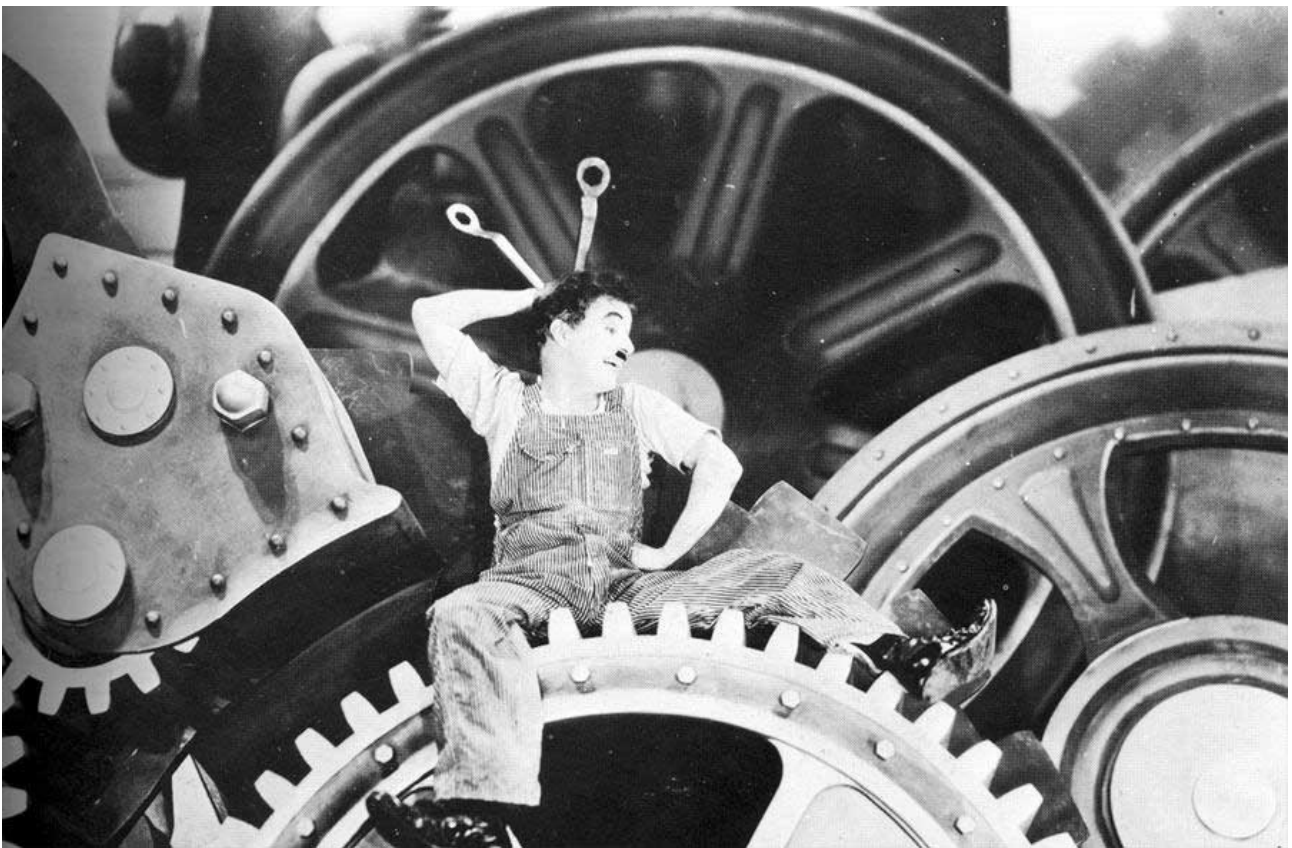


The Dawn of Modern Era: Montaigne and Spinoza as Alternatives to Cartesian *Weltanschauung*.



According to the Austrian-born American physicist **Fritjof Capra** (*The Turning Point*, 1982), Cartesian paradigm is the base for Scientific Revolution and then Industrial Revolution. It supports the idea that world is a machine, that it is explainable as a machine. The ontological separation between mind (*res cogitans*) and material world (*res extensa*), operated by **René Descartes** (1596-1650), posed man beside God, as dominator of natural world and creator of an artificial, technological one; if Medieval Era, during which man was only a (privileged) creature of God, had ended more than a century before, this philosophical operation started the Modern Era from the cultural point of view. It was in perfect accord with the contemporary **Francis Bacon's** aim of domination over nature and was continued and perfected by **Isaac Newton** (1642-1727).

