

## From Cracks in the Liberal Edifice to the Rediscovery of the Common Good

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The collapse of communism caught the world unaware, though the causes underlying this implosion had been at work for several decades. The system fell like a house of cards because of a congenital error in the utopia it proclaimed, an error that was anthropological in nature: the idea that human beings are communal. Proponents of liberal utopia, however, leave it up to the real actors—in the exercise of their freedom—to define the space that the market will occupy within their society. While this doctrine states that the market is the most effective means of ensuring the happiness of society's members, the market's natural tendency is to expand to occupy a larger space. Consequently, the private sphere is progressively emptied of its content in favor of the public space, especially the market. The general dissatisfaction with utopias leads to the emergence of initiatives seeking to harness the procedures to the quest for meaning and substance. At both the personal and regulatory levels, initiatives aiming to limit the spread of the economic can emerge when the discussion moves on to political terrain. Whether the initiatives concern ethical investment or corporate social responsibility, these are approaches that attempt to use procedures from the liberal economy to address fundamental questions—questions of substance. These initiatives may well pave the way for the rediscovery of a new meaning of the old notion of the common good.

The still-vivid experience of the twentieth century attests to the fact that utopias, those idealized visions at once imaginary, elegant, and intellectually coherent with the perfect society, do not endure (for long) when confronted with the real world. Recent decades were witness to the turbulent upheaval caused by the breakdown of the communist utopia and the political project for

real socialism, while the liberal utopia and the social democratic political project have become ever less persuasive, failing to gain support and, therefore, to deliver on their promises in a more complex and globalized world. The utopian collapse is a given: already completed in one case, widely expected in the other. It is highly possible that the liberal utopia will go the same way as communism and that celebrations of its triumph will be short-lived.

The notion of the common good, long ignored by social philosophy owing to a supposed contamination by Scholastic and Christian overtones, merits a reevaluation in the light of the changed times. At a time when utopias are at the point of collapse, the notion of common good injects hope into societies founded on human rights. The common good is not yet another utopia, rather it is that element that favors awareness of the Other, an element wholly absent from today's democratic and market project but that is nonetheless capable of enriching it and, thereby, allowing it to rapidly meet the needs and aspirations of communities and the people they comprise.

This article attempts to show that human rights—the primary accomplishment of the liberal project—can only be preserved and enhanced if the project can shake off the grip of its liberal utopianism to make awareness of the Other its foundation and cornerstone. For this to come about presupposes the rediscovery of the notion of common good and of the theory of human nature on which this notion rests.

## **Cracks in the Liberal Edifice**

The collapse of communism caught the world unaware, although the causes underlying this implosion had been at work for several decades. The final nail in the coffin was the economic distress experienced by the populations and the lamentable performance of the military technologies, though these superficial observations are by no means the whole story. The communist regime had in fact manifested from its very inception a profoundly inhuman character, one contrary to human nature. Owing to the use of tremendous resources devoted to coercion, terror, and indoctrination and allied to the blind faith of the first generations of communists, it took the economic failure of the system and its ideological exhaustion to allow the population to regain a sense of hope and gradually regain its courage. Pope John Paul II's harsh words and unambiguous statements acted as an unexpected catalyst. By attacking the foundations of the system head-on and denouncing to the world not merely the real system's visceral inhumanity but also that of the project and the communist utopia, the Pope opened a fatal breach. Taken up and amplified by communication

technologies, this message launched a tidal wave at the same time as the Western media was carrying real-time images of another society, free and prosperous, into their bleak dwellings. Against a particularly propitious international backdrop, it took just a few years for this surge to sweep the system away without any loss of blood. The system's organizing principle had lost all grip on reality from the moment that its accompanying terror disappeared, breaking up under the weight of its internal contradictions, the most important of which was a misunderstanding of human nature. The system fell like a house of cards because of a congenital error in the utopia it proclaimed, an error that was anthropological in nature. The fact is that the communist utopia is based on the idea that human beings are communal, and, in reality, it allowed its builders absolute freedom of action—as witnessed by the long history of violence seen throughout the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat. Once the powerful ceased to believe and the rest ceased to fear, the levers of arbitrary power—which was the sole coherent force—disappeared. This vacuum was not compensated for by intermediary structures or procedures because they were, by definition, absent. Nothing could therefore slow the systemic dislocation, which immediately became total.

