

The Rural Origins of European Culture and the Challenge of the Twenty-first Century

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In the Beginning was the Paradox

When I began to reflect on the ways of how I might begin this article, I remembered that, a little while ago, I had annotated a small book that I had found all the more interesting because it did not have the slightest scholarly pretensions. I had opened it more or less mechanically and found in it a passage, already underlined in pencil by myself, that seemed to me to offer an almost perfect approach for developing what was in my mind: “ ... *i Veneziani, sopra i pali di larice, hanno edificato chiese e palazzi.*”¹ In fact, I could hardly have dreamed up a better metaphor, and in any case a more than adequate one, than that of those larches. They were produced in an Alpine environment and now, sunken into the lagoon, they served as the foundation of one of the most astonishing urban cultures that men ever conceived and built.

Culture is essentially an account of memory that establishes itself among men; it emerges, develops, and blossoms thanks to nature, which people hasten to forget once culture has provided them with the means to live or survive. In the same way as one does not think of forests that have made possible the construction of the Piazza San Marco, one also forgets, with the best conscience in the world, the rural context from which European culture has drawn its means of existence. From its beginnings, European culture has thus been profoundly tormented by the paradox of having produced its memory from oblivion. This paradox is all the more basic, since “Europe is not [merely] a geographical term”

but doubtless even more so the manifestation of a spiritual and intellectual climate.² And yet, no abstract formula, however cleverly conceived, will ever succeed in providing an exhaustive explanation of a paradox. Georges Duby had no illusions about this when he spoke of Europe in the twelfth century: "It is quite true that the vitality of the town originated in the vitality of the countryside, that the town drew upon the surrounding rural areas; it was the generous womb of migration, its livelihood, and of the raw materials that sustained its workshops. The source of bourgeois fortunes was to be found there among the fields. And the bulls that one put, like guardians, at the top of the towers of Laon, were they not seen like a homage to rustic labor?"³ How much, though, have art historians conditioned us to be mistrustful as regards the interpretation of sculptural and pictorial representations. Duby came to the core of the paradox when he wrote: "One thing is certain in any case, i.e., that the money, the innumerable coins that passed from hand to hand to build the cathedrals was *first earned through the hard labor, through the fatigue of the peasants.*"⁴

Up to the end of the eighteenth century the countryside — "an environment that man had molded according to his needs, that he had shaped with his works and filled with his jobs ..."⁵ — was everything, or almost everything. And today a mere ten generations separate us from this world! What are barely more than two centuries if compared with the millennia that separate us from the agricultural revolution that began to transform Europe in the Neolithicum first from Crete and continental Greece and later via the Balkans? Fewer years separate us from Homer and Hesiod than they were removed from the first attempts at agriculture! Suffice it to say that, present-day impressions notwithstanding, rural life — or to put it differently, the creation of the countryside — is "a work of man that was accomplished through the continuous efforts of many generations; it is a human achievement that, developing from the natural theme of the tranquil seasons, accomplished the conquest of the soil and the adaptation of the land to man's needs and wishes. Tilling and pasturing; the oldest and most durable tasks ... daily tasks like bread and nourishment ... regular tasks like the passing of the hours and days between Sun

and Earth It is the ancient labor that never ceased since the beginning of time when man gained an idea of his destiny of pain and labor; and it was his work that will last for as long as he lives on earth" ⁶ This quotation by Gaston Roupnel, whose pathos may trigger a smile, exudes a ruralism that appears to us to pertain to a bygone past, at least as far as Europe is concerned.

However, it is at this point that the original paradox gathers fresh momentum and begins to spread around the globe: How could Europe, heavily urbanized and industrialized as it was, continue to live if it did not extract the essentials of its livelihood from its soil? How naive it was to think that it was possible to leave the countryside and to renounce rural life: at the most the problem shifts and the answers one provides may differ, but they do not become less indispensable and tangible. If contemporary Europe wants to establish a link between memory and culture, it cannot detach itself from its relationship with nature — whether this relationship develops here in Europe or elsewhere in the world — unless nature is once again forgotten.

The Agricultural Revolution, the Urban Revolution, and Civilization

This sub-heading takes up a theme of extreme complexity that did not start everywhere at the same time nor did it assume a universal form. At the same time what is certain is that everywhere and on each occasion there emerges a tangible relationship with "things" which ended in the immediate satisfaction of needs, but whose repetition has woven the cloth of culture. I use this term in its anthropological sense: culture is an account of power which is consubstantial with that of the material. Engels had no illusions about this when he wrote: "It is precisely the transformation of nature by man and not nature as such that forms the most essential and direct basis of human thought, and man's intelligence has grown to the extent that he has learned to transform nature." ⁷

In other words, all culture is consubstantial with the work that is put into material things. This must be understood in a broad sense because we may be dealing with inorganic matter just as

much as we do with organic matter, with plants, animals or even humans to the extent that man himself transforms himself through his work.

