



LUISS OPEN

SEPTEMBER 2019

# In Search of Lost Limits or The Need to Recover a Sense of Time.

25 september 2019

Editorial OPEN SOCIETY ([HTTPS:HOPEN.LUISS.IT/CATEGORY/OPEN-SOCIETY/](https://hopen.luiss.it/category/open-society/))



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Let us begin with the ABC or, indeed, just the letters A and B as reconstructed by good old Aristotle, that philosopher who made generations of scholars smile with his deceptively ingenuous “A=A” and “B=B”. Which, digging below the surface, contained a profound truth, namely, that “A does not equal B”; and upon this *pivot* more than two thousand years of the West’s history have been constructed.

Combined, the **principles of identity and non-contradiction** have constituted the *pivot* by virtue of which what is right has been distinguished from what is not right; what is beautiful from what is not beautiful and what is true from what is not true.

Values and goods have competed with each other constantly for centuries but although often, in the inevitable balancing process, both have merited protection, the preference has been for an “either/or” approach. For example, during the early Middle Ages, the choice between a personal or a territorial application of the law (i.e. between favouring minorities, by tolerating use of their law, or imposing one sole form of law throughout the territory, thereby fostering relations between all members of society) varied from period to period. Society moved within a mosaic that was, indeed, changing in its content but one that was constant in terms of its method for setting *limits; limits*, which are in the nature of things.

Even before they smiled at Aristotle, generations of scholars remained dumbfounded by the apparent banality of the pre-Socratic Heraclitus, whose Πάντα ρεῖ (Panta rhei or “everything flows”) lapped against or, for some, actually burst the banks of the obvious. But it was those who failed to grasp the deeper meanings who had made the mistake. In this case, too, a profound and fruitful truth was condensed in those words: in nature, movement flows from tension and contrasts.

Nowadays, on the other hand, everything seems to be dissolving. People would like to eliminate every limit and deny the natural dialectic operating between inherently contrasting forces. And this when every athletic movement demonstrates, conversely, that in nature it is opposites that are the rule i.e. that contrast: the javelin thrower runs and then stops and it is only in stopping that he gives his movement meaning; albeit running, the tennis player always needs a point of rotation in order to hit the ball. Or, more trivially, a door can open if it can pivot on a hinge that also halts it. In physics, mechanical momentum indicates, precisely, rotation around a pivot.

And yet pivots and contrasts seem to be obsolete at the mental level. There exists only an indistinct  $A=B$  lurking within a persuasive word that promises much but offers little by way of anything concretely constructive: the word “inclusion”. It seems as though what is centrifugal has become synonymous with negativity, whilst only the centripetal equals positivity. This when, on the contrary, it is in the nature of things that there should be *points of resistance*: and yet the constant, obsessive quest for *lines of compromise* apparently continues to enjoy hegemony.

**Human activity is a continuous quest for truth**, for new dimensions and for new values but *contemporary ‘natural law’* pretends to seek truth by overcoming points of resistance; indeed, by settling comfortably on any and every line of compromise provided that that may avoid all forms of inconvenience and does not tamper with the superficial comfort of mental and physical well-being.

At §§4-5 of his *Nova Methodus Discendae Docendaeque Iurisprudentiae* (Francofurtum ad Moenum 1667), the good Leibnitz attributed a *duplex principium* to law and theology: *ratio* (a natural theology and a natural jurisprudence) and *scriptura* (positive commandments i.e. commandments laid down by human beings). That fruitful dualism (distinguishing between that which is natural and that which is laid down by human beings) seems to have been repealed. Everything is allowed to flow into an artificial *ratio* of pleasure: an easy, inclusive world without hard edges or points of resistance; an obsessively cheerful world that swallows everything in order to avoid contrasts and points of conflict.

Such an approach leads to a need to recover the sense of Time. **It is easier to live for today:** that which has been is of no importance; that which will be is not yet and therefore slips into irrelevance. Generous political initiatives are valuable for their announcement effect i.e. today: that those initiatives are not then followed by consequent, concrete acts is of no importance. The absence of Time makes it easier to obfuscate every critical reflection and offers the undoubted advantage of dissolving the responsibility principle, which involves answering in the future for every omission or action, on the other hand.

The London School of Economics of the post-war period merits praise for creating the rules regulating the welfare state. An unintended repercussion, however, has been a ‘socialization’ of conduct over subsequent decades. As a result, forms of de-responsabilization have become rooted in contemporary society. For example, toasts were drunk in Italy at the passing of a law obliging parents to buy car seats that ring when an adult gets out of the car; this to remind them that there is an infant in the vehicle. That is tantamount to stating that both the *Zeitgeist* and the legal system are making it legitimate for parents to forget their children.

