DIALOGUE BETWEEN SOCIOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY: ONTOLOGICAL TRUST, SEARCH FOR MEANINGS, AND SELF-REFLECTION IN AN ERA OF UNCERTAINTY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to initiate a dialogue between sociology and philosophy, in order to clarify the relationship between ontology and society, subjectivity and the massification process and between the need for meaning and the spread of nihilism. The starting points of my analysis are Giddens' claim that the formation of identity in contemporary society requires ontological trust and Touraine's thesis of the end of society which calls for the formation of subjectivity. In the dialogue between philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers and sociologists such as Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Anthony Giddens and Alain Touraine, I reflect on the meaning of ontological trust, the way in which it can be achieved and why today it has become central to the sociological debate. The fruit of this dialogue is that what was once considered society's role is now recognized as the burden of the individual himself. For this reason ontological trust is fundamental for the formation of a strong and stable identity, for overcoming nihilism and finding new meaning and for the affirmation of the ethic of responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

In this article I would like to reflect on a series of issues that I consider essential to understand the nature of the social-historical period we live in. I would like, in particular, to address the question of the "destiny of modern man" in contemporary society. By destiny I mean "the individual social-existential experience".

At the beginning of the modern era, man[1] had certainties. Rationalization and secularization taught him that he was the author of social order, and believing in those tools helped free him from the yoke of tradition. Science, for instance, gave the impression that one could control nature and with it control the development of the forces of production. Politics had secured the control of national boundaries and, most of all, the certainty of control of the good functioning of democracy. Modern man had built his myths: progress, freedom and equality, and thanks to them he thought he would live in the golden age.

From the beginning of modernity until today there have been profound changes that have led some philosophers and sociologists to speak of post modernity (Lyotard 1979), or of late modernity (Giddens 1990, 1991). Even if it is hard to believe that we are at the end of an era and at the beginning of a new one, it is evident that the certainties of early modern man have been lost by contemporary man who lives in a society where risk rather than security is the prevalent condition (Beck 1992), where radical individualism has replaced solidarity, where free competition and the ideology of the fittest are the new myths. It is not by chance that the British sociologist Anthony Giddens, serious observer of contemporary societies, has mentioned the necessity to rely on "ontological trust" in order for the individual to face deep uncertainties of contemporary society. Or the French sociologist Touraine, who believes that only strong subjectivity, which implies self- reflection and the strength to accept the responsibility for actions taken, is an answer to the end of society. By the end of society Touraine means the end of solidarity (Touraine and Khosrokhavar 2000).

Neither sociologists believe that social struggle is a valid opposition to the uncertainties of contemporary society, on the contrary they find the answer in the individual himself. The individual must be able to find in himself the security the society does not guarantee as well as the integrity that will make him responsible toward himself and the other. For this reason, ontology is considered for the first time so crucial in the sociological literature. A dialogue with philosophy is then in order, given that ontology has always been a philosophical field. I will address in particular the question of how ontology and society are connected, in order to clarify how ontological trust as well as strong subjectivity can be achieved. My thesis is that the search for meaning is what connects the two, and self-reflection is the way meanings are found.

The Greek tragedies have shown the central role the quest for meaning has in one's life and how it can be fulfilled through the process of self-reflection (know yourself). Modern man, and more so contemporary man has

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[1] I use the term man, and the pronoun he, in the general meaning of human kind.

lost the capacity for self-reflection because he has been trained to see in-strumental rationality as the only valid tool for acquiring knowledge. Weber has been the main interpreter of the process of rationalization which he saw as the main feature of modernity. The main consequence of such one-dimensionality has been the loss of meaning and the loss of the tragic, which is the inability of man to reach that level of reflection where the truth about existence is discovered:

> Man cannot return to an immediacy without reflection, without losing him-self: he can, however, follow this path to its end so that rather than succumb to reflection, he can reach his own foundation by means of it...Therefore, in-finite reflection, precisely through its limitlessly mobile dialectic, is the con-dition of freedom...In this encounter Existence is given to itself as a gift so that by giving itself up to infinite reflection, it fully masters it (Jaspers 1986 [1883-1969], 43-44).

Contemporary man instead finds himself in an iron cage (Weber) and nihilism is his answer, confining himself to an existential desert and at the same accepting to be part of the mass society which sees the individual as a small cog on a big machine:

> Today the spirit of religious ascetism- whether finally, who knows?- has es-caped from the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer […] No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance (Weber 2002 [1904-1905], 124).

Weber was inspired by Nietzsche who declared that modern man suffers from the problem of giving an answer to that screaming question , 'To what purpose do we suffer?' (Nietzsche 1956 [1887]).

In this article I will first of all define the meaning of ontology and its link to the social sphere; furthermore, taking off from the reflections of Durk-heim and Weber, I will move on to consider the social-existential drama of contemporary man: being between anomy and the iron cage. I then consider how contemporary man can overcome this social-existential condition, and become an individual rather being just a member of the masses, with a new emphasis on self-reflection and the quest for meanings. These two can save contemporary man from being stultified in a condition of ignorance about his destiny, believing that the struggle for survival is the only meaning of life and the ideology of the fittest the only way to face it.

1. ONTOLOGY: FROM BEING TO EXISTENCE

Heidegger defines ontology as 'the doctrine of being' which deals with general definitions of being (Heidegger 1999, 1)[2]. He further clarifies his idea stating that being must be understood as 'Being in the world'. It is clear that for Heidegger the ontological question of being cannot be considered in abstract terms, but rather in relation to socio-historical reality. The main question concerns then the relationship between the I and the world. For Heidegger the "I" is immersed in the world and understanding his being in the world, understands his *Dasein* (existence). In his act of understanding there is also his freedom to transcend the limitations because he can make a choice and therefore he can make his existence his own project.