The agricultural revolution coincided everywhere with a far-reaching shakeup of all economic, social, demographic, technological, and cultural structures — a problem which is evidently beyond the scope of the question to be dealt with here. Nevertheless, it is possible to chose a particular aspect that, in a certain way, brings together, summarizes, and illustrates these transformations, namely that of domestication which might be defined as follows: "... there occurred a complete domestication when a plant or animal, profoundly transformed through the activity of human selection, could without human assistance, no longer protect, feed, or reproduce itself." ⁸ In this way human domestic ecosystems emerged progressively, among which some were granted a privileged status such as the "vegetal" or the "animal," the "sedentary" or the "mobile," the "diverse" or the "homogenous," the "individual treatment" or the "treatment as a masse." ⁹

In terms of the general morphologies that shaped the specific agrarian landscapes constituting the visible configurations of the human ecosystems, one might return to the notions of *saltus-ager-pascuum* and *silva-hortus*, the first of which privileged animal husbandry, while the second was centered on the growing of vegetables. ¹⁰

In the long run, the domestication of plants and animals were issues of knowledge acquired over very long time-spans, knowledge that first allowed the extraction of foodstuffs from different environments and that later promoted beliefs and myths to be found in agrarian cults. In his *Works and Days*, Hesiod offers a poem entirely dedicated to the links between man and nature in which, through precepts, there emerged a peasant morality and culture: "A dwelling first; a ploughing steer be thine, a purchas'd girl, unwedded, tend thy kine: Two ploughs provide on household works intent, this art-compacted, that of native bent: A prudent forethought; one may crashing fail, the other instant

yok'd shall prompt avail: Of elm or bay the draught-pole firm endures, the plough-tail holm, the share-beam oak secures." ¹¹

Hesiod also notes the days that are favorable or unfavorable for certain activities. This ritualization of time probably is the bringing together of ancient empirical knowledge which established correlations that ultimately turned into causes. These ritualizations have not completely disappeared even today: a Ligurian peasant working for a friend of mine still bottles his wine during full moon. Who is not familiar with the meteorological or agro-meteorological sayings that still circulate in our countryside: "If the moon increases on a Sunday, prepare decks and boards; if the moon is reflected in the water, it will be fine three days thereafter." ¹²

It goes without saying that contemporary science deeply mistrusts ethno-cultures and the validity of such knowledge, since its accuracy cannot be demonstrated with the help of our conceptual tools; and yet this knowledge persists because it has for a long time constituted the codes that form the ideological framework of the rural world.

Crete, the outpost in the Mediterranean, at the cross-roads of influences from the Near East and Egypt, was probably the first to be touched by agriculture, and there is nothing astonishing about what was known of agrarian cults. The fact that they were always celebrated in the palaces testifies to their importance. ¹³ The tree assumed a very significant role here through which the cult took the form of "a caressing of leaves, of an adoration of the tree goddess, of processions and the offering of flowers." ¹⁴ These cults were probably accompanied by songs and dances: Ariadne became the heiress of the tree goddess and she gave sons to Dionysus, whose names evoked images of vines. Homer then took up this theme and turned it into Achilles's shield: "A vineyard then he pictured, weighted down with grapes; this all in gold; and yet the clusters hung dark purple, while the spreading vines were propped on silver vine-poles." ¹⁵

Gods and goddesses are thus associated with cults that are devoted to vegetation: Jason and Demeter united in Crete on "soil

that had been turned over three times;" Zeus and Europa did so at Gortyne near an evergreen plane tree; Zeus and Hera near Knossos¹⁶ All these cults, possibly being of Asian provenance, tried to restage the annual vegetation cycle. As Martin Heidegger put it: "*Den Griechen freilich trug einst das Asiatische ein dunkles Feuer zu, dessen Flammendes ihr Dichten und Denken in die Helle und in die Masse fügte.*"¹⁷ Asia has also given us plants that have manifold uses: plants to make drinks with, plants for seasoning, for salting, plants for the animals, but also and indeed above all plants for medical applications that are even older.¹⁸ Here, too, the lines between magic and phytotherapy are numerous and clear. The transition from medicine to poison is, as Paracelsus remarked in the sixteenth century, merely a matter of dosage.¹⁹ Do we need to refer to the herbal poisons of justice like those served at ordeals or to the nemlock with which the judges put an end to the life of Socrates? All cultures have also presented themselves through ornamental plants, through flowers that were charged with symbolic meanings. Here again the magic role of some of these has been used to protect the house and the farmstead from certain evils.

This being said, in what we tend to call the civilization of Europe since the ancient Greeks, the animal has shaped our consciousness more than the plant. In his *History of the Animals* Aristotle defines the plant in relation to the animal. In the days of these early forms of scientific inquiry plants appeared to be living only in comparison with inorganic matter, whereas they appeared lifeless vis-à-vis an animal.

