

21 Marzo 2018 – Hotel Windsor, Milano (conversazione privata).

Q: First of all, thank you so much for agreeing to this meeting! I don't know if I've been introduced to you already, but my name is Alessandra Maglie, and I'm in my first year of my PhD. I'm a PhD student in Social and Political Change, but my background is actually in political philosophy. Then I developed a passion for gender studies, and then I decided to shift towards history of ideas. I came across your work, and I think it's a good basis to start a PhD thesis. I still have some questions for you, some challenges, some doubts...

A: Which ones of my work have you encountered so far?

Q: Your autobiography, which I loved, and the Bourgeois trilogy – I read all three of them...

A: Oh good, because the first one, the one about...

Q: The Bourgeois Virtues...

A: Yes, the Bourgeois Virtues, that's focused on what you do...

Q: Actually, most of my questions will be about that book in particular. I also read the *Rhetorics of Economics*...

A: *Rhetoric*. It hasn't got a plural. It's not like politics. It's *rhetoric*. Okay. It hasn't got an "s" at the end.

Q: Alright, thank you.

A: I know, for some reason non-English speakers have a lot of trouble with that word. They call it *rhetòrics*, but it's *rhetoric*.

Q: Okay, now I know.

A: Not just Italians, everyone, Swedes, Germans...

Q: Now I know, thank you. So, my first question relates to my interest in Gender Studies. I would like to know if you consider yourself a feminist-

A: Very much so.

Q: Alright, and if so, what are the authors that inspire you?

A: Well, it's first wave feminism that influenced me a great deal. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Feminine Mystique*... that was more of the experience of my mother actually, than me. But certainly Simone de Beauvoir, although I don't approve of her politics, and then a number of other books, like, for example, there is a very good book called *You Just Don't Understand* by... I'm trying to remember the name... she's a linguist. And it's about how men-

MINGARDI: Deborah Tannen.

A: What's her last name again?

MINGARDI: Tannen.

A: Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand*. And it was very illuminating to me because I was a man and I acted like a man, and I thought like a man... For example, I did not get female friendship at all. I didn't understand that. Men are friends, but they are friends who go to the football match, and they often don't know how many-

[La conversazione si interrompe quando viene servito il caffè]

A: Thank you. That's the Americano.

MINGARDI: With water...

A: I know, I know, it's counter to everything you believe. Anyway, whereas as you know, as any woman knows, friendship is quicker among women, and deeper. So anyway, that influenced me a lot. I have friends in economics who are feminists, and I heard a lot from them. Nancy Folbre, and... what's her name? I remember her first name but I don't remember her last... She's about Nancy's age, maybe slightly younger. Anyway, I've gone a number of times to IAFEE, the *International Association for Feminist Economics*. It meets every year in various countries. We've been in Turkey, then Mexico... But anyway, the only thing there is that they're all on the left. And I'm not on the right exactly... I'm a liberal, so I'm against the whole idea of- I don't want to be dealing with how to use state violence, how the left wants to use it redistribute, and the right wants to use it for war and aggression against some people... The only argument is how will state violence be used, but we liberals want state violence to be reduced dramatically. And we don't want it to about- if we should encourage class warfare at home or warfare abroad... That kind of thing... So, in any case, they're on the left. I'm speaking about my friends in feminist economics.

Q: And what about- I'm very interested in the moral aspects of your work. For example, what about the moral systems that inspired you? You write against, and rightly so, Bentham and Kant, which is the most interesting part of your work... But at the same time, as far as I know, especially in the United States, there is a long tradition of virtue ethics, especially on the Republican side, and I was wondering what role...

A: That's kind of... That's the simpleminded Republican side of this. It's not sophisticated, and it's not feminist at all. It's very, "you're gonna follow the rules and that's what I want from you". And I don't like that. I think that the Bourgeois virtues fit much better with feminism, and then do either Kantianism, which is distinctly masculine, or, for that matter, utilitarianism, which is also distinctly masculine, and... a book, to go back to early question for a moment, that influenced me a great deal is Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*. And of course, this book is about moral philosophy. And she says, quite correctly I think, that girls and women have a contextual storytelling, narrative, relational understanding of ethical rules, and especially ethical actions. And that fits very well with virtue ethics and very poorly with these masculine things. So, I think, the problem is that virtue ethics sometimes gets confused with sort of, as we say in the United States, the "Baltimore Catechism", with nuns to enforce it. That is, rules that the church gives or that the conservatives give. And you're to follow those, but that's not it. It's character. It's history and it's relationships. It's a fact that virtue ethics was revived in the 1950s and especially the 1960s by female analytic philosophers. Especially in England. So, in common phrases these days in the United States we say, it's in the "wheelhouse", whatever the hell that means, anyway, it's in the way of thinking of the family.

Q: I think you mention them a lot in your books: Philippa Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe...

A: In fact, I make a joke. I say that Alasdair MacIntyre is a "honorary woman". See why? I don't like his economic ideas, but I do like- he's a virtue ethicist.

Q: Exactly about that: you mentioned a specific category of virtue ethics, ethics of care, which I'm very much interested about, and it's something that I really want to look into, especially to read your work within this framework. But I was wondering – and this is one of the biggest challenges that I see in your moral system – I was wondering how ethics of care would be compatible with a free market system... because I mean, the very basis of a free market system is liberty and equality for all, while ethics of care is all about a caregiver and a care-receiver, so it's based on an asymmetrical relationship.

A: I understand, and that's true, but that that's not foreign to the economy. I actually think of liberalism itself in gendered terms. There's a masculine type, that says, well, it's just about competition. It's kind of a social Darwinism. We don't need to have any relation with our employees or employer, the boss, just shut up and do the job. That's the masculine side. The other side, the feminine side, says: let's not do violence to each other. Let's come to know each other. Speak to any person in business and you'll learn that they will be terribly interested in what the customer wants. Now if she's a driver of a tram, she won't have that interest unless she has good sense. Exceptional good sense. But if she's the provider of a service, like tourism services, she wants to know you to know what you want. And so, it's not: "Screw you. I'm not gonna have anything to do with you". I think it's very... I call my form of liberalism "sisterly", as against "brotherly".

Q: At the same time though – but I think that's probably in the spirit of your work – it's very normative, it's like a project for the future. Do you think that is feasible? How can the economic system we live in change and where does the change start? And how do we start it?

A: Well, you know, there was a time when most of the clergy, the intellectuals, the artists, the journalists, were liberal. That was in the early 18th century. In Italy, there was a figure like Ferraro, whom I learned about from him [*indica il prof. Mingardi*]. I just read a wonderful biography of Thoreau: we think of him as this hermit, and he's nothing like that. The author, I forgot her name, but it's a superb book from the University of Chicago Press, came out ten years ago. And it turns out that he was in business. His father, he started a pencil firm. And Henry took it over and made it into the main makers of quality pencils in the United States, for about ten years... So, somehow, we got from the 18th century, when most people were socially conservative, in Italy or Britain, to a place where their ideology was essentially liberal. How did that happen? The anti-slavery crusade, rights for women, John Stuart Mill, blah, blah, blah, blah. So, the point of all that is that ideologies can change, the ideologies in the society, the agreed upon conventions of politics can change. When they're allowed, alas, they are undergoing a worldwide change now, which we must resist, towards populism. It's urgent that we stop the Berlusconi and the Trumps.

Q: Indeed. Again, about your moral system. It's impactful to look at the summary of your books and see that every single virtue has been tagged as either masculine, feminine or androgynous. So, how-

A: That's right. That's right. In the book, that's how I structured it.

Q: Yeah, I get it's the structure of your moral system, but how would you defend your system from the counter argument that it reinforces gender roles?

A: Well, it was merely an organizational principle. It was merely an aesthetic way of – you know, a way of making beautiful the seven virtues: there's a left side – I ought to have done it the other way around, but there's a left side that's masculine and a right side that's feminine. And these are merely the side of cooperation and competition. I emphasize that all of them are needed. Now, I understand that there is a danger here, of a kind of essentialism. And that irritates some people. I don't, as I say, as I just said, you need both. Okay, you need both. You needed in your life. I needed my life. We all need it. We all

need both from a masculine side and a feminine side. As I say in the book, courage is not just about men, it's what men think about all day long, every five seconds, or ten seconds maybe, they're thinking about courage. But a mother taking care of her severely handicapped son gets up in the morning with courage. You need courage to live, and love likewise. On the other side, women think about love and connection every fifteen seconds maybe. And that's true of men and women I've known. It's true of me, in my change. I don't care if it's biological or not, I don't think it is necessarily, I think it's highly cultural. But it can be perfectly biological without meaning that women have to stay home and cook meals only, and take care of the children. So, you see, partly it was just a way of organizing the chart, because it occurred to me that there is an autonomy part on the left, and a connection part on the right. And on the autonomy, the chief virtue there is courage, on the connection, the chief virtue there is love. I think It fits the experience and the lives of most men and women. Now I could go on, but...

Q: No, it's clear. But going back to the question about gender roles, you mention Harvey Mansfield in your book more than once... I was wondering what you think about, if you know it, his book, *Manliness*?

A: I don't know it very well. He's a close friend of my parents. Harvey was a colleague of my father's and continued to be a friend of my mother's. Here's what I think of Harvey: he's like Machiavelli, like a "*caff  americano*": a Machiavelli, plus water.

Q: I get it... The book is about a critique of the gender-neutral society. That's why I'm interested in your thoughts on that.

