

# NOTES

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## Opinions

*“Polis genetics”.*  
*Knowledge and power*  
*in the time*  
*of the modern crisis*

Roberto Scalon\*

### 1. “Polis genetics”

The expression “genetic polis” is an enigmatic one. It is a proposed blend of two concepts which are usually separate and at times, rightly or wrongly, set against each other: culture and nature. This blend combines a noun and an attribute in such a way that the element of nature (the attribute: *genetic*) connotes that of culture (the noun: *polis*), which however takes the former. We therefore have one of those cases – whether and to what extent this might be rare and therefore anomalous is hard to say – in which, as we have seen, on one hand the “cultural” noun (which refers to an element of culture takes a “natural” attribute (referring to something in nature), while on the other the natural attribute connotes the cultural noun: *genetic polis*.

The noun *polis* indicates that specific component of the cultural world that is the political community – both the cultural world, broadly speaking, and the political community – which was established by man as a social animal. The attribute (*genetic*) also refers to a part of nature which is actually more restricted, the *bios*, or rather on closer inspection it refers to its essence, the *genus*. In the expression “genetic polis” we therefore have a specific cultural element, the political community, and specifically its most intimate characteristic, the purpose it aims to serve, namely justice – connoted by a specific natural attribute, the *bios*, and specifically its most representative component, the *genus*.

From this point of view, therefore, this expression regards man and his cosmos. Indeed while in the animal kingdom there are numerous species which in generic terms can be considered social, organised into communities designed to ensure the efficiency and safety of the group (and in that sense “political”), only in the human context do we see the *polis*, that particular political community that can be considered such due to its pursuit of happiness, namely the emanation of good and truth in terms of justice, equality and freedom. Consequently, we can

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assume that the term “genetic”, when applied to an object which is exclusively and undoubtedly human (the *polis*), cannot but connote it further in that sense, referring therefore to that term *genus* used by classical Latin writers (such as Cicero) in typical expressions to indicate the “human race”: *genus humanum* or *hominum genus* (Castiglioni, Mariotti, 1983, term “Genus”).

We can therefore say that the expression *genetic polis* describes the political vocation as a constituent element of the human race (*genus*), inserting it into an ethical dimension, thus in terms of the pursuit of happiness and (common) good. In this sense it affirms an intimate, orderly and irreducible bond between *bios* and *ethos*, as a typical trait of human nature. Politics is therefore basically the setting and means (the political community) designated for the innate pursuit of happiness and good – in the specific terms of justice, equality and freedom – that constitutes man.

But to assert this means viewing the relationship between nature and cultural as teleological, and therefore not random or accidental, but ordered with respect to a final purpose that lies outside of it, an end in itself, a *telos*: namely human happiness. Stated more effectively, this relationship between nature and culture, rather than being included in a teleology, actually manifests the existence of that teleology, rendering it visible, evident, historically verifiable and provable. Moreover, it is a manifestation of the truth-based structure that characterises man, both man himself and his relationship with his peers and the cosmos, as two sides of

the same coin. We can therefore assert the existence of a *logos*, the truth-based structure of man and all that is real, that is definitively revealed by the evidence of that intimate relationship between *bios* and *ethos* which presents itself as ordered by a *telos*, that the polis is the setting/tool of. The polis is however necessary and never accidental or optional: it is the political community based on the pursuit of the common good and the happiness of all of us. This perspective includes the very concept of biopolitics, which appears immediately meaningful when one begins to address the expression “genetic polis”<sup>1</sup>.

In actual fact the truth-based structure of man reveals the truth-based structure of the whole of reality, its non-accidental nature, by virtue of which – for example – the human intellect is naturally unsatisfied by the imposition of viewing man and the cosmos in terms of chance/necessity. This hypothesis is reductive, and the theory that it gives rise to could be described as reductionist, namely it entails an intellectual strain, a wrench, an effort, rejecting the intuition that derives from the clear, everyday manifestation of the truth-based structure of reality, which is revealed to the intellect in the human urge for good. And while in nature and the cosmos the existence of an ordered, rational structure is evident, when it comes to humans driven by an innate moral urge things move up a notch. Human morality manifests the truth-based structure of human nature, which boasts a substance that cannot be reduced or ascribed in a mechanistic or

1. «What is the basis of biopolitics, from the jurist’s point of view? It would appear there is only one possible answer: man, not as a natural, biological being, but intended in the Aristotelian sense as political animal, or if we prefer, person, subject living in the polis, and that only attains his identity in the polis (therefore as citizen rather than savage, namely he who, as inhabitant of the wilderness, is precluded in principle from any genuinely social relationship». (D’Agostino, 2009a, p. 255).

materialistic sense to mere *bios*, or as we would now put it, the genetic factor. This morality is evidence of truth and good that reveals the substance and purpose, in a word the meaning, of the whole of reality: human happiness.