Thus the Etruscans practiced divination through the study of the intestines of animals, as is shown by an archaeological find made near Plaisance in the last century: a bronze model representing the liver of a sheep that is in the shape of an altar.²⁰ In Etruria, bees were a bad omen because they symbolized royalty. It was the same with the wolf, the lion, the birds of prey and of the night. Probably there existed a division into *animalia felicia* and *animalia infelicia*.²¹

The Slavs also accorded great importance to animals: the sacred horse for the divination, the snake as a protector of the hearth. Among the Germans, the boar played a role in sermons and sacrifices and was associated with the fertilizing forces of the soil.

To put it differently, the connections between man and animal were extremely complex in all agrarian societies of Europe. Nor did the animal have significance only as food: "Outside the nutritional cycle it is being 'consumed' through words, through representation, by being used materially as well as intellectually." ²² In the same way as popular empirical knowledge has constituted an ethno-botany, ethno-zoology has become disconnected from the many links with the animal as a source of raw materials for a multitude of useful and artistic objects. Do we need to remind ourselves that before the agricultural revolution of the Neolithicum the oldest "artistic" representations in caves were those of animals? The Middle Ages were marked by the art of hunting. Emperor Frederick II made many sacrifices to it, as is testified by a brief text extracted from *Novellino* (Novella XC) that runs as follows: "*Il tradimento del falcone*": "*Lo' imperadore Frederigo andava una volta a falcone, e aveane uno molto sovrano che l'avea caro più d'una cittade. Lasciollo a una grua; quella montò alta. Il falcone si mise alto molto sopra di lei. Videsi sotto un'aguglia giovane; percossela a terra, e tanto la tenne che l'uccise. Lo imperadore corse credendo che fosse una grua: trovo com'era. Allora con ira chiamò il giustizierre, e comandòch' al falcone fosse tagliato il capo perchè avea morto lo suo signore.*" ²³

Frederick II was very interested in animal life. He asked Michele Satto to translate Avicenne's "*De animalibus*" and he occupied himself with "*De arte venandi cum avibus*," demonstrating his interest in "*far conoscere le cose che esistono così come esse sono.*" ²⁴

Thus, through ecological and ethological knowledge accumulated by animal-breeders and hunters that constituted indisputable benchmarks for the sciences to come (even though the latter at first distanced themselves from them), the animal world has sustained occidental culture across all sorts of preoccupations, giving rise, from Antiquity to the contemporary period, to bestiaries and stories that have not ceased to haunt the European

imagination. Beyond the imaginary, the animal became and has remained an essential auxiliary to man's games: races and fights involving horses, dogs, cows, and bulls, to mention only these species.

It is perhaps appropriate to consider for a moment the world of minerals that is frequently regarded, conceived of, and represented in terms of references to plants and/or animals. Up to the eighteenth century one spoke of metal seeds just as one referred to the semen of animals and plant seeds. One attributed an "embryological evolution" to minerals: "During its birth in the mine, the ruby is of white color. As it ripens, it gradually assumes its red color."²⁵

Thus throughout the ages since the Neolithicum, for a little over 300 generations, a rural civilization has been unfolding, that — from the shores of the Mediterranean to the Baltic Sea and from the Oriental regions — the black soil of the steppe — and to the Atlantic coast, has created the preconditions for a environment favorable to the emergence of the towns due to enclosures and ploughing, roads and villages, houses and gardens. At first there was the Greek *polis*, followed by the Roman city and, finally, the medieval town without which the culture would have existed, but it would not have been disseminated, nor would it have given birth to works that form our European inheritance. They are the heritage upon which we have built our thought, the arts, and the sciences. Do we have to remind ourselves that the city is the birth-place of writing that has changed all our thinking in that it could now be preserved? Without a script the collective memory would not be what it is; a critical spirit could barely have developed and the conservation of things would have been entirely dependent on an extremely fragile oral tradition.²⁶

The rural world was the locus of the oral tradition, whereas the urban world was that of the written word through inscription on or in stone, cloth or skin, and finally on paper. Inseparably connected, the dual links between rural life and the oral tradition, on the one hand, and between urban life and the written tradition, on the other, produced Occidental culture. The town drew upon the energy of the countryside in order to transform it into information; but the town also borrowed rural and nature themes in order

to transfigure them and to turn them into symbols. A creator of archetypes, the town has frequently betrayed its original models by using them as ornamentations whose naturalist value had often become rather weak, as various art historians have demonstrated; however, art is not a copy; it is a transformation and even a transfiguration.

Nevertheless, the links between the rural world, the urban world, and civilization have, from the start, been very close and remained so even after the eighteenth century with its upheavals the consequences of which are still with us today.