Heidegger distinguishes between authenticity and inauthenticity. The individual who is able to care about his being in the world, therefore exercising his freedom, is authentic, rather the individual who accepts the limitations, in other words accepts his condition without intervening with his own project is inauthentic (Warnock 1970). Being in the world thus means both to be determined and at the same time to have the possibility of overcoming the limitations, which is an act of freedom.

The philosopher Jaspers further clarifies the relationship between the I and the world:

> The animal is bound to a natural fate which automatically fulfils itself in accordance with natural laws. Man is likewise bound but in addition he has a destiny the fulfilment of which lies in his own hands. Nowhere, however, do we find man as a completely rational being; he is borne along by natural necessity, which reaches into the furthest ramifications of his reason. In earlier centuries the imagination of men conceived of angels as pure intelligence. Man, however, is himself neither animal nor angel; he shares the condition of both but the existence of neither (Jaspers 1968 [1923], 8).

For Jaspers, one's possibility to fulfil his destiny is also the reason for his fragility since freedom gives him infinite possibilities which could be the cause of illness:

> Here the incompleteness and vulnerability of human beings and their freedom and infinite possibilities are themselves a cause of illness. In contrast with animals, man lacks an inborn, perfected pattern of adaptation. He has to acquire

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[2] The reflection on being has a long philosophical tradition. I consider only those authors who have emphasized the relationship between the ontological sphere and the socio-historical conditions.

a way of life as he goes along. Man is not merely pattern, he patterns himself. In so far as he is merely pattern, he is nearer to the animals (Jaspers 1968 [1923], 8).

Jaspers then uses the concept of psyche for describing the experience of Being in the world:

Psyche is not to be regarded as an object with given qualities but as '*being in one's own world'*, the integrating of an inner and outer world': "among these categories is that of life as an existence in its own world since all life reveals itself as a continuous interchange between an inner and an outer world (Jaspers 1968 [1923], 12).

Jaspers' definition of being in one's world adds one aspect with respect to Heidegger: he clarifies the relationship between the inner and the outside world, putting emphasis on the experience (psyche) rather than on action (caring). For Heidegger, in fact, the individual is 'thrown into world' (*Verfallenstein*) and he is able to make his *Dasein* (existence) through an act of caring for the world[3].

Jaspers' analysis clarifies the central points that interface the relationship between the ontological and the social sphere: first the fact that the individual existence develops as a continuous interchange between an inner and an outer world, and it is in this exchange that the meaning of existence is found; then, the recognition that man shapes his own destiny making choices and therein lies his freedom: finally, the recognition that to make choices man faces infinite possibilities which may cause illness. For Jaspers then the question is not authenticity vs. inauthenticity, but between freedom and illness.

The analysis of the two philosophers have shown that the individual is not totally controlled and shaped by society. Freedom lies in the I (conscience), in the ontological sphere, however, the I is immersed in the world, therefore must relate to it in order to live his own freedom. The relationship between the ontological and the social dimensions is then crucial because it is where the individual can overcome his given destiny in order to become the creator of his own destiny, within certain limits.

In conclusion, ontology is that sphere where man stands before infinite possibilities which require that he make a choice. In making the choice he experiences freedom, because he exercises his will as a project. Socio-historical reality however is where the infinite possibilities and the act of making a choice finds limits that cannot be avoided or ignored since socio-

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[3] Already the Greeks have recognized the central role played by the psyche, also called the soul, in human existence, which they also defined as the place of inner experience.

historical conditions are the necessary ground on which his will can be exercised and his project realized. For this reason it is not possible to speak of man's project in general terms, but to define it with respect to the socio-historical conditions in which he lives[4].

The Greek tragedies represent clearly the link between the ontological and the social. They represent the drama of the individual who is forced to confront the choices he has made given certain socio-historical conditions, that is, the pattern he has chosen for his life, and the unexpected consequences of his choices. For this reason, the Greeks used the word destiny for describing human existence.

Man's existence has its roots in both the ontological sphere where there lies the freedom of the individual and in the social realm, where the constraints are. The ontological and the social are then strictly related, to deny one means to give a partial view of man's existence.

2. DURKHEIM: SOCIETY AS SUI GENERIS ENTITY

Sociologists have rephrased the link between the ontological and social sphere in terms of the relationship between the individual and society. This question is at the centre of Durkheim's sociological analysis. He recognizes a primacy of society arguing that the individual needs society because without its norms and rules, and, above all, without society in its symbolic dimension, man would be in chaos.

For Durkheim man has two parts: the materialistic part and the spiritual part. The former is dominated by infinite desires which must be controlled by the latter. The spiritual part comes into life through the internalization of society as a sui *generis entity*. With the expression *sui generis entity* Durkheim wants to underline the symbolic nature of society. He explains it arguing that the symbolic is triggered by the feelings of gratitude which transform the group into a sacred entity.

Given that it is the individual conscience that can attribute a symbolic meaning to something, we can argue that even though Durkheim wants to avoid recognizing an independent role of the individual conscience, and for this reason most of his critics have accused him of social determinism, he is forced to bring it in as the place where the group's transfiguration into a sacred entity occurs. He does not speak of freedom and choices, but of the in-

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[4] The question of the relevance of ontological trust is also present in the psychoanalytic literature. Particular authors such as Erik Erikson (1963), Peter Laing (1963 [1950]), have addressed the fundamental importance of the formation of trust as result of the interaction with the mother. In such interaction they also see the beginning of a social relationship.

dividual need to be connected to a superior entity, which inspires respect and submission, both expressions of the feeling of the sacred. Even though Durkheim does not mention the ontological sphere, de facto he introduces it because the ontological sphere is where the capability for transfiguration is, which is the feeling of the sacred.

