

Sad Europe

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The love of the old people

In the movie *Cloud Nine* (*Wolke 9* is the original German title) Andreas Dresen stages a simple love story: Inge is married with Werner, but she meets Karl, and falls in love with him. She decides to leave her husband and goes to live with her lover. One night, while she is sleeping in the arms of her beloved Karl, Inge receives a phone call: Werner has killed himself.

Well, so what? A love story, as I've said. I forgot to say something important: Inge and Werner and Karl are aged between seventy and eighty years old. I think that Dresen has created a beautiful movie.

The love of old people is a subject that literature and cinema, with very few exceptions, has not told: a subject we know very little about, for the quite simple reason that old people have never existed. Until recent decades people aged more than 60 were such a small minority that they were lonely and rare. Surrounded by an aura of respect and veneration sometimes and more often rejected at the borders of society, but always alone, deprived of means for survival, unable to form a community.

The lengthening of the average life span has been coupled so far with the rewards for previous contributions to the growth of society: the right to retirement money. In the coming years in Europe one third of the population will expand the population of the elderly. It is the generation that was born after the war, when the fulfillment of the modern promise of peace, democracy, and wellbeing apparently was at hand. Five hundred years of brutal capitalist expansion was supposedly alleviated by the political force of organized workers. The generation born in the years from 1945 to 1975 absorbed in its cultural background the expectations of freedom and peace and justice as if they were universal values. Of course they were not because the universal values do not exist, they are only idealistic illusions that translate the cultural expectation produced by social relationships.

The capitalist counteroffensive launched during the three decades of triumphant neoliberalism destroyed the conditions for the possibility of freedom and justice because as it imposed the brutal law of competition in deregulated labor markets subjugated social life to the unbounded domination of profit. The generations now coming on the stage of history, growing up during the years of the capitalist counteroffensive, do not possess the memory of the past social conditions, nor the political force to defend their existence from the predatory economy.

We know nothing about old people, nothing of their emotions, of their loves, of their ability for social organization, of solidarity and of political force. We don't know because we have not experienced it.

But now that experience is emerging. The age of senilization is here, and Europe is the place where this experience will first develop. Denatalization has started in the territory of old Europe because the post-war generation has not proliferated with the same intensity of the generations before. This trend is spreading all over the world for many reasons: diffusion of the no baby pill, cult of the individual realization, conscious refusal of maternity, high costs of reproduction in the urban environment, but in Europe it is already giving its fruits, and we can speak of an advanced state of senility.

Here I don't want to speak of the economic effects of senilization, nor of the dilemmas of a society where more and more people reach the age of retirement while less and less people

are in the age of producing. On this point I want say only this: the assertion that it is necessary to force seniors to postpone their retirement is purely a neoliberal trickery aimed to prolong laboring years and to maintain young people in a condition of unemployment and precarity.

What is interesting here for me is the cultural effect of social senility in the long run. The senilization of Europe is contemporary of a process of massive migration that the policy of containment (Schengen) will not be able to stop. Migration is part of a push of the poor who are demanding a redistribution of wealth that has been concentrated in Europe during the 500 years of colonization. This is why we have to see the senilization of Europe as a particular face of a phenomenon of redefinition of the planetary economic balance.

Dementia

The next decade contains an essential choice for Europe. The dilemma is between two hypotheses: one is to be open to a deal of distributing wealth and of resources, one that implies opening European borders to the crowds coming from Africa and Asia and a downsizing of western consumption: the adoption of life styles heading towards degrowth of production and consumption.

The other is the intensification of an inter-ethnic civil war whose first signs are already visible in the European territory. The success of the xenophobic parties at the elections of June 2009 is one of those signs. The majority of European people are desperately defending the privilege accumulated during the centuries of colonialism, but this privilege has been deteriorating since the fall of colonialist empires in the past century, and is now falling apart in the global recession. The June 2009 elections show the European sadness, which is the inability to deal with senility, and with the psycho-energetic decay of the social organism. The result of the polls is not the effect of a political will; they are the symptom of a quickly expanding senile dementia.

