CHAPTER 5

Reason and Social Ontology

Luigi Ruggiu

Abstract: Social ontology is general ontology. Reality is spirit, being is mediation. Community is not given, but is an expression of mediation. Objectivity and subjectivity are moments of the social being that is realized as free. The ‘We’ and the ‘I’ are both constituting and constituted. The relation with otherness is constitutive. Identity is a becoming. Desire is a tension towards the other of consciousness. Otherness is difference that asks to be recognized. But recognition is tension and struggle. In this process the space of the compatibility of life projects is determined.

1 The Sociality in Question

The ongoing debate on the nature and meaning of what is called ‘social ontology’ involves a wide range of questions and movements, from John Searle’s encyclopedic project, founded and built on sociality, to the revival of communitarianism, which advocates a return to the community as a remedy for the globalization and the anonymous dispersion of present-day societies.

Why is sociality in question, and what sociality is in question?

The meaning and uses of the term ‘social’ become clearer when we contrast it with another term in the history of thought—namely, Aristotle’s term ‘political’, in his celebrated definition of *anthropos* as a ‘political animal’. This definition connects two terms that at first blush appear to be contradictory: on the one hand, the living being; on the other, as a specification of the first, the relation with the ‘political community’—with the State—which is thus the specific form in which human beings who live in a community are organized. The State, for Aristotle, was but one of many possible forms of the aggregation of living beings, which finds its necessary fulfillment and essential realization in the perfection of the political community. It is not fortuitous that Medieval culture found Aristotle’s ‘political animal’ overly suggestive. In the Middle Ages, in fact, ‘politikon’ was translated as ‘social’, which seems to express the degree zero of association—a sort of neutral term, common to both

---

humans and animals. The renowned examples of sociality in insects—bees in particular—and in beasts sharply underline the inadequacy of this sense of the term.

Nevertheless, the aggregation of human beings does not constitute itself by means of the generic instinct of natural ‘socialization’ typical of certain beasts; rather, it seems to represent a form of aggregation based on the community as an expression of both instinct and reason. Here, however, reference to the adjective ‘common’ indicates an aggregation that, not simply factual, is based on deliberate choice. ‘Common’ forms are founded on certain basic values that, for Aristotle, are revealed by language, the expression of community par excellence. Hence the forms of sociality must share and realize common ends, which means going beyond simply ‘being together’ on the basis of conditions that are necessary but not sufficient, such as sharing a territory or aggregating for purposes of defense or the satisfaction of needs.

The foundation of the human community is constituted by a natural bond that holds its members together. Aristotle expressed this bond in terms of three elementary and natural communities: male/female, father/son, and master/slave. Human beings cannot live alone: this prerogative is reserved only for God, or for beasts—high and low degrees of being, super-naturality and sub-naturality, with human beings positioned in between.

This picture dominated Western thinking from antiquity until the modern age, when new forms of sociality eroded and then superseded the natural sociality that had characterized the classical form of thought and life. Modernity gave rise to the construction of human being as a private individual, and as a subject independent both of nature and of the relation with other humans. The price to be paid was the separation of humans from the world and from their fellows. Cleavage took the place of unity—a cleavage that modified our relations with both political and socio-economic institutional structures, which now present themselves as independent objectivities pitted against us and undermining our autonomy.

Hegel was fully aware of the negative consequences of this situation in the political sphere, with the crisis of the State and of the various forms of social aggregation. The crux was the supremacy of subjectivity and of the private. The dramatic crisis of the State-form was heightened by the expansion of a completely new and self-sufficient economic form that accentuated the sensation of an end of the State and of the political.

The only way out of this contradiction seemed to be a revival of the classical political form, to be navigated by means of a full and total reabsorption of the individual in the State. The part—i.e., the individual—immersed anew in the State understood as an organism, completely devoid of all autonomy,