

IS SCIENTISM A THREAT TO THE OBJECTIVES OF THE ECONOMY AND ECONOMIC POLICY?

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The paper presented by Llach and Crespo, is highly stimulating due to the objective of the study in itself and the courage shown in the adoption of a posture which, while by no means maximalist, can be said to go against the dominant stream of thought, both in the most pretentious research circles and universities in general. In these circles can be clearly seen the very real subordination of knowledge and its transmission, as well as the formation and dissemination of culture to the worship of scientific discovery which, often being sterile can only find justification within itself and the introspective satisfaction of the research activity in itself. In all this we find a common denominator of an anthropological nature, which might be defined as the loss of the existential significance of the human person in both singular and social dimensions.

Without in any way detracting from the merits of the paper and stressing my admiration for its underlying rigour, I dare to point out that, while the doctrinal line running through it is, in all probability, present in the majority of those who devote time and enthusiasm to economic research, it is fair to give recognition to the authors for taking the risky decision to confront with such clarity a matter of such complexity.

With Respect to the Scientific Nature of Economics and its Objectives

It is difficult to dispute the statement made in the paper that quite a few, perhaps most, economic researchers are more committed to highlighting the scientific image of their activity than to solving the economic problems facing humanity. This involves, on the one hand, the childish reaction to a certain unjustified feeling of inferiority with respect to the experimental sciences and their methodologies, and on the other hand, losing sight of the

objective common to all science and all knowledge – that of serving the human person.

With respect to the former, the exaggerated interest in forming part of what are known as *the sciences*, it is worth remembering, with a certain nostalgia, the words of J.A. Schumpeter. The author asks:

But is Economics a Science? The answer ... depends of course on what we mean by 'science'... If we define science according to the slogan 'Science is Measurement', than economics is scientific in some of its parts and not in others. There should be no susceptibilities concerning 'rank' or 'dignity' about this: to call a field a science should not spell either a compliment or the reverse.¹

Or is it the case that sciences, the natural sciences for instance, should be considered superior to philosophy and theology, which are the synthesis and basis of all knowledge? What is true, however, is that the thirst for recognition as a science has led to a desire for measurement in fields where this can only be attempted with enormous difficulty and with such limitations as to render sterile the results obtained. One of the main reasons for economic research's loss of social credibility resides in this misguided desire to dress it in scientific clothing, even where this is impossible and this ultimately leads to the self-complacency of the model designed.

It is also necessary to highlight a loss of direction with respect to the ultimate aim of scientific research and even that of science itself, which is none other than to serve man and his dignity. The recognition of this should be the driving force behind all scientific effort. If nuclear and chemical weapons were worthy of special attention and rejection at one time, now there are many weapons of a non-material nature which humiliate and enslave people: materialism, consumerism, hedonism, the trafficking of human beings, drug trafficking, etc. Economists could also make themselves heard in this respect rather than hiding behind the jargon of structure and perturbing euphemisms.

John Paul II established that:

Because knowledge is meant to serve the human person, research ... is always carried out with a concern for the *ethical* and *moral implications* both of its methods and of its discoveries.²

¹ Joseph A. Schumpeter, 'History of Economic Analysis'. George Allen & Unwin Ltd. Sixth Printing. London 1967, pp. 6-7. First Published in Great Britain 1954.

² John Paul II, 'Apostolic Constitution of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on Catholic Universities *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*'. Rome, 15.08.1990, num. 18.

He had already stated before UNESCO that

It is essential that we be convinced of the priority of the ethical over the technical, of the primacy of the person over things, of the superiority of the spirit over matter.³

These are the basic postulates of an anthropological order if we are to have research that serves humanity and does not lose itself in arrogant vacuum constructions.

It is said of A. Marshall that, in his study, just opposite where he worked, he had an oil painting of a beggar and that when he raised his eyes and contemplate that image, he concluded that his work was devoid of sense as long as such beggars continued to exist. A very clear vision for an economic science committed to the real problems of the world, perhaps the world's greatest problems, those of poverty and exclusion.