The extraordinary impulse for scientific research and technological discovers, which characterised modern period until today, originated from these ideas. Nowadays the most advanced sciences have overcome the classical Newtonian physics, but nevertheless it goes on inspiring biology, medicine, psychology, sociology and, above all, economics. As evidenced by the above mentioned Capra, that's why societies and governments are not able to face



strong ecological alarm and to imagine a new way of life. The English anthropologist and psychologist **Gregory Bateson** too indicated Cartesian dualism as the reason for actual schizophrenic attitude and in several books recommended the reunification of mind and nature; the theologian and philosopher **Hans Jonas** on his part supported a very similar interpretation for present harmfulness of the dualistic vision (*The Phenomenon of Life*, 1966).

In the opinion of *degrowth* supporter **Jean-Claude Besson-Girard**, Cartesian philosophy replaced all that globally belongs to the human field and determines human natural and social relationships with the exclusive thought of Self (*Decrescendo cantabile*, 2005). Therefore our purpose here is to evidence great thinkers from the same period that observed reality with a very different perception, more sensible to *complexity* and *holism*, which both are needed by *degrowth* movement and by any other conception seriously aiming to better existence and society.

Michel de Montaigne (1533-92) was born about sixty years before Descartes; although he influenced the style of Descartes, his attitude, *forma mentis* and purposes were a far cry from those of the compatriot. As **Maurice Merleau-Ponty** evidenced (*Signs*, 1960), the French philosopher never renounced to think soul and body as an indistinguishable mix. He never aimed at building a system of truth, he constantly dedicated his attention to the characters of human being, among which doubt, error and uncertainty.

The distance between Descartes and Montaigne is so

large that, according to young Italian philosopher **Diego Fusaro**, they are the origin of a double way of thinking, crossing all Modern philosophy: the first consisting in the attempt of metaphysically interpreting reality and human being (Hobbes, Hegel, Marx); the second preferring to point out the impossibility for this operation (Pascal, Hume, Nietzsche). Although Montaigne comes before Descartes, at his time he had already understood dangers originating from a blind trust in science and technology. In *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, the French thinker criticises those, who elected scientific research the omnipotent and infallible means to find the right path in any situation and to dispel the fog of any doubt. His kind of «weak thinking», as we would say in contemporary words, still sounds as a very good antidote against *monocultures of the mind*, following the famous expression by **Vandana Shiva**.

Montaigne's *relativism* is also a precious cultural example, when we look at today's *westernization of the world* (which is instead the title of a book by **Serge Latouche**), inspired by technological superiority. The French writer taught us that it's a nonsense looking down on «cruelty» of savage peoples, when European civilization has bathed our continent in blood with a number of civil wars and has invented a wide range of sophisticated tortures!



Montaigne's love for animals is proverbial and it granted a rational conception destroying *anthropocentrism*, a plague strictly linked with the illusion of never ending growth. A brilliant British essayist used as title for his book about Montaigne the famous philosopher's observation: *When I am playing with my cat, how do I know she is not playing with me?*

It's therefore clear that for Montaigne animals are not machines (as for Descartes), but creatures with