It could be claimed that over a long period the origins of all changes were almost always rooted in some kind of agricultural revolution. If we look at Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire, there was a moment when, with the Barbarians becoming sedentary, there occurred a repossession of the soil; after all, one had to feed oneself in order to survive. This development probably started on a modest scale between the seventh and eighth centuries. It triggered what has been called the "agricultural revolution" of the tenth to the thirteenth centuries. According to Marc Bloch, it was a development that was without precedent in the period between the Neolithicum and our own epoch.²⁷ This revolution was accompanied, between 990 and 1060, by a social revolution which, in a nutshell, might be called the triumph of Christianity over paganism, the slow diffusion of triennial crop rotation which increased cereal yields, the extension of arable lands by the clearing of forests, and the general increase in the circulation of wealth. In this system, the town as a distributor, weak in terms of numbers, but qualitatively important, was to play an essential role through its centralization and concentration. This could only be achieved through the land; but through the connection with the countryside, the town crystallized the initiatives and transformed wealth. In this respect, the painters of the Italian Trecento have left us with an exceptional document which is both exceptional and excellent. I am speaking of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's "Buon Governo" that all at once gives us a view of the landscape around Siena and the agricultural activities that were characteris-

tic of the countryside. These frescoes perfectly illustrate the interpenetration of the rural and the urban spheres.²⁸

Art and culture that, up to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, had retreated to the monasteries, little by little moved toward the towns. To quote Jacques Le Goff: "In the course of the twelfth century the urban schools assumed a decisive lead over the monastic schools."²⁹ He added: "Scholasticism is the child of the towns. It dominated the new institutions — the universities and the intellectual corporations. Scholarship and teaching became a profession, one of the numerous activities that became concentrated in the urban sphere."³⁰ Moreover, the explosion in Gothic art gave birth to the great cathedrals that gave exact proof of the rise of the towns.

After the cloisters, the cathedral appeared like a place where culture had become condensed: the power of its architecture, the lavishness of sculpture, the art of stained-glass windows, the paintings, and this all the more so if we think of Milan Cathedral whose construction probably marks one of the medieval beginnings of the alliance between architecture and mathematics.³¹

Those cathedrals have not stopped occupying the Occidental imagination and to inspire poets like Charles Péguy who wrote:

*Et quand se lèvera le soleil de demain,
Nous nous réveillerons dans une aube lustrale,
A l'ombre des deux bras de votre cathédrale,
Heureux et malheureux et perclus du chemin.*³²

As Georges Duby has written: "It should not be forgotten" that the cathedral — at the heart of the town which frequently had become a center of wealth — represented, "beyond its superb facades, a monument of humility, a symbol of renunciation."³³ The cathedral was the town's pride, its protection, and its alibi.

The cathedrals were erected with astonishing speed — Chartres in 26 years, Reims in 11! Situated at the heart of the town, they were the compact expression of wealth some of which was acquired by improper means by the merchants, but which was to be redistributed into the community in the shape of donations. Until the dawn of the fifteenth century, art was entirely, or almost

entirely, dedicated to the depiction of Christianity. This is reflected in the imagery of the churches that was dominated by artists who, in the majority of cases, had been set the themes that were to be treated by them.

However, architecture, painting, and sculpture, all of which were made possible by a wealth whose growth accelerated from the twelfth to the fourteenth century, were also a product of fear. It was the fear of the rich who remembered that they had "little chance of entering the Kingdom of Heaven: this is what Jesus had said, who himself lived among prostitutes and lepers, and who loved them."³⁴ So, the charity and generosity that the rich practised were rooted in virtue, but also and above all in fear: fear of God, fear of the Last Judgment. These were the eschatological fears that first emerged toward the year 1000, but which persisted during subsequent centuries. As Jean Delumeau has convincingly shown, the fears permeated all epochs, but each had its own characteristic fears. In this respect, the work of Dante symbolically marks the transition from one epoch to another with the proliferation of satanism and descriptions of the torments of Hell which one also finds in Irish legends and in the *Divine Comedy*.³⁵ In San Gimignano one can see the frescoes by Taddeo di Bartolo of 1396 which depict Hell with a throne at its center and a gigantic Lucifer sitting on it.³⁶

At the end of the fifteenth century, art was no longer produced like that in the cathedrals. Thenceforth artists began to conceive of, and to define, their own themes. Artists like Brunelleschi, Donatello, Masaccio, and L.B. Alberti developed a new orientation. One of their preoccupations — notwithstanding the differences between them — was to know and to represent Nature objectively. The town now became the artistic center par excellence. While it continued to sustain itself through the countryside, it henceforth became the orbit of the artists, evidently for economic and social reasons. The connection between town and country definitively tipped in favor of the urban center that drew its substance, like a parasite, from the rural environment. The town traded information against energy.

The Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century

The pendant of the agricultural revolution of the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries is that of the eighteenth, with the introduction of continuous cultivation thanks to the appearance of fodder plants. But again this third agricultural revolution does not occur simultaneously, nor does it appear everywhere with the same speed. Beginning in the north-west of Europe, in the Netherlands and in England, it soon extended across the rest of the Continent. Perhaps we should remember that this agricultural revolution, which facilitated the reclaiming, merely through the practice of triennial or biennial crop rotation, of a third to one half of the land that had been left fallow merely through the practice of triennial or biennial crop rotation, was accompanied by a steep rise in yields. By augmenting food production it allowed the liberation of labor that henceforth became available for other activities, such as industrial production whose beginnings were also to be found in England. Without the agricultural revolution, the industrial revolution would have manifested itself later or might not have happened at all, at any rate not in the shape in which we have come to know it.

Yet the great event is the industrial revolution that eclipsed the agricultural one. Once more the countryside served as a prop for the transformations in which our contemporary civilization is rooted. In the eighteenth century we encountered a fresh paradox as far as culture is concerned. This — and again we must come to an understanding of the meaning of this word — is the moment when the idea of nature is triumphant; it is also the moment when agriculture finds its theoretician in the person of Quesnay and his physiocracy that marks the beginning of the investigation of nature through science and whose new techniques would, little by little, put in jeopardy both the natural ecosystems and those of the humans.

The idea of nature that obsessed the eighteenth century, was in fact not conceived in the same way in the first half of that century, i.e., between 1717 and 1755, as it was by the encyclopedists in the second half: nature, seen as a geometric clock, came to be juxtaposed by a “naturalist” history of nature.³⁷ In a certain way

Nature as Animal took revenge on Nature as Clockwork. To quote Jean Ehrard: "Nature was no longer an order, but a force that had its *raison d'être* within itself." ³⁸

Paradoxically, Quesnay founded physiocracy with his *Tableau économique* which tried to show that agriculture is the sole source of wealth precisely at the time when wealth generation definitively moved to the emergent urban and industrial civilization. Thenceforth this civilization geared itself toward a modernity within which the traditional rural civilization appeared to be retarded in several meanings of that word; it was less and less the master of its future, and the culture it had borne seemed more like a collection of residues. This culture that did not distinguish between practice and knowledge to make up a coherent whole and that was transmitted through example and orally, was replaced by a culture that distinguished ever more sharply between theory and practice. The separation of the two became the sign of the triumph of science and technology over empiricism which had ruled virtually unchallenged until then. It was not just a revolution in the hierarchies of knowledge; rather it was in effect a profound shaking-up of the system of knowledge as a result of which the seeds planted in the seventeenth century now began to emerge as new trees of knowledge.

After 1850, the city and industry formed the habitual horizon of an important part of the European population, most certainly in the north and north-west. In the south the emergence of industrial conglomerations was much slower. The industrialism of Saint-Simon sums up quite well an epoch whose system of values was collapsing.

However, at the same time the rising romanticism glorified nature. In his *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais*, Novalis has given a perfect illustration of this: "O! daß der Mensch, sagten sie, die innere Musik der Natur verstünde, und einen Sinn für äußere Harmonie hätte. Aber er weiß ja kaum, daß wir zusammen gehören, und keins ohne das andere bestehen kann. Er kann nichts liegen lassen, tyrannisch trennt er uns und greift in lauter Dissonanzen herum!"³⁹ Premonitory words, indeed in many ways prophetic ones, that anticipates the disasters man

would cause to nature's ecosystems through ignorance — disasters that the rural world would be dragged into and that would rock it. It is again Novalis who reveals to us why poetry became the favored instrument of the friend of nature: "*Am hellsten ist in Gedichten der Naturgeist erschienen.*"⁴⁰

From the nineteenth century to the present, the literary, pictorial, sculptural and musical currents were innumerable that looked toward nature for their inspiration and themes. Often it was a nostalgic romanticism, but not exclusively so; for nature always remained the focus of original and organic metaphors. Paul Celan's "*Die Winzer*" employs rural metaphors from the vineyards in order to give expression to man's destiny.⁴¹ But they are merely metaphors to which the poet resorts not in order to magnify rural life, whatever it may be, but to give full weight to the simplicity of the ancient gestures.

It was to be a good century in that art invested in new techniques and utilized them. The "industrial revolution" in art took place from the turn of the nineteenth to the turn of the twentieth century. In Jean Prat's words: "One promotes the glorification and exaltation of industry and all it produces: everything becomes linked at a fast pace; everything is unleashed to make us believe that the new world has come at last."⁴² Movement is probably the most basic characteristic of a world that was born between 1880 and 1920. Even if the theme of nature is the obvious one, what is of interest is not what it is, but the movement it experiences, for example, in Vladimir Baranoff-Rossiné's painting of 1907 with the title "*Le soleil couchant sur le Dniepr.*" In this respect Marinetti's statement is also revealing: "A roaring automobile that seems to run on bullets is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace."⁴³ It may perhaps be useful to remember the interpretation that Hannah Arendt gave of totalitarianism, whether of the Nazi or Bolshevik variety, when she argued that its idea of domination could not be realized through the State nor simply through a terror machinery, but only through a movement that was kept in a constant state of movement.⁴⁴

This fascination with movement is perhaps also the most radical way of breaking with the past and with the rural world on which it had been built. "Movement" contaminated everything, as Charlie Chaplin's "Modern Times" announced in the cinema in 1936 through the figure of the worker who found himself caught in the cogs of a machine.