The role of the sacred in the formation of the social bonds between the individual and society emerges very well in his work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1965 [1912]). Durkheim was a structuralist, he believed that, in spite of social changes, certain structures remain the same. This is particularly true of the fundamental connection between the individual and society. In order to explain it, he thought it better to analyse this relationship in primitive society where it was still very strong. The social life of primitive man was grounded in the sacred, whereas modern man has a far weaker connection with it and for this reason where once there were social ties there is now individualism, where once there were meaning now there are pathologies. Pushed by his commitment to construct sociology as a science (Jones, 1998), he saw the source of the sacred in the group's ties, however group ties could have such role only if perceived as sacred. Nevertheless, for Durkheim individual consciousness is grounded on collective consciousness therefore he denies the existence of the ontological sphere as separate from the social one[5]. There is then in Durkheim's theory of society as a sui generis entity a twist that partially legitimizes the criticism of him as being a reductionist. However, I believe that the definition of society as a *sui generis entity* and social fact as *res* lose their deterministic character if interpreted in a phenomenological way, as the following quotation illustrates: 'It is the Sache, res, the question that must be analyzed, as it presents itself, not in its factuality, on the contrary in its essentiality' (Bello 1992, 29).

The closeness to the phenomenological view emerges also if we consider the development made by Edith Stein, pupil of Husserl, with respect to the phenomenological method. Edith Stein, in her seminal work on empathy that she developed in her dissertation, moves Husserl's emphasis from the transcendental ego to the relation with the other[6].

Edith Stein wrote her dissertation in 1911, the year Durkheim wrote his "Communication to the International Congress of Bologna", where he clarifies the difference between value and reality judgment. The following year,

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[5] The relationship between a symbol of the sacred and the formation of positive feelings is also present in the work of C.G. Jung. Both authors share the idea that the symbol of the sacred creates inner unity, and reinforces the sense of identity.

[6] "In her dissertation on empathy, done under Husserl's supervision, she accepts the method elaborated by her teacher and she applies it in a genial way, above all if we think of her young age, to the analysis of the intersubjective field, to the knowledge of the other" (Bello, 1992, 60).

he published *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* 1912. Even though from two different perspectives they both underline the link between conscience and feelings, between conscience and the relationship to the other (Stein 1989 [1917]).

Even if Durkheim speaks of collective feelings and not of a dyad, the similarities with the German philosopher lie in the recognition of the link between conscience and feelings. St. Augustine and the medieval mystics, who also underlined the relationship between love and conscience, between God and conscience, already saw such a link. In their understanding, the spiritual man prevails over rational man, and conscience is not grounded in Cartesian doubt but on feelings.

The same view is shared by a few critics of modernity, for instance Simone Weil, the French philosopher who was trained in the Cartesian method, which she abandoned for mysticism and the rediscovery of spirit beside reason (Weil 1999). The same view was shared by the Spanish philosopher Maria Zambrano who in her book *Man and the Divine*, sustains that at the origin of perception there is the sacred: "There are yet neither "things" nor beings in this situation; they become visible only after the gods appear and have been given names and shapes. Gods seem to be, then, a form of agreement with reality" (2001, 26). Zambrano continues her reflections saying: […] the initial primal relationship of man with the divine does not occur in reason, but in delirium. Reason will channel delirium into love'. Further, she adds: 'the supremacy of psychiatry coincides with the sacred, the divine not yet revealed' (2001, 24).

Durkheim's emphasis on religion thus means for him the refusal of the Cartesian view and of the materialistic view. His evaluation of primitive man, because of his roots in the sacred, is an implicit critique of modern man, who has lost such roots. Moreover, Durkheim, valuing the religious life of primitive man, has refused a linear view of history, and with it the idea that modernity is the most advanced stage of humankind and has nothing to learn from the past. On the contrary, modern man, according to Durkheim, must rediscover the primitive man in himself in order to go back to his roots, to the deep emotional ties with the group, to the sacred, even though the idea of the sacred might have a different content.

The Jewish man, grounded in the Old Testament, discovers the New Testament, and with it the idea that law is connected to deep feelings of communion. Durkheim's reductionism is thus only apparent.

3. INDIVIDUALISM AND THE CULT OF MAN: TOWARD A NEW RELIGION?

Durkheim's deep interest in Religion emerges in the letter that he sent to the

English priest, Simon Deplaige, Durkheim's contemporary, who attacked him on a series of articles published by the *Revue Neoscolastique*. Deplaige accused Durkheim of having raised society to a level superior to that of the individual. Durkheim answered the English priest with a series of letters he wrote to the editor in which he underlines the profound impact his discovery of the role religion plays in society had on him. After making this discovery in 1895, his way of thinking changed: "This reorientation was entirely due to the studies of religious history which I had just undertaken, and notably to the reading of the works of Robertson Smith and his school' (Durkheim 1907, 612-613).

He accused then, Modernity, with its loss of roots, with its separation of feelings from reason, of causing social and individual neurosis. This is explained by Durkheim as the fading of the link between the individual and the group, between the individual and the symbolic. He defines this situation with the concept of anomy; one of the main symptoms is the increased rate of suicides (Durkheim 1951 [1897], 924).

