneficiaries are not only the poor but also the entire human and social climate. Not to "abolish the poor", then, which seems to have become the shortcut that sums up so much logic about public safety and public order, menaced by the presence – as they say – of people with difficulties.

But returning to the question of the actual possibility of defeating poverty, we should ask ourselves whether one must of necessity renounce the ambition of abolishing poverty, of abolishing at least the hardest and most hateful aspect, which is misery and absolute lack of means, of whether instead this is not be a realistic objective for European social policies. Whether the objective is in fact outside the range of our budgets, that in our country an elderly woman not die of cold in her home, as occurred at the beginning of this year 2009⁶, or that a man not die of cold and hunger under the doorway of Teatro Carlo Felice in Genoa.⁷ Or that a mother not die burned with her child in Rome on the day after Christmas because in attempting to shelter from the cold, the cardboard shack where they lived caught fire.⁸ I could continue the sad rosary of events that quickly become forgotten but deserve more respect and consideration. In fact the poor, whether one wants it or not,

⁶ <http://www.repubblica.it/2009/01/sezioni/cronaca/donna-morta-liguria/donna-morta-liguria/donna-morta-liguria.html>

⁷ http://archivistorico.corriere.it/2008/dicembre/31/Muore_clochard_Gli_avevano_tolto_co_9_081231036.shtml

⁸ <http://repubblica.it/2008/12/sezioni/cronaca/incendio-baracca/incendio-baracca/incendio-barraca.html>

exist, are in our cities. And they have the right to exist.⁹ Their poverty, their need, does not for this reason render them less as citizens. This does not mean “including” anyone. The poor exist and take part by right in our society. It is an evangelical realism, “the poor are always with you”, that in this period conflicts with a dangerous impatience, which becomes a culture, laws, attitudes. This is to think that one can do without the poor, that it is enough to keep them far from us, chase them away, not see them. It is a fact that even irregular foreign citizens exist, exist as people, are within our territory. Is it a sensible choice to consider them a danger and do nothing to include them in the network of health and assistance?

A society, a city, a social fabric, that pushes away the poor or doesn't see them, is not for this reason a society, a city, a social network without the poor – it is simply a mutilated and unliveable society.

To fight against poverty and its consequences is possible. To build a better world is possible, “not as the fruit of magic – as Andrea Riccardi recently stated – but as a patient process of constructing a civilization of living together in small daily dialogue, in meeting each other, in respect for the freedom and personality of the other, in solidarity with the poorest, the smallest, with life in all its manifestations and seasons. To build a new world more humanity and more spirit are needed”.¹⁰

The poor can be the point of departure. They, with their problems and their questions, can be the point of departure for European construction. The poor at the centre. The Sant'Egidio Community holds this expression dear. It is certainly not just a way of talking: it incarnates this very well, is it's way of feeling and of being. The Sant'Egidio Community reads and understands the world beginning with the poor, reads and understands newspapers and the Books of the Apostles – to paraphrase Karl Barth – beginning with the poor, is involved in situations such as peace and dialogue beginning with the poor. Those who know the Sant'Egidio Community know how much the presence of the poor as friends, family and faithful is something decisive and fundamental.

But the reason why it is important today is that a European social construction cannot be imagined – not only a good or just one, but a social construction that has coherence, stability, or future – without beginning with the poor. Let me conclude with an extremely effective statement by Sacks: “civilizations will not survive by force but by the way in which they respond to weakness; not by richness but by the attention they give to the poor.... The ironic yet profoundly human lesson of history is that what makes a culture invulnerable is the compassion that it shows towards those who are vulnerable. The value that should be maximized above all is human dignity.”¹¹

This is the task that European institutions and civil society can carry out together in order to reach an objective which is at the same time ambitious and achievable, that of restoring dignity and respect to all its citizens, beginning with the poorest, so that social life itself re-acquires grace and civility.

⁹ Last year was also the 60th of the declaration of human rights, which among other things affirms: Art. 3, Every individual has the right to life, liberty and personal safety. Art. 22, All individuals, in that they are members of society, have the right to social security, as well as to the carrying out, through national effort and international cooperation and in terms of the organization and resources of each Nation, of economic, social and cultural rights essential to their dignity and to the free development of their personality.

¹⁰ Andrea Riccardi, Introductory Report to the OPENING ASSEMBLY – “The Civility of Peace: Religions and Cultures in Dialogue”, Cypr 15-18 November, <http://www.santegidio.org/index.php?pageID=111&res=1&idLng=1062&idTesto=5>

¹¹ Jonathan Sacks, The Dignity of Difference, How to Avoid Confrontation of Civilizations, Garzanti 2004, Milan cit. pag 214.