

EDITORIAL

Giuseppe De Rita*

Every once in a while it is good to retrace one's experiences, albeit remote in time, as is for me the long period in which I was President of the Permanent Observatory on Youth and Alcohol: distance, as our ancient forebears used to say, helps to put in focus problems that we are often unaware of when we are immersed in them up to our necks and hold responsibilities thereon.

In this reflection, the question I ask myself is the following: how effective and long-lasting is the self-regulation philosophy that we laid down as the essential grounds for our joint research efforts and group discussions? This philosophy was already questioned at the time, but the two subsequent decades witnessed a dual and mirrored tendency to tear it to pieces: on the one hand the tendency of the collective culture to surrender to a certain degree of licentiousness in lifestyles, consumption habits, drinking; on the other hand, the tendency of the political culture to enhance the forced regulation of ensuing behaviours, also through the use of every possible legislative instrument.

We all remember, especially we who established the Observatory, how strongly we confided in the self-regulation of behaviours that were dangerously close to deviance during the '80s and '90s. The very phenomenon of drug-addiction, which was then highly anxiety-provoking for families and communities alike, was tackled in an *ad hoc* National Conference (in Venice, under the Craxi Government) with the political assumption of favouring self-regulation as a weapon to be used to save hundreds of youths a year from a heroin overdose. And even if drug consumption has increased since then, it should also be acknowledged that it is better controlled now than in the past, also because there has been a switchover to different substances whose consumption is apparently more "compatible" with being individually regulated in everyday life.

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We confided even more on the self-regulation of alcohol consumption. Wine consumption had long been unregulated among the elderly and it was thought that young people would be more watchful; the tendency to consume hard liquor was spontaneously dropping; a body-fitness fad (diet and fitness) was taking root whose natural consequence was to reduce alcohol consumption; and, in addition, there was a growing tendency to “drink well”, giving preference to quality wines, often of high-end brands, expressing an increasingly sophisticated oenogastronomic culture. Therefore, there were all the necessary conditions to imagine that self-regulation was not only a desirable, but also a viable, perspective. Varying lifestyles were in synergy with a new and more articulate drinking culture; and this synergy induced us to look with indulgence more than suspicion at those who, both in Italy and abroad, proposed an almost repressive stand on alcohol consumption.

I did not personally follow how things developed during the last decade as I was addressing other issues and problems. But if I look back at the approach to alcohol, especially among the young, I must say that the most vivid impression I get is that of a progressive corrosion of the primacy of self-regulation. A licentious tendency has taken root in young people’s behaviour, and not only in Italy, especially with respect to drug addiction and perhaps even more to alcohol consumption (both indoors and outdoors), with their entire personal experience hinging upon the more or less prolonged excitement of self-oblivion (the so-called “high”) that was previously sought through drug-addiction. This makes everything more ambiguous and in part uncontrollable: both in setting the boundary between normal behaviour and a “high”, and between a high from alcohol and the consumption of different types of substances. This creates a dangerously sticky situation which is very far from “cooling down” to the point of enabling its understanding, interpretation and confrontation.

It is easy to understand how such a situation might increase social anxiety and alarm and drive policy-makers to promote initiatives that disregard the perspective of self-regulation and to tend to put in place a more or less compulsory external regulation. Emphasis is placed on the issue of lifestyles with the aim of underscoring that, in order for these to be positive and healthy, they must eliminate any temptation to become dependent on tobacco smoking, alcohol, drugs, and even food, if it is consumed above the risk threshold of some of the body’s organs. And, with a view to acting “quickly and well”, a flurry of social and legal controls were adopted: in the case of smoking, the results are there for everyone to see, making anybody daring to “stick to the bad habit” feel guilty; but also for alcoholic beverages the tendency is clear-cut: from the tables with alcohol thresholds hanging on the walls of pubs, to the increasingly widespread use of breathalyzers, and the ban to sell alcohol in specific places or in given timeframes; while, strangely enough, it is

impossible to find repressive instruments for the use of drugs (perhaps it's only a question of deviance and not the violation of orderly and wholesome lifestyles).

What will become of us, old and loyal supporters of self-regulation, in the face of the winning options of either licentiousness or hard-fisted repression? My answer – and not as the founder and first President of the Observatory – is that now we have more responsibilities and a wider scope of action than in the past. The two above-mentioned options do not have much of a future, in terms of raising young people's awareness: the former because it merely condescends to self-oblivion; the latter because it tries to be “minimally comprehensive”, envisaging behaviours that are highly subjective and therefore tend to conquer back more or less commendable spaces of liberty.

To go on working along the cultural and political lines of self-regulation is therefore a necessary task to be performed increasingly well, unless we want to be excluded from the debate. And I'm happy that the Observatory is performing its task ever better, as can be easily seen on reviewing the enormous amount of material accumulated during the past few years and running down the table of contents of the complex monographic publications contained in its pages.