



## **Francesco Giacomantonio, *Il discorso sociologico della tarda modernità. Individui, identità e democrazia* [The sociological discourse of late modernity. Individuals, identity and democracy] (Genova: il melangolo, 2007)**

by Giorgio Baruchello

Francesco Giacomantonio's new book attempts to combine and cross-fertilise the perspectives on the late-modern condition that have been developing across a vast area of scholarly research. The book's gaze spans from political philosophy to sociology via political science, amidst traces of semiology, media studies and social psychology. Its aim is to articulate a set of notions that, in recent decades, have been playing a crucial role in these disciplines. Such notions would seem to describe most clearly the features of individual and social existence in the age of globalisation or, as Jürgen Habermas calls it, in the age of *SptKapitalismus*. Lyotard, Habermas, Beck, Giddens, Bauman, Touraine are some of the well-known voices considered and discussed in the book (29). Terms such as post-modernity, modernisation, reflexivity, subjectivity, political action, representation and communication form the scholarly lexicon that Giacomantonio carefully explores and organises in the first part of two comprised by the book (13-95). Thanks to this lexicon, Giacomantonio highlights the anxiety-laden precariousness of the individual's condition in today's fast-paced, ever-changing, globalised society: Human beings are paralysed by the risk society (68). This anxiety, amongst other things, is said to pull the individual towards two opposite poles of attraction. One is the pole of extreme forms of individualism; the other is the pole of tribalism-communitarianism: whichever may be prevalent, both options contribute to pulverising any sense of community that may have existed (73).

Giacomantonio stresses the fundamental shift of today's globalised society from traditional politics of emancipation typical of early modernity and aimed at attaining adequate freedom and protection for growing sections of society to life politics, i.e. politics of lifestyles (81; this distinction is borrowed from Anthony Giddens). In connection with this point, Giacomantonio emphasises issues, analyses and proposals orbiting around late-modern democracy, given that in mature modernity, the democratic model is commonly perceived as the privileged condition or ideal of political organisation (85). Consistently, the last chapter of the first part and the whole second part of the book (97-159) are devoted to the study of the *political* late-modern condition. Then, the anxiety-laden precariousness of the individual's condition in today's globalised society is read as the inability of the existing political structures to cope with the needs of the individual citizen.



In particular, it is argued that the nation-State has lost much of its capacity for steering the individual citizen amongst the destabilising waves of the global economy, to which those very same structures seem to have become subservient. As the author writes: It can be observed that in the late-modern society the States function as regulator is diminished and that power and politics diverge: thus, both the agenda and the code of the choices are determined by other institutions, i.e. by the markets (72).

The book timidly proceeds to consider ways in which democracy may regain meaningfulness and efficacy in a world in which [private] enterprises create the basis for inequality, justice, freedom and democracy worldwide, since their decisions vis--vis investments determine the distribution of labour and income (125).

Giacomantonio is deeply aware of the inner conflicts and limitations of democracy and acknowledges extensively the criticism moved against it by several schools of thought. However, he appears to believe that a democratic civil society could be built slowly in each and every country, respecting local heritages, peculiarities and idiosyncrasies (152). What is needed to this end is not a handful of charismatic leaders, rather people and institutions capable of generating and utilising *discourses* that lead to just and responsible collective actions (171).

Giacomantonios book is an erudite and useful map of issues, analyses and proposals by leading experts in each field of inquiry that he considers. In truth, the books first part could serve as a textbook for university courses on modernity, individual-society relationship, or subjectivity. It should be noted, however, that the students of these hypothetical courses would probably find such a textbook rather daunting, given its far-from-uncommon, highly abstract, thoroughly academic, painfully bland style. Providing a few concrete, real-life examples in 171 pages of dense theoretical prose would have made it more approachable, without compromising the high level of scholarship that informs it. As concerns the contents of the book, it is perplexing not to find any real articulation of the notion of life, despite its being central to the type of society that is said to characterise late-modernity (the same can be said of Giddens, from whom Giacomantonio derives it). Perhaps, developing a clearer, richer study of life could be a task that Giacomantonio might wish to tackle in some future work of his.