Bellah in his introduction to Durkheim's sociology of morality poses the question whether for Durkheim the increase in suicides might be a symptom of a pathological society. The American sociologist recognizes that Durkheim considers it a sign of sickness of modern society, together with the appearance of pessimism. He concludes that for Durkheim the problem is one of meaning, of man knowing the purpose of his existence and of legitimate standards for judging his own actions (Bellah, 1973, p. xxx). Durkheim, the scientist, has never been separated from the social reformer, who believed that history can not go backward and for this reason saw the good side of individualism. Given that individualism fosters the cult of the individual a new religion can develop which can renew the feeling of the sacred:

> Society has consecrated the individual and made him pre-eminently worthy of respect. His progressive emancipation does not imply a weakening but a transformation of the social bonds. The individual does not tear himself from society but is joined to it in a new manner, and this is because society sees him in a new manner and wishes this change to take place (Durkheim 1924, 72).

The cult of man helps the individual to overcome his egoistic attitudes and to reach a level that obliges him to come out of himself and relate to others:

> If, moreover, we remember that the collective conscience is becoming more and more a cult of the individual, we shall see what characterizes the morality of organized societies, compared to that of segmental societies…It only asks that we be thoughtful of our fellows and that we be just, that we fulfil our du-

ty... (Durkheim 1947 [1893], 407-408).

Even though Durkheim does not speak of subjectivity or self-reflection, he is forced to see that the features of modernity require that the individual himself become more aware of the need to respect the other and to be just with the others. Before, Durkheim saw society having such role, but with the affirmation of individualism he was forced to accept that the same role can only be fulfilled by the individual conscience, without an external authority.

4. THE PHILOSOPHICAL VIEW: THE LOSS OF TRAGIC AND NIHILISM

The analysis of the ontological drama and how nihilism is the answer to it in modern times has been carried on by the existentialist philosophers, among whom I focus on Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Jaspers. The analysis of Nietzsche's and Jaspers' are particularly relevant given that their works have deeply influenced Max Weber's analysis of modernity and his claim that modern man is living in an iron cage.

Nietzsche's main thesis is that the culture of the tragic ended with Socrates and it has meant the separation from the tragic and consequently the loss of roots. Socrates in fact claimed the superiority of reason over the tragic and mythical culture (Nietzsche 2000 [1872]). For Nietzsche the tragic is man's deep experience of the truth of human existence: pain. Pain is the result of an intrinsic inner disunity, represented in the Greek mythology with Dionysius, who symbolizes a primeval status of division and dismemberment. The Greek's pessimistic view, for Nietzsche, is the truth of life (Nietzsche 2000 [1872]).

The Socratic epistemological revolution was followed by another important epistemological revolution, the advent of the Judeo-Christian view, which created a divided conscience whose main imperative is no longer the will to power but guilt lived as sin and the need to expiate it. Ancient man was at one with his conscience; thus, the main imperative was "know yourself", and the main acknowledgment was the recognition that the tragic is the essence of life. Christianity has replaced the tragic with the idea of salvation, substituting the Greek pessimistic view with guilt and the fear of sin (Niezsche 1956 [1887].

With the advent of modernity, another epistemological revolution occurred. Gradually, the knowledge that God is dead replaced the Cristian faith with nihilism. Nevertheless, man cannot endure nihilism. He must find a way to discover new values and with them to reach a new meaning of life (Nietzsche, 1995 [1883-1891].

Kierkegaard has also analysed the consequences of the process of secularization and rationalization in Modern Times. He argued that modernity has left the individual entirely to himself, making him believe that he is his own creator: a belief that has transformed guilt into sin, and pain into remorse. This nullifies the tragic (Kierkegaard 1959 [1843], 147). Anxiety has replaced it, feeling the entirety of his sorrow at the present moment, and his pain is without meaning. The main consequence is madness:

> Anxiety is in this sense a truly tragic category, and the old saying: quem deus vult perdere, primum dementat, in truth rightfully applies here (Whom the God would destroy he first makes mad (Kierkegaard 1959 [1843], 152-153).

Both philosophers recognize that man's deepest experience is an experience of chaos, of disunity, which means deep pain and loneliness which can be overcome thorough the transvaluation of values, that is the overman (Nietzsche), or through a leap of faith (Kierkegaard).

Kierkegaard illustrates how the leap of faith saves one from anxiety in his book *Fear and Trembling*. In his poetic philosophical style he evokes Abraham's anxiety, which represents the acceptance of surrender to an unknown will. Abraham's act of trust is the leap of faith thanks to which he conquers what he was afraid to lose: Isaac's life. Together with Isaac's life Abraham obtains the deep transformation of his conscience: the unknown becomes the infinite, the experience of nothingness is transformed into the experience of the divine and chaos is now cosmos, universe and firmament. Such a miracle can occur thanks to man's capacity to trust the unknown, that is thanks to a leap of faith. Ontological trust and faith go together: "Yet Abraham believed and did not doubt, he believed the preposterous" (Kierkegaard 1973 [1844], 35). Abraham, Kierkegaard says, was the tragic hero who did not say a word:

> He remained true to his love. But he who loves God has no need of tears, no need of admiration, in his love he forgets his suffering, yea, so completely has he forgotten it that afterwards there would not even be the least inkling of his pain if God Himself did not recall it, for God sees in secret and knows the distress and counts the tears and forgets nothing. So either there is a paradox, that the individual as the individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute/or Abraham is lost (Kierkegaard 1973 [1844], 35).

Faith allows for the formation of the inner relationship grounded on the inner relationship with the Other, bringing feelings of communion with himself and with the Other. At this point the connection between tragic and ontology is clearer. The ontological level, being the place where deep emotions and then deep experience is formed, allows for self-knowledge which brings

inner transformation and the emergence of the spiritual man as opposed to the natural man, and the world as a spiritual entity.