A: I think, as an inspiration, it's first wave feminism, but you know, I don't... although Harvey is a nice man, and he's in his 80s, he's still teaching at Harvard. And he went to his chair who was a woman... And now this is my father's department. My father was professor there in the in the Government department. At the time in the 1950s and 60s, the Harvard department of Government, as they called it, was well known for being conservative. And now of course, it's changed tremendously. And now it's quite- it's larger than it was. It's about 40 people. In my dad's day it was more like 20. Okay. That's the scene. And Harvey told us, when we ate with him in Harvard Square a couple of years ago, my mother and I, he told us about him going to the chair, the woman, saying, "I'm thinking of retiring" – he's about 85 now – "I'm thinking of retiring". She said: "Oh, Harvey, you can't retire, you're the only conservative!". One! Eighty-five years old!

Q: Oh, I see! [breve pausa, ridiamo, la conversazione riprende] So going back to the concept of care, I would like to specify what's going to be the core concept of my PhD thesis: I was thinking of looking into how feminist thought challenges capitalism, both from the inside, like you do, not as a form of straightforward criticism, but with some corrections, and from the outside, so-

A: Look: how does capitalism actually operate? And I think my friends on the left are wrong about it. They think it's just competition, they think it's just masculine – they think of capitalism as intrinsically masculine. And I believe that's wrong. When you look at how a good company works, they work with love. If you haven't got love, in a small office or whatever you're doing, it isn't going to work well. I wrote a paper, which is a very small paper, on my website last fall, about Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage, which is created in this kind of silly way by being very deep and difficult. It's not! I kind of realized. I went back to it, I reread the passage, and Ricardo is this terrible, he has a terrible exposition – he wasn't a good writer – that you can't understand. If you're a natural economist you do, but most people, including me, are not natural economists. And I realized that the principle of comparative advantage is the principle of cooperation. In a small office, we don't make a secretary into the CEO, 'cause it's not good for her, it's not good for the company. And if you're the CEO, and

the CEO became secretary. That wouldn't work. It wouldn't get the most output from what they've got. And so on efficiency grounds alone, the economy depends on the principal of comparative advantage, which for the world means we should have free trade. So we allow people to specialize in what is least costly in their specialization. So, I'm saying that the description of capitalism as an ice hockey game for people crashing into each other all the time, is wrong. It's more like a dance. More like a ballet or a square dance. Do you see what I mean? It's about cooperation as much about competition.

Q: Okay, but I was thinking, I mean, the image that we have of contemporary capitalism is probably less about small businesses and more about big corporations...

A: I understand, but you know, you take small companies away from Italy, and you haven't got much. The vitality of the Italian economy depends tremendously on its very small companies of craftspeople and entrepreneurs in a small scale. And that's true of the American economy as well. Not as much American economy as in Italy, but in any case, let's see... Large companies can be loving. I just heard John Mackey, the CEO of a grocery store chain called *Whole Foods* in the United States, he just sold out to Amazon and he's run his company since it was one store in California, to now that it's an immense corporation. It's free market principles, but also love. His store is an actual food store, but much bigger than most American food stores... 3M in the United States, which does scotch tape and things like that, 3M is...- The vision from the left, of capitalism as an alienated system, is wrong. Or, at the very least, it's not the whole truth. There are all kinds of- You know, my claim is that the left is wrong about how capitalism actually operates. And to improve it, we need to recognize how it actually operates. Even in the most masculine, competitive parts of the economy. Take foreign exchange markets. Turns out that international foreign exchange markets, these guys – they're all guys – talking to each other from Hong Kong and London and Rome and New York and so and so forth... Every day, they start by telling each other, anonymous people who haven't ever met, jokes. The new jokes. It's one of the reasons that new jokes circulate around the world at incredible speed. Because of the foreign exchange market. You wouldn't think that the foreign exchange... and the reason to do that is that's a way of establishing a male version of friendship.

Q: A social capital...

A: A social capital, that makes you- and you can depend on it... you know it, maybe it's good for business. I don't know. Probably it is, but that's, that's not even the whole of it. It's just, I'm a man, you're a man. Here's a dirty joke. Yeah.

Q: Bantering!

A: That's exactly that's the word! Banter. And it's not something that that women do at all. They don't banter.

Q: So, you think that if women were in that position, they wouldn't do that?

A: They would do something else to establish connection and love. They would say "How are you? How are your children?". I was talking last night to this young man, and I noticed that he had a ring. We were talking about his work... now, he's a smart guy and a very accomplished young scholar. But he didn't have the feminine sense to ask me about my work.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: No woman would spend an hour and a half or two hours talking about her own work to someone else without returning the favour. And he didn't. It occurred to me, but I couldn't- we were talking about his work all the time, I couldn't quite get to it. I was gonna ask him if he has any children, or

what does his his wife do, blah, blah, blah – or his male husband, I don't care – but we didn't ever get to that, because it was in the realm of male talk.

Q: Oh, ok, I'm quite new in academic environments, but I can absolutely see how this works...

A: Yes, it's not it's not because they're, well, they're egomaniacs, but it's this sort of common sense of connection that they don't get. It's all about competition.

Q: Well, going back to the concept of capitalism, my core idea for my thesis is about, as I said, critiques from the inside or from the outside. And I was wondering if you've ever encountered the works of Nancy Fraser, because she recently wrote this paper called *The crisis of care. On the social and reproductive contradiction of contemporary capitalism*. I think it's interesting because I came to realize that talking about capitalism and feminism at the same time, means to talk about care. And she says: «Every form of capitalist society harbours a crisis tendency. Its orientation to profit tends to destabilize the very process of social reproduction on which it relies».

A: It's complete nonsense. Utterly nonsensical. The problem is the left use profit as kind of a tax, as something that comes out of nowhere and you add a tax, namely the profit of the bosses, whereas profit arises from mutual advantage. The only reason that FIAT makes any money is it makes automobiles that people like, so both sides are made better off when you buy a Cinquecento. See? So, it's complete nonsense to say that, and it's also nonsense to say that it's capitalism. All systems should be based on profit. And if they're not, they're not systems of mutual advantage. They're systems of screwing one group for the benefit of another. That's the principle of feudalism, where lords, take, say: "If you don't like it, I'll kill you". It's the principle of socialism. I'm from the state. I'm going to tax you and take away whatever I want, for the benefit, I claim, of this group over here. And actually, it turns out in most socialist systems, actual socialism, like in Eastern Europe, and Mao's China, actually even contemporary China, this taking is for the benefit of the Communist Party. So it's a new aristocracy. Whereas under capitalism, and I think you need to read some fundamental capitalist texts to kind of get this, but they understand that you only make money if you do good. If you steal from people, that's not capitalism. That's something else.

Q: There's something that it's very evident in your books. You say something like, capitalism as a model is good, but sometimes people are bad.

A: Yeah, sure. But that's true in all systems. That's true in every imaginable system. Well, you can imagine a perfect world, where everyone is nice to each other. That's one of my objections to the care philosophy, 'cause it focuses only on love, and that's why – that's not the only reason, but - I didn't go with the care philosophers because it seems to me what you're advocating is love, love, love, and then they end up on a kind of socialist side. My friends in the church – I'm an Anglican, and I'm a progressive Anglican: I believe in gay marriage, and then female priests and bishops and all that. Most of my colleagues in the church are on the left: they think that the gospel of love which they believe in and support, is all you need for an economy. I don't think so. I think you also need prudence and courage. 'Cause if you haven't got prudence and courage, you haven't got progress. You're just dividing up a fixed pie. What has enriched the poor in last couple of centuries, as I say in the books, is the enormous increase in the size of the pie.

Q: About that, one of your theses in the *Bourgeois trilogy* revolves around the importance of the *Great Enrichment*, and you write that it's about a shift – it wasn't about the original accumulation of capital, it was about a shift in ideas.

A: Yes, ideas. Most particularly, the underlying idea is liberalism, which inspired the people to open a restaurant or to make coffee or whatever.

Q: You write that in a polemic claim against the historical materialism of the Marxist tradition...

A: Yes. I was once a Marxist.

Q: Yes, I read that as well. But what is the role of causation in your book? Because you mention a specific cause of the Great Enrichment, which is the shift in rhetoric. But at the same time, for example, one of the main references in your book, I think I can say that, is Max Weber, at least as much as Marx. But historical causes play a very different role in both of them: Weber, for example, rarely talks about causes, he talks about conditions. So, what do you see in this rhetorical shift? Do you see a cause or a condition?

A: A cause.

Q: A direct cause?

A: Yes, and here's what I mean. There are all kinds of reasons why, which I discuss most thoroughly in the third volume. Max Weber was mistaken. Look, *The spirit of capitalism* is one of the great books of the 20th century, and if you haven't read it, read it. Marx, I'm always saying to my right-wing colleagues, my conservative colleagues, I say, Marx was the greatest social scientists of the 19th century without compare. And they all say: you're crazy, Marx was terrible! And then I say to my left-wing friends that he was wrong about practically everything. It's not because he was stupid, it was because he had the wrong kind of economics. He's a classical economist. He believed in the labor theory of value. And he had the misfortune of being born when he couldn't have taken advantage of the revolution in economics in the 1880s, when economists got clear about value, in a much deeper way than what Adam Smith, Marx and others said in their labour theory. And he also wrote before the professionalization of history. So his understanding of the past was radically mistaken, because he hadn't had the advantage of people who actually looked at the sources in a serious way. Although he was amazing. He knew a lot. But what he knew, he got wrong.

Q: I have a question about your methodology...

