The blog of
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Nec laudibus, nec timore, sed sola veritate

A Quiet and Peaceful Life (fragment I)

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I am very pleased to announce to my readers that my first book, ***A Quiet and Peaceful Life****, has just been published by Unión Editorial. You can purchase it here. It will take a few days before it is available on Amazon or in bookshops. In it, I explore whether the political-economic system in the West works and whether our authorities enable citizens to lead "a quiet and peaceful life," as St. Paul urged two thousand years ago. I apologize to my readers in English since for now it is only available in Spanish. Today's article is a fragment from the book. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.*

The individual vs. the State: the principle of subsidiarity

The principle of subsidiarity is one of the most important guiding principles of society, enabling citizens to live a quiet and peaceful life. However, it remains little known among the public and ignored by the power junkies, since the principle of subsidiarity sets limits on their authority; and, since power by its very nature tends to expand, it is only natural that this principle should make them uncomfortable. The suffocating role that the State has gradually assumed in Western societies —to the detriment of the individual's legitimate sphere of free action— is a consequence of this willful ignorance.

What does the principle of subsidiarity entail? To understand it, we must start from a premise: the division of the sphere of action between the State and the individual is a zero-sum game —the more space the State reserves for itself, the less space the individual has for his or her own development in freedom. The principle of subsidiarity, therefore, is what sets the "narrow limits"[1] of the State's sphere of action.

This philosophical principle is of immense significance, for "experience shows that the denial of subsidiarity —or its limitation in the name of a purported democratization or equality of all in society— restricts, and at times even nullifies, the spirit of freedom and initiative"[2]. We owe the clearest definition of the principle of subsidiarity to the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church: "The most weighty, unshakable, and immutable principle remains firmly in place: one cannot take from individuals and give to the community what they can achieve through their own effort and industry, just as it is not just to take from smaller and lower-level

[1] R. TERMES, *Antropología del capitalismo* (Rialp, Madrid 2001) 354.
[2] *Compendio de la Doctrina Social de la Iglesia* 187.

communities what they can do and provide and give it to a larger and higher-level society, since every action of society, by its very nature and force, must aid the members of the social body, but not destroy or absorb them"[3]. The State must not unnecessarily occupy the space and fulfill the functions carried out by lower-level social organizations, such as the individual, the family, the business, the community, or private charitable organizations.

In short, the State cannot deprive individuals of the capacity —and, for heaven's sake, the right— to do what they can accomplish on their own. To do so would ultimately amount to robbing them of part of their dignity as human beings.

Subsidiarity derives from the Latin *subsidium*, meaning "help," which implies that the State exists to assist by providing the conditions under which private initiative can flourish, but not to replace or absorb the role of citizens[4]. To help is not to replace; indeed, to replace means to harm, as we see, for example, when overprotective parents do their children's homework for them. For this reason, when, in its lust for power, the State uses the pretext of protecting society from all evil by pretending to be omnipotent —a divine attribute— it violates the principle of subsidiarity and causes great harm to the individual and to society.

The harm caused by the Welfare State

The social experiment that has constituted the greatest attack on the principle of subsidiarity in history has been the Welfare State, although the propaganda has been so constant and effective that I understand why the reader might consider any criticism of this model nothing short of scandalous. Is it not obvious that the Welfare State constitutes an advance in civilization and symbolizes the principle of solidarity?

Nothing could be further from the truth. What the Welfare State symbolizes is the simple and abusive expansion of the State's power at the expense of the individual. Indeed, we must not be misled by the appearance of legality and altruism with which the Welfare State (or "Vampire State," as French Catholic thinker Gustave Thibon aptly put it) sucks the blood off its citizens. Perhaps this is why St. John Paul II warned against the "excesses and abuses" generated by the Welfare State, which stemmed primarily from an "inadequate understanding of the State's proper duties," and reiterated the crucial importance of respecting "the principle of subsidiarity"[5].

The Welfare State separates freedom from responsibility, thereby undermining both. For this reason, Thibon warned that we must ensure, on the one hand, "that individuals are not tempted to shift their personal responsibilities onto the State,"

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[3] PIUS XI, *Quadragesimo Anno 79*
[4] P. BOOTH, *Catholic Social Teaching and the Market Economy* (Lexington Books, Maryland 2005).
[5] JOHN PAUL II, *Centesimus Annus 48*

and, on the other, "that the incapable and the lazy are not automatically insured against their own failures, even if this may entail some injustices"[6].