Sophocles in his trilogy showed the process of transformation of the natural man into the spiritual man, from inner disunity to inner unity and to the feeling of communion with the Other. In his first tragedy, he describes the moment in which the natural man, Oedipus the King, confronts his sins. It is a tragic moment in which there is no salvation. Deep emotion characterizes it, for self-knowledge is not gained without deep pain (Sophocles 1941 [456 b.c.]). In the following tragedy, *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles describes the process of inner transformation, so where once there was a guilty man, there is now a transformed man who has accepted his sins and has found the deep meaning of his life. After years of peregrination, Oedipus is ready to find a place that he can call his home. He finds it at Colonus, which is part of Athen's territory. Oedipus dies a member of the Athenian community. Leaving Thebes, he was homeless, as a sign of his guilt, now a re-born man he had a home, a community to which he belonged.

Freud, who more than anybody else has taken into consideration the role of instincts, has described human destiny governed by the laws of nature with the Oedipus myth. Man can be saved from it through culture. Unfortunately, Freud opposes natural man to the rational man (where there was the Id there will be the Ego) and in this way he denies the existence of an ontological drama that man lives beyond the instinctive level (Freud 1989 [1923]).

Jaspers has also devoted a great deal of his philosophical work to the question of the tragic (Jaspers 1953). Through the analysis of Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's ideas, whom he sees as addressing the same questions and formulating the same view, he underlines the connection between the loss of the tragic and the drama of modern man:

> Thus in their basic substance they have in common a historical judgement about their time. They see the impending *nothingness*, but both possess knowledge of the substance of what was lost... [What is lost is] "infinite reflection" through which man can reach the authentic Existence. Modern man is left with a form of reflection that is "reasoning without commitment, ... dissolution of all authority, …abandonment of all content that gives to thought measure, aim, and meaning; in this way, having become an indifferent game of the intellect and with nothing to restrain it, reason now fills the world with noise and dust (Jaspers 1986 [1883-1969], 42-43).

The tragic, on the contrary, is the ceaseless pursuit of the answers to questions, and such questions, What is man?, What leads him on, What is guilt? What is fate? What are the ordinations valid among men, and where

do they come from? What are the Gods?, are directed to the gods . Such incessant questioning does not make the person merely a spectator, but a man who is personally involved and for this reason he discovers his limits, his responsibility, his guilt and his pain. Tragic knowledge, as Jaspers recognizes, makes man free because he leaps into transcendence where he finds meaning. The primacy of rationality has separated man from his deep roots, where he had to confront pain and disunity, but at the same time he would be involved in a cathartic process that would make him aware of his limits giving him however the possibility to transcend them (Jaspers 1953, 34-36). The process of transcendence is not the result of the work of Gods and of faith, rather the result of the process of self-reflection thanks to which man experiences the deep contradictions of human existence, the antinomies of which human existence is made: between freedom and limits, between choices and constraints.

The loss of the tragic, denounced by both the philosophers means the loss of the ontological experience, that is, the only one that would make him feel that he knows himself. In the process of knowing one's self, of self-discovery he also finds himself. On the contrary, the process of rationalization forces modern man to think only in an instrumental way, searching for rational-technical solutions rather than seeking a reason to exist and a reason to overcome one's self, one's limits. This is his iron cage.

5. MAX WEBER AND THE IRON CAGE: THE PHILOSOPHER STATES THE PROBLEM; THE SOCIOLOGIST MUST FOLLOW THROUGH

Weber, besides being a sociologist, was also an economist, an historian, and a philosopher. He had a deep philosophical view that influenced his sociological view (Jaspers 1965 [1937])[7]. He believed in fact that sociology's main goal is to understand the meaning of social actions given that man's search for meaning is the center of man's existence. Weber analysed the destiny of modern man looking at the process through which meanings are formed. Contrary to Durkheim, he has never defined himself as a positivist; his epistemological interest has been to frame sociology as one of the sciences of the spirit. In order to avoid introspection, he has chosen history as the ground for understanding the origin and the development of the spirit; that is, of that original relationship through which man finds fundamental meaning.

In his book, The *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* (1904-

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[7] Jaspers was a good friend of Weber. At Weber's death he wrote a necrology in which he underlined Weber's philosophical attitudes (Jaspers, 1989).

1905*)*, Weber analyzes the existential condition of modern man in the early phase of capitalism. He links the origin of capitalism and its early development to the development of the Spirit of Capitalism. He defines it a rational conduct of life that assumes the nature of a vocation. The historical reason for the formation of this type of personality is the rise of the Protestant Ethic (Weber 2002 [1904-1905]). In his book *Max Weber and Thomas Mann*, Goldman maintains that for Weber and for Mann the idea of "a calling" is central to understanding the formation of the "occidental personality" (1988, 4). Both authors went back to the original idea of "a calling" as work done to serve God, and they thought that it was this idea that gave the first generation of capitalists the meaning of their existence.

With the development of the process of rationalization, however, the inner worldly ethic loses its original meaning concerned with the question of salvation, because the instrumental reason becomes dominant, completely separate from the fundamental questions. This has also implied a process of disenchantment that has replaced the meaning of calling in service to God to the secularized notion of work causing a transformation in both individual and collective life. It has caused the loss of meaning and the spread of nihilism (Goldman 1988, 2).

