

LIBERAL HUMANISM AND HUMANE ECONOMY.
LUIGI EINAUDI'S OPEN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers a reinterpretation of Luigi Einaudi's thought through the categories of liberal humanism and humane economy, with the aim of clarifying the deep connection between his vision of man, liberty and open society. Far from being a conservative anchored in the past, Einaudi emerges here as a thinker profoundly open to the future, animated by confidence in man's capacity to always begin anew and renew himself. The article explores several central themes in Einaudi's thought: the *oikos* as the anthropological and narrative foundation of a good society – a space of ethical and symbolic formation; the anthropological conception grounded in the primacy of liberty and the defense of individual dignity; the conception of economics as a humanistic and moral science aiming at fostering a humane economy; the minimal conditions for an open society – a society on a human scale, attentive to diversity and pluralism, sustained by good institutions, good rulers and free and responsible people striving to resist evil. The essay shows that Einaudi's legacy continues to offer valuable conceptual and normative resources for thinking about an open society, conceived not merely as an institutional structure, but as a moral task entrusted to the liberty and responsibility of each generation.

Keywords: Economic Humanism, Liberal Humanism, Open Society, Institutions, Liberty.

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"If man's gaze were not directed towards the new, and upwards, then how would humans be distinguished from animal species?" (Einaudi 1950: 23).

"The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin" (Arendt 1958: 246).

"This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They don't give up" (McCarthy 2006: 137).

1. ON CELEBRATING THE (RE)BIRTH OF LUIGI EINAUDI

Throughout 2024, I often asked myself what the point was of celebrating the 150th anniversary of Luigi Einaudi's birth. This question became increasingly pressing and unavoidable every time I was invited to take part in one of the many conferences organized specifically for these celebrations. It took me a while to realize that the answer was quite obvious and clear. It was right in front of me, and I couldn't see it.

Celebrating an anniversary of 'birth' is celebrating the meaning of an ever-possible 'rebirth': Einaudi's, of course, but also ours. These celebrations should therefore encourage us to 'remember', but also to 're-actualize': the 'Einaudi' being celebrated and 'we' who are celebrating are (we are) mutually involved.

More precisely, on the one hand, I think it is important to remember the sense of rebirth that Einaudi was always capable of throughout his long life, and which is evident in both his thinking and his actions, as a scholar and statesman, in his continuous and unwavering efforts to rethink and rebuild a good society, an open society.¹ Einaudi (1874-1961) lived a long life spanning the "long century" and the "short century". He lived in one of the most turbulent and transformative periods in human history: he lived through and experienced the first effects of the industrial revolution in Italy, the progress of the 'golden age' and its final convulsions, the economic

¹ I underlined the similarities between Einaudi's and Popper's open society – probably mediated by the thought of J.S. Mill and by Einaudi's reading of TALMON 1952 in SILVESTRI 2008: 62-63. Here, I will try to develop this point further, also drawing on SILVESTRI 2012a, and 2023b. See also MARCHIONATTI 2004: 84.

crises (from the Great Depression to the Great Crisis), the two wars that brought the old continent to the brink of ruin and self-destruction, nationalism, the revolutions that swept away old institutions, dictatorships and totalitarian regimes, empires that collapsed, new states that were born, borders that changed, the destiny of the world that gradually passed into the hands of other powers, and a new Italy and Europe that were struggling to be reborn. Moreover, Einaudi was not only a spectator, critic, and chronicler of this history, but also an authentic architect and protagonist of the 'reconstruction' – as Governor of the Bank of Italy, member of the Constituent Assembly, Vice President of the Council of Ministers and Minister of the Budget, and finally President of the Republic – during one of the most delicate phases in Italian history. How was he able to survive all these 'deaths', all these 'ends'? Or, to paraphrase Arendt's passage in the epigraph – not coincidentally placed by her in the section of *The Human Condition* dedicated to "natality" – how could he survive all this "ruin and destruction, if it were not for [his] faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new", without believing in the possibility of a rebirth, of being able to "start" all over again each time? As the young Piero Gobetti (1960 [1922]) astutely noted, Einaudi was endowed with "an absolute trust in the inexhaustible activity of men", a trust that he certainly also placed in himself.

As for us, it is ultimately 'us' who are reviving Einaudi, here and now: at every celebration, and again and again for each new generation. It is ultimately us who must remember, update, and rethink the meaning and value of Einaudi's thinking, for the present and for the future. And this is not only to prevent such celebrations from turning into a sterile exercise in canonizing and embalming Einaudi (which, I believe, he would never have wanted). Anthropological literature has shown how commemorative rituals serve to 'renew' the community bond and symbolically reintegrate the past, present, and future. The celebration of a birth – especially that of an illustrious figure – is not a simple remembrance, but a ritualization of time, a form of cyclical time that opposes the dispersion of linear time. Perhaps it is precisely in this opposition to the corruption of time and the sense of the end, in this 'resistance', in 'keep trying', in 'not giving up', that an authentically 'human struggle' takes place. A struggle that Einaudi pursued until the very end, and one that we are called to preserve, renew, and keep alive (or at least so I believe).