The extreme harshness of the conditions required for survival under communism, both material and psychological, forced populations living under this regime to adapt. Observers thus spoke of *homo systemicus* and *homo sovieticus*. Such people lived permanently on the threshold of schizophrenia, trapped between a private sphere whose existence and, more importantly, whose legitimacy was repudiated by the system and a public space permanently at the mercy of the absurd and the arbitrary. These people survived only by dint of a thick carapace that allowed them to preserve a minimum of individuality, thereby protecting them from fusion with the social. The difficulties of the post-communist transition highlight the extent to which the scars left by forced adaptations run deep.

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama astounded the world with his claim that the fall of the Berlin Wall provided proof that the liberal utopia, on the verge of becoming reality, marked the culmination of humankind's ideological and historical evolution. With the liberal utopia, history in the Hegelian sense had reached its end point because perfection had been attained and human truth was finally incarnate in reality.<sup>1</sup> Even if Fukuyama's reasoning did not carry the day, the liberal world found it welcome and reassuring, as it found itself somewhat dazed by a victory over communism that was both complete and unexpected. Today, fifteen years after the *End of History*, circumstances have changed, and the liberal utopia has lost much of its seductive power.

The fact is that these fifteen years have shown that the application of the liberal utopia-inspired social model is far more problematic than anticipated and that it has difficulty in winning over populations; tangible results consequently fail to live up to expectations. Furthermore, unexpected occurrences have served to shine a light on profound cracks in the edifice that, at least potentially, risk endangering the coherence of the social system claiming to represent this utopia.

### **Pressure from the Economic Empties the Private Sphere**

Within the liberal utopia, the economic sphere benefits from a wide degree of autonomy. In fact, within this distinctive sphere of social life, ties between members of society are limited to trading transactions governed by market mechanisms. Since the era of Mandeville, Smith, and later Pareto, the market has been the mechanism best able to regulate the distribution of wealth within society. By bringing together those who offer goods and those who seek them, the market protects protagonists from abuse by forcing them to compete allowing all of them—so long as they have the means—to best satisfy their needs or desires. Trade—an instant, impersonal, and balanced transaction—provides markets with a shelter from friction and conflict whose origins lie, at times, in interpersonal relationships. The emblematic image of the *homo oeconomicus*—the person whose nature is limited to an instinct for peaceful maximization of his or her utility to the exclusion of all other considerations—provides a very convincing vision of the society in which the economic occupies the foreground.

The liberal utopia leaves it up to the real actors—in the exercise of their freedom—to define the space that the market will occupy within their society. While this doctrine states that the market is the most effective means of ensuring the happiness of society's members, the market's natural tendency is to expand to occupy a larger space. This is certainly true in reality: Keeping step with the specialization of needs and technological progress, whole swaths of human activities switch from the private sphere to the public space where they are required to submit to the regulating action either of the market or of public institutions. The very rapid growth of the service sector is symptomatic of this evolution: generations of *homo oeconomicus* have tended to favor market-governed trade exchanges for the performance of tasks (education, healthcare, leisure) freighted with, at times, complex relationships that naturally belong within the purview of the private sphere. Consequently, the private sphere is progressively emptied of its content in favor of the public space, especially the market.

The truth is that the extension of the market's role is fuelled by a very powerful self-justification, according to which the only remedy envisageable for possible imperfections in the market consists of expanding the market. The liberal society, consequent to this justification, tends toward a market society in which the individual—an increasingly isolated figure—only ever leaves the public space in order to sleep (and yet, what of Big Brother and other forms of flagrant display and voyeurism?), and this public space becomes a forum in which aspirations for self-realization are played out. The draw exerted upon these individuals by the public space with its market, its cameras, and its dreams of riches leads to intense pressure upon the private sphere, which in turn dwindles and disintegrates on a large scale. This process is all the more pronounced by being fully coherent with the vision of human beings, of average, ordinary people who have no other aspirations than the satisfaction of their individual needs, and, as a result, it encounters only very limited moral resistance that is easily discredited.