A: Oh, by the way, I missed the causal point. The other point I make that a lot in the third volume especially, is that humans are not computers with necessary and sufficient conditions. There are a lot of necessary conditions. You can't be having a constant civil war. If there was a civil war going on now in Milan, if that building was occupied by the other force which is shooting at us, we wouldn't be able to speak peacefully. And that's true that of the rule of law, necessarily, would be utterly unenforceable in Milan, that would be very bad for the economy. And like in *I Promessi Sposi*, the gangs of thugs, the dominants, they'd decide, they'd come and steal, and it was right here, in Milan. It didn't work out very well for the economics. So, I'm saying that they're always necessary conditions: you need some banking, you need foreign trade... But they existed anciently, in China and Japan, South Asia, Ottoman Empire, Eastern Europe for that matter, they had trade, they had banks, especially in China, and yet they didn't have the Great Enrichment. So, there's got to be something else. And then the secret ingredient, I'm claiming, is liberalism, which inspired people, made ordinary people feel that they could have a go. They could do something with their lives instead of, you know, you're born as a milkmaid, you stay as a milkmaid.

Q: Makes sense. I had another question about your methodology. It's interesting that in your books, you mainly appeal to literature for your arguments, and not much to – how would you say – to hard numbers...

A: Well, I think a lot of people get that impression. But I don't think they're thinking very clearly, the whole book is based on quantity. Because the key point – I mean, this is particularly clear in the second volume, *Bourgeois Dignity*. The big number is the immense size of modern economic growth. As an Italian, you're something like 3,000%, in material terms, better off than your great-great-great-great-grandmother. We just are. And that size makes it impossible for the railway or foreign trade, or other things, to be causes of the Great Enrichment. It can't be. What has to be is these people having ideas, having new ideas, for coffee... Look, the espresso machine was invented by an Italian, I forgot his name, and it has revolutionized coffee drinking worldwide. There are thousands of those inventions, this one [*indica il suo cellulare*], electric lights, and blah, blah, blah, and that is unique to the modern world. Not that there was never innovation in the past, but it was very slow. And then after around 1800, North-western Europe first and then the whole of Europe went completely, you know, *pazzo* about innovation, and this was complete novelty. And it's completely obvious to me that capital accumulation or trade or exploitation or any of the usual explanations are just totally inadequate. Take the basic argument of the left, that the reason the West is rich is that it steals from the poor of the rest of the world, or that it exploits its own its own proletariat. But wait a sec: stealing from poor people it's not a good business plan. If you're gonna steal from people, steal from the Germans or the northern Italians. The Frenchmen. Don't bother with stealing from Indians. It can't explain the magnitude. The magnitude is absolutely foundational.

Q: I was thinking, from my own perspective, I am a philosopher and my background is in philosophy. Do you think that a background in economics is absolutely necessary to really getting into the spirit of the Bourgeois trilogy, and what do you think a philosopher could add-

A: It's very simple. You just read a few books. You read some of mine, I can recommend books to read that will serve so at least you'll know what the capitalist argument is. Whether you believe it or not, is another matter. But, for example, have you had an economics course?

Q: No, I just read textbooks.

A: Which ones?

Q: So far, Landreth-Colander on the history of economic thought.

A: No, that's not what I mean...

Q: If you've got any advice...

A: David is fine, but that's not gonna get you to really understanding the thought... What you need is a text in economics itself. And what I recommend is Armen Alchian: he's got a book called *Exchange and production theory in use*. And if you can't find that, it's just the first half of an elementary book called *University economics*. Read that with some attention. And you'll understand the basic capitalist argument. But that's not the only one. There's one more, called... what was his name... he was a priest, an economist at Washington in Seattle, *The Economic Way of Thinking* it's called.

MINGARDI: Paul Heyne.

A: Paul Heyne, *The Economic Way of Thinking*. Read that first. He was he was a theologian, he was a Protestant, he was a minister, but also a professor of economics. So, it comes from a deeply ethical point of view, whereas Alchian tends to be very anti-ethical. He just doesn't wanna talk about ethics, we're going to talk about efficiency. But you have to get both. So those two would be, if you read them with sympathy. You can't just say, "Oh, I know this is wrong from the beginning". If you open your mind to these two, you'll see the basic point. And then there's a there's a more advanced book, but it's

kind of unnecessary: it's my own, it's available on my website. I'm gonna do a third edition of it this year, it's called *The Applied Theory of Price*. But I don't know, I think it's too much.

MINGARDI: And I had one to read before anyone else: Henry Hazlitt, *Economics in one lesson*.

A: Yeah, that's good. Although on that score, I'd rather you read Frédéric Bastiat. He was a frenchman. He was in business and he was a liberal columnist. How about Ferraro, is there anything...?

MINGARDI: Ferraro was very brilliant, but he was basically writing introductions.

A: But that's what she wants...

MINGARDI: No, introduction to books, I mean, introductions in a proper sense. And for this reason, I mean, it's very difficult to get all of his stuff, I've got his collected works, but it's not available in any format. I think that Pareto's *Course of Political Economy* is still a great book. It's much better than the manual. There's a very good book which is by an economist that goes by the name of Sergio Ricossa, and the book is called *Impariamo l'economia*. And it's roughly an equivalent of *Economics in one lesson*.

A: Yes, I think it's very suitable to read something in your native language, if it's well done. Then you'll start to get what economists are on about. And you must try, when you're when you're reading these books we've suggested, try not to bring Marxist categories to that matter, because they'll just confuse you. I have a friend, Yanis Varoufakis. He was the finance minister of Greece, briefly, in this last government they've had...

MINGARDI: Briefly, but rather intensely there...

A: It was at the height of the great financial crisis. He's a Marxist, and he believes that flows of capital, that's what the economy is about, exploitation and so on, complete nonsense. But what I urge you to do is to pretend you don't know anything about that side, and focus on what these capitalist writers are saying. Because then you learn, then you can say: well, I don't think that's it, I like the Marxist questions better. Like, what's his name? The guy in jail from Turin...

MINGARDI: You're thinking about Gramsci...

A: Yes, Gramsci is great, I've read a considerable amount. And he's wonderful. But he's basically saying that capitalism is wrong.

Q: Thank you for your advice! Finally, what do you think is the biggest challenge the younger generations could face in the next few years? Both in the academia and outside...

A: Getting a job. And the reason it's hard for the younger generation to get a job- Take an extreme case of South Africa, if you're black in South Africa, you are screwed. Young person unemployment is on the order of 50%. In France, if you're not in university or on schooling, you're not in a job. Unemployment is a quarter, 25%. This is a worldwide disaster. And it's not a result of capitalism, it's a result of interference in job deal. If you make it impossible to dismiss and fire people, then no one will hire you. If you can't fire people, you won't hire them. Because it's too dangerous. In South Africa, where democracy – thank god – came in 1994, they adopted what was then the German labor laws, which, meanwhile, the Germans have moved away from. And under the German labor law at the time, it was essentially impossible to fire anyone. The result in South Africa has been, that if you hire someone, if he steals from the cash pool, if he insults the customers, if he doesn't show up for work, you cannot fire him unless he's been convicted in a court of law, unless you go to the magistrate. So, this guy's stealing from me, let's prosecute him and put him in jail. You can't get rid of him. In the United States, it comes in the form of the minimum wage. But not all countries have this. They have it actually in South Africa, which adds to the problem. But this wasn't so once young people could get

jobs rather easily. I'm talking about the 19th century, early 20th. Because people weren't interfering in the wage market, then we thought we'll make people better off, we'll add safety regulations and so on. And it's a disaster. If we want to help poor people and we should help them by giving them income. You can't do it on the cheap by making the bosses pay. You make the bosses pay, they won't hire the people in the first place. Whereas if we all get taxed to give for people intercom systems, not wage subsidies, income subsidies, hey, I'm all in favor of a minimum income, not a minimum wage. So you don't interfere in the deal, but workers and bosses are making money, what you do is bring poor people up to a respectable business.

Q: Thank you, there is so much more that I'd like to ask but I think our time-

A: Do keep in touch with me here. Feel free to ask more questions...

Q: Thank you so much. I'm certainly going to when I get further into in my research, thank you.

MINGARDI: She's a student of a very good historian of political thought, Mario Tesini. He published his own translation of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*...

A: There have been Italian translations before, haven't there?

MINGARDI: There have been Italian translations before, but you know, somebody is starting and publishing a new philological work. It's very impressive.

A: Bastiat and Tocqueville were both members of-

MINGARDI: They were both on the left!

A: -of the French Assembly, yeah, they were sitting on the left! Because at the time, liberalism was the way...

MINGARDI: ...In February, but in June no more!

A: That's right! Okay, good!

Q: Very good, thank you!

A: Well, carry on. Sounds like you're very thoughtful. Are you married?

Q: No, I'm not!

A: Oh, okay, well then.

Q: Thank you so much for agreeing to this meeting – you could have spent the morning sightseeing in Milan, and you didn't...

A: Oh no, I don't wanna sightsee in Milan, this is my idea of fun. I love it more than anything else. Real intellectual conversation. As we used to say in Iowa where I taught for many years, it's "a hog's heaven".

Q: Nice, I think so too. You still have, I think, a couple of public talks in the afternoon?

A: Yeah, not quite sure what my schedule is, but he knows [*indica il prof. Mingardi*].

Q: All right. I think I'll be there, but I might need to leave before the second one ends: I've got to catch a train to go back to Florence tonight.

A: Of course, I understand. Is that where you live?

Q: Yeah, I live there now, but I was actually born in the south of Italy.

A: Where?

Q: So, you know that Italy is shaped like a boot? I was born in the heel.

A: You're in the heel! Yeah, that's where, well, not all, but that's where many of the Greek colonies were. Until very recently, there were still Greek speakers. Are they still there?

Q: Yes, but the Greek dialect is basically only spoken among the older generations in some areas, younger people rarely do...