In this sense, as has been observed (Allodi, 2003, pp. 97-101), Max Scheler talked about *man's place in the cosmos*, setting out and imposing a hierarchical order on the three types of knowledge and criticising the pragmatic and positivist – in his view typically modern – conception of knowledge. He warned about the ill-fated consequences for the future of man that would derive from the unilateral success of “scientific/positive/technical knowledge”. This kind of absolutization – an outcome of positivism – leads to the corruption of the form of knowledge involved in “the dominion and transformation of the world for our human aims and purposes” (ivi, pp. 99-100), detaching it from the other two forms of knowledge (philosophy and salvation). The latter, as ideals of knowledge, are what give the future of man in space and time a teleological order (i.e. related to his aims, as a spiritual/substantial, intellectual/rational and material/biological being) and make fulfilment and happiness possible.

This article therefore consists in an analysis of the relationship between the progression of modernity – of the modern age – and man's place in the context of the exponential growth witnessed in the pairing of knowledge and power in the latter part of this period, that reached its apotheosis with the mapping of the human genome.

Knowing something makes the object of that knowledge available to the subject in possession of the knowledge, exposing it to his or her control, dominion and action. Here it can be useful to consider Aristotle's classic distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*, the

two fundamental modalities of human action: *poiesis* represents technical action in a productive perspective (instrumental reasoning), while *praxis* is moral action in a practical perspective (practical reasoning). With the former, the meaning of the action lies in the object produced, which may turn out to be instrumental for a purpose that surpasses it and that is external to it, while with the latter the value of moral action lies in the extent to which the action is good, in the pursuit of good, in other words in the service of what it acts on, to the point where they are one and the same thing. It seeks to affirm that, not make use of it, and its purpose is therefore immanent and does not lie in something external to it.

In the light of this distinction, all things considered, the question of «activity» or action, in relation to the extraordinary knowledge represented by the mapping of the human genome (in its entirety), would appear to be rather simple, though naturally it goes without saying that here simplicity is not intended as banality or something predictably obvious, but in terms of cognitive evidence, something accessible to the intellect. The concept is that in order to be sure that such knowledge is put to good use, we must ensure that action on the subject in question, namely the human genome, is of the *praxis* rather than the *poiesis* variety. Such action must contain its own good purpose, by virtue of which man's action on man must never view the latter as a means but always an end, upholding it and serving the human urge for good and desire for happiness.

In this sense, as is known, Jürgen Habermas talked about the “risks of liberal genetics”, referring to the concrete possibility that interventions in the genetic field deliberately carried out by a set of adult, independent (and therefore “powerful”) humans upon

other, entirely vulnerable, dependent humans (human embryos in particular) could introduce an evil for man, in the form of an irreversible genealogical difference that on the individual front would represent a clear breach of individual human rights, being an alteration of that «non-available “natural destiny” [...] that appears to be an essential element of our consciousness of our freedom» (Habermas, 2001).

## 2. Modernity in its time of crisis

The reflection we intend to start from is that the socio-cultural and historical/structural context where man finds himself in the situation of having to exercise moral responsibility with respect to the explosion of the knowledge/power combination, is no longer the modern age, but the crisis of modernity: “advanced”, “radical” “mature” or “second” modernity are all expressions that more or less directly describe the end of something and the start of something else, and explore the new characteristics of a scenario that is prudentially described in canonical and still inevitably generic terms as “post-modern”. It would undoubtedly be useful as well as interesting to dwell on the full meaning of the notion of “crisis” as applied to modernity, but such a consideration would call for at least one essay in its own right. However we can assert that the crux of this crisis undoubtedly, and perhaps first and foremost includes – as one of its constituent elements – historic evidence of a failure: on one hand modernity did not manage to fulfil its promises, while on the other this occurred not because it was not placed in the condition to deploy its full powers, but due to the fact that it lost the criteria for exercising that power. The story of the failure of modernity is

in fact the story of its undesired effects, its adverse consequences.