In such a context, the idea of efficiency becomes all-important. In fact the “efficiency ethos,” which makes the relationship between means employed and results obtained the primary criteria at both individual and social levels, became widespread within nineteenth-century bourgeois society. The extension of the economic sphere into the heart of liberal societies was made possible by the triumph of rationalism, of which economic efficiency became the most immediate manifestation. It is *homo oeconomicus*'s utter rationality that caused him to develop the market society and to use it efficiently for the benefit of his happiness. The accent on rationality as the common ground between individuals is perfectly compatible with the individualist vision of human nature upon which the liberal utopia rests. However, reliance on cold calculation, of which the economic represents the ideal sphere of application, leads to transactions being favored above other forms of interaction, notably relationships. This only serves to exacerbate the pressure on the private sphere, referred to above, emptying it of its traditional content.

The economic has been on the rise for the past fifty or more years, while at the same time the social connection at the heart of Western societies has dimmed. This observation allows us to posit the hypothesis that the economic exerts an irresistible attraction over the individuals, who, seduced, extricate themselves from traditional social links and in doing so empty the private sphere of an important element of its content. Thus, it may be that this extension of the domain governed by impersonal relationships and procedures (market and administration) culminates in the appropriation of content that, until very recently, was a matter for interpersonal relationships. Such a change

increases the importance of functional communities—companies and institutions—based upon the interchangeability of actors and the depersonalization of their relationships, which are ephemeral, by definition. At the same time, the importance of living communities, especially the family, based on long-lasting and personal relationships among members, dwindles. Were this hypothesis to be validated, the structure of private life, whose protection is the *raison d'être* of the liberal utopia and the social systems it inspires, would be in the process of being emptied of content that would at the same time enter the purview of the public space. Thus, paradoxically, the growth of the market would result in its *raison d'être* being denied the most precious of all treasures—that which the liberal utopia claimed it would protect against external threats. The transfer of private life's essential content into the public space and the market would have drained, in the truest sense, the liberal utopia of its justification. At the center of this augmented public space, we find a fusional individual acting according to the dictates of modishness as interpreted and delivered by way of marketing campaigns. Marshall McLuhan recognized this possibility as early as the late 1960s when he stated that modern humans were going to wear their brains outside their skulls instead of inside.

The spread of the market's domain brings our societies closer to the abstract society already described and desiderated by Karl Popper. In this vision, the cold, strictly functional, transaction governed by procedures occupies the entire space of interaction to the extent that no space is left for relationships. One may ask whether, if such a stage were reached, society would still exist, or would it rather be a social mayfly, such as is seen rapidly forming then equally rapidly disappearing in airport concourses. It is the result of random coincidences of time and place with no past and no future like the coming together of quarks in a nuclear experiment. The question of the very existence of the social must be addressed in the face of such atomization. It is a similar question to that examined above, concerning the sustainability—at the heart of Western social systems—of the private sphere.

Let us conclude with this quotation from Albert Tevoedjre:

The ills of the industrial civilization have their origins in the principles applied at grassroots level in order to increase production and profit: concentration and specialization.... It is through concentration and specialization that the structures of society alter, sometimes dangerously. To this increasing frustration in industrialized societies one might point to the profound riches of many African and Asian societies, where the family comprises individuals from several generations and associates all living under the same roof. The insane live in the village and are accepted and feel rec-

ognized. However, from the moment industrialization “specializes” the individual, every time the economy switches from use-based to exchange-based, one sees the family reduced to its most simple expression. The accumulative society certainly enjoys an extraordinary ability to take things over.... But can the society itself be said to truly exist?<sup>2</sup>

If, in a world where societies of varying degrees of openness exist in parallel, it is logical that the most open will draw toward them members of more closed societies who have something to offer. These new arrivals, providers of a measurable economic contribution, will have no trouble in finding a role within an open society. At the same time, this market-driven pseudosociety will tend to eject (marginalize and exclude) those who fail to find a role. This has a twofold effect: (1) traditional societies that implode as they find their most dynamic elements constantly drawn always from them, and (2) open (Western) societies that become the venue for marginalization and exclusion of useless and isolated atoms of humankind whose survival is permanently under threat. This process is made possible by the far-reaching demutualization of shared destinies and thus of the protection measures against existential risks.

### **Inequalities Open the Door to Exploitation**

The all-embracing rush toward the economic increases inequalities, because it tends to crush the protected spaces that often contain living communities, and forces every one of their members into the role of an economic actor. In this way, the sources of inequalities multiply in relationship to the same cold procedures that govern economic and political life in an open, democratic, market society. This is, above all, true of inequalities in the ability to fully participate: illiteracy, lack of understanding of complex mechanisms, lack of information. This de facto inequality in the face of the objective and universal rules of the game has consequences that are not merely purely economic but are also political and social. These inequalities are as glaring within each national society as they are in North-South terms.