21 Marzo 2018 – IULM, Milano.

"Scientism in Economics" (intervento pubblico)

My male name was Donald, which in Irish means "world ruler" – Donald Trump...! I apologize. Whereas "Deirdre", I'm not quite sure what it means, but I think that in old Irish meant "wanderer", which I think is *perfetto*. I mean, that's right, I'm a wanderer, and as my colleagues have mentioned, I wander among the fields, the academic fields, and other fields. I was trained as an economist at Harvard. My first job was at Chicago, at the famous University of Chicago. It's like your university, a private university. Since then, I taught at state universities.

As he [*indica il prof. Mingardi*] said, I'm a Chicago School economist, and what that means to me is that I believe in certain, rather simple, but important, principles and economics, like: things are scarce, we have to make trade-offs in life. Like, I tried to end the operation on my vocal cords, and it didn't work. Okay, well, that's life. Things are scarce. You can't have everything. Or that what's crucial in understanding modern economy is inquiry, new firms coming in. This is a problem right now with taxes: the taxing monopolies in Italy are very powerful in politics, they've prevented Uber from coming into the taxi world, that's happening partly in London, they're trying to stop it, in Germany they have. And so, inquiry is how we make progress in an economy. New ideas come in, new ways of talking, new ways of doing. So, I'm a Chicago economist: that doesn't make me a conservative. Do I look like conservative? I'm not a conservative. I'm a liberal, as you say in Italy. I'm a believer in the virtues of markets. I want the government to be small and competent, which I'm afraid – and I think you'll agree with me – it's not the government you have in Italy now, as it is large and incompetent, and this is not a good combination. I think most modern governments have a certain incompetence about. So that's what I am, I'm a liberal. But I've been everything: I was a Marxist when I was your age. Not a very scholarly young Marxist, but I was a Marxist. I found that if you read half of the *Communist Manifesto*, you pretty much got it. Because all you need to know is that the history of humans is the history of class struggle, and then you can stop. You don't need to learn anything else, which is great. So I would say, I've been a Keynesian, because at Harvard College, that's what was on offer. And I've been an econometrician: I've done econometrics, mathematical quantitative economics, and my current scientific field, in the way Italians use the word science, is economic history. I've got three books. This is the third [*mostra agli studenti la sua copia di Bourgeois Equality*]. This is the biggest one, it stands up by itself. Let me pass it around, so you can see what this is all about.

My discussion this afternoon will be about essentially this book [*mostra agli studenti la sua copia di The Rhetoric of Economics*]: about the scientific standing of economics as a field. Now, I love economics. I'm very interested in how the economy works. I think I understand it. [*Il microfono si spegne*] I have to stay close to there, okay. And if there are any engineers here, I want to stop what they're doing and work on microphones, because microphones fail about a third of the times. So I've been everything, I've been all over the political map, and the scientific map. I'm a quantitative economist, but I'm also a literary economist. And if you read my big books, you'll see that I'm also a

professor of English. But today will be about economics as science. Now, I think all of you are, in one way or another, students of language. And I think we should start with the very word “*scienza*”. In Italian, and all the other languages I’ve asked about – Japanese, Tamil, Arabic, Turkish, French, German, Russian – the “science” word means “systematic inquiry”, as distinct from, say, casual journalism or uninformed opinion. So, you can have a science of, I don’t know, English language literature, or a science of philosophy, or a science of history: *scienza* applies to all of them. In French they speak of *sciences humaines*, the “human sciences”; in German, *Wissenschaft* means “science”, and *Klassikwissenschaft* means “classics”, like the study of Greek and Latin. And in Italian, an Italian mother whose twelve-year-old daughter is very studious and works at school very well and is doing very well in, say, sixth grade, she calls her daughter “*mia scienziata*”, which in modern English makes no sense at all. “*My scientist*”? What does she study, physics, chemistry? Because there was a change in the English meaning of the word, and this has been a big problem because English has become the *lingua franca* of the world, which must drive the French crazy. French speakers might think French is the *lingua franca*, but no, no, English is. This problem with the word “science” has spread to other countries, other intellectual environments. Here’s what I mean: from the middle of the 19th century on, increasingly, the word science came to mean “physical and biological sciences”. That’s all. They were the model. In fact, the model was not even biology, although biology was included. But biology is about stories, it’s about narrative, whereas physics is about models, it’s about metaphors. Comparing the fall of an apple to the fall of the moon is a typical piece of physics. Telling the story of evolution is a difficult piece of biology. So, one is model building and metaphorical, the other one is storytelling. And what happened is – I think I’m reasonably sure of this, you’re free to quote me – is that it came out of a dispute in Oxford and Cambridge, about new chairs, new professorships of chemistry. The Oxford English Dictionary – which all of you should become familiar with, it’s a wonderful book, it’s actually twelve volumes, that’s some enormous number, but it’s available online. The Oxford English Dictionary is built on historical principles, it gives us the history of every English word. That’s wonderful. You can go back and find the word “belief” is cognate with the word “love”, and that “belief” in Christianity was really, until the 17th century in English, a commitment to a way of life, not propositional, not about the virgin birth or whatever. It wasn’t about statements. It was about actions. Love, connection... The word “science”, go look it up this afternoon: the Oxford Dictionary also mentions the common meaning in ordinary usage. And it’s new, the earliest quotation I have with this new meaning of science in English is 1863. Before that, the word “science” as I said meant “systematic inquiry”. And you can see the problem: if you define systematic inquiry as being like physics, then you’re in trouble right from the beginning. Because not all fields will fit into this model building, even the mathematical way of talking in physics. I don’t want you to understand that I am against mathematics. I’m not particularly good at it, but I admire mathematics as a field just by itself, and I admire many of its applications in economics. So, it’s crude to think that what I’m saying is, you know, math is too hard, I don’t like, let’s do something that’s not mathematical. That’s not the point. The point is that even mathematical sciences, in the modern English sense, such as biology, are not mathematical in the same way that physics is. Evolutionary biology has become very mathematical but there’s nothing intrinsic about biology that you can’t tell as a story. And yet economists, which is very much an English-speaking field – the great economists have been completely, disproportionately English speakers for a long time: English, Scottish, and since the second World War, overwhelmingly Americans, or working in America.

This idea that economics can be social physics is in fact rather old than economics. The great Adam Smith – I always cross myself when I mention Adam Smith – you know, the great Scottish philosopher, inventor of modern economics, in the 1700s. They were all inspired by Newton. Newton, the great mathematical physicist in the late 1600s. So, they wanted a social physics. And this ambition was carried out most thoroughly. In the United States, as I said, after the second World War, that’s when

economics became mathematical and became an explicit imitation of physics. In fact, there's a couple of people associated with it. One of them is called Paul Samuelson, who taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology because he was Jewish, and Harvard wouldn't hire him because of that – and this is even after the Second World War – so he went to MIT instead. Paul Samuelson was my mother's mixed double tennis partner for many years, in case you need to know that... put that in your notes: Paul Samuelson, my mother's mixed double tennis partner. And he had this vision of economics as physics. Now, this gets us into lots of trouble. The first one is that we then think of science as *only* being what physicists or maybe chemists do. Here's one of the problems: we want, in modern economics since the second World War, to treat you all as participants in an economy as though we didn't know what you were thinking when you buy things or go to work. We look at you from the outside, as though you were molecules. Molecules don't talk so far as we know, maybe there's a conversation going on, but we don't know anything about it, they don't talk. They don't have meaning in their lives as molecules. And so, that grew up, this conviction that economics, modern economics should be behaviourist. There are lots of “-isms” in this talk. “Behaviourist” means that what you do is all we know about you. We don't know what you're thinking as you buy a dress, or purchase lunch, or go to work. Meaning is stripped away. Now, as students, as some of you are, in translation, you know, you learn early on, in learning how to simultaneously translate – which by the way, I regard as a miracle: if you can simultaneously translate I admire you right away – that in translation, if you can't translate word for word, you're going to speak nonsense, right? You have to decide what the meaning is, and then express it in Italian or English or Chinese or whatever it is you're trying to do. And that's true of any language: I'm speaking as a linguistic idiot, too. You know the joke: a person who knows three languages is trilingual, a person who knows two is bilingual, and a person who knows one is a native English speaker! Very sad... But so, you strip away the meaning in a human activity like translation or economic behaviour, and you're missing some of the scientific meaning in this older and larger sense. You're not understanding your subject very well. Right? And that's the first problem with scientism. Scientism, as you heard last time, is the theory that everything should be modelled on physics. That's essentially what it is. All human inquiry should be modelled on physics. Now this is stupid, *stupido*. It's a silly way of talking.