Consistent with this vision are the words he uses in the prologue of the first English edition of his 'Principles of Economics', in relation to the function of economics.

... the function of the science is to collect, arrange and analyse economic facts, and to apply the knowledge, gained by observation and experience, in determining what are likely to be the immediate and ultimate effects of various groups of causes; and it is held that the Laws of Economics are statements of tendencies expressed in the indicative mood, and not ethical precepts in the imperative ... But, ethical forces are among those of which the economist has to take account. Attempts have indeed been made to construct an abstract science with regard to the actions of an 'economic man', who is under no ethical influences and who pursues pecuniary gain warily and energetically, but mechanically and selfishly. But they have not been successful, nor even thoroughly carried out. For they have never really treated the economic man as a perfectly selfish: no one could be relied on better to endure toil and sacrifice with the unselfish desire to make provision for his family; and his normal motives have always been tacitly assumed to include the family affections. But if they include these, why should they not include all other altruistic motives the action of which is so far uniform in any

³ John Paul II, 'Discourse to UNESCO' (Paris 02.06.1980), num. 22. Quoted in 'Apostolic Constitution of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on Catholic Universities *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*' num. 18.

class at any time and place, that it can be reduced to general rule?⁴ John Paul II expressed his sadness that, in our time, The humanistic character of culture sometimes seems relegated to the periphery, while there is an increased tendency to reduce the horizon of knowledge to what can be measured and to ignore any question touching on the ultimate meaning of reality.⁵

The Tendency to Limit Economic Research

The question at the end of Marshall's text has yet to be answered satisfactorily. What reason exists for a rule of a general nature, in the words of the Cambridge Professor, to be ignored in economic research and be replaced by the construction of an abstract stage upon which universal selfishness is the supreme behavioural principle.

The only explanation is the predominance of materialism over all other considerations of a spiritual nature. The prevalence of what is measured and weighed over esteem for the practice of virtues, over generosity, over fraternity, over charity or if you prefer a term used more commonly nowadays, over solidarity. However, this artificial and abstract stage is incapable of explaining a great deal of human behaviour, and this includes behaviour related to economics.

In the words of John Paul II,

... The economy in fact is only one aspect and one dimension of the whole of human activity. If economic life is absolutized, if the production and consumption of goods become the centre of social life and society's only value, not subject to any other value, the reason is to be found not so much in the economic system itself as in the fact that the entire socio-cultural system, by ignoring the ethical and religious dimension, has been weakened, and ends by limiting itself to the production of goods and services alone.⁶

That is to say, as the fondly remembered Holy Father suggests, the anthropological deficit is responsible for this vice and any structural problem. By following this path, the research itself is stripped of content and the inves-

⁴ Alfred Marshall, 'Principles of Economics'. 'Preface to the first edition'. The Macmillan Press Ltd. Eighth Edition. London 1920, pp. v-vi.

⁵ John Paul II, 'Homily of John Paul II'. Jubilee of University Professors. Sunday 10 September 2000, num. 4.

⁶ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*. Rome 01.05.1991, num. 39.

tigator is enslaved within the limited boundaries he himself has build up on his scientific career.

Professors Llach and Crespo accurately analyse the scientific reductionism implicit in the abandonment of the wide field of research – *field-determined* – in order to occupy the limited space of the specific discipline, isolated and unconnected – *discipline-determined* –, emphasizing the human impoverishment, as well as scientific impoverishment caused by this decision. In our opinion, the real impact is of far greater magnitude than the benevolent premises of the authors and their conclusions.

It is true that at a macro level, economic research, like any other research, is carried out in the scope of an area of knowledge, in that of itself it involves the segmentation of that communication of knowledge to which the human heart by nature aspires: to find the ultimate basis of any specific knowledge. On a micro level, however, i.e., when we look at a specific researcher, the singular subject or individual who carries out a scientific job, the frame of the discipline once again appears extraordinarily limited. This is true to the point that, at the present time, and most than frequent, research of broad scope is the exception, and there is a general rule that having set out on a given line of research at an early stage in his career, the researcher will continue his activity inside the line for the entire duration of his scientific life.

