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REACTION 2

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The keywords we are focusing on today are DEVELOPMENT and SELF-INTEREST.

Let's start with development. A noun which implies change, growth, or improvement over a period of time. From the mid-1950s onward, it is used in the context of positive change, especially in the political and economic spheres. The graph here shows us how much the use of the word in print has changed with time, and is indicative in its own right.

Then there is self-interest. This term implies that I am free to choose to seek my own personal gain. There should be nothing wrong in this - in pursuing my own good. But what about pursuing my self-interest irrespective from the consequences on others? Is there a limit to my own freedom? We normally agree that there is a limit to one's freedom where its expression starts to obstruct other people's rights and freedoms.

Who are the 'others'?

In the study of Sustainable Development, we have two main groups of 'others' – those we share our existence with today, and those who will make part of future generations.

An early - and still the most widely accepted - definition of Sustainable Development proposed by the Brundtland Commission on behalf of the United Nations in 1987 describes it as:

“meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”ⁱ

Therefore Sustainability implies that it is necessary that we meet everybody's needs today, without making it difficult for future generations to do the same.

Are we behaving in this manner?

Are everyone's needs being met today, and are we leaving a better place for future generations?

It is a question that every person needs to reason out personally before we can attempt to obtain an honest response as a society.

In my opinion, one of the simplest and most effective tests in Ethics is called the Mirror Test; promoted strongly by Peter Drucker (known as the father of modern Management Science, no less).

The Mirror test invites us to reflect what kind of person we want to see in the mirror, to stand in front of a mirror and ask whether we are proud of ourselves and our actions; or to decide on a course of action with this in mind.ⁱⁱ

Are we running our actions through any test of this kind before proceeding? I believe we still are.

Yet, the fundamental problem in all of this lies in the fact that we still find a justification for the most irrational of behaviours and actions. Even for those actions of ours which are manifestly wrong. We are never failing the Mirror test.

Now, let's be very clear. Not all development is wrong and negative. Not all construction is harmful. Yet, we all agree - at least privately - that not all that is going on is good. That at least some of the development we have seen or are witnessing is wrong. And here let us not just single out construction, but we should review the whole economic setup of our country.

The answer for the problem of still justifying oneself even when in the wrong can find an explanation in a concept first created by anthropologist Edward Banfieldⁱⁱⁱ while working in Sicily in the late 1950's and then borrowed by Jeremy Bossevain^{iv} for the Maltese context in the early 1960's:

Amoral Familism, that is; *Social behaviour that is solely focused on the economic well-being of the family.*^v

It does not matter that I am not behaving well or not doing the right thing as long as my close family is benefitting from it.

This provides me with justification. It helps me pass the Mirror test.

Banfield observed that villagers 'were unable to act together for their common good, or for any other scope that went beyond the immediate, material interest of the nuclear family. And this was perpetuating the state of poverty and backwardness the community was in. They were stuck in a rut and could not get out of it because everybody was pulling the rope only his way.

Now let us see if this applies to us.

Let's have a look at the economy of Gozo. According to E-Cubed Consultants, in 2014, tourism accounted for around 50% of the island's private sector economy. Tourism also accounted for 30% of the private sector jobs on the island.^{vi}

The great majority of us agrees that whatever is drawing tourists to Gozo will not be here for much longer. We are told as much by tourists themselves. We all compare the positive aspects Gozo still retains with what has been lost on mainland Malta.

Will tourists continue to come here if Gozo maintains the course of becoming a bad copy of elsewhere? Probably not, because even if they prefer that type of destination, tourists would choose the original over the copy; especially if we remain so expensive.

Where would the Gozitan economy shift to? Where will the Gozitans of the future earn their living from? Will Gozo end up a retirement home like so many other Mediterranean islands?

Second case; the infrastructure. It seems that people are not even welcome in our streets (we say *huma żejda* in Maltese). Think about our sidewalks (*bankini*). If you use them, you risk

injury. Why? Because they are at the service of the house or building behind them and not to serve the public. The public walks in the street.