There's nothing wrong with this behaviourist argument to some degree, but it's not decisive. It's not all we can know about consumption. It's what you do when the price goes up. Yet many American economists, and increasingly European economists, believe this: they believe we have to pretend that we're not human beings, looking at other human beings. And that's to throw away half the evidence. That's not *scienza*, that's *scientismo* or something: that's a crippled version of science. Instead of walking on both legs, it's hopping along on one leg, your observational leg: raise the price of ice cream and you eat less of it. If you think that ice cream is bad for you, it doesn't sit well on this argument. Eating ice cream stops meaning anything, it stops making a difference in how you think about the consumer. So that's one problem. The other problem – well, there are lots of problems with this – is that in a very similar way, you treat humans as predictable, in a deep sense. Because the analogy is with meteorology, right? The science of the weather. Now, meteorology is applied physics. That's what it is. It's what the clouds do and how they behave. And we don't we don't have any psychological theory of the clouds. They don't do it for spite. They don't do it because they're silly. They just do it. And the problem there is that then people get angry at economists when we can't predict the future. A lot of people, including, by the way, the Queen of England, were very disturbed. Economists couldn't predict the great recession that you remember from grade school, in 2008. Oh, the economists! Economics isn't really a real science. It's not meteorology, it should be because we want predictions about the economy. And there are deep problems with thinking of economists as predictors of the economy. Now I can make certain predictions about the economy of a kind of qualitative sort. So, I can say to you, if you introduce in Italy central planning socialism, income per head will fall, and you will become

poor. I think that's pretty sound, I think there's a lot of basis for this: look at Eastern Germany, North Korea, the Eastern European countries and Mao's China, and you get a pretty good conception that thoroughgoing central planning – and I'm not talking about Sweden, I mean real central planning socialism, does not work pretty well and wouldn't work in Italy. And anyway, the Italians would be finding ways to get around it all the time. But I can't predict when the next business cycle will turn. I can't tell what will happen to the price of housing in Milan. *Perché?* Because if I could, I would have a little econometric equation for making me rich, beyond the dreams of avarice. Because if I knew which way the stock market was going to move, or the way the Italian economy was going to behave in the next ten years, I could buy and sell assets in a way that would anticipate which way the prices are going. Whether they go up or down, you could do this. And I could make an unlimited fortune. Right? Like so my apartment in Chicago. I put all my money on this bet. Because if I was like a meteorologist, I could tell the social weather as well as the physical. But that's deeply wrong because of this. You could call it "Heisenberg's uncertainty principle of economics". I once wrote a book, in 1990, called *If You're So Smart. The Narrative of Economic Expertise*. And if an expert economist- the joke in the title is: if you're so smart, why aren't you rich? To which, the answer to a rich person would be: if you're so rich, why are you so stupid? But the point is that if economics were like physics, and if this behaviourist view worked, then we could predict the molecules, the economic molecules. It would be simple. But it's not. And there's an even deeper problem on the same line. Molecules don't have ethics. They don't love, they're not courageous. They're not prudent. They maximize, by metaphorical extension, in their movement, but that's not because they want to maximize. It's because it's in them, in their nature, to bump into each other. And so, humans have all of those qualities. Even most animals and certainly plants don't have these virtues, you might say. We have these saying in the languages: "the lion is courageous". Well, not really: *coraggio?* No, no, no, no, he's not courageous. If he comes across an elephant, he runs away. Perfectly sensible. He's outclassed by the elephant. Whereas humans can go over the top... Well think of the Italian Army in the first World War on the Austrian front. The officer would say: "*Andiamo!*", over the top, they would go and be shot down, killed by Austrian machine guns. And then the Austrian officers, they would say – how would you say that? "*Wie geht's*" or something, and they would go and attack the Italians, and they would be shot down by the Italian machines. And that's like the lion attacking the elephant. It doesn't happen among plants and animals, but it does happen among humans.

The way the Austrian economists say this is, is: well, the other kinds of economists talk about how people react to prices and incomes, how they *react*, they're just kind of sitting there waiting for the price to change, and then it changes and they go, well, okay. And what the Austrian economists don't like about that is that it leaves out action. *Action*. Coming to this university, was an action on your part. You came here to study and to learn. You weren't just reacting to prices, although that may be a consideration. It's understandable, but you were doing something, you understand what I'm saying? You're *acting* in the world, instead of *reacting*, instead of just waiting for things to happen. So that's another problem with this physics analogy in economics. And there are lots of other problems, which I speak of in the book. I speak of the "*vizi*" of economics, the sins of economics, and the way people usually talk about what's bad about economics is to say, oh, they're all conservatives or they're all liberals. They're all whatever they are, and that's what's bad. No, or that they use mathematics, which I don't think that's it by itself. But what the real sins are, too- By the way, start thinking of questions. The time to think about questions is when the speaker is speaking. Don't wait until the end, start formulating questions, or else I'll call on you, and make you have a question. How long do we have? We have until when? Until 4:20? Okay, I'll stop in a few minutes, and we'll start talking to each other. That'll be better, that will be more interesting. The first problem has to do with the way economists are trained in mathematics. So, when I was trained in mathematics, in modern economics, you have to know some maths. It's not some very high-level math. It's not the mathematics of mathematics

department, so to speak. But it is massive. It's the mathematics of the mathematics department in spirit. And here's what I mean by that: using mathematics to summarize the world or to increasingly characterize, say, the market for housing in Milan. You've got a supply curve of housing, and a demand curve for housing. This is a metaphor. It's a mathematical metaphor. It says: the very complicated social relationship of renting or buying a house in Milan is like certain mathematical objects called curves. Downward sloping demand curve, upward sloping supply curve, and the intersection of the two determine the rental price or the purchase price of housing in Milan. Now, this metaphor, which, from a complete outsider, sounds insane, is actually a very useful way of thinking about housing prices in Milan. It can't, as I just said, it can't help you to predict them very well. Because if you could do that you would be so smart that you would be a millionaire. So, there's something wrong with that. But still, it helps you understand the past certainly, you can do economic history with this, the supply and demand curves. But the trouble is that the economists were all trained, not by engineers or physicists, who use mathematics to model things to make little toy equation representations of the world. But by mathematicians, who cares- Hey, excuse me, hello, you in the background? Stop that. No talk in my class, it's impolite. People at the back of the room often think that the professor isn't looking at them, I don't know why, I can see you!

Anyway, the kind of mathematics that people are taught, if they take their math courses from professors of mathematics, is quite different from what engineers or meteorologists or physicists use, because what the math department is interested in, this is explained it in the book, but let me explain quickly here, its existence, not magnitudes. Somewhat surprisingly, mathematics is not about how big things are, or how much things are. It has nothing to do with mathematics. Mathematics in the math department is about whether things exist or not. Here's an example. The Goldbach's conjecture is a proposition in mathematics that's been around for a couple of centuries. And here's what it says: This is amazing, pay attention. Goldbach's conjecture says that every even number is the sum of two prime numbers. Prime numbers are 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, those numbers that can't be evenly divided by two, right? Oh no, it's worse than that. Those are odd numbers that I'm talking about. What? I'm confusing myself here... Anyway, they are numbers that can't be broken down. They can't be you know... 16 is four times 4, or two times, two times, two times 2; 17 can only be expressed as, well, 17. There is no integer multipliers that you can make 17 with, that's what a prime number is. Prime numbers are really quite amazing, but this proposition is astonishing. Try it out in your head. You can see that it works, you know, up to the numbers I can think of. But it turns out great, this conjecture is true forever. It's always true no matter how large numbers, which is remarkable because half the numbers are even, and prime numbers get less and less common as you get bigger and bigger numbers, and yet it's still true, except that the mathematicians haven't been able to prove it. That's why it's a conjecture. They've been trying for two centuries to prove that this is true forever and for any even number that you could possibly imagine, and they haven't been able to do it. Actually, turns out there is a supplement: every odd number is the sum of three primes. Neither of them has been proven. They don't even know if this proposition is decidable, which is kind of an abstract kind. But anyway, they don't know nothing, *niente*, and yet, there it is. The Goldbach's conjecture is cool enough, because it's been calculated up to enormous even numbers and all of them turned out to be the sum of two primes. So, as I said, you can use it for *scienza*, but you can't use it for mathematics. You can't use it for this abstract love that mathematics professors have for proof. I call it "Greek style-proof". You can show the Pythagorean theorem in the abstract without having to deal with any particular triangle. You can show it for all triangles. And that's what the mathematicians like. They like these transcendent truths. Well, that's not what we need for economics. Yet the economists, because they're inspired by mathematicians, not by engineers, are obsessed with proof. Turns out that you can prove under special circumstances that an economy that has such and such characteristics will be efficient. You can prove it on a blackboard. Does that mean that the actual economy in Italy or the United States is close to perfect? No. In fact,

these proofs have nothing to do with the sort of social engineering question of how good the Italian economy is compared with what? Perfection? You don't know, because that's an engineering quantitative problem.

So that's the first *vizio*, the vice of economics. The second sin is statistical. And I'm not going to spend a lot of time on it because it's a little bit intricate, it's a little bit hard to believe that anyone would say or do such a stupid thing as the economists have done. There's a technique called "statistical significance". Has anyone here encountered the concept of statistical significance? I think not on the whole. You know Greek, but you don't know statistical significance. That's better. Learn more Greek, ancient Greek. Here's the trick, the claim of the economists in their statistical work- [*il microfono si spegne*] There we go, I need to get closer and closer to this, at some point I'll be standing on the desk. Anyway, they say: here it is, numbers contain their own interpretation. Numbers contain their own interpretation. They claim, incorrectly, that if you could have a series of, I don't know, prices of ice cream or some physical measurement, you can tell whether it's statistically significant by just looking at the numbers. Now, suppose I make a similar proposition about language. Suppose I say that sentences in Italian contain their own interpretation. If you just look at the sentence, you know what it means. And you know that that's false, on all kinds of grounds. For example, you can use "*certo*" when someone said some incredibly stupid thing and say "*Ah, certo!*". Right? So, the sense of *certo* does not interpret itself. If you had no sense of irony, if you were kind of four years old, you wouldn't understand that, you'd think "Papa said *certo*, so it must be *certo*". But as an older person, you know that it can be used ironically, and any word Italian language, any sentence in Italian language can be reversed in significance. [*Si interrompe per riprendere due studentesse*] Would you people stop talking back there? Look, high school is over. Let me get back on track here... Any sense can be interpreted ironically. And that's just part of it. Obviously, irony depends very much in the audience. If you have an audience of four-year-olds, they're not going to get it. If you have an audience of college students, university students, they'll all get it. You can't understand any sentence without a language community to which you're speaking, and the significance of the sentence depends entirely on the circumstances in the community and the joke. It depends. You can say: "the cat is on the mat", for example, the famous philosophical example in English. "The cat is on the mat", the "mat" being kind of a rug. Well, you could be using that sentence as a philosophical example, in epistemology. "The cat is on the mat". Well, how do you know the cat is on the mat? Blah, blah, blah... Or you could be answering the question: Where is the cat? The cat is on the mat. But to understand the sentence at all, you need to know what a cat is, what "is" is, and what a mat is. If the cat is floating in the air, a meter above the mat, is she on the mat or not? You see, now you can see very easily why numbers don't have their own interpretation built into them. There's nothing inside a number any more than inside an Italian sentence that tells you conclusively what its significance is. Well, this technique ignores that. It's a very simple philosophical point, and it says, "well, no, that's wrong".