## 3. *Lupus et agnus, or rather, the outcome of the modern polis*

The signs of the crisis in the modern polis – namely the political community designated in the modern era to the pursuit of the common good and human happiness, in terms of producing high standards of justice, equality and freedom – are easy to see when we make a sociological analysis of the current situation of the planet. Put very simply, it is a fact that at the beginning of the third millennium most of the earth’s population lives in conditions of poverty and hunger and varying degrees of social inequality, and is readily exposed to natural and political events with devastating consequences for entire populations. For its part the so-called first world, as well as witnessing pockets of increasing poverty and marginalization, is experiencing a deep-seated crisis (of which poverty and marginalization are one of the signs), which is manifested in a set of deficits or structural collapses on at least five levels.

1. An unprecedented demographic deficit, above all in Europe, the very cradle of modernity, where the birth rate is now below the substitution rate.
2. A security deficit, which consists in a constant and increasing exposure to political, economic/financial and terrorist events with highly destabilizing consequences, that are ever less predictable and increasingly likely to lead to potential structural collapses of the market, involution in terms of authority, if not totalitarian regimes – of democratic institutions, as well as total material and/or biological devastation, with the potential extinction of the human race as the

- consequence of extended attacks using weapons of mass destruction.
3. A community deficit that manifests itself in the problems faced by civil and political, national and international communities, and in particular their related institutions, when it comes to formulating stable cognitive categories, certain, shared ethical and normative codes that spring from an honest (i.e. not ideological or self-interested) analysis of reality, with which to tackle the complexity of history and responsibly manage high levels of risk, at the very least attempting to reduce risks by eliminating their real, concrete causes.
  4. An individual cognitive and existential deficit. As never before in its entire history, the western world (and once more in a particularly serious, deep-seated way, Europe) appears to be populated with a growing multitude of frustrated and/or alienated individuals, incapable of ascribing a meaning to their own individual and collective lives that goes beyond the fulfilment of physiological and functional needs, or an ingenuous, infantile form of escapism from the angst of life, something which is moreover increasingly sought via the use of hallucinogenic drugs. All of this also has extremely serious consequences on the educational level, leading more attentive observers to view the “emergency in education” as one of the crucial challenges when it comes to safeguarding our societies and their potential for a future.
  5. A moral deficit. The moral decline of western societies – in terms of both crime and corrupt institutions, and with regards to the morality of entire communities – in both the public and private spheres – has now reached unsustainable levels in terms of both quality and quantity. It does not seem an exaggeration to assert that in western societies there are anti-human dynamics at work, namely with potentially lethal consequences for the human race. This is certainly not due to moralistic reasons, rather the fact that those who suffer the consequences of these increasingly serious and widespread situations are the weakest and most helpless sections of the population. The latter, paradoxically because of their very weakness, are then partially or totally deprived of their most basic rights: there is no shortage of examples of this, from prostitution to sexual abuse of minors to the physical elimination of more than one thousand million human foetuses legally aborted in advanced industrial societies in the last century alone, in what, it must be said, is actually the most colossal and successful genocide in the history of the world (and that moreover is still in progress). And the attitude of those who could and should intervene alternates between indifference, fatalism and in some cases, even complacency. In this regard it is very telling that it is now prohibitively difficult to talk about abortion in terms of a morally illegitimate practice and act, so strong is the cultural pressure that affirms the opposite on all levels, viewing the legalisation of that practice as the safeguarding of an inalienable right and a historic attainment of civilisation. But beyond the rhetoric, for decades now the facts of the matter, the statistics and demographic trends, now unequivocally state that as well as implementing an inconceivable violation of the life of helpless, innocent human beings and wreaking incalculable, immediate damage to society – in terms of concrete consequences the exponential increase in this practice, together with the systematic diffusion of the culture that underpins it, has

brought about the demographic suicide of an entire continent (Europe), together with the extinction of peoples and cultures. Added to this is the consequent structural problem of handing down European civilisation for posterity, with its incomparable patrimony of authentic attainments, the result of a historic process of development that has been in progress for around 2500 years<sup>2</sup>.