Can you count how many obstructed pavements you have encountered in your life; electricity poles, traffic signs, private signs, festa decorations, flower pots. The parent with the baby in the pushchair? Its his or her problem. The person in a wheelchair? His or her problem. Anybody exercising; running or walking in the street? Their problem.

Third: how honest are we about the marketing of Malta?

Ultimately, we do know where all of this is leading us to. We know too well what the consequences of our actions are.

Economically we are better off. What about our quality of life? Are we happier? Calmer? Healthier? Do we have more family time? What about our mental health, obesity, anger, road rage, anxiety?

At times it becomes clear that it is not only future generations that we are failing. We are failing ourselves.

Think of the craze on antique photographs of Malta and Gozo on Facebook and elsewhere. Does this tell us something? Are we not the same people who are destroying that which remains from what we find so attractive in those photos of Malta and Gozo of a century ago? Would a psychologist find something to report on here?

We must also bear in mind that we live in challenging times. In his work *Liquid Times*, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman speaks of five new unprecedented challenges Man faces today:

1. "The passage from the 'solid' to a 'liquid' phase of modernity; a condition where social forms like institutions and structures that regulate us can no longer (and are not expected) to keep their shape for long – they melt faster than the time it takes to cast them – thus we are losing all our points of reference,
2. The separation and pending divorce of power and politics – much of the power of the state is moving to the politically uncontrolled global space, with politics remaining 'local' and therefore increasingly ineffective and less relevant to the local citizens,
3. The gradual withdrawal or curtailing of communal, state-endorsed insurance against individual failure or ill-fortune deprives collective action of much of its past attraction and saps the social foundations of social solidarity – 'community' sounds increasingly hollow,
4. The collapse of long-term thinking, planning, and acting, and the disappearance or weakening of social structures in which thinking, planning and acting could be inscribed for a long time to come. This leads to a splicing of both political history and individual lives into a series of short-term projects or episodes ... which do not combine into the kinds of sequences to which concepts like 'development', 'maturation', 'career', or 'progress' could be meaningfully applied,

5. The responsibility for resolving the quandaries generated by vexing volatile and constantly changing circumstances is shifted onto the shoulders of individuals – who are now expected to be ‘free-choosers’ and to bear in full the consequence of their choices... The virtue proclaimed to serve the individual’s interests best is not *conformity* to rules, but *flexibility*; a readiness to change tactics and style at short notice, to abandon commitments and loyalties without regret”.^{vii}

Therefore is Bauman telling us that Man today is being pushed to act alone, and mostly only in his self-interest?

To conclude.

Is our conscience completely rotten?

Are we at the point of no return?

Certainly not I believe, although a lot of damage has been done.

We are certainly missing the wood for the trees, and we should seriously consider rediscovering Banfield and Bossevain with urgency. And to have a look at Bauman too.

Recovery starts with self-awareness.

Finally I would like you to observe that I have not used the word environment a single time.

REFERENCES

ⁱ Brundtland, G.H. (1987) Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. Geneva, UN-Dokument A/42/427

ⁱⁱ Drucker, P. F. (2008) Managing Oneself. Harvard Business Review Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Banfield E.C. (1958) The moral basis of a backward society. Free Press, University of Chicago.

^{iv} Bossevain J. (1965) Saints and Fireworks: Religion and Politics in Rural Malta. Taylor & Francis Group.

^v Banfield E.C. (1958) The moral basis of a backward society. Free Press, University of Chicago.

^{vi} E-Cubed Consultants (2015) The Contribution of the Tourism Industry to the Maltese Economy. Ministry of Tourism

^{vii} Zygmund B. (2007) Liquid Times – Living in an Age of Uncertainty. Polity Press.

Notes

Incidentally, it is the same Drucker who on the subject of business ethics, then, complains that business ethics singles out business unfairly for special ethical treatment. But that is a story for another day.

No avenue for investment in malta apart from construction. System failure – so large hoards of money and resources being found available by the construction machine.

We are all experts on what others should be doing, but then the mirror is lost on us.