So you can see that this problem with the word "science" in English or "*scienza*" in Italian is very deep, and I'd be interested to hear your opinions on how much *scienza* has been corrupted by the new English meanings of "science": when you hear the word *scienza* in ordinary Italian, do you think of merely this very broad systematic learning that has nothing to do with mathematics or experiments or anything like that? Or you think of *scienza* as in "*mia scienziata*"? I suppose I can add one more thing, which is that the result of all this stuff that I've been talking to you about is that there's no such thing as a method of science. Scientific method is used as a club, to beat on other scientists. You say: "You're not scientific because you don't use statistical significance", or "you're not scientific because you don't use enough math", or "you're not scientific because you don't do whatever I want you to do". It's meaningless. Science is rhetorical all the way down. I've written four books on this, and I still can't convince my economist colleagues. Science is rhetoric all the way down. It's *retorica*. By the way, learn to pronounce the word "rhetoric" in English. It's not "*rhetorics*", there's no "s" on the end, and it's not

“rhetòrics”. It’s *rhetoric*. Everyone, say: *rhetoric*. [*Il pubblico ripete*] Okay. It’s the art of unforced persuasion. It’s the art of finding arguments, and the arguments change over time. They don’t necessarily get better, sometimes they get worse. But on the whole, I have to say, in systematic studies of any sort, gradually the quality of argument gets better and better. And that’s a good thing. But there’s no timeless, decided now and forever, scientific method. So when you hear the phrase “scientific method”, look for who’s been beaten, who’s been hit with the club of scientific method. Now, that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have any standards. We should have standards of good arguments. Honest, not lying, actually trying to find the truth, actually working on meteorology, or physics, or history, or economics, or English studies, or philosophy, with seriousness. That’s more about the ethics of the science, not about some already interpreted feature of her speech or her activities. It’s about a serious person trying to do serious things, a serious honest person not lying. That’s science, *scienza*. Thank you very much.

14 Marzo 2019 – Grand Hotel Sitea, Torino (conversazione privata).

Q: Let’s start with the simple questions. My issue right now is that, in writing your intellectual biography, I’m trying to go back and understand where your ideas come from, and to do that I think it’s important to understand what your family *milieu* was. Last time we spoke we talked about, for example, Harvey Mansfield, who you told me was a friend and a colleague of your father... so for example, if you were to suggest some names or personalities who were close to your family when you were younger, what would you say?

A: Let me think... My father mainly was my model, but my mother had the most-... I’m like my mother emotionally, in the sense that she’s very adventurous and she’s very intellectual – not a scholar, she didn’t graduate from college, whereas my father was a scholar. In high school, there was an English teacher, called Hal Melcher – Harold I think his name was, Hal he was called. He was an inspiration, he was the kind of person I wanted to be, very energetic. He was a male, you see, I mainly had male models, didn’t have any female models except my mother. And then, in college, there was a teacher I had in my sophomore year named Erik Gustavsson, and he again was – for an economist – rather broad, intellectually. He was important to me. And then, in my senior year, my model was John Meyer, a transport economist and econometrician, and I was his research assistant for two years. I got a summer job on a project of his, and he was influential because he was a model on how to be an entrepreneurial academic. And then I learned from two colleagues of his, two professors of civil engineering at the MIT, and these people and John, taught me about magnitude, taught me about “how big”, they taught me to think quantitatively. One influence which is kind of odd, but I think it had influence on a lot of my generation, as far as quantities are concerned: we all used slide rules [= *regolo calcolatore, una forma di calcolatore analogico*], we didn’t have calculators, and so when you use a slide rule you have to know the order of magnitude of what you think the result is going to be; you’re dividing and multiplying basically, it can’t do adding. You have to know the correct magnitude, or it won’t put the decimal point in the right place: you’ll be off by a factor of 10, or 100 – that’s a disaster, the bridge would collapse! So, it forces people who learned-, that’s an odd fact but I think it’s true, that the generation before the calculator learned about approximation and rough magnitudes everytime they did an engineering problem, or an economic, quantitative problem. Anyway, that was a big influence. Then, my next model is Alexander Gerschenkron: I’ve written a good deal on Gerschenkron, he was so cool...! We then had a seminar with Gerschenkron, and I had colleagues who became models: Richard Sutch, a contemporary of mine. He was a graduate student at MIT the same year as I was at Harvard. He was a quantitative thinker – he had been trained in Washington as an undergraduate by Douglass North, the great Douglass North, before he moved to a private university

in Washington – he seemed to like universities who had “Washington” in their name. So, he was a model... People – men – who influenced me, not women.

Q: Besides your mum...

A: My mum was a big influence. She's why I'm an intellectual. She is why I'm broad, why I'm not interested in being a specialist; although my father's respect for intellectual excellence in any field was very similar to my mother's. They both respected intelligence and knowledge in a way that many people don't. So that was quite an influence on me.

Q: But you said you don't like opera, despite the fact that your mum was an opera singer?

A: She doesn't like opera much, she doesn't like to watch it – she likes to sing! It's like a baseball player: he doesn't like to watch baseball – he likes to play.

Q: In your autobiography, and in some other papers, you mention some of the anarchist thinkers who inspired you, like Emma Goldman or Petr Kropotkin. When did you read them and what role did they play in your education?

A: Don't exaggerate how clear I was about all this, because you're talking about a teenager, you're talking about a 15-year-old boy – or girl, it doesn't much matter. Reading Kropotkin – his famous book called *Mutual Aid* – and getting the idea-... but don't think of me as being scholarly about it. I wasn't. I was kinda casual. I knew about Emma Goldman, she's got an autobiography, and I read that a long time after, but I knew about her. She was raised in Rochester, New York... I kinda sympathized- but the main influences on me were folk songs. My politics were very simple, and on the left, and it was the time of folk music in the United States, and also in Britain...

Q: So, Joan Baez?

A: Joan Baez! Actually, because I'm a woman I call myself now a “Joan Baez socialist”, but at that time I was more Pete Seager, or Woody Guthrie... and then, of course, as students we read Marx. Not just in economics – in fact, *not* in economics. American universities are just strange, by world standards: you go to university and you don't just take the courses in your field: I had to take courses in history, science, I took a Geology course – this was when I was a junior. General education in every other place in the world – maybe not in Japan but in Canada, Britain, Italy – it's expected to happen in the secondary school, so you get general in secondary school and then you go and become a chemist, and you take only chemistry or maybe physics. And so, I was introduced to Marx in other courses, and I read a lot of Marx, and then I taught it as a graduate student. I had a full-ride fellowship, I didn't have to teach, but in my second year Gerschenkron, my supervisor, said: “Eh, you better teach”. So, I taught in a course called “Social studies”, which was an undergraduate, honorary concentration in Harvard college. There we read Marx, Durkheim, Weber, classics of anthropology, Tocqueville, we didn't read Adam Smith, for example. There I read a lot of Marx because I had to teach it, and I had already stopped being a Marxist by then, at least by my own sort of childish definition. I read the *Communist Manifesto* when I was maybe even in high school. I have Marxist friends who were seriously reading Marx when they were 15-16 years old – they were reading volumes 2 and 3, you have to be crazy for reading volumes 2 and 3 of *The Capital*! But they did. I wasn't that way. I didn't immerse myself in Marx, even though I thought of myself as a Marxist. And then, I thought of myself as a left-wing democrat, and so it went. I was all a bit casual about all this, I've gotten more serious as I've gotten older.

Q: Where were you, and what were you doing during the Sixties, with all the civil rights movement going on?

A: I didn't burn my draft card. I was a male, so I had a draft card, but to my shame, and to the shame of every middle-class boy in the United States, I had a "good draft card". My childhood friends, in Wakefield, Massachusetts, were being drafted and sent to Vietnam and died. I was the son of a Harvard professor, and the draft boards were these committees of notables: leading lawyers, bankers, manufacturers in Wakefield, Massachusetts – and they were *never* going to send the son of a Harvard professor to Vietnam. It was never gonna happen, and it made for a lot of upper-middle class guilt in the United States. And so, people like me were out there protesting against the Vietnam war, as I did, but they didn't do anything about it. I had all the correct ideas: I was in favour of the civil rights movement for blacks in the United States, I was in favour of the women's movement, I was against the Vietnam war, I was in favour of gay liberation, and finally I realized that I could change gender at age 53, and God tapped me on the shoulder and told me: "Okay, dear, this is your last chance to put your money where your mouth is". Because I didn't get to do anything serious about all this: I was a good husband, I didn't oppress my wife, I tried to help her in her career and did – I was a big improvement from my father, who was terrible that way – but I didn't do anything radical in any of these things. So I thought of myself as a Marxist, but you know [chuckles] I wasn't a revolutionary. I didn't want to bomb anyone! I was sort of peaceful with everyone. I was a liberal, in a kind of fundamental sense, without knowing it, and then I gradually grew into this carapace, like a lobster growing into its external shell.

Q: About Austrian economics, I don't think they were part of your intellectual background, so you came across it later in life. When did it happen and how?