In the twentieth century, rural life has definitively become concealed, hidden to a point that generations of city-dwellers know nothing about the countryside. This was a consequence of the era of mass production in the years after World War II. The country was emptied of people and the rural exodus left nothing but bloodless villages in which fewer and fewer young people lived. The transition from the countryside to the city resulted in a cultural and social disorientation. In his admirable little book entitled *Marcovaldo*, Italo Calvino has, with sad humor comparable perhaps to that of Chaplin, reconstructed that loss of points of orientation.

Today the ancient rural culture is totally destroyed; there are merely remnants, ruins that continue to subsist in an urban-industrial setting. Various practices also survive in regional cuisines, folklores that are more reconstituted than authentic, sayings and proverbs still scattered around, in the field of meteorology or agro-meteorology, in radio and television broadcasts. The classic tales of children's literature are no longer informed by ancient traditions. The reason is because these tales can hardly contribute to the education of a young city dweller for whom these traditions are no more than something fantastic. Their significance and interest will depend on the degree to which the references reflect the techniques which he will have to confront.

Well? Well, must we deduce from this that the twentieth century has finally sealed the fate of rural life and hence also that of nature? Certainly not, and this I would like to demonstrate in my conclusion. The question which poses itself is to know if we are at the dawn of a new agricultural revolution, initiated this time by science and technology both of which are irreversible, just as is agricultural work that we cannot do without, whether we like it or not.

At the Dawn of a New Agricultural Revolution?

If a question mark has ever been justified, it would be with respect to this sub-heading, even though there exists no doubt in my mind as to the need for this agricultural revolution.

In fact, after the most massive shift in labor toward industry and services that this century has seen, our economies find themselves in an impasse on more than one account. It is above all an impasse of unemployment which destroys the social fabric of our societies and which, in time, will also destroy the economy with all the political consequences one can imagine. There is moreover the environmental impasse through the destruction of nature. Nature's processes and mechanisms, that constitute the very basis of our existence are, at the very least, disturbed. Finally there is the cultural impasse to exactly the same degree to which the cultural fabric is only woven when labor connects with reality. Where work no longer possesses stability and continuity, it has become a means to acquire money in order to be able to live; it is no longer self-realization, except for a small elite. As regards the real, it has been defined by Heidegger in what he called the "theory of the real," that practises technical-scientific knowledge in order to inspect nature rather than the "concrete real" to which Husserl urged us to return relentlessly in order to correct our simulations. We are no longer confronted with the concrete reality of things, but only with their signs. In the same way, as money is not wealth, but a sign of wealth, the cultural information that we are given for consumption is no longer truly culture, but a sign of it, because this culture is without memory; it is in some way amnesic. In fact, we have forgotten two essential things: first, the historicity from which all civilizations draw their reference points in order to move forward; second, nature upon which all civilization is built day after day. Without the two, all civilization becomes unravelled; it regresses due to the progressive automation of its divergent spheres. The economic sphere is a telling example of this; it absorbs what appears to be useful to its growth and rejects the rest. Anyway, the disappearance of culture in the older sense of the term coincides with the appearance of autonomous cultures,

namely those of enterprises. We speak today of a corporate culture the way one talked about the culture of the Renaissance or of Spanish culture at other times. The enterprise has become the unit of reference to a point where an employee who works for IBM or Dupont is first a member of the corporation before he belongs to his national community! One may think that these remarks are so exaggerated as to disqualify themselves; but this is unfair, for I do not condemn, but merely state this. I do so to prove that the corporate culture has annexed the national culture, as is evidenced in a recent Coca-Cola advertisement. It took the Parthenon as its model, but the grooved stone columns had been replaced by the shapes of the famous bottle! It seems that the Greeks reacted with indignation and the company had to withdraw the advertisement.

The question is not whether or not this is scandalous, whether or not this is acceptable, or whether this is an abuse of a cultural heritage. The question, in fact, comes from a different direction: it lies deeply embedded in the processes of substitution and disarticulation of a culture which reveals itself as having put in place a mechanism that reorders this culture toward strictly economic goals; the famous "sponsoring" is merely a discreet, but in the end nevertheless dangerous expression of this. If it does not exist already, we shall soon see television advertisements that, thanks to corporation X, we can swim on beach Y with maintenance and propriety being assured by the company. After all, many among us will reply, why not? Alas, this means that we have given up control over our inheritance and that we do not take a sufficient interest in preserving a collective management of it whose values are rooted in historicity and whose goal is the protection of nature which has been subjected to an onerous private relationship.