The consequences are impoverishment, general and specific. General, because nothing outside this narrow line of research holds any interest for the researcher and specific impoverishment because nothing said or written more than ten years before will be of interest in the research, even if its objective were the same. The literature of the great classics and that literature constitutive of the basis of scientific knowledge is deserving of some consideration.

Therefore, in our opinion and in accordance with the path mapped out by professors Llach and Crespo, we believe ourselves to be in a position to state that we have moved from a state of – *discipline-determined* – to another far more limited state that might be described as – *topic-determined* –. Herein lies the roots of the inability to move towards a synthesis of knowledge in which the harmony of creation shines resplendent.

Integration of knowledge is a process, one which will always remain incomplete; moreover, the explosion of knowledge in recent decades, together with the rigid compartmentalization of knowledge within individual academic disciplines, makes the task increasingly difficult. But ... It is necessary *to work towards a higher synthesis of*

knowledge, in which alone lies the possibility of satisfying that thirst for truth which is profoundly inscribed on the heart of the human person. Aided by the specific contributions of philosophy and theology, university scholars will be engaged in a constant effort to determine the relative place and meaning of each of the various disciplines within the context of a vision of the human person and the world that is enlightened by the Gospel, and therefore by a faith in Christ, the *Logos*, as the centre of creation and of human history.⁷

Man, his essence and transcendence, does not permit the dividing up of that which is called upon to serve him. As John Paul II states,

Today the most attentive epistemological reflection recognizes the need for the human and natural sciences to enter into dialogue once again, so that learning may recover the sense of a profoundly unified inspiration.⁸

We cannot forget the same Pope's call to university professors on the occasion of the Jubilee:

You, my dear friends who are involved in scientific research, must make universities *cultural laboratories* in which theology, philosophy, human sciences and natural sciences may engage in constructive dialogue, looking to the moral law as an intrinsic requirement of research and a condition for its full value in seeking out the truth.⁹

Anything else would represent a preference for the abandonment of the consideration of the world in its true state. It would be to turn our backs on a reality that begs explanation, to wander aimlessly without our fellow man, without brothers, without beings with inalienable rights, on a stage with no opportunity to commit with others. In this world, into which we have placed scientific activity, a new field of economic research is sought on a daily basis, even made to explain phenomena lying outside the scope of economics such as: family relations, altruism, economics of religious practices, etc... however, it continues in its failure to provide an answer to the fundamental questions posed in the world of economic relations: poverty, inequality, marginalisation, illiteracy, insufficient basic utilities, etc.

⁷ John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on Catholic Universities *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. Rome 15.08.1990, num. 16.

⁸ John Paul II, 'Address of John Paul II to University Professors of all Nations'. Jubilee of University Professors. Vatican City, Saturday 9 September 2000, num. 5.

⁹ John Paul II, 'Address of John Paul II to University Professors of all Nations'. Jubilee of University Professors. Vatican City, Saturday 9 September 2000, num. 5.

Man in the Drawing Up of Economic Policy

Where he is and what his role is when it comes to designing economic policy. The same anthropological deficit that we have hitherto criticised, in accordance with the parameters of the work of professors Llach and Crespo, is also to be observed when marking the space which, for reasons of dignity itself, corresponds to the human person in the framework of economic policy: both with respect to the ends and to the means.

As far as ethics or morals are concerned, it is clearly the case, and therefore unnecessary to explain at length, that any measure which might be implemented should recognise and extol the dignity of the human person. Inadmissible, even when their consequences are indirect, are those lines of action which humiliate or simply subordinate man, giving priority to material things. Not even from the most radical economic perspective can such hypotheses be accepted. The person is a combination of body and spirit¹⁰ and therefore, and also within the field of economics and economic policy, it must be acknowledged that there are needs to be satisfied both of a material nature and of a non-material and spiritual character.