Against the background of a race for tangible economic results, these inequalities in the ability to follow the rules of the game ineluctably lead to massive exploitation of some people by others. For the sake of brevity, we shall examine two forms of exploitation here: that which explicitly targets consumers of goods and services and that which occurs through financial markets.

Every manner of marketing effort aims exclusively at consumers’ wallets. These efforts are intended to influence consumers’ behavior by acting sometimes upon their judgment and willpower, and at other times, conversely, on

emotion and instinct. In the latter case, the exploitation is all the more markedly pronounced, attempting as it does to undermine the calculating and rational creature known as *homo oeconomicus*. Brands' ultimate objectives are the instinctive purchase, consumer loyalty, and the establishment of a genuine emotional relationship between consumer and brand or manufacturer. The undeniable success of modern marketing methods confirms that there are hidden depths to human nature that the cold rationality of *homo oeconomicus* cannot plumb. Furthermore, the resources devoted by business to unravelling the secrets of human psychology—the better to manipulate it—demonstrate the degree to which the core premise of the liberal society—the reasoning individual, conscious of his or her needs and desires—is perceived by economic actors as an obstacle to be circumvented, mobilizing the emotional in order to provide for the continued growth of the market society.<sup>3</sup> This is the purest expression of the willingness to use emotion as a vector for exploitation.

The phenomenal growth in the volume of financial transactions has profoundly altered the manner in which Western societies view their futures. Increasingly, it is the sum of capital accumulated during a working life, not intergenerational solidarity, that is the depository of the individual destiny of every member of Western society. However, financial savings have to be invested prior to being consumed once the age of retirement is reached. The stock-market growth of the past quarter century is accounted for by both the considerable injection of liquidity and by the invention of a service—risk coverage—by financial operators; a service they have learned to provide. The invention of quantifiable risk provides financial innovation with an inexhaustible supply of new services. Playing on fear of the future with consummate skill, financial products have generated a demand for a sense of security in a climate marked by the financialization of mentalities. In the final analysis, the financial euphoria of the past twenty years was caused by the highly sophisticated exploitation of savers by financial experts who were in a position to profit from the manna thus generated.

### **Loss of Bearings—The Conflict of Interest Example**

In a society where the private sphere is on the point of dissolving into a public space ruled by cold and impersonal procedures, questions of meaning and ethical boundaries have lost all point of reference. Furthermore, the question remains as to whether they are a matter for the inner life of the individual or whether they can be summarized as conformity to prevailing procedures. The long list of financial scandals that has rocked liberal society highlights the frailty of its own anthropological presuppositions.

It has been a little over two years since the notion of conflict of interest took root in the public space, keeping pace with the lengthening list of financial and economic scandals. At the same time, our societies are progressively waking up to the devastating potential of conflicts of interest and of their own unpreparedness in the face of the sickness that threatens to corrupt the very heart of the market economy. Is not this the very market economy that is founded on an act of faith, according to which the rule of the free market transforms private vices, notably the selfish pursuit of personal interests, into public virtues? However, recent scandals show that the market is derailed by conflicts of interest, and, unable to initiate the usual virtuous circle, the market instead amplifies a vicious circle that threatens its very foundations. Conflicts of interest are at the center of a paradox that, although by no means new, is currently reaching alarming proportions. The fact is that the damage runs deeper than we care to admit, and it is high time to start the process of offering a diagnosis.

Modern society is ever more complex and knowledge-based, and thus offers an especially propitious framework for the spread of situations known as conflicts of interest. It is very easy for a medical doctor, armored in authority and knowledge, to prescribe medicines that are at best unnecessary and at worst harmful. In so doing, doctors betray the patient's trust in the name of the incentives offered by the drug companies. In societies where two-thirds of national income derives from services and is generated by manipulation, if not by knowledge, at least of information, reliance on proxies and experts is omnipresent. The expert—lawyer, vehicle mechanic, banker, accountant, or doctor—often acts as prescriber, especially in respect of his or her own services. The same applies to proxies, who are agents for the interests of third parties for the purposes of a service or transaction. The conflicting motivations between respect for the client's mandate and concern for one's own turnover is as old as the profession itself.