Now there are at least two further factors that exacerbate this situation. The first consists in the fact that with regards to some of these phenomena (for example the abuse of minors, or hunger in poor third world countries) while Western countries acknowledge the gravity of the situation, they merely attempt to contain them, intervening on the causes only superficially and to a limited extent. The second factor – and the one which most justifies talk of an unsustainable moral deviation with potential anti-human outcomes – consists in the fact that with respect to a growing number of events in which the rights of the strong (the most powerful) prevail over the strength of rights (of the weakest) – for example the action of powerful pressure groups in the economic and financial, environmental and biomedical spheres – the institutions and a large part of the media in advanced western countries tend to side with the

former, lending themselves directly and/or indirectly to falsifying data and manipulating public opinion. This mystification is also a forerunner to genuine legal action in which systematic violations of the rights and dignity of weaker subjects are not only permitted but concealed or even misrepresented as the affirmation and safeguarding of the rights of the more powerful subjects. Among the latter there are particular groups that, claiming to be “minorities” clumsily attempt to play the role of weaker subjects. Today this takes place prevalently with the rhetorical, hyperbolic and misleading use of the notions of “human rights” and “civil rights”, in line with a “paranoid” entirely modern interpretation of the concept of “self-determination” or the “right to self-determination” (D’Agostino, 2009b).

#### **4. The crisis of Western civilisation as analysed by J. Huizinga**

In the 1935 essay «In the Shadow of Tomorrow, A Diagnosis of the Spiritual Distemper of our Time» the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga explored the characteristics of the crisis afflicting the western world.

On closer inspection we can say that Huizinga’s famous essay basically links the crisis of modernity to the col-

2. In this regard, as far back as the 1930s J. Huizinga – a writer whose work we will examine further in the coming pages, asserted: “Apart altogether from the ethical delineation between use and misuse in this respect, there is the question of the social consequences of consistent birth control. To many it augurs progressive racial extinction, with the inevitable concomitant of cultural destruction. According to calculations based on demography, a continuance of the present rate of decline of the birth-rate of most Western-European countries would suffice to ensure the disappearance of the native populations within a few generations. If this be true, the problem of the crisis of civilisation loses much of its urgency, for in that case its negative outcome would be certain from the outset. Why attempt to safeguard a civilisation if the heirs to which it is to pass are lacking? Be this as it may, the fact that science has made birth control technically possible and hygienically harmless cannot unconditionally entitle it to the claim of having fulfilled its function of promoting the common weal and raising the level of culture” (Huizinga, 1966, pp. 77-78).

lapse of its two supporting pillars: reason and freedom. Yet reason and freedom are also the indispensable conditions for the exercise of power, which is the triumphal outcome of this era, namely modern man's unlimited dominion over his world. This leads to the paradox – which is real in the modern context and merely apparent in classical thought of a Hellenic/Christian matrix – whereby advanced modernity manifests itself as a “society of risk”. Indeed modern society is characterised on one hand by the exponential growth of the power that has accumulated in the hands of man, and on the other by an increasing deficit in the reason/freedom combination that modern man should have been able to count on to maintain his capacity to make proper – namely good and fair – use of his power.

As Huizinga underlines, this situation justifies challenging the notion of “progress” – the great modern myth, the ambiguousness of which is immediately evident – observing how this notion – progress – considers only one side of the coin, that of the growth of the knowledge/power pairing, reifying that and viewing every teleology as resolved therein:

When one considers the development of each one of these means by itself without introducing a valuation, this development fully warrants the application of the term progress. They have all increased enormously in power. Remember, however, that progress in itself merely indicates a direction, without implying anything as to where the road leads, whether to salvation or perdition. [...] The expectation that every new discovery or refinement of existing means must contain the promise of higher value or greater happiness is an extremely naïve thought [“superficial optimism”] [...] It is not in the least paradoxical to say that a culture may founder on real and tangible progress. William James once said: “Progress is a terrible thing”. It is more

than that: it is also a highly ambiguous notion» (Huizinga, cit., p. 39).

So how does the collapse of reason and freedom manifest itself? The collapse of reason basically takes the form of *disavowal of the intellectual ideal*, intended as the constant quest for knowledge driven by the search for truth, and the expression of the inseparable link between truth and reason. This abandonment of the intellectual ideal occurs both in terms of the object of the knowledge, by means of pragmatism – which declasses truth to a relative value – and in terms of the knowledge-holding subject, where reasoning is restricted to the confines of rationalism. Paradoxically then, in modern societies the novel phenomenon of mass schooling and obligatory education is offset by a «general weakening of judgment» and the «decline of the critical spirit».