A: It was Don Lavoie he's the one who really got me into it. Another one was Karen Vaughn, she and Don had tried to hire me – she was Chair of Economics at George Mason. They came to me and flattered me – and I am easily flattered – because they were interested in my rhetorical work. Don recognized it. He was taught about hermeneutics, the "reader" and the "listener side", and he saw me as the "speaking side" of this persuasive dyad. But it was very slow: I didn't read a lot of Austrians, but then I got assigned, for example, two years ago... they asked me to do a paper for a conference about Lachmann, one of the Austrians, who was a professor in South Africa. We used to come at NYU, and Don Lavoie, and Peter Boettke, also went there – but anyway, that was the Austranism that I like – the Hoppe stuff, the one where they don't think they have to look at the world, because they already know everything about it, struck me as very strange. I had picked up copies of some of Kirzner's books, but I didn't read them very carefully, and I couldn't quite understand them, and I didn't get that Kirzner was my man, until much, much later. It's really only when I started working on the second volume of the *Bourgeois Era*, and I tried to figure out why economic growth took place, then I started to read Kirzner again a little bit, because of his "alertness" theory, and then... I got it! Actually, about ten years ago I was asked to come to a conference honouring Israel Kirzner, at Beloit college, so I had to read more of Israel's work, in order to be coherent in praising him – and later, he honoured me the same way a few years ago. You go to Beloit for a week, it's in Wisconsin, and they bring people to praise you, and then they publish a book. And actually, you need to go look at that book.

Q: Okay, I will! On a side note, just because I've seen that a lot, especially in the *Bourgeois* trilogy, you appeal to literature a lot. Which are some of the novels or poetry books that inspired you, and that you suggest I read?

A: One that I talk about, and all economists do, is *Robinson Crusoe*, but it was more like the other way around. I read what everyone reads – Jane Austen, or whatever – as an economist. For example, Shakespeare: I was ashamed that I didn't read enough Shakespeare, so when I was a professor at UIC I took a course from a colleague in English – it was wonderful! We read the *Winter's Tale*, which is a terrific play, and I would read it with my own work in mind. Look, I'm a scholar, I read for use, because

I have an agenda in mind. If I notice something in Jane Austen that fits, I instantly write it down – but I don't read novels in order to make an argument. Anyway, what was the question?

Q: Whether there is any work of fiction that inspired you.

A: Ah, *The Buddenbrooks*! I read it around 2000, and I could see it as a portrait of the German bourgeoisie. Then, when it was published, I read *Nice Work*, by David Lodge, and that's another good one. In Iowa I thought an economics course that used literature; I had already read *The Buddenbrooks* by then, and I used Dickens' *Hard Times*, and I realized pretty quickly that Dickens knew nothing about the economy. He was a publishing entrepreneur, and a performing one since he gave public speeches – he was an entrepreneur as a writer and as a published, but knew nothing about the economy – yet people think Dickens tells you about the Industrial Revolution, but it tells you nothing about the Industrial Revolution, whereas *The Buddenbrooks* does. And then I got into Robert Frost, the American poet, and I realized it rather recently, but he's an unusually economic poet, he talks about the economy all the time. He was actually conservative in the 1930s, against Roosevelt. So Frost wasn't really influential, but... but be careful of the talk about influence, because we're humans, and we tend to use these so-called "influences", and we change their- see, my favourite example is McDonald's, which is used culturally differently in different cultures. In the United States its advertising is: "You deserve a break today"; it's directed at mothers: you should take your child and family to McDonald's, so you don't have to cook today. Whereas in Holland it's the only restaurant that stays open in the evening, it's a place where you can go get a coke or something, so teenagers use it that way – and it strikes Americans as very strange to look at McDonald's as a teenage hangout. See, it was being used differently in different cultures: people talk about the "McDonaldization" of the world, as if American culture is being imposed – no, it's not, they were using it in their own way. I think that's true of people, yourself as well: you have your own agenda, and the older you get, it's your agenda that... you get more and more biased, you might say, because you get a clearer idea of what you're doing, whereas, when you're a teenager you're just wandering around, bumping into walls, not knowing what you're doing: so you run into things, get all excited about them, like folk music, or you sing the Labor's songs, "people's flag is deepest red...", and blah blah blah...

Q: Makes sense. Very last question, just out of curiosity: it's probably not going to end up in my thesis. I'm just curious. Is there a reason why you always quote from T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*? Is it just because you like it? I've seen you quote a lot from it...

A: I've memorized it when I was a kid! I was a poet when I was in high school, and I wrote what my father judged to be fairly good poetry, which I gave up sort of in my junior year of high school. I didn't really think I was gonna be a poet, because you couldn't earn your living that way, but... "*We are the hollow men, we are the stuffed men...*", it's a great poem...

Q: "Not with a bang, but with a whimper"?

A: That's right. I'm so glad that I wrote this trilogy – and I'm gonna write other books, but I ended with a bang, not a whimper. And it's good, because most careers – think of political careers, which always end in defeat... that's why they go away... think of May, the prime minister of Britain: lastly, she's gonna leave!

Q: I've read there is another book of yours that is going to be published: *How to be a Humane Libertarian*. Is it already out?

A: The title keeps changing. That's the one that's called *Why Liberalism Works*; then there's another one, which I have under submission which I can send to you – if you promise not to put it out, and you will of course – which is a collection of articles, and it's under submission for the Chicago Press. It's

about institutionalism and humanomics, and how to solve neo-institutionalism with humanomics. So, it's an attack on neo-institutionalism: what we really need to do is what I was talking about this morning, namely, humanomics.

Q: Makes sense.

A: I'm very interested in your project, and by the way, to make it a great book, and you could write a great book...

Q: I hope so!

A: You can do it! It's not to make it entirely about me, but use comparisons, to bring it into the wider context: what economics is like, what people moving away from the Left is like in European civilization, in the last fifty years, what American politics is like, you know, all those things that go into it... what the quantitative revolution in economics was all about, and how Deirdre fit into it, and how the others fit into it too... Because then it explains her story, for what it's worth, as an illustration of larger themes.

Q: I'm convinced of that too, that's why I'm writing your intellectual biography!

A: Ok, you're good, sounds good!

Q: Thank you so much!

7 Giugno 2019 – Peace Palace, Den Haag.

“God's Work in the World: The Deep Compatibility of Real Liberalism with Any Abrahamic Religion” (intervento pubblico)

My central point is that liberalism, understood in the classical way as a society of non-slaves, not actual slaves, is highly consistent, and may indeed have historical connections, with the idea of free will, in Abrahamic, and specifically Christian, theology.

Now, I understand that this is, you can say, an irritating claim, because most modern Christian thinkers, in the last century or so, have assumed that Christianity, particularly progressive Protestant Christianity, implies socialism. I'll speak of Paul Tillich, and quote him, if I can find it... there it is: 1919, when he was a young pastor in Germany. In his answer to the inquiry of the Protestant Consistory, he says that the spirits of Christian love, if there's anything distinctive about Christianity, compared to paganism, it's that it's a theology of love. «The spirit of Christian love accuses – *j'accuse* – a social order, which consciously and in principle is built upon economic and political egoism, and it – meaning, Christianity – demands a new order in which the feeling of community is the foundation of the social structure. Christianity accuses deliberate egoism of any kind, in which each is the enemy of the other, because his advantage is conditioned by the disadvantage, or ruin, of the other. It demands an economy of solidarity of all, of joy and work, rather than profit».

A clear example of the ideology of modern social democracy could hardly be given. I think it's wrong. I think it's mistaken. One obvious point you can make it in suggesting that this is a modern aberration in theological thinking, is to point out that this was not the case in earlier Christianity, nothing like it. Indeed, it would be very interesting to inquire when in Christian thought, when exactly, we moved away from a doctrine which is characteristic of much of Christianity, of taking up your cross to bear. If you're in your mortal life, a blind cripple, begging by the West Gate, take up your cross: for if you perform this task that God has assigned you, in Christian spirit, you will have eternal life. And the

economist is instantly tempted to think of this in terms of the interest rate. Because, if you have an infinite life at any interest rate, it overwhelms the discounted present value, it overwhelms any inconvenience in this life. And yet there was a change. There was a change which comes – I said that the data is somewhat unclear... it was peculiarly Protestant, though Catholic social teaching is struggling with this issue of capitalism versus socialism when it comes down against socialism, but not entirely in favour of the sort of thing that's attacked in this quotation for sure. But it's mainly Protestants who think this way. There are people here who are much, much more scholars of the history of theology and church history, who can tell me whether I'm correct or not, but it seems to be in 19th century... and indeed, this parallels, I believe, a shift towards new liberalism. Not the way Americans use it... in Latin America, the word liberal has been taken over by conservatives who say that liberalism is about having a large army oppressing the population. I think liberalism is consistent with the idea of a society of free adults. As we said yesterday, God wants us to be adults, not perpetual children. If he had wanted us to be perpetual children – “she” actually, sorry – if she wanted us to be perpetual children, she would have forgiven us, our plucking the fruit of the tree of the knowledge, of good and evil, and said: “That's okay, dear. That's all right. You can stay in Eden”. But she cast us out. So, as I say, historically speaking, there was a period of about a hundred years, in which progressive thought in Europe was liberal. That doesn't mean everyone is. There was a reaction, there were attempts to stop it, to continue the feudal order, the order of kings and princes, and princes of the church. Let's take some dates: 1748 to 1848 is the period of nascent liberalism, and it was an entirely new idea. There was no worry about the way the world worked, because the next world would take care. There is a joke against this from American atheists, which says: “you'll get the pie in the sky when you die”. And then Adam Smith, Voltaire, early exponents and admirer of English culture and its beginning liberalism, Mary Wollstonecraft too, in the United States there was Henry David Thoreau, who was a liberal: they were all saying yes, that's what it is, all men are created equal – so says also Thomas Jefferson, the driver of slaves. Yet the idea was there, and has had force in our society to the point at which the most vile tyrannies take on the symbols of liberalism enthusiastically. The People's Democratic Republic of China, for example. As Orwell says in *Animal Farm*, all animals are equal, except some are more equal than others. But then, from 1848 on, liberalism sustained another assault. Communism, the first and second International, anarchists – like my childhood hero, Prince Kropotkin – but it's also under assault by a sort of modern version of this, in the 1870s and 80s in Britain: the new liberalism. In what does the new liberalism consist? It consists of the conviction that the poor are to be pitied and are to be managed, as children, that their other selves, their higher selves, would want to be so managed. What comes about is American progressivism. In Germany, of course, it comes through a conservative, Bismarck, and Disraeli in Britain has the same theory, the same impulse, that says: “We'll give the poor, as the German Empire, state pensions to buy them off from the Social Democrats”, so they would “steal their thunder”, as we say in English – it's a strange expression – so they would steal the thunder of the socialists, and we supporters of the Empire, we conservatives, will be viewed as their benefactors, as their loving fathers and mothers. So, there's this drift into socialism both from the left and the right. And that's what I'm objecting to, with every ounce of my energy.