The conflict of interest is not only a matter that affects individuals, it concerns business too: the bank that generates additional commission income by churning client portfolios more than is necessary; the manufacturer of cars or other products that artificially limits the lifespan of a product in order to force clients to make a further purchase when the time comes; the food or cigarette manufacturer whose products, unbeknownst to customers, include a dependency-creating ingredient.

The truth is that conflicts of interest comprise situations where one and the same actor (person or business) is caught between conflicting loyalties: loyalty to a function or mission and loyalty to personal and or corporate pecuniary

interests. Looked at in greater detail, the issue is in fact one of a conflict of motivations—one material, the other not—rather than a strict conflict of interest in the pecuniary sense. Thus, the notion of the conflict of interest is revealed as a euphemism used to disguise an ethical dilemma that lies at the true heart of the problem. The contemporary malaise has its origins in the fact that by relying on ethics to suppress ever more widespread conflicts of interest, we are recognizing, although not wanting to admit, the limits of the market project. This project would have us believe that it can do without ethics, proposing that they be replaced by the arithmetic of self-interest, which alone is sufficient to ensure the social optimum.

The agency theory, the cornerstone of the modern economy, views remuneration as a function of results as the only way in which the interests of principal and agent can be made to coincide. A large portion of the current debate surrounding corporate governance takes its inspiration from agency theory. However, all these solutions rely on self-interest, and, as such, they reduce the individual to a utility-maximizing servomechanism devoid of all ethical scruples. Such a person becomes easy to manipulate because all that is required is to set up appropriate structures for remuneration. In such a context, it is the paying body that commands and that holds all the rights. The agent, following the example of the head of a major multinational, will simply take a bow and hasten to pocket the check—perhaps for a huge sum—offered in return for blind loyalty. When applied to politics, the logic of self-interest can justify every corrupt practice. In the economic sphere, the recent scandals have shown that when left to its own devices the economy can become a devastating force, not only against itself but against society as a whole.

The considerations above tend to suggest that the liberal society's organizing principle is not as autonomous as the utopian ideal would have us believe. Taken to extremes, this principle could release the seeds of destruction capable of sapping the foundation of the social system. There comes a point in the system's evolution where the primacy of procedure over substance ceases to be the source from which the system derives its coherency, becoming instead the entrance through which entropy dislocates the self-same system.

## **Disenchantment with Cold Procedures**

### **Learning from Failures**

The communist experiment came to an end because its project imagined that all shared an identical vision of human nature, whereas the liberal system is shaking because, as Auguste Comte tells us, it is based upon a rational premise of the superiority of cold, impersonal market procedures and of deliberative democracy. Where communism banked on the organic unity of the human race, liberalism, on the other hand, posits the absolute autonomy of every individual.

There are structural similarities between the two utopias discussed in this article, the most important being their anthropocentric character. Logically, it is to these respective anthropological premises that we should look for the causes of failure. In the words of Russian philosopher Julij Szejder, we are witnessing a double anthropological catastrophe. This catastrophe is caused by the fact that both systems attempted to denature mankind—with varying degrees of wholly ephemeral success. The systems falter because once a certain stage is reached, human nature strikes back. The communist system collapsed because it failed to spring the lock of a private sphere whose existence it denied. As for the liberal system, it is faltering because the private sphere, whose defense was its purpose, has dissolved at the same time as the public space, governed by its cold and impersonal procedures, fails to meet the needs of individuals who are isolated and utterly unequal.

### **The Emergence of a New Organizing Principle— Concern for the Other**

The dissatisfaction that emerges as a result of the over-proceduralization of Western societies leads to the emergence of initiatives that are seeking to harness such procedures to the quest for meaning and substance. At both the personal and regulatory levels, initiatives aiming to limit the spread of the economic can emerge when the discussion moves on to political terrain. Whether the initiatives concern ethical investment or corporate social responsibility, these are approaches that attempt to use procedures from the liberal economy to address fundamental questions—questions of substance. In the interests of brevity, we shall only look at the solidarity-based economy here.<sup>4</sup>

It is no easy task to categorize the loose conglomeration that is the solidarity-based economy, encompassing as it does long-established initiatives such as fair trade and microfinance, and extending all the way to attempts to set up a

