

Note on the concept of “community” from the viewpoint of international solidarity strategies

At the time of the founding of « Economy and Humanism » in 1941, the original small group around Lebreton and Perroux defined its general orientation, which was to promote a new “community order” reconciling the individual and the collective. The central issue concerned the definition and the management of the “common good”. It meant responding to “human needs” as opposed to the unlimited dictatorship of the market, as well as against “state socialism”, represented by communism, both given to denying the human person and community solidarity. The consonance with Mounier’s “community personalism” is clear.

Lebreton was deeply preoccupied by the interpretation of Marxism, which called for the institution of universal social justice. He found difficulty with the question of historical materialism and gave Henri Desroche the responsibility to draw an in-depth analysis of Marxist positions. This resulted in the “Significance of Marxism” for which Desroche was condemned by Rome, despite Lebreton’s intervention (1951).

Desroche, at the same time, was working thoroughly on the community and continued to strongly base himself on the founding line of Lebreton’s thought. He edited a book “Caractères de la communauté” (“The Features of Community”), published by E.H. in 1944. During his whole life, he remained concerned about this question of the management of the common good by social actors.

We should think about the relevance and the permanence of this Lebreton-Desroche construction at this start of the 21st century. Analyzing it closely, one notes especially the underscoring of an essential paradigm touching the foundations of the community and its links with the common good.

Along this line, it clearly appears that the concept of community cannot be reduced to an abstract stereotyping. Community exists where persons are “brought together by fundamental human relations”, organize themselves in “complementary situations and functions” and work out together a “consciousness of the we”, based on their affinities, solidarity and affective relations (E.H. Manifesto). The teams working with Lebreton acknowledge that communities are multiform (from the family to the village and beyond) and evolving. But the main point is the perception of the aware and responsible social bond without which the notion of “common good” is compromised.

We can therefore ponder over the role of this dynamics in the organizations and institutions of today. The collapse of the “communist bloc” opened the way to the recognition of the market principle as supreme regulatory mechanism. Correcting the excesses have been attempted by redefining the mission of the state as a counterweight to the hegemony of neo-liberalism. The state then appears as representing the “common good” discourse, but, in the problem posed by Lebreton, comes the following fundamental question: The state acts on behalf and under the control of which community? What is the level of belongingness of the citizens in relation to this community? (In the vision Desroche stands up for : members belong to their community and their community belongs to them as well).

The whole movement of protest against the hegemony of the market originates from what is called “civil society”. But this concept remains vague and abstract, most of the time. The question of community can be enlightening in this regard. The social movement that is linked up to “civil society” draws its force and legitimacy insofar as it raises the question of the definition and management of common interests. One thus goes back to the problem of a community which generates a mandate aiming to fulfil the common good of its members. This meets up again with the question of the dynamics of democracy and citizenship. Lebret and Desroche perceived well the “community movement” as an aggregate of forces rooted in the living fabric of peoples, and organizing itself, through the necessary arbitration, level by level, for the interest and the development of the “whole person” and of “every person” to prevail.

In the present period, it is good form to denounce “communalism” as an obstacle to integration into the national entity. This position is justified if one refers to closed communities, withdrawn into themselves and hostile to what is not them. But there is danger in rash extrapolations. Communities that are open, lively, solidarity-based, rich by their mutual contributions are poles apart with these “withdrawn communalisms”. Several examples, oftentimes dazzling, exist in today’s world – particularly in migrants’ networks, in neo-urban and neo-rural grassroots movements, in the North as in the South. The media powers, so often linked to market forces do not give them access. Why? Because the re-centring of the community question has heavy consequences on the relationships of forces that dominate the social scene. The World Social Forum in all its different levels is a privileged place to say that it not obligatory to accept the unacceptable.

Roland Colin, president IRFED
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