But above all Huizinga underlines how while on the one hand western civilisation appears to move backwards in terms of fidelity to the intellectual ideal, on the other it attributes increasingly explicit importance to life and action on the mind and knowledge. This comes about in the spirit of vitalism, the worship of earthly life. Basically there is a progressive «subjugation of the will to knowledge to the vital impulse», the subjugation of the intellectual ideal – of knowledge – to the basic life force, as the manifestation of power and dominion, together with the diffusion of an attitude of ingenuous and infantile optimism about the future.

The efficacy and meaningfulness of this analysis could be viewed as having relative value, namely that it should be interpreted in the light of the historical context the author belonged to, coming to terms with the major totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, and the Nazi regime in particular. Yet

Huizinga himself responds to this possible objection, underlining how the problem is a more radical one that concerns not only a number of European societies but the whole of western civilisation, at a decisive juncture that would not be resolved with the fall of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. The latter, in his view, represent an undoubtedly tragic but not conclusive episode in a broader crisis that transcends them<sup>3</sup>.

Now it is in this clearly vitalistic forward thrust that we witness the collapse of the second great pillar of western society, that of freedom, with the decline of the *polis*, in its classical sense of political community dedicated to the pursuit of the common good. The “worship of life”, this struggle for life, («Life and Battle») that heralds the return to «*regna regnis lupi*», is indeed accompanied by a banalisation of the life of man, which ultimately views man as enslaved to his atavistic impulses, his merely biological, animal dimension. This thus contributes to the gradual decline of the *polis* as the political order of communal life, faithful to the moral order inscribed in the truth-based structure of man and reality. Hand in hand with the decline of the *polis* is the liberation of *kratos* from *nomos*: power, ever less held in check and channelled by the rationale of *politics*, absolutizes the knowledge of domination, deploying it as pure “violence”, thus in the service of that vitalistic assertion of strength over weakness. As clear examples of this process in the modern period, Huizinga indicates at least four phenomena, which on closer inspection

consist in the profanation of four basic ideals: the figure of the hero, education, faith, and lastly science.

1. The *degeneration of the heroic ideal* is a process that began in the history of western society with the fall of the chivalrous ideal and the advent of the Renaissance. The heroic ideal thus became progressively detached from the attribute of virtue (and therefore also sanctity) and service to common good, as the sacrifice of the “superior man” – both strong and virtuous – devoted to defending the weak, if necessary laying down his life. In the reflections of the German philosopher Jacob Burckhardt Huizinga identifies an enthusiastic description of the advent of an entirely new heroic ideal in the Romantic era. This is characterised by «bold action and self-reliant determination by the individual of his life’s aims», that, as Huizinga notes, «cuts straight across all democratic and liberalist ideals». This innovation paves the way for the emergence of the strictly modern conception of the hero. Indeed it was with Friedrich Nietzsche, a student of none other than Burckhardt, that the modern heroic ideal arrived at its most radical formulation, that of the tragic hero. This is in fact proclaimed «through the complete despair of the value of life [...] completely detached [...] from the practical realities of political organisation and human society» (ivi, p. 144). This is the same as saying that the modern heroic ideal – that is, the

3. “But it is not only the dictators and their followers who desire the subjugation of the will to knowledge to the vital impulse. We have here the most fundamental element of the cultural crisis as a whole. This revulsion of the spirit is the essential process dominating the situation in which we find ourselves today. Was it philosophical thought which led the way and society which followed? Or do we have to reverse the order and admit that it is a case of thought dancing to the tune of life? The doctrine itself which subjugates knowledge to life seems to impose the latter view” (Huizinga, cit., pp. 83-84).



modern representation of the human subject doing its utmost to achieve self-fulfilment, actually lies beyond that teleological order (*bios, kratos, nomos, ethos, logos*) within which the *polis* acquired form and content, and of which it can be said that the *polis* represented a synthesis, the defining characteristic of European and western civilisation (Lenoci, 2009).