LETS (Local Exchange Trading Scheme). What these have in common is a desire to create an alternative to the economism issuing from the liberal utopia. In substance, the solidarity-based economy perceives the economic act (purchase, sale, loan, and so forth) as inseparable from its social consequence—known to economists as externalities. Consequently, the objective of the solidarity-based economy is to promote acts and modalities of action that give rise to societally positive externalities. For some, this involves cultivating a just price, irrespective of the market. This means a price that provides the main players—notably small-scale farmers from the Southern Hemisphere—with the wherewithal to live a life in dignity. For others, the objective is to seek to include those excluded from access to credit and other financial measures. Awareness of the Other as persons, with personal needs, weaknesses, and possibilities, constitutes the fundamental characteristic of the solidarity-based economy and allows an easy contrast to be made with the impersonal desires of the liberal-market economy. Whereas the liberal utopia proposes that every externality be subsumed into an *ad hoc* market, the solidarity-based economy offers a wholly different vision, affirming that it is the transaction itself that is required to take the externalities into account.

Unlike the traditional-market economy, for which procedure is all, the solidarity-based economy introduces the substantial into the heart of economic activity. Solidarity-based economy initiatives seek to modify rules and mechanisms because of the effects a transaction exerts upon its protagonists. This represents a radical inversion of the uncompromising proceduralist approach. Through its desire to use economic transactions as a seedbed in which to nurture relationships, the solidarity-based economy enriches and humanizes the premises of the liberal utopia.

### **The Common Good in the Modern World**

The term *common good* includes the word *good*. The expression is, therefore, directly connected to the ultimate moral category, that of “good,” the human nature’s stimulus and spur, at least according to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Good is sometimes synonymous with “happiness,” in the sense where the achievement thereof crowns the fulfillment and accomplishment of human nature or purpose. The use of the word *good* in the expression *common good* is a way of making explicit the premise according to which its precise content cannot be described, nor socially constructed, without fundamental consideration of human beings of that which they seek to accomplish during their existence and of the true sources of their ultimate happiness. Good, in this sense, is an all-encompassing notion that cannot be divided into specific elements. A

further difficulty arises from the fact that good can only be understood when referenced to evil. However, evil dropped off social scientists' radar screens at approximately the same time as triumphant rationalism was banishing references to good.<sup>5</sup>

In qualifying *good* by the addition of the adjective *common*, the expression is focused on the fact that mankind is unable to attain good in total solitude and isolation and that, for an individual and personal being, good of necessity involves the social and the community.

Whatever the precise definition and institutional arrangement, the notion of the common good expresses the desire of a group of people to lead a happy life. It hints at the tension that is possible between the common good's two poles: that of the group, and that of each individual member. From its inception, political philosophy has always set out plans for the perfect society although without ever offering any definitive solution. Approaches to the subject have varied down the centuries, as Garcia Estebanez tells us:

The traditional method [he says referring to Aristotle, Plato, and Saint Thomas] started from the idea of a perfect society and defined individual interests according to this idea. The modern method (Habermas, Nozick, or Rawls) adopts the opposite perspective, taking individual interests as the starting point in its conception of the perfect society. Individuals may then present, compare, and reconcile these interests by projecting them onto a social model upon which they are agreed.<sup>6</sup>

No matter the exact definition, writers who have considered the subject agree, implicitly at least, on the fact that communal living is a necessity from both the material stance (to guard against poverty) and the social stance (to guard against solitude). Furthermore, is community life already a good in itself, as Hollenbach tells us? "One of the key elements in the common good of a community or society, therefore, is the good of being a community or society at all. This shared good is immanent within the relationships that bring this community or society into being."<sup>7</sup>

Community life, and by extension the common good, can be grounded in many different things. Modern thinkers emphasize the deliberative procedure that allows community members to reach a consensus. Taking the actual operation of American society as an example, Hollenbach shows that in reality the public sphere for debate and confrontation has been emptied of its content, leaving in its place a widespread indifference that is barely hidden by the principle of tolerance. Tolerance is therefore the atrophied, modern version of the common good, one that threatens the very existence of American society. The

fact is, Hollenbach goes on to state, that tolerance is not enough to meet contemporary social challenges, notably those posed by the urban poor in the United States or by globalization. This situation has come to pass because lying at the center of these phenomena are relationships of economic and social interdependence established over decades. However, tolerance, “an ethos whose primary values are independence and autonomy, is not adequate to address this new interdependence.”<sup>8</sup>

A common good that restricts itself to tolerance alone therefore demands not merely that the rich and socialized unblinkingly tolerate the poverty and solitude of the excluded, something that is made easier because they do not rub shoulders together, but additionally that the excluded tolerate the opulence of the rich that the media displays for all the world to see. Thus, if the common good resides only in the institution of tolerance and the procedures that render it operational, community life—and thus society—is exposed to the risk of breakdown occurring at the point where the tolerance of some becomes intolerable to others. Put another way, and mindful of the modern world, the procedure for guaranteeing tolerance alone, no matter how sophisticated, is an inadequate basis for the common good. It has to be supported and complemented by solidarity in daily life.