By separating freedom from responsibility, the Welfare State eliminates the powerful incentive provided by the trial-and-error system, thereby neutering its extraordinary educational potential. Because of this overprotection, society becomes more fragile and the common good is undermined. As Nassim Taleb put it, "if 'antifragility' is the property of all those natural systems that have survived, depriving these systems of volatility, randomness, and stressors will harm them. Thus, we have been making the economy, our health, political life, and education more fragile"[7]. Furthermore, the elimination of the trial-and-error system suppresses the informative function that pain serves in preventing the repetition of self-destructive behaviors. Therefore, in societies where pain is artificially suppressed, no learning takes place, and their members make self-destructive and harmful decisions over and over again.

This is not the only destructive mechanism of the Welfare State. Indeed, by providing seemingly free services, it also destroys the informational value of prices, and through its insatiable appetite for revenue —which at times takes on a confiscatory character— the Welfare State also erodes private property. Historian Richard Pipes had no doubt that "democratic social welfare measures have usurped property rights and freedom in a more subtle and undoubtedly less violent way [than communism], but in the long run perhaps no less dangerous"[8]. The late and great Spanish Professor Dalmacio Negro also observed with concern how "the Welfare State recognizes unlimited formal political freedom, which serves as an alibi to ritually legitimize itself —primarily through the vote— while it undermines and destroys other freedoms"[9].

Finally, judging it by its results (how else to judge it?), the Welfare State has been a disaster, as Spanish thinker Rafael Termes rightly pointed out: "The Welfare State, in the hands of politicians seeking to perpetuate their own hold on power, produces effects contrary to those it claims to pursue: comprehensive and long-term unemployment insurance leads to more unemployment; aid to the marginalized produces more marginalization; anti-poverty programs produce more poor people; protection for single mothers and abandoned women multiplies the number of single mothers and single-parent households"[10].

The Welfare State has been impoverishing the population through its high taxes, the burden of its absurd and tyrannical regulations, and the disincentive to take risks. This impoverishment —which explains why there are fewer and fewer owners and

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[6] G. THIBON, *La solución social* (Ensayos Aldaba, Madrid 1977) 169.
[7] N.N. TALEB, *Antifragile* (Random House, New York 2012) 5.
[8] R. PIPES, *Propiedad y libertad* (Turner, Madrid 2002) 273.
[9] D. NEGRO, *La tradición liberal y el Estado* (Unión Editorial, Madrid 2011) 250.
[10] R. TERMES, *Desde la Libertad* (EILEA, Madrid 1996) 157.

more and more subsidy recipients— will have consequences we are already experiencing, including a gradual erosion of freedom. This gives meaning to the possibility foreshadowed by South Korean Catholic philosopher Byung-Chul Han in a dramatic statement expressed —take note— in the past perfect tense: "Freedom has been an episode"[11]. As the French political philosopher Bertrand de Jouvenel asserted, "as long as the body of free men participating in public power is composed solely of individuals who have individual interests to defend, freedom will seem precious to them and power dangerous. But when this 'political people' is composed of a majority of people who have nothing —or believe they have nothing— to defend, and who are repulsed by excessive de facto inequalities, then they begin to appreciate only the power that sovereignty confers to subvert an unjust social structure: it is the hour of the messianism of Power"[12]. It is, in short, the hour of the new totalitarianism toward which the Welfare State is leading us.

The Welfare State is also the State of Fear, as Jouvenel described with his usual precision: "The psychological hallmark of our time is the predominance of fear over self-confidence. The worker fears losing his job, fears an old age without savings; that is why he demands what is now known as Social Security". This fear affects everyone: "The banker is no less fearful, for all individuals, all classes, seek to base their individual existence on the State —that is, they tend to regard it as a universal insurer"[13]. The Welfare State promotes a Culture of Fear because it is precisely that very fear that allows it to continually increase its power.