The responses to these private influences that tend to replace the larger community have, for the last thirty or so years, come from organizations devoted to the protection of nature and embodied in the ecological movements and those concerned with the preservation of our historic heritage. They are propelled by pangs of collective conscience, whose results are considerable but, however necessary, ultimately insufficient.

Work, environment, and culture are ultimately the three intimately linked elements, whose revaluation in Europe might constitute a project for the twenty-first century. The geographic framework is already defined, since we are dealing with nothing less than the task to regain the immense territories which man has already given up or will do so — the social wasteland, or *Sozialbrache* (a term coined by the German geographer Hartke) — on the one hand and, on the other, the lands that are still under cultivation, but with methods that are dangerous to the agrosystem in particular and to the ecosystems in general.

The *Sozialbrache* of modernity is spreading, and it constitutes a tremendous reserve of net product for the future for the resumption of economic growth. In fact it is the only activity, “*che lasci un residuo netto di risorse e il settore agricolo; infatti e con questo residuo netto che vengono nutriti tutti coloro che sono addetti alle altre attivita.*”⁴⁵ Mercedes Bresso has rightly done justice to the physiocrats; for they were the first implicitly to understand that the net product of agriculture is biological energy. Moreover, the famous economic table represents a prefiguration of the ecological cycle whose functioning is assured by photosynthesis through solar energy.

Biological energy is the only source that is renewable and this in a world that is always on the verge of an energy crisis, because of big dents already made in non-renewable energy sources whose use, moreover, presents major drawbacks for the survival of ecosystems. Based on this we can develop the hypothesis that agriculture has all the opportunities to regain a prime and fundamental significance in the next two decades.

Thanks to biotechnology, the cleaning up of the environment through the use of renewable energy, the revitalization of the forests for a maximum production of oxygen, the availability of useful products from diverse industries, the introduction of new crops whose products would find outlets in various fields are no longer in the realm of hypotheses. At a time when Europe is moving toward direct payments to agriculture to augment the wastelands in order to reduce production, one may rightly find the preceding remarks astonishing. However, we forget that overpro-

duction affects essentially cereals and meat products, not vegetables and animal produce that are not for human consumption and that could replace today's synthetic products whose manufacture uses up non-renewable resources as far as raw materials and energy are concerned. A radical transformation of our agricultural production in cooperation with industry would suddenly permit the re-use of the wastelands, the amelioration of environmental conditions and the creation of new employment.

A new agriculture would also be the rediscovery of a tangible reality; it would promise a new culture that would revive to a sufficient extent the forgotten knowledge of ethno-botany, ethno-zoology and ethno-mineralogy. Who would have thought, only 15 years ago, that watches would be made of stone and wood?

A new agriculture means new research requiring technical and scientific skills that are nowadays not employed in the traditional sectors.

This new societal project that stands in the tradition of the Rio de Janeiro Summit requires a revival of all traditional rural practices and knowledge put into the larger context of science and technology. Is one not in the process of rediscovering in the polytechnic schools wood and its uses — to cite merely this one example?

There is no authentic culture without antecedents, and there is no living culture without the reordination of nature and work, the two sources of value.

Throughout human history, man has passed through the state of organic nature, that of mechanical nature, and that of cybernetic nature, and each time he has privileged capital over nature and man. ⁴⁶ Are we not faced with the necessity of imagining a fresh reordination that leads to a synthesis of those three states of nature in a manner that truly assures the satisfaction of all needs, that is to say, from the physiological needs to aesthetic needs, including those of the reassurance that nature is treated like an inherited usufruct that must be passed on to later generations; in other words, transformed and not destroyed?

The necessity of conserving nature is so evident since we are dealing here with the primordial condition for the survival of the human ecosystems without the existence of which culture will come to an end. The idea to conclude a new contract with nature is no doubt a very seductive one; but it is in my view inadequate. Nature cannot make an agreement with the human species: it proposes a variety of conditions that supply regulations for its management. On the other side, there are those groups of people that try to think up a new "social contract" in order to avoid breaking the ecological cycle, in order to "close the circle", as Barry Commoner put it so well 20 years ago.⁴⁷ True, this is a metaphor; but science is ultimately no more than the organization of metaphors. This is why some people think that "scientific inspiration is very close to poetic inspiration. There exists between them a common area, small but significant, in which both of them are verbal creations."⁴⁸

Life and culture are concomitant and societies will not salvage themselves unless they are capable of imagining a new social contract with respect to the interrelations between the eco-, bio-, and socio-spheres. Where this does not exist, they risk the destruction of the entire edifice that has been constructed, not without pain, since the beginning of mankind.