2. *Puerilism* is the name that Huizinga gives to the phenomenon of the desecration of the educational/pedagogical ideal. He describes it as «the attitude of a community whose behaviour is [...] immature, [...] which instead of making the boy into the man, adapts its conduct to that of the adolescent age» (ivi, p. 150). Puerilism, as the «contamination» or «confusion of play and seriousness», is typical of the modern age in its time of crisis and indeed «is no doubt one of the most important aspects of the malady of our time». The decline of the intellectual ideal, the weakening of judgment and the critical spirit, giving rise to this «relaxation of inhibitions that derive from strong moral convictions», represent the ideal conditions for this “widely prevalent attitude of semi-seriousness [that] at once explains the close connection between heroism and puerilism. The moment the motto becomes “Let us be heroes!”, a great game has started» (Huizinga, cit., pp. 161). Here we come to a point which is crucial to our argument. In this

advanced stage of modernity politics has progressively taken on the task of creating the conditions for the exercise of that banal vitalistic conception of human life as a game, based on the exuberant affirmation of *bios* to the detriment of real life and the real, constituent needs of human beings. In this reverse *polis*, *nomos* has lost touch with *ethos* due to the loss of *logos*, here intended simply as reason, the intellectual ideal, the critical spirit. The relationship has been upturned: now rather than limiting and controlling force, the norm secures its affirmation; *nomos* is put into the service of *kratos*. The protagonist of the game of life in advanced western societies is a puerile, egocentric hero with an individualistic attitude, no longer capable of taking «serious things entirely seriously: work, duty, fate and life», but attributing «great importance to what a clear judgment would qualify as trivial», and above all treating «truly important things with the instinct and gestures of play». The disavowal of the intellectual ideal quashes the desire for (common) good and feeds the spasmodic quest for (individual and egotistical) well-being; action (as well as time and money) is devoted to satisfying whims, pursuit of the ephemeral, the self-fulfilment of the banal hero. The sense of responsibility declines together with what it draws on, namely the pure judgment of reason and its desire for knowledge<sup>4</sup>.

4. A political philosophy or activism based no longer on the tenets of reason but those of being and self-interest flourishes marvellously in the overall context of modern puerilism, with its slogans [...] It does not matter that mass instinct, upon which it speculates, is not underpinned by pure judgment: it has absolutely no intention of judging itself with purity, because that would be the work of the knowledge-seeking spirit. It is not preoccupied by the fact that by rejecting judgment, the sense of responsibility is reduced to an insipid sense of solidarity with a cause about which it is merely known that dedication is required. (Huizinga, cit., p. 117).

3. The third phenomenon – the manifestation of the collapse of faith in the intellectual ideal in favour of the gradual affirmation of a vitalistic forward thrust – can be seen in the forceful return of *superstition* in western societies. This new form of superstition, characteristic of the modern period, «lies within the sphere of purely rational thinking and confidence in true science and technology» (ivi, p. 165). In Huizinga's view it consists in a blind faith that the tools that science and technology offer man are entirely in line with his aims. This is – once more – equivalent to the impossibility of a teleology (a discourse on purpose) that goes beyond instrumental rationality. As if to say – paraphrasing Hegel –: “if there are questions that science and technology cannot answer and problems they are not able to solve, it means that those questions have been formulated badly and that those problems are not real ones”.
4. Lastly, as a consequence of the advent of the new brand of superstition, we then witness what the Dutch historian terms the phenomenon of *science misused*. This is a critical phenomenon which represents the end result of a process with ominous consequences for the life of modern societies. While there was an attempt to use pseudo-science – in the form of ideology and mystifying propaganda – to validate racist arguments, the abuse of proper science will lead to even graver risks for humanity:

The theories of race showed us an example of quasi-science usurping the place of true science in order to serve Might. In true science, directed towards the devising and construction of means of power, Might finds a still stronger instrument for the furtherance of its ends. “Knowledge is

Power”, once the jubilant cry of the Victorian era, has now begun to have a sinister ring in our ears. [...]

Science, unguided by a higher abstract principle, freely hands over its secrets to a vastly developed and commercially inspired technology, and the latter, even less restrained by a supreme culture saving principle, with the means of science creates all the instruments of power demanded from it by the organisation of Might. [...]

Once more, however, it would be a grave mistake to think that Huizinga is referring only to the emerging National Socialist regime here. What the phenomenon of National Socialism (in its inception at the time Huizinga was writing) went on to tragically highlight, was that the misuse of science is an intrinsic risk of deviation for modern society, and not a perverse exception. In this sense it is how the modern age has developed that has created the conditions for the growth of totalitarian political regimes, of which Nazism (as well as Communism) was a particular manifestation. Proof of this is the fact that the Dutch historian indicates abortion and its diffusion as a birth control practice as the most disquieting aspect of the misuse of science. But we are all aware of the fact that the institutions that embody the modern *polis*, namely Western secular democracies (with the European Union leading the way), as well as the large international organisations (the UN, first and foremost) see the legalisation and spread of this very practice as one of the indispensable criteria for classifying a political regime as “democratic” and “liberal”.