I was a Marxist when I was a kid. You know the famous saying “If you're not a Marxist by the time you're 18, you have no heart. If you're still a Marxist when you're 28, you have no brain”. I just made it! This doesn't go down very well with my Marxist friends, and I apologize to every Marxist here. So what we get is a paternalism that's extremely prominent in 20th century politics, and there's some sort of connection with – again, the details I don't know because I don't know the history of theology very well, but there's some connection with this conviction that the state should be the “guarantor”, that the state should treat you like a comforted child. The phrase we heard yesterday, “from cradle to grave”. My comment on that, is that if you have “cradle to grave” security provided by seizing resources from someone else, you'll always be in the cradle. And as far as Christian autonomy is concerned, you

might as well be in the grave. To put it theologically, and here I'm on very shaky grounds because I'm an economist, not a theologian, God wants us, as I claim, to be adults, capable of evil. That's fundamental to free will: if we can't choose evil, if we can't choose between good and evil in a fallen world, as fallen souls in fallen world, free will is meaningless. If we're God's pets or God's children... the "Prosperity Gospel", for example, is an interesting recent example of this heresy. "Don't worry, God will provide". "The lilies of the field toil not, but their splendour is unparalleled". If that's your line, then work is unnecessary, and economy is unnecessary. The state will provide as God does. Now, St. Paul had something to say about this. In what we believe is his first letter, he says: when I was with you, I worked night and day. And I understand that some of you are just standing around praying and not working. And this is shameful. You must not. They were not working because they expected the second coming any moment... I hope doesn't happen this afternoon because I'm not prepared for it! He says, now you must work. No, those who do not work, he says, should not eat. You gotta work, because by working you're helping other people. That's the key point. And that's the economics that Paul Tillich, in that quotation, just completely misunderstand. He thinks of income as coming like manna from heaven, and then the question is how to distribute, and in family or among friends, things are shared, and it's perfectly sensible and true thing. It comes down from heaven, we'll share it out. But it makes no sense when applied to a country of 330 million people. To get people to be of service of each other, you need to have an economy. I don't like the word "capitalism" for reasons I can explain to you. One has to have commerce, property rights. What Tillich doesn't understand is that the business world is a field of cooperation on a massive scale. Inside the company you cooperate with your suppliers, you cooperate with your customers. True, there is competition. But the competition takes the form of interest. If I'm making computers, you're making computers and someone else is our customer, I'm free to compete with you. If your computers are not really good, and I can sell the computer to her, she's better off, I'm better off, too bad for you. But if we don't do that, "too bad for you", then there's no economic progress at all, and this amazing modern enrichment that we've experienced in the last two centuries doesn't happen, and won't go on happening in India and China and Africa and South America and so forth. So, it's essential, for the relief of poverty, for competition to be there.

So, that's my theme. I have various other pieces of this argument, but I will leave time for discussion. Because I want to challenge the assumption that I'm sure many of you have, that Christianity entails socialism, social democracy. By the way, I should announce that I'm not against a safety net as we call it. As an American you'd think, "Oh, well, that's the terrible capitalist American talking". But in fact, safety net in the United States, honestly, is rather similar to the safety net in Holland or Sweden. It actually is. You might think, "No, no, that must be wrong: I've seen on the news, there are poor people". Most Dutch people think that 50% of Americans are black and in poverty, which is not true. But that quantitative point aside, here's what it says. Especially after the first World War, there has been this enormous increase, in all countries, of safety nets. So, I'm not against a safety net. But I am against the extension of the power of the state. Henry Kissinger says, of France in which 55% of national income is allocated by the state, he says that France is the only successful communist country. You can kind of see this joke. But I think that a properly Christian view is not the subordination of the poor. Let me get one more quote... wait no, I don't think pull it up right now. But the problem is that if we start with pity for the poor, an entirely appropriate, theologically sound, impulse or emotion – if we're their mother, our impulse is to take over their lives, to provide them with housing, designed in properly modernist style, to provide them with an education that teaches them to be properly bourgeois, to provide them with medical care that we regard as appropriate, "to provide"... that is corrupting. It doesn't treat the human soul as properly free. So I think it's a big mistake to think that there's an entailment, a logical connection between the Sermon on the Mount and about the belief by a famous economist named Frank Knight, that the Sermon on the Mount, or Christianity, is, he says,

inconsistent with what we unfortunately call capitalism. And that I think it's wrong too, I think Frank Knight it's wrong, and Paul Tillich is wrong. They're both wrong. Contrary, a properly understood Christian capitalism is not a cover for conservatism, as it is in Latin America, or a cover for corruption, as it was for a long time in Italy. It is the way to go, it's the kind of society that frees the people.

Let me conclude with this: liberty is liberty is liberty. I don't care what it is. Of course, my freedom extends only as far as yours. I don't mean that you're free to be an axe murderer, but you're free to pursue your harmless projects, anyway you wish. To be a model railroader or to knit, as long as I'm not going to use the knitting needles to take over the airplane, I believe I should be permitted to pursue my projects. I have a trilogy called *The Bourgeois Era*. Three volumes – it's usually the case with trilogies. They're thick volumes that claim that what happened in the modern world is that people started to honour the bourgeoisie, in a way that was not true in earlier societies, and let people, both middle class and otherwise, "have a go" economically. This was classical liberalism, and it resulted in this gigantic explosion of innovation and an increase in income. It's quite important to have this figure in your mind of 3,000% per capita. I gave a talk on this, this fall, to the famous department of Cultural Anthropology at Cambridge, and one of the very distinguished anthropologists there, after I gave the talk, he said, "Look" – I'm not going to tell you who this was, but he stood up and said, "You know, I believe these figures and the factor of 30. I've studied these matters and from 1800 on, in places like Germany or Japan, this factor of 30 makes sense. But you know, this 3,000% that's- that's much too big". I moved on to the next topic! [*Il pubblico ride*] So it's a gigantic increase, and that was the consequence of freedom. That's the claim: commerce is not intrinsically evil; and Christianity, by the way, to an unusual extent in comparison with the other, say, Hinduism or Buddhism or other theistic faiths like Zoroastrianism, Christianity is particularly hostile to the market, and yet out of this society dominated by this idea, came the modern world. My claim is that the reason why that happened was through a new liberalism, through individual freedom. To come to my conclusion, freedom is freedom is freedom. That's the Germanic word. Liberty is liberty is liberty. That's the Romance word. Free in politics, free in religion, free in affectional preference. It's quite interesting that it's only in northern countries that for 100 years, homosexuality, especially by men, was criminalized, not in the Latin countries, not even in America. Only in places like Germany, Britain, and the United States. Freedom is freedom is freedom, and freedom includes freedom to start a hairdressing salon, when and where you want. The freedom to enter an occupation: it's very alarming that in my own country, in 1950, only 5% of occupations by number of employees required state licenses. 5% only. Now it's 30%. This is moving in the wrong direction. Freedom is freedom is freedom, and it's Christian. Thank you.

13 Luglio 2020 – Conversazione via email.

Q: The future of democracy: in your articles you mentioned how there's an actual risk for governments to take advantage of the situation, and make the current extraordinary measures ordinary. What can we, as citizens of liberal democracies, do to avoid seeing the current restrictions as the new norm?

A: Write against the descent into statism – for example, the statism recommended by Mariana Mazzucato. There's no other trick but public opinion.

Q: "Land of the free" protests: there have been instances of anti-lockdown protests in the US under the slogan "land of the free", where a few citizens, concerned with the socio-economic outcome of the quarantine, called for an earlier reopening (despite the rise in cases and deaths in the country). Is there a healthy balance between liberty and security, free market and public safety?

A: Certainly. If the Canadians are invading, or if a forest fire is starting, or if wearing a face mask would stop Covid 19 the government should order the response. No sensible liberal wants people to give other people Covid 19 by breathing on them. My liberty extends only as far as your nose.

Q: On police brutality: The murder of George Floyd resonated so much also because it happened in this particular time in history, since Floyd lost his job due to the Covid pandemic. Is it especially symbolic that the protests against police brutality happened in a period of time when state intervention has been increased due to the medical emergency we're facing?

A: I don't think so. The key is the new technology of smart phones, which have forced white people to experience what every black person knows.

Q: Defund the Police: The "Defund the police" movement aims at reinvesting funds previously aimed at police departments and reallocating them to other institutions and forms of community support, such as social services, healthcare, education etc. Do you think this could be an effective way to promote initiatives from civil society and/or strengthen local communities, or is it just another manifestation of the "nanny state"?

A: Yes, the nanny state. What we need to do is to break the political power of police trade unions, which always oppose sensible policies to stop bad violence.