Mises would say that

It is arbitrary to consider only the satisfaction of the body's physiological needs as 'natural' and therefore 'rational' and everything else as 'artificial' and therefore 'irrational'. It is the characteristic feature of human nature that man seeks not only food, shelter, and cohabitation like all other animals, but he aims also at other kinds of satisfaction. Man has specifically human desires and needs which we may call 'higher' than those which he has in common with the other mammals.¹¹

For this reason, any economic policy measure which tends towards welfare or perhaps what can better be described as 'the well-being', should take into account this broad range of needs to be satisfied that cannot be fully sated if only material goods are used.

Having said this, where does man fit into the drawing up of economic policy? The Second Vatican Council was emphatic in this respect:

¹⁰ St. Augustin assessed: *Quid est homo? Anima rationalis habens corpus ... Anima rationalis habens corpus non facit duas personas, sed unum hominem.* 'In Johannis Evangelium', XIX, 5. In the same sense, 'The quantitate animae' XIII, 22; and 'De moribus Ecclesia', I, 27, 52.

¹¹ Ludwig von Mises, 'Human Action. A Treatise on Economics'. William Hodge and Company Limited. London-Edinburgh-Glasgow 1949, pp. 19-20.

Man is not wrong when he regards himself as superior to bodily concerns, and as more than a speck of nature or a nameless constituent of the city of man. For by his interior qualities he outstrips the whole sum of mere things. He plunges into the depths of reality whenever he enters into his own heart ... there he discerns his proper destiny beneath the eyes of God.¹²

This superiority over the material universe implies dominion over all creation by express will of the Creator. For this reason, this relationship must dominate over the natural order of things: the harmony of all creation. Therefore, Leo XIII had no hesitation in stating that:

Nature ... must have given to man a source that is stable and remaining always with him, from which he might look to draw continual supplies. And this stable condition of things he finds solely in the earth and its fruits. There is no need to bring in the State. Man precedes the State, and possesses, prior to the formation of any State, the right of providing for the substance of his body.¹³

The social doctrine of the Church underline in this sense: The citizens and with them, man, must have control over their own development. Therefore, Pius XI also stated, forty years later that the Leonian encyclical, that:

... as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them.¹⁴

Herein resides the anthropological nucleus for any economic policy measure and indeed for policy in general. Respect for the personal dimension, for the singularity and uniqueness of the human persons created at the image and likeness of God and consequently entitled of an inalienable dignity. A subsidiarity based on the respect for the will of the Creator which must be complemented by, but not substituted for, a solidarity through which commitment to one's brother is strengthened in a spirit of co-operation for the satisfaction of all needs. And the efforts of scientific investiga-

¹² Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*. Rome 07.12.1965, num. 14.

¹³ Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum*. Rome 15. 05. 1891, num. 7.

¹⁴ Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Quadragesimo Anno*. Rome 15.05. 1931, num. 79.

tion must be in accordance with this priority, the identification of scarcity, discomfort, the needs of those close and distant, with a view to contributing to their satisfaction.

A union of subsidiarity together with solidarity, which serves to solve the problems of economics when confronted with economic agents, in the light of public measures in various areas. As is stated in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church,

Solidarity without subsidiarity, in fact, can easily degenerate into a 'Welfare State', while subsidiarity without solidarity runs the risk of encouraging forms self-centred localism. In order to respect both of these fundamental principles, the State's intervention in the economic environment must be neither invasive nor absent, but commensurate with society's real needs.¹⁵

Allow us to end by congratulating and expressing our gratitude to professors Llach and Crespo for the valuable contribution represented by their paper to reflection on a matter so close to and so deeply rooted in the community, in terms of the individual as well as the family and society as a whole.

¹⁵ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Città del Vaticano 2005, num. 351.