Thomas Mann in his novel *Buddenbrooks* describes the transformation that occurred from the first generation of capitalists to the third [8]. The founder of the dynasty was primarily a man of faith and secondarily a capitalist, while his grandson, Thomas, the last capitalist of the family, loses his faith and consequently his role as capitalist does not give him any reason to live. Mann describes Thomas as a man divided between his narcissism, which causes him to give importance to the material symbols of his wealth, and his nihilism, which leads him to find solace in Schopenhauer's philosophy. The capitalist who found meaning in life seeing his work as a vocation is dead and by the third generation has been replaced by a divided man who even though haunted by nihilism struggles to accept it as his only creed. However, he knows that such a struggle is in vain because emptiness is his new dimension:

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[8] Harvey Goldman in his book on *Max Weber and Thomas Mann* justifies the comparison of the work of a sociologist and a writer in the following way: 'We are accustomed to seing the discourse of social science and literature as quite distinct, concerned in different ways with different issues of "outer" world and "inner" world, the one focusing on explaining empirical "reality", the other on "fictional" explorations or representations of themes from that reality. But this distinction is unfortunate and artificial, especially for an approach to social science that is interpretative rather than causal in its orientation. Such an approach must rely on a broader range of cultural experience and expression and a wider set of themes to do its work'. (1988, 16).

In his hours of gloom- and they were frequent-Thomas Buddenbrooks would ask himself what sort of man he really was and what could still justify his seeing himself as something better than any of his simple-hearted, plodding, and small-minded fellow citizens. The imaginative élan and cheerful idealism of youth were gone. To play at work, to work at play, to strive, to direct one's self-serious, half-whimsical ambition toward goals to which one ascribes on-ly symbolic value – that requires a great deal of vigour, humour, and a breezy kind of courage for debonair, sceptical compromises and ingenious half-measures; but Thomas Buddenbrooks felt indescribably weary and list-less… Because, as soon as he began to think of the end of life as something more than a distant, theoretical, and minor necessity and regarded it, instead, as imminent and tangible, as something for which one must make immediate preparations, he began to brood, to search himself, to examine how things stood between him and death and what he thought about matters beyond this earthly life. And at his very first attempt to do so, what he found was hope-less immaturity and a soul unprepared for death….No, when it came to ulti-mate and highest questions, there was no help from outside - no mediation, no absolution, no soothing consolation…before it was too late, he must either achieve some clear readiness for death, or die in despair (Mann 1993 [1901], 593, 631-632).

Thomas Buddenbrooks' loneliness is so deep because there are no longer any shared values and consequently each person is imprisoned within his own walls. Even a relationship with his wife and son is prevented by the fact that neither shares the values in which he has grown up: "earnest, pro-found, remorseless, to the point of self-flagellation" (Mann 1993 [1901], 632). The difference between Thomas's values and those of his wife and son reflects the discrepancy in Thomas' conscience between the world of his ancestors based on *Beruf*, i.e. hard work and accumulation in the hope of salvation, and his inner world which by now is very unstable because it is no longer connected to any belief or *Weltanschauung*.

The decadence from the first to the last generation becomes very clear in Hanno, Thomas's son. Hanno is reminiscent of the romantic heroes of late XIX century and beginning XX century; for them sensitivity is all they have, and for this reason it has become a cause of weakness rather than a force of inspiration. Mann, influenced by Goethe, portrays Hanno as a per-son sick in his spirit, unable to find a place in this world, as the following words show:

I just want to go to sleep and not have to deal with it. I want to die, Kai! No, I won't amount to anything. I can't even bring myself to want anything. I do not want to be famous. The idea scares me, as if it meant doing something wrong (Mann 1993 [1901], 636).

Hanno may represent the man of late modernity whose crisis of identity reflects the crisis of values of the nation. This is pointed out by Weber and Mann as well. They believe that the existential crisis of the individual and the crisis of values of a nation go together; one recalls the other, in other words they are dialectically related. For instance, values for Weber are collectively defined, however it is the individual conscience that will chose which values to make his own. Neither of them, society or individual, can do without the other.

With the decline of consciousness of the bourgeois of the first generation, the man of virtue, the heirs confront meaninglessness because in a materialistic culture stultification takes the place of the existential inner dialogue for the search for meaning. In his essay *Science as vocation*, Weber underlines the drama of modern man: the inability to face the profound questions of existence: life and death:

> Now, this process of disenchantment, which has continued to exist in Occidental culture for millennia, and, in general, this "process," to which science belongs as a link and motive force, do they have any meanings that go beyond the purely practical and technical? One will find this question arise in the most principled form in the works of Leo Tolstoy. He came to raise the question in a peculiar way; all his broodings increasingly revolved around the problem of whether or not death is a meaningful phenomenon. His answer was: for civilized man death has no meaning (Weber 1994 [1918], 286-287).

Modern man is caught in a crisis of meaning, this includes death. The end of modern man's existence will not coincide with the peak of his wisdom; on the contrary it will coincide with the collapse of all his certainties and the bitter experience of not leaving any sign behind because, after all, most discoveries are temporary. Contemporary man is in fact caught within the process of technological change which makes each discovery a precarious result, thus also making existence itself obsolete overall (Weber 1994 [1918], 287).

Weber clarifies this point when he compares modern man to Abraham, who, on the contrary, could see the meaning of his death and therefore of his existence:

> Abraham, or some peasant of the past, died "old and satiated with life", in terms of its meaning and on the eve of his days, had given to him what life had to offer; because for him there remained no puzzles he might wish to solve; and therefore he could have had "enough" of life. Whereas civilized man, placed in the midst of the continuous enrichment of culture by ideas, knowledge, and problems, may become "tired of life" but not "satisfied with life". He catches only the most minute part of what the life of the spirit brings

forth ever anew, and what he seizes is always something provisional and not definitive, and therefore death for him is a meaningless occurrence. And because death is meaningless, civilized life as such is meaningless; by its very "progressiveness" it gives death the imprint of meaninglessness (Weber 1994 [1918], 287).

Weber's denouncement of the iron cage in which modern man would be forced to live is also a denouncement of the formation of the mass man; a man who has lost a separate destiny, who has been deprived of his own particular drama, whose conscience is dominated by ideology and who is fearful to face life as an individual on his own.