Notes

1. M. Rigoni Stern, *Arboreto Salvatico* (Turin, 1991), 5: "The Venetians have built churches and palaces on piles of larch."
2. L. Brunschvig, *L'Esprit européen* (Neuchâtel, 1947), 7f. Also on this theme: H. G. Gadamer, *Das Erbe Europas* (Frankfurt, 1989).
3. G. Duby, *L'Europe au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1984), 104.
4. *Ibid.* (My emphasis).
5. G. Roupnel, *Histoire de la campagne française* (Paris, 1981), 13.
6. *Ibid.*, 13f.
7. Quoted in: J. Barrau, "Les Hommes dans la nature," in: *Histoire des meurs*, Vol. I, Encyclopédie de la Pléiade (Paris, 1990), 35.

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8. Ibid., 36.
9. Ibid., 38
10. Ibid.
11. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, transl. by C.A. Elton, in: J. Banks, ed., *The Works of Hesiod, Callimachus and Theognis* (London, 1876), 353f.
12. M. Rebetez Beniston, *Perception du temps et du climat: une analyse du climat Suisse romande sur la base de la tradition populaire*, Rapport final Fonds National, Projet No. 12-28906.90, 29f.
13. F. Vian, "Les religions de la Crète minoenne et de la Grèce achéenne," in: *Histoire des religions*, Vol. I, Encyclopédie de la Pléiade (Paris, 1970), 470.
14. Ibid.
15. Homer, *Iliad*, transl. by R. Fitzgerald (Garden City, N.J., 1974), 453.
16. F. Vian, op.cit., 472.
17. M. Heidegger, *Séjours. Aufenthalte* (Paris, 1992), 42ff.: "Once upon a time the Asiatic carried a dark fire to the Greeks whose flames put light into their thought and fiction and gave it measure."
18. J. Barrau, "L'Homme et le Végétal," in: *Histoire des meurs*, Vol. I, op.cit, 1286.
19. Ibid.
20. R. Bloch, "La Religion étrusque," in: *Histoire des religions*, Vol. I, op.cit., 844ff.
21. Ibid., 855.
22. R. Pujol and G. Carbone, "L'Homme et Animal," in: *Histoire des meurs*, Vol. I, op.cit., 1310.
23. *Il Novelliere. Sette secoli di novelle italiane*, Vol. I (Florence, 1973), 15: "The treason of the falcon:" "It so happened that Emperor Frederic went hunting with a falcon, a falcon he loved and valued more than any city. He loosed it to attack a crane, which flew to a great height. The falcon soared even higher and saw below him a young eaglet. He brought it down and held it so tightly that it died. The Emperor ran over thinking his prey to be a crane, but soon saw what it was. Enraged, he called the executioner and ordered that the falcon's head be cut off because it had killed its sovereign."
24. G. Romano, *Studi sui paesaggio* (Turin, 1991), 19f.
25. E. Gonthier, "L'Homme et le Minéral," in: *Histoire des meurs*, Vol. I, op.cit., 1391.
26. See J. Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge, 1986).
27. Quoted in: R. Foussier, *Enfance de l'Europe. Aspects économique et sociaux*, Vol. I: *L'Homme et son espace* (Paris, 1982), 126.
28. See G. Romano, op.cit., for many details.
29. J. Le Goff, *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval* (Paris, 1982), 63.
30. Ibid.
31. See S. Moscovici, *Histoire humaine de la nature* (Paris, 1968).
32. C. Péguy, "Présentations de la Beauce à Notre-Dame de Chartres," in: idem, *Oeuvres poétiques complètes* (Paris, 1948), 673-87: "And as tomorrow's sun rises,

we will be waking up to a lustral dawn, in the shadow of the two arms of your cathedral, happy and unhappy and stiff from walking."

33. G. Duby, *op.cit.*, 107.
34. J. Delumeau, *La Peur en Occident* (Paris, 1978), 306.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*
37. On this topic see J. Ehrard, *L'idée de la nature en France à l'aube des lumières* (Paris, 1970).
38. *Ibid.*, 150.
39. In: Novalis, *Werke in einem Band*, ed. by H.-J. Mähl and R. Samuel (Munich, 1981), 218: "Oh, that man, they said, would understand the inner music of nature, and had a sense for outer harmony. But he barely knows that we belong together and the one cannot exist without the other. He cannot leave anything alone; he separates us tyrannically and rummages in nothing but dissonances."
40. *Ibid.*, 206: "The spirit of nature has appeared in its brightest form in poetry."
41. P. Celan, *Ausgewählte Gedichte* (Frankfurt, 1968), 49.
42. Thus J. Prat in his Preface to the catalogue *L'Art en mouvement* (Saint-Paul, 1992), 11.
43. Quoted *ibid.*, 12.
44. H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London, 1967), esp. 388ff.
45. M. Bresso, *Pensiero economico e ambiente* (Turin, 1982), 183: "... that leaves a net revenue of resources is the agricultural sector; in effect it is this net revenue that sustains all those who are employed in other activities."
46. On these various states, see S. Moscovici, *op.cit.*
47. B. Commoner, *The Closing Circle. Confronting the Environmental Crisis* (London, 1971).
48. J.E. Schlanger, *Les Métaphores de l'organisme* (Paris, 1971), 18.