Such fear has always been exploited by the age-old bargain of power: "Give me your freedom, and I will give you security," because freedom demands responsibility — making decisions, getting things right, making mistakes, and accepting the consequences of our choices. But what generally goes unnoticed is that the anxiety to find a guarantee of security always comes hand in hand with the loss of freedom. That is why Jouvenel was so categorical: "It is not necessary to prove that when one seeks security, what one finds is the totalitarian state"[14]. That is why, in Ancient Rome, there were slaves who did not wish to be manumitted, since they feared the insecurity that accompanied freedom.

However, the most perverse aspect of the Welfare State is that it leads ordinary citizens to believe they will never be able to fend for themselves, but will always need the State —a false and denigrating belief that stands in direct opposition to both the common good and the principle of subsidiarity that should govern every society. In this way, the citizen "enjoys all the security of a slave with regard to subsistence, yet without the risks of punishment"[15].

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[11] B-C. HAN, *Psicopolítica* (Herder, 2021).
[12] B. DE JOUVENEL, *Sobre el poder* (Unión Editorial, Madrid 2011) 437.
[13] Ibid. 452
[14] Ibid. 454
[15] H. HAZLITT, *La conquista de la pobreza* (Unidad Editorial, Madrid 1974) 83.

The origins of the Welfare State: Greece and Rome

Nearly 2,600 years ago, Athens became the first democracy in history, an experiment whose decline began imperceptibly but inexorably the moment the citizens of Athens began to think only of their rights and not of their duties. By seeking to have the State guarantee them privileges rather than their freedom, as in the old days, the Athenians gradually lost their taste for freedom. "The masses prefer someone who flatters them to someone who benefits them," Isocrates summarized with resignation.

The men who smiled hypocritically at the masses and won their votes were not statesmen, but demagogues who promised that every Athenian would be guaranteed free admission to the theater. This led to an increase in the tax burden, even though in Athens taxes had traditionally been considered a hallmark of tyranny. Edith Hamilton, one of the foremost experts on Ancient Greece, summarized Athens' failure as follows: "What the people wanted was a government that would provide them with a comfortable life, and with this as their primary goal, the ideas of freedom and self-reliance were overshadowed to the point of disappearing. The freedom that Athens now sought was to feel liberated from any responsibility. There could be only one outcome. If men insisted on freeing themselves from the natural burdens of life (…) they would cease to be free altogether, since responsibility is the price every man must pay for his freedom. Athens had reached the end of its freedom, and it would never regain it"[16].

At roughly the same time that Athenian democracy was born, the Roman Republic emerged. The Roman Republic had established a delicate balance of powers. There was an aristocratic Senate (etymologically, "the government of the best"), an executive branch composed of magistrates (whose highest representatives were the two consuls, elected for one year and possessing mutual veto power), and its assemblies or councils. Among these, the assembly of the plebs stood out, with its distinctly democratic character, as it elected its own tribunes. Well, a tribune of the plebs, Tiberius Gracchus, sought to introduce a law for the redistribution of wealth: "For the Republic to intervene to balance the distribution of wealth that the citizens of Rome had collectively created —rich and poor alike— was something new. When the Senate refused to support the proposal, Tiberius decided to break with tradition and present his motion directly to the assembly of the plebs (…) believing that he could not succeed in politics if he obeyed the existing rules"[17]. Tiberius Gracchus would soon be beaten to death by a mob paid for by the Senate, but a corrosive force had been set in motion that would not end with his death. His brother Gaius, also elected tribune of the plebs, went much further in his ambitions and passed a law to distribute grain to all Roman citizens who wanted it at below-market prices, all financed —of course!— with public funds. Furthermore, he proposed extending the right to citizenship, reducing the power of the Senate, and distributing plots of public

[16] E. HAMILTON, *The Echos of Greece* (Norton 1961) 47.
[17] E. WATTS, *República mortal: cómo cayó Roma en la tiranía* (Galaxia, Barcelona 2019) 84ff.

land among the poor. The seed of the Republic's destruction had already been sown. As historian Pedro Barceló reminds us, "the plebeians of the city of Rome showed a growing willingness to cast their votes in elections for whichever candidate was best able to guarantee their material interests, so that the manipulation of elections through vote-buying would henceforth become a common practice in politics"[18].