The loss of meaning is not only a drama for the individual; it is also a drama for society which is transformed into a dehumanized machine whose goal of efficiency can see the extermination of a race as a technical task. Bauman in his book *Modernity and Holocaust* (2001) maintains that the Shoah has been possible because of the efficiency of the German bureaucracy. Furthermore, the search for meaning was twisted into nationalism and the ideology of the supremacy of the race, which both found their main expression in the religion of death. Death of the enemy, both outside the country and inside the country. The connection with the transcendental was thus replaced by the values promulgated from the religion of death: war, violence and aggression.

6. BEYOND NIHILISM: LOOKING FOR A REASON TO EXIST

If we draw conclusions from the ideas advanced by the authors I have analyzed in the previous sections, we see that all of them conceive of a strong subject that can bring about cultural renewal: a man of faith for Kierkegaard; a man able to go beyond his time and his limits (overman) for Nietzsche; a tragic man who centres his existence on 'infinite reflection' for Jaspers; a charismatic leader capable of bringing new values and, then meanings for Weber, a man who has man as his main value, for Durkheim.

All these ideal types have one trait in common: inner trust (ontological trust) and the need to find new values that allow modern man to go beyond nihilism. In fact, for Kierkegaard, Abraham is a man of faith because he has been able to trust God; Nietzsche also evokes trust when he reclaims the human above all: man as the highest value, and most of all, man in search of himself ("you sought the heaviest burden and you found yourself- it is a burden you cannot throw off…"), who for Jaspers, becomes a man of infinite reflection through which he reaches authentic Existence. Weber translates philosophical ideas into a sociological view, so the solitary and self-

reflective man of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Jaspers, becomes the charismatic leader, who announces new values and with them a new culture is created that will give a meaning to life again. The same is true for the man who believes in the religion of the individual, which implies a trust in Man, therefore he must find trust in himself.

The belief in ontological trust has replaced the belief in progress. Neither the sociologists nor philosophers, that I have considered, believe blindly in progress, the myth of modernity. All of them see and denounce that technological discoveries and rationalization cause problems in man's existence as well as in society. Weber, for instance, denounces the danger of being trapped in an iron cage because the needs of social organization have become stronger than man's individual needs. The domination of instrumental reason has forced man to live in a deserted land, where the seeds of inner life have been eradicated. Durkheim has interpreted the same loss in terms of moral disorientation, which recalls Kierkegaard's claim of anxiety as the result of absence of the inner relationship of the "I" with the "I"[9], only possible in the presence of a relationship with the transcendental. Finally, Nietzsche's idea of eternal present expresses the same denial of progress and change.

Nietzsche, in particular, is one of the first philosophers who, contrary to Hegel, refused the teleological idea of history and substituted the idea of the necessity of a continuous confrontation with the roots, the essence of human nature, in order to find those values, those aims that could take man beyond himself. Zarathustra is the symbol of such a man, able to go beyond himself; not super man, then, but "the higher man", the man who strives for transformation. For Kierkegaard too, it is not progress that brings freedom, but the possibility for man to choose among the infinite possibilities. Freedom in fact is an existential condition besides being a political one. The man who confronts infinite possibilities and is able to overcome the anxiety that the choice implies is the man with a strong subjectivity. As explained by Jaspers the condition of having infinite possibilities can also bring illness rather than freedom. For the individual to feel free in the face of infinite possibilities it is necessary to be able to establish a strong relationship with himself based on a dialogue with the ultimate values. This forms a link between the inner and the outer world, which cannot be accomplished without the development of a feeling of belonging that is a feeling of communion within and with the world.

On the relationship between the inner and the outer world, I find Jasper's reflections on guilt particularly illuminating. Guilt is the other face of anxie-

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[9] Kierkegaard maintains that inner unity is the result of the formation of the I with the I, which can be formed only through the relationship with God. It is this relationship that forms the spiritual man (1973).

ty. It is, like anxiety, an ontological and a tragic category, as Sophocles has so brilliantly shown in *Oedipus the King*. It becomes dominant when trust/faith is lacking which causes the death of the soul, as Kierkegaard argues in his work *The Sickness unto Death* (1973 [1844]*)*. Guilt is present when there is the death of the soul. In other words, when there is no internal relationship of the I with the I, which, for Kierkegaard, is possible only if there is also a relationship with God/transcendental. Man naturally is in a state of disunity, perceived as sin and its arising guilt.

Nietzsche also gives great importance to guilt seen as the cause of the divided conscience of the Christian man. For the German philosopher, the Christian emphasis on guilt has imprisoned man, preventing him to live life fully. The man of yes should supersede the guilty man.

Jaspers went beyond the analysis of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, considering *The Question of German Guilt* (2001 [1947]). His first statement is: " No one is guiltless" (Jaspers 2001 [1947], 16), then he moves on to enquire about guilt, which means responsibility, individual and collective responsibility. He recognizes that the main problem is "that so many people do not really want to think […]" (Jaspers 2001[1947], 16). To think is to deal with guilt: "for only consciousness of guilt leads to the consciousness of solidarity and co-responsibility without which there can be no liberty" (Jaspers 2001 [1947], 114-115). The process of self-reflection should be carried on at both individual and collective levels. Even though the two are different, the latter can occur only by way of the former because a real metamorphosis can occur in the individual, in many individuals independent of or mutually inspiring one another (Jaspers, 2001 [1947], 96).

A self-reflective man is not then an egoist, but a man who feels responsible for all his actions, and sees purification from guilt as "an inner process which is never ending but in which we continually become ourselves. Purification is a matter of freedom […] the premise of our political liberty" (Jaspers 2001 [1947], 114). The formation of the subject thus implies a person capable of assuming the responsibility of freedom, conceived as the freedom to build his own existence, recognizing the consequences of his actions, which are his choices. This means not only the formation of a free and responsible man but also of a responsible citizen: "For only the pure soul can truthfully live in this tension: to know about possible ruin and still remain tirelessly active for all that is possible in the world" (Jaspers 2001 [1947], 116).