One of the most important meanings of the concept of common good, therefore, is that it is the good that comes into existence in a community of solidarity among active and equal agents. The common good, understood in this way, is not extrinsic to the relationships that prevail among members and sub-communities of a society. When these relationships form reciprocal ties among equals, solidarity achieved is in itself a good that cannot otherwise exist.... When society not only falls short of the level of solidarity it could reasonably aspire to but is shaped by institutions that exclude some members from agency altogether, the resulting interdependence becomes a ... “common bad” that affects the quality of life of all members, especially of those who are excluded.<sup>9</sup>

The common good therefore supposes both interpersonal interactions, a good in itself—in the pattern of Aristotelian political friendship—and a reasonable measure of material solidarity, a quality that fellowship in any case requires. The common good is not thus a precise institutional project, it is rather a set of principles for life within society. These principles relate to two spheres of need common to all human beings: material needs and relational needs.

The common good demands the involvement of all, in the respect of individual freedom, and in establishing institutions capable of regulating the social life (contributive justice) in accordance with the principles of justice and solidarity. Nevertheless, in societies organized like ours, there can be no question of limiting the quest for the common good to the establishment of an institutional architecture capable of a degree of material solidarity through the distribution of wealth (distributive justice). The common good also requires that a space be provided within all interpersonal ties, including economic, for reciprocated fellowship and concern for the Other (commutative justice). The fact is that the common good, to use the terms of Etienne Perrot's elegant definition,<sup>10</sup> lies in the relationship between the individual good and the community good; it cannot be reduced to the economists' concept of general interest (the sum of individual goods) nor to a social good. It is therefore not simply yet another utopia predicated on a precise societal project, it is instead a horizon, a call to embrace new ideas, above all to go beyond the cold proceduralism of liberalism.<sup>11</sup>

In their separate fashions, both of the utopian visions discussed in this article have distorted the notion of the common good. The liberal utopia fixates on the common element, based on the idea that the good will emerge naturally once the public space has been reordered. Communism never really came to grips with the common, starting as it did from the idea that it would naturally prevail once the good had been attained. Today, at a time when the ruins of an inhuman system are of interest to but a very few, it is vital for us to learn the lessons of communism's unprecedented collapse so that we may enrich the liberal society's organizing principle by changing its emphasis so that it takes better account of the common good. Without a change of emphasis, the superficial cracks in the system that are already apparent today risk propagating to become the fatal fractures of tomorrow.

## Notes

1. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 415.
2. Albert Tevoedjre, *La pauvreté richesse des peuples (Poverty: Wealth of Mankind)* Les Editions Ouvrières, coll. Economie et Humanisme (Paris, 1978), 33.
3. James B. Twitchell, *Lead Us into Temptation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 210.

4. For ethical investment, see Paul H. Dembinski, Jean-Michel Bonvin, Edourd Dommen, and François-Marie Monnet, “The Ethical Foundations of Responsible Investment,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 48 (2003): 203–13.
5. In this regard, see the work of Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Avons-nous envoyé le mal?* (Paris: Bayard, 2003), and, more recently, that of Jean-Claude Guillebaud, *Le goût de l’avenir* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2003).
6. Emilio Garcia Estebanez, “Le bien commun dans une perspective thomiste,” in *Le bien commun: approches philosophiques et politiques* (Brussels: Espaces, 1997), cahier 2, 24.
7. David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics: New Studies in Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 9.
8. *Ibid.*, 42.
9. *Ibid.*, 189.
10. Etienne Perrot, *La séduction de l’argent* (Paris: Desclée de Brouver, 1996).
11. Jean-Claude Lavigne, “Le bien commun revisité,” in *Le bien commun: dialogue entre les religions* (Brussels: Espaces, 1997), notebook 2b, 59.

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