One step further brings us to the use of science to smother the germ of human life. Prevention of conception through artificial means *may* promote social welfare and happiness. The term “control over nature”, which we deemed essential for culture, is not quite applicable here. It is not “control

over nature” but frustration of nature, potential destruction. The point where the use of science to this end becomes misuse depends on the ethical attitude towards birth control, which, again, is to a large extent governed by the religious view (Huizinga, cit., pp. 76-77).

While western democracies were preceded in the introduction of abortion by Soviet Russia (as is known, this was one of Lenin’s priorities right from the start), Nazi Germany was the forerunner in terms of euthanasia and eugenics.

##### **5. Knowledge and power: the challenge of biopolitics, its trials and the risk of totalitarianism**

In our view the genuine character of the crisis described so eloquently and in many ways prophetically by Johan Huizinga can be fully comprehended when viewed in the light of the decline of the modern conception of the *polis*. The totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century are a consequence of this, and also represent a warning for the future. As we have said, the risk of totalitarian deviations in western politics in no way ended with the conclusion of the ‘short century’; rather it is an inherent component of the modern political paradigm. As we know, this is reflected in the analyses of scholars like Talmon (1952), Böckenförde (1991)<sup>5</sup>, Spaemann (1980), Del Noce (1981), Lübbe (2001), and in the aforementioned sense, that of Habermas (2001). Here we will take a brief look at the valuable analysis carried out by Robert Spaemann in his famous essay on Rousseau, recently translated into Italian (Spaemann, 1980). In short, Spaemann examines the seemingly

contradictory hypotheses set out by Rousseau, in *Contract sociale* and *Émile* respectively, regarding education as based on the quest for human happiness. In *Contract sociale* Rousseau asserts that it is possible to reproduce the idea of the Greek *polis* in a modern key, based on the ideal model of Sparta, namely with the creation of the “total *polis*” in the form of the modern secular state. This entails plans for the complete “totalitarian state education” of man, to make him “part of the political totality”, under the unlimited dominion of the *volonté générale*. But in *Émile*, Rousseau, now resigned, acknowledges the historical impossibility of this design, definitively compromised by the affirmation of Christianity. Indeed the latter, along with the separation between theology and politics, or rather in view of that separation, eliminated the conditions that would make a civil religion possible, instead giving rise to a *religion de l’homme*, in which man is a citizen of the universe, and only secondarily, and in line with that conception, is citizen of the polis, by virtue of its political, or relational nature.

Starting out from a rejection of the Greek/Christian order, the only education possible for Rousseau thus remains that based on the subjective criteria of the individual in harmony with itself, as a fulfilment of the natural impulse, freed from any normative code ordained by a superior order, the truth-based structure of the cosmos and man. Spaemann thus identifies the common denominator between the *Contract* and *Émile* as the contraposition of *physis* and *nomos*. Posited by pre-Socratic philosophy, this is on the whole rejected by classical Greek thought (Platonic and Aristotelian thought in particular), and by

5. The first edition of this famous essay by Böckenförde dates to 1967.

Christianity, and restored to unity in *logos*. To return to Rousseau, while in *Contract sociale* this contraposition is resolved by the sublimation of *nomos* – that is, in the form of the total *polis* – in *Émile* it is resolved with the sublimation of *physis* as mere *bios*.

In this scenario the task of politics is that of creating the conditions to enable the expression of ‘natural’ man (the savage – man as a biological, material animal: solely *physis*, precluded from any kind of social experience) in terms of his emancipation from the *nomos* allegedly inscribed in human nature. The diametrically opposed alternative to this entails politics that, as a direct expression of human nature (man as “political animal” or “social being”) aim to free him from his natural state<sup>6</sup>. The former pursues a programme of “negative education” that asserts the puerile heroic ideal of self-affirmation as pursuit of one’s own desires, through the use of the power made available by science. The latter offers a programme of “positive education” that consists in the construction of personal identity through society, as a scenario for deploying virtues to gradually arrive at an elevated heroic ideal, where the hero humbly places his “might” in the service of the weak; a form of strength that also

includes making use of the power made available by science and technology.

Basically these are the two possible directions for the development of biopolitics and biolaw, in a word for the “genetic polis”. On one hand, biopolitics as “arbitrary power over biological life”: the free will of the individual solipsistically engaged in self-determination using all the power at its disposal; on the other, biopolitics as “good government in the service of the human being” (Palazzani, 2009; D’Agostino, 2009a<sup>7</sup>).