**It is pleasant enough complying with contemporary ‘natural law’.** It imposes itself in the name of an alleged inevitability and it lives on facile forms of ‘thinking’ that line the Big Capitalists’ pockets. It also offers the advantage of pre-packaged ‘reflection packs’ that can quickly be adopted as guide-lines because they have no dialectical structuring and are without bulkheads.

An example of facile ‘thinking’ can be found in the “principle of non-discrimination” when, in nature, the opposite applies: all subjects are different (with all that that entails). Truly seeking to apply the “principle of non-discrimination” concretely would result in an absence of any kind of evaluation and every limit or parameter for evaluation (which inevitably leads to judgments, which would, however, be discriminatory) inevitably evaporates.

From the times of the legendary Code of Hammurabi, law was born setting limits that created instances of freedom. The legal dimension is bound by evaluations; it has always fostered and protected forms of behaviour that it deemed worthy of protection, whilst it has discouraged and suppressed those it deemed harmful. But if, today, we seek to place the “principle of non-discrimination” above those categories, then every form of reasoning and every evaluation of what is beautiful and what is right falls away and we appeal to emotions, whilst eliminating all rational argument.

The operation that is being endorsed (out of laziness and a desire for convenience) is culturally stagnant and clearly without any future. It is therefore anti-historical. Conversely, every cultural

option – which then turns into concrete everyday choices – pre-supposes an overview; a vision that involves, in its turn, the projection of the effects of choices over Time. *Contemporary 'natural law'*, on the other hand, has created a control mechanism that is imposing a furious aversion to history, understood as memory.

But what are we to do if there are no pivots? What is beautiful? If the superficial rapidity of social media prevails, then every critical reflection becomes “old-fashioned”. What are we to do if there is no dialogue, that art of dialectic, that ‘question’ with its hermeneutic meaning? Hans Georg Gadamer notes how, in Plato, the beautiful (καλόν, kalon) is not simply symmetry and order and that it is through beauty that the nature of measure is made manifest: “measure is the decisive condition for beauty” (*Wahrheit und Methode* (III/3), Tübingen 1960) . Today, therefore, there has been a volatilization both of the value of the beautiful and of its anagogical function: that beautiful that weaves such a close relationship with the good (αγαθόν, agathon). That good that, in its turn, is so connected to truth (αλήθεια, aletheia).

**Thus the sense of a limit has been lost:** enjoying the tolerance of infantilely unaware parents, the digital-native generations flood each other with repetitive messages urging protection of the environment, ignorant of the CO2 that that messaging creates.

The absence of any limits (fostered by economic interests, which push for trash, which favours quantity) brings with it an absence of balance. And *contemporary 'natural law'* cannot tolerate careful consideration. On the contrary, it fights those who seek “the right measure of things” and, therefore, the beautiful. Those who seek balance are expressing an intolerable arrogance and are alien to the natural order, thus becoming an enemy. Those who defend categories are attacking thought; they are, therefore, isolating themselves from the community and thus become an enemy or *hostis* (πολέμιος, polémios). (True war was only the war waged between Greeks and barbarians, the latter being, by their very nature, enemies. Domestically, on the other hand, a people cannot wage wars with itself. Indeed, in his *Politeia* (V-XVI), Plato distinguished between πόλεμος (war) and στάσις (civil war) and thus only those outside the community were, precisely, the πολέμιος or enemy).

The reader who has had the patience to read this far might (understandably) have found his/her attention wandering and begun to think ill of the author of these lines, accusing him of serious conceptual improprieties. Well, in order to avoid any misunderstanding, the author of these lines clarifies that he has limited himself to observing things (natural and human things) through the lens of History. That lens that magnifies a question: **how can a society keep going without a sense of Time?**

Indeed, the boundary line between A and B seems to have disintegrated. That line on which was built the ancient *actio finium regundorum* of Roman Law, the marking of the boundaries between estates: “Up to here is yours and from here on is mine”. The line by virtue of which, “from a certain point onwards I must take on the related responsibilities but up to that point, you must assume them”.

Today, however, every boundary line is seen as a barrier and, therefore, to be knocked down. Yet the line of that *actio* created instances of freedom. Just as rules, in general, have created instances of freedom. Only limits create a space; otherwise, everything is nothing.

And every reference to Dostoevsky, *Demons* and nihilism seems superfluous.

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