During the modern age a very delicate balance was created between the sphere of infosphere and reason. The political will could act rationally because that balance gave the historical actors the possibility of knowing a relatively narrow range of information and therefore of deciding on it. But the acceleration of the semiotic emission and the thickening of the infosphere has produced in the long run an effect of overload, and therefore of anxiety and undecidability, and panic. At the same time Europe has grown old. It is a demographic problem first of all, but not only demographic. Europe is a country of old people clinging desperately to their lives not because they love it, but only because it is their property. A country of old people needing young nurses coming from Philippines, and Moldavia and Morocco, old idiots terrorized by the despising agility of those young people who have suffered so much in their life for our fault, that they do not fear any more suffering, and don't care about the punishment of European law. Dark skinned young people are looking at our respectful disdain, waiting for the time when they will be able to give us back the unforgettable violence that has made them intimately hostile. Senile dementia (loss of memory, irrational fear of what is unknown) is spreading in every generational stratum of the European society mentally frail and socially tired. Young voters who vote for rightist nationalist parties are not less obtuse than the old and frightened, no more able to think and to find a way out their conformism.

How will it end? It's easy to predict. Old Europeans are well armed and they will kill. Pogrom, mass violence, inter-ethnic civil war. This is the future of Europe. We should find a way to translate in non-religious terms the concept that Christian express with the word "resignation." What can be done when nothing can more be done, when too much hate has

accumulated in the collective karma? How can we continue being happy and free when we understand that a war machine is hidden in every niche?

This is the question that I am addressing to myself, to my friends and to my generation, the generation born after the last war fought by young people, before the senility took hold of our body, making possible a pacific wisdom, or pushing towards the abyss of the aggressive dementia.

Debt

The generation who grew up in the decades of the post-war hope today is facing a huge cultural task, not less important than the task we have been able to carry out in 1968. Now we should be able to create the conditions for the European society to start consciously a process of degrowth, and of repayment of the immense debt that the western society has accumulated during the five hundred years of colonization.

The current recession is a consequence of the financial debt that the west (especially the US) accumulated during recent decades. But beside this there is a heavier debt that cannot be in any way repaid. It is the symbolic debt that comes from the genocide of the native populations of America, from the deportation and enslavement of million of human beings from Africa and Asia, from the humiliation and the destruction of millenary civilization.

The senile generation of Europe may become the subject of a cultural revolution aimed to prepare western society to a long lasting agreement for the redistribution of the wealth and of the resources.

Such a cultural revolution should start with a critique of the energetic juvenility permeating modern culture. The ideology of unbounded growth and the cult of aggressive competition are the foundations of the capitalist development, but also the nourishment of romantic and nationalist ideologies that have aggressively mobilized the western society in the late-modern time.

A senile culture aspiring to degrowth and the reduction of the consumerist push, on the activation of solidarity and of sharing seems today – I must concede – a very dubious utopia. The elections have shown that European population is determined to defend with all means its privilege.

But this stance cannot bring anything good, and is already bringing lot of evil. An interethnic civil war is hiding in daily life, and we are going to see it explode with unimaginable violence. Young people accustomed to difficult life conditions are surrounding the fortress. They are bearing the unconscious memory of centuries of exploitation and humiliation, and they are also bearing the conscious expectation of those things that advertising and globalist ideology have promised to them.

During the past decades Europe was looking like the continent of peace and social justice, now it is sinking in a wave of sadness and cynicism. Young people seem no more able to change the social conditions, and are wandering in the labyrinth of a society without solidarity and relaxation.

The senile population could be the bearer of a hope is they will be able to face the inevitable with a relaxed soul. They could discover something that the human kind has never known: the love of the old people, the sensuous slowness of those who do not expect any good from life except wisdom. Wisdom of those who have seen much, have forgotten nothing, but look at every thing as if it was for the first time.