While the challenge of biopolitics lies in choosing between these two options, the scope of this challenge becomes evident when we consider some of the main issues on the biopolitical agenda. In particular we intend to take a brief look at those which directly or indirectly concern genetics and its most precious area of study, the human genome, as a «sign of the unity of nature» (Faggioni, 2007, p. 1227) – human nature – with all the subjects that share it.

One of the foremost issues is undoubtedly that of transgenics, by which I mean the production of transgenic organisms using human gametes or genetic material, and in particular by means of the «transfer into the

6. In this regard the dimension of the human bios is aptly encapsulated in the word “flesh”, a biblical and theological term that expresses an attribute of corporeity – namely carnality – by virtue of which the body is viewed as an integral part of a rational and spiritual being, and which at the same time is a particular characteristic of its relationship with the divine (D’Agostino, 2009a, p. 260).

7. «This is why biopolitics is at a crossroads today. It could neutralise itself and its own tensions, placing itself in the service of abstract forms of subjective self-determination, even when these acquire objectively necrophiliac overtones (not only the call for euthanasia, but above all all those forms of manipulating the human body that, ultimately signifying an incapacity to accept one’s own identity, are manifestations of a delusional desire to be different, entailing the death, or rather the murder of the real being). But biopolitics could also finally open up to a perception of fragility, based on a vision of human flesh not as an arena for potential manipulation, but as the premise, a “concentration” of that dimension of good that can be exercised in the order of our lives». (p. 261).

genome of an early embryo of an exogenous gene, that is, from other species, and able to be transmitted to offspring» (Faggioni, 2007, p. 1222). Another area is that of nanoscience and nanotechnology, with their respective applications in the medical field (Spagnolo, Daloiso, 2008).

Depending on whether biopolitics opts for the direction of “good government” or the paradigm of “arbitrary power”, the outcomes of these developments will be very different. For example within certain limits (“specific transgenics”) transgenics would permit xenotransplants, but would categorically exclude the production of hybrids and chimeras, as well as the practice of “hybrid cloning”. Similarly the use of nanotechnologies, the positive applications of which are potentially enormous for man, has been strictly governed on an ethical level by the principle of caution, given how difficult it is to predict their level of toxicity for man and the environment; various different countries are moving in this direction (Daloiso, Spagnolo, 2009). The use of nanotechnologies, on the other hand, would be entirely excluded if devoted to transhuman or even posthuman ends.

Along with these challenges, attention should also be devoted to the risk of deviation that the genetic polis is genuinely exposed to. One of the first of these risks is represented by the ideology of *Transgenderism*, intended as the «political/cultural movement that as of the 1980s began actively promoting a vision of gender identity that no longer coincided with male/female physiologically-based sexual identities, but rather was based on a continuum with the cultural constructs of “male”

and “female” at either end. This movement asserted the rights of all people to position themselves at any intermediate point on the spectrum: be it transexual, homosexual or bisexual. » (Sina, 2007, pp. 353-354). Another risk consists in the *transhumanist* or *posthumanist* project, described by its founder as a new form of «postmodern, lay humanism». Here the term “transhumanism” – once more in the words of its founder – refers to that «cultural, intellectual and scientific movement that asserts the moral duty to improve the physical and cognitive capabilities of the human race and apply new technologies to humans in order to eliminate undesirable and unnecessary aspects of the human condition, such as suffering, illness, ageing and even mortality» (Bostrom, 2003)<sup>8</sup>. With the term “posthuman” Bostrom means a further evolution of transhumanism which consists in creating beings with physical and intellectual capabilities vastly superior to both humans and transhumans. In terms of theory the transhumanist and posthumanist project draws on anthropological assumptions which can clearly be ascribed to “biologist reductionism”, while on the technical/practical level it entails the use of embryo and prenatal eugenics, molecular nanotechnology, the intensive use of antidepressants as well as «genetic therapies or biological methods to block cellular ageing», to the point of positing «the possibility of post-biological existence» (Postino Solana, pp. 278-279).

These developments lead us down the slippery slope of a radical, emancipatory utopia, a form of antihumanism that in a short space of time would bring about what C.S. Lewis prophetically described as the “abolition of man” (Lewis, 1944).

8. Quoted in Postino Solana (2009, p. 271).

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