The loss of meaning caused by a culture that puts emphasis only on materialistic needs and the struggle for survival is then the result of a deep inner split between feelings and reason[10]. Such division means the transformation

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[10] Richard Sennet speaks in fact of an inner split between the self and the I that characterizes

of the ontological level from the siege of emotions and meanings into a reservoir of chaotic feelings that the individual is unable to control. The expression "the gods have become illness", uttered by the Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst C.G.Jung, means precisely the inability of the individual to control and to live meaningfully with his feelings.

To free modern man from his illness means to free him from solitude making him experience the inner unity and the outer community so that feelings can become links, ties, and meanings. This means the creation of a society able to recognize that the individual has both material and spiritual needs, and to accept that the second is not secondary to the first (Weil 1990 [1949]). Furthermore, it implies the recognition that new values, and with them a new culture, can be formed only by the individual consciousness. It is not social struggles, war, class struggle that can save us from the iron cage or the desert in which we live. Furthermore, in times of uncertainty and wars all over the planet, the question of guilt (everybody is guilty) is a standing question.

7. THE NEED FOR SUBJECTIVITY IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY AND THE DEATH OF SOCIETY

Anthony Giddens and Alain Touraine, following Durkheim and Weber, have re-proposed the need to find meaning as the way of overcoming man's social existential condition of uncertainty. Both sociologists see a solution in the development of subjectivity and in the formation of a strong identity rather than in a collective struggle. They are aware that it is not possible to go back to a society where community can replace radical individualism and a collective struggle can defeat free competition. They are also aware that the new social condition exposes the individual not only to loneliness, to the feeling of being up-rooted, but also to the problem of a profound disconnectedness that is the cause of widespread individual and social pathologies (Graziosi 2015). Finally they are aware that Durkheim's theory of the formation of a new religion has not taken place, while Weber's theory of the iron cage is more and more present. Even though they share the view of social change, they give slightly different interpretations of subjectivity.

Giddens believes that subjectivity can be formed only in the presence of ontological trust. He stated so openly (1991), however he does not believe that ontological trust can derive from faith, as for instance Kierkegaard believed, or from inner dialogue with ultimate values, as Weber thought. His

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the personality of contemporary man forced to be flexible by the requests of the market economy (1999).

answer is secular, more precisely psychological. He relies in fact on Peter Laing's existential view of schizophrenia.

In his analysis of schizophrenia, the Scottish psychiatrist recognizes ontological trust as the necessary condition for the development of a healthy personality. He defines ontological trust as the feeling of being an entity that exists in time and has a place in space. This condition is what allows a person to be ontologically born, that is, a presence in the world. Without ontological trust the person does not have a strong identity and therefore he will never achieve the secure autonomy necessary for internal coherence and to form a relationship between the body and the soul (Laing 1990 [1960]).

Sharing Laing's view, Giddens maintains that once there is ontological trust a strong identity can be formed through self-reflection. This allows to recognize a pattern that ties his life together thus gives meaning and coherence to his existence. Contrary to previous society, identity is not formed by the internalization of social roles, nor is it stable over time (Mead 1934), but is the result of a narrative constructed by the individual himself reflecting on the events of his life, finding a continuous thread that gives them a meaning (Cavarero 1997). For Giddens, subjectivity coincides with the activity of self-reflection. It is Touraine who gives a broader view.

For Touraine, the main social change is the death of society, that is the absence of strong social ties, strong institutions and a system of collective values that characterized the previous stages of modernity. Subjectivity is the way the individual can face the death of society, which however for him can be developed not thanks to faith but through a process of self-reflection that expands consciousness and allows for the formation of the ethic of responsibility toward the other. With respect to this latter aspect, Touraine goes back to Weber's idea. Weber was the first to speak of the need for modern man to develop the ethic of responsibility in face of the growing individualism. Ethics has its roots in the individual consciousness, while morality has them in the collective consciousness present only if society is strong. Touraine believes that such a result can be achieved thanks to the new culture that is emerging with minority movements, in particular with the enhancement of women's culture (Touraine 2004).

8. CONCLUSIONS

The main result of the dialogue between philosophy and sociology is the recognition that the burden to find meaning, to form a strong identity, to form subjectivity, is on the individual. A responsible and reflexive subject can replace the emptiness left by the death of society.
It is the only way in which the individual can escape nihilism, emptiness,

moral disorientation, all of which cause inner disconnectedness, and to achieve a deep feeling of unity. This social existential condition will allow him to conceive of himself as the agent of his own life and therefore to experience freedom as the will to pursue his goals, without however ignoring the presence of social constraints. As the existentialists J.P. Sartre e S. de Beauvoir maintain, freedom is an ontological aspect and it can be exercised, that is have a real experience of it, conceiving existence as a project (Graziosi 2017).

The reiteration of the importance of the ontological level by sociologists is then mainly due to the new social-existential conditions in which the individual can no longer count on collective agents for reaching a better position but must confront the growth of inequality, the growth of alienation by himself and find the solution in himself. The doubt remains that to build a strong subjectivity is a privilege for an elite and not for everyone. It is possible that, instead, the future will be a repetition of the past, with the masses becoming the protagonist of the revival of populism, going even so far as to pursue authoritarian solutions. Nevertheless, there is always hope that those who are able to form a strong subjectivity will denounce the manipulation of the masses and work for a culture that increasingly favours the formation of subjects, that is, free responsible individuals.

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