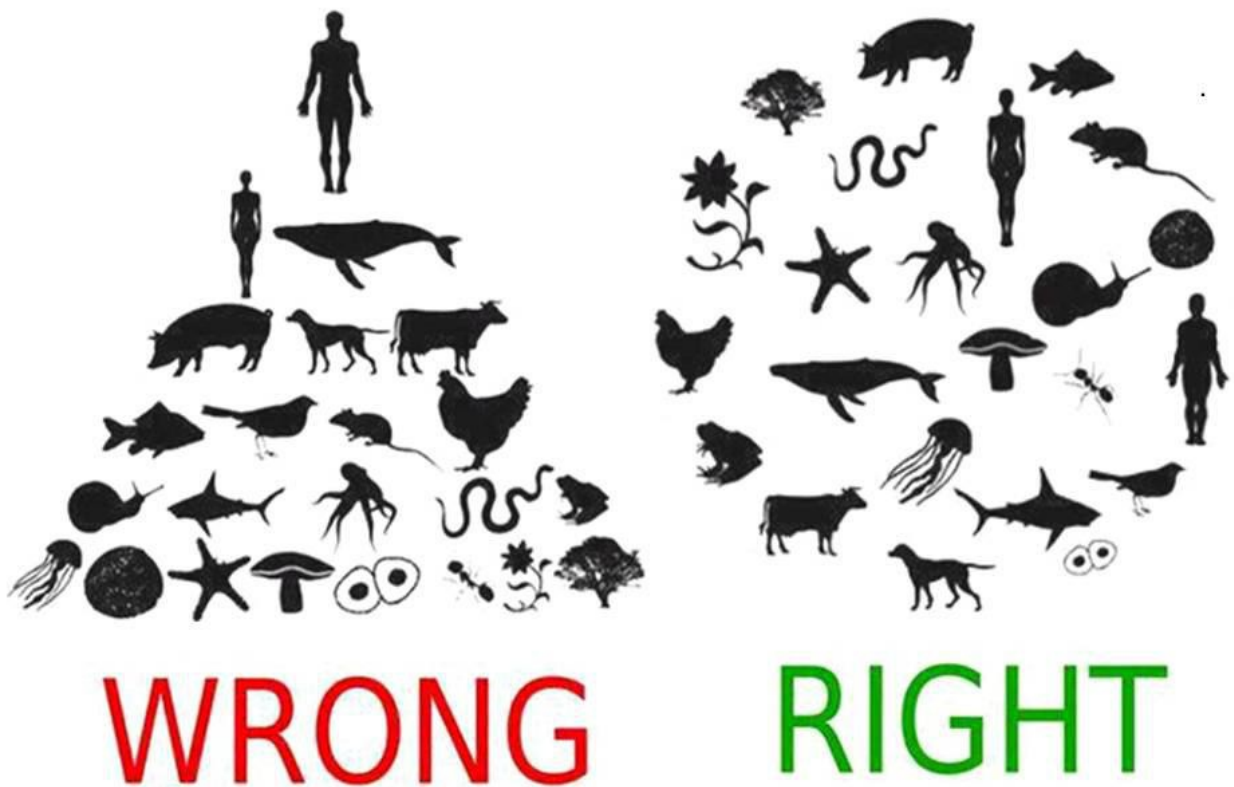
whom we can create a reciprocal dialogue; in this regard, **Jacques Derrida** notes that *Apology* is one of the most important books about animals before and against Descartes (*The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 2006).

Another relevant French intellectual, **Jean Starobinski**, observed Montaigne's attitude towards Nature and concluded that, on the contrary of Descartes and Bacon, he voluntarily submitted himself to the rules of the «admirable» Mother. That's what on the other side links Montaigne to Dutch Jewish philosopher **Baruch Spinoza** (1632-77). Spinoza carefully read, analysed, commented Descartes's work, but his *Weltanschauung* resulted completely different, because for him mind and material extension belong to the same, unique universal *substance*. As a consequence, Cartesian dualism (which was even radicalised by Descartes's followers) is totally abandoned by the Dutch thinker. An identical *ordo rerum ac idearum* at the same time overcomes medieval Scholasticism and modern Cartesianism. In Spinoza's philosophy (as in Montaigne's one) willpower gets strongly debunked and evidently conditioned by body impulses (in an extraordinary prognostication of Freud's recent discoveries). **Karl Löwith** thinks that Spinozian doctrine about «free necessity» of action relativizes our conscious will and power into an involuntary must; it gives our Ego a determined part inside absolute and universal totality. Relationships among human components (and nevertheless between man and society and between man and nature) deeply change thanks to the ideas proposed by Spinoza, who protected them

with an heroic attitude, even at risk of his own life. (Descartes's character is on the contrary depicted as that of a fearful conformist.) Thanks to Spinoza, human being can be no more a heartless master and manipulator of natural world, but one of its creatures, or better one of its integrated, organic elements.



Spinozian vision, which has sometimes been called *Pantheism*, is still representing a remedy against modern aggressive individualism. In this meaning it has also acted for authentic democracy and it has inspired a leftist philosopher like **Antonio Negri**. Social justice and natural justice both and together find in the Jewish theorist a never ending source of motivation.



Arne Næss, the founder of *deep ecology*, which may stand for *degrowth* spiritual background, was a «friend» of Spinoza. Indeed, the nature conceived by Næss and his followers is not passive, dead, value-neutral as in mechanistic science, but all-inclusive, creative (*natura naturans*), alive and perfect; it's considered under the light of a sort of *panpsychism*.

Latouche proposes an *Aufhebung* of modern, rationalist past (*Décoloniser l'imaginaire*, 2003); for this purpose, a return to Montaigne's and Spinoza's words may be precious and useful. The same Latouche is convinced that *degrowth* thought took advantage of the meeting between social *criticism* by **Ivan Illich** and **Cornelius Castoriadis** and *bioeconomics* by **Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen**: in our opinion the former ones are somehow heirs of

Montaigne's skepticism, the latter of Spinoza's logical but hearty method.