In his interesting essay, *Rome, du libéralisme au socialisme*, Philippe Fabry highlights the "socialist transformation" that would explain Rome's decline beginning in the 3rd century B.C. At the end of the Second Punic War, Rome had defeated its age-old rival Carthage and had become the master of the entire Mediterranean, but it faced a dilemma —the same one the United States would face after the fall of the Soviet Union: What to do with such a powerful army when there are no enemies left? The solution lay in creating more enemies. Thus, the all-powerful Rome embarked on a vast territorial expansion that would lead it to conquer Gaul, Britain (as far as Hadrian's Wall), Central Europe (as far as the natural borders of the Rhine and the Danube), the Balkans, Asia Minor, and North Africa. This succession of conquests would forever alter the Roman socioeconomic model "by bringing about a considerable influx of wealth" derived from war booty rather than from labor[19]. For Rome, this "enrichment through plunder"[20] contributed decisively to the corruption of its system of freedoms.

A series of socialist ideas, previously unknown in Roman society, then began to take hold. The *ager publicus* —land owned by the state— was distributed to citizens, the debts of the poor were canceled, and wheat was distributed at a price below its actual value. From then on, "the political debate centered on the socioeconomic role of the State rather than on the law and individual liberty, as had been the case in the early centuries of the Roman Republic"[21]. Now the struggle was over who could secure a larger slice of the State's pie, and the successive creation of precedents increasingly raised the people's expectations. There was another unintended consequence: "The increase in the State's influence over society, the proliferation of rules and regulations, and the need to register and obtain permits" led to a rise in corruption among officials proportional to the growth of their power. Thus, in Imperial Rome, "the full panoply of the socialist State was deployed: redistribution, jobs at the Administration, and subsidies"[22].

The Roman Empire gradually transformed into a Ponzi scheme whose financial survival depended on constantly achieving new territorial expansions. When that expansion ended and gold stopped flowing into the River Tiber, the Ponzi scheme —which defines modern welfare states— collapsed spectacularly.

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[18] PEDRO BARCELÓ, *Breve historia de Grecia y Roma* (Alianza, Barcelona 2001) 246.
[19] P. FABRY, *Rome, du liberalism au socialism* (Godefroy, Paris 2014) 39.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., pp. 48-49.
[22] Ibid., pp. 66-67.

Three lessons can be drawn from these two important historical episodes. The first one is that human nature and the nature of political power do not change: *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. When a political system incentivizes the injustice and deceit inherent in living beyond our means —and does so through the simple scheme of reaching into our neighbor's pocket while shouting "equality!"— the result is as grim as it is predictable. As Montesquieu said, "there is no tyranny more atrocious than that which is exercised in the shadow of the laws and under the guise of justice"[23].

Likewise, when such a system resorts to populism and patronage —that is, to the flattery of the masses and the buying of their support with public funds— it sets in motion a mechanism of social dissolution that is very difficult —if not impossible— to reverse. Therefore, the second lesson we can draw from the downfall of Greece and Rome is as follows. No parent raises and educates their children seeking their applause; if they did, they would destroy them. In the same vein, contrary to popular belief, the decision to regard the applause of the masses as the key element of political action leads to nothing good. There is no doubt that a system in which the ruler is completely shielded from the discontent of the ruled runs counter to the common good. But equally inadequate is a system of government based exclusively on the applause of the governed.

The third and final lesson is that when those in power abandon the pursuit of the common good and devote themselves exclusively to furthering their own political interests —gaining or retaining power— destructive forces are set in motion that ultimately pervert the system. The immediate question that comes to mind is whether this process is, in the long run, inevitable. In other words, given the fallen nature of man, is it not inherent that those in power tend to defend their own interests and abuse the people they govern, forgetting the common good? Does power not ultimately become an excessive burden for human beings?

The answer —based on the overwhelming weight of historical experience, Christian anthropology, and common sense— must be a resounding yes. Therefore, a political system designed with wisdom can never depend on the goodness of those who govern, nor can it sit idly by and hope that whoever comes to power will be good. On the contrary, it will take preventive measures, taking into account the fallen nature of man and his natural tendency to abuse power, and will find ways for the governed to free themselves from an abusive ruler.

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[23] Quoted by C. IGLESIAS, *Razón y sentimiento en el siglo XVIII* (Real Academia de la Historia, Madrid 1999) 190.