All this long preamble is meant to say that, as a scholar and as a citizen, I feel a duty to offer, through this article, a small and deeply personal contribution to the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of Einaudi's birth – an attempt to recall and reflect on the meaning of that ever-possible rebirth (his, and ours), however mysterious it may be, and

on the link between rebirth, freedom, and the open society, and how these are, in turn, intimately connected to Einaudi's liberal and economic humanism.

I believe this is important for at least two reasons.

Firstly, in recent years, there have been several attempts to 'rehumanize' economics.² Rediscovering Einaudi's liberal and economic humanism is an important contribution in this direction, especially since for Einaudi, economics is an intrinsically humanistic discipline, a moral and social science, or the "science of good government" (Silvestri 2023a).

Secondly, this article is an attempt to dispel a certain stereotype that portrays Einaudi as a classic liberal and conservative, with his gaze fixed on the past. Norberto Bobbio (1983: 242), for example, while attributing to Einaudi the "courage" to have been able to reflect on the great and eternal problem of "good government" vs. "bad government" – "one of the great themes, if not the greatest of all themes in political reflection of all times" – seems to give precisely this representation of Einaudi: "no-one uses the words good government and bad government any longer, and anyone who does still use them seems to be looking to the past, a distant past, which only a composer of useless preachings has the courage to bring up again any more".

If the first quote in the epigraph is not enough to refute this image of Einaudi, I hope that this article will help to show whether and how Einaudi's open society is genuinely open towards the future, the new, and upwards.

Finally, a terminological clarification is necessary in order to begin to understand why and in what sense, for Einaudi, an 'open' society is a 'good' society. Although Einaudi's thinking encompasses some of the different classical meanings of 'good government' – *government by law* (or *rule of law*), *government by good rulers*, government or *mixed constitution*³ – I will mainly use (unless otherwise indicated) the notion of 'good government' in its original and more general sense of 'ideal model of society' or 'good *politeia*', or, in its contemporary variant, 'good polity' or 'good society'. It is in this general sense that it appears, for example, in the title of one of the most representative books of Einaudi's liberal thought – *Il buongoverno* (1954a) – published in the last year of his term as President of the Republic. Obviously, a book published by a President of the Republic is never just a book. In this article, I will also try to understand what that President's

² See for example SMITH and WILSON 2019, McCLOSKEY 2021, SILVESTRI and WALRAEVENS 2023.

³ On the various meanings of good government, see BOBBIO 1983, SKINNER 2006, SILVESTRI 2011.

'message' was, addressed not only to Italians but to anyone who cares about the search for a good society.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 attempts to clarify the meaning of Einaudi's liberal and economic humanism, with particular reference to his reflection on the *oikos* as the foundation of a good society, on the anthropological foundations of his liberal thought, and on the humanistic economics necessary for a humane economy. Section 3 focuses on the minimum requirements – or the 'human-social-institutional foundations' – of a good society so that it can be characterized as open, that is, a society: on a human scale; that cares about diversity and pluralism; made up of good institutions, good rulers, and free and responsible people; that strives to resist evil. Section 4 summarizes and concludes with a wish for an open and welcoming society.

2. LIBERAL AND ECONOMIC HUMANISM

Einaudi's 'liberal' and 'economic' humanism can be interpreted in many ways and requires some preliminary clarification of terminology. Let's start with 'humanism'.

I will use the word 'humanism' in both a general and a specific sense. In a (very) general sense, one could say that, just as 'we cannot help calling ourselves Christians' (in the Crocean sense), we cannot but call ourselves heirs to that Italian humanism which not only rediscovered the value of the Greek and Latin classics and the study of the *bonae litterae* (rhetoric, grammar, history, and moral philosophy), but also attributed a new centrality to man, to his dignity, to his faculty of reason, and to his possibility of self-determination.

With reference to Einaudi's thinking, this general meaning acquires very particular nuances in his reflection on the *oikos* as the foundation of a good society; the anthropological foundations of his liberal thought and the humanistic economics necessary for a humane economy.

2.1. *Oikos, Nomos, Polis*

Einaudi's research into the good society began (and began again) every time the values of liberal society were threatened, trampled on, or erased; like any re-search, it began *post res perditas* ('after all is lost'). Einaudi's genuine reflection on good society began to take shape as an attempt to rebuild on a new basis the liberal institutions that had been gradually crumbling in the period from World War I to the consolidation of the fascist regime.

The end of liberal institutions prompted Einaudi to reexamine the past in search of the “foundations” or, if you will, the ‘spirit’ and *ethos* of those good institutions that should form the basis of a future good society.

The ‘place’ most dear to Einaudi’s research is the *oikos*, a place that is both real and ideal, because it was there that he was not only “educated” in bourgeois “habits” and virtues⁴ and the ethics of “duty”, civic virtues, and emotional and social relationships of solidarity, but also had a fundamental experience of loss and reconquest, death and rebirth. After his father’s death, Einaudi experienced being ‘welcomed’ into a second, new home: the “ancestral home” of his uncle (on his mother’s side), whom Einaudi said he worshipped “like a second father” (Einaudi 1988 [1922]: 38). Describing the *ethos* and deeds of his family, Einaudi writes:

What I observed in my ancestral home were the universal habits of the Piedmontese bourgeoisie for much of the 19th century. [Those habits formed] a ruling class that left a deep mark of honesty, ability, thrift, and devotion to duty in the political and administrative life of Piedmont, which made Italy. [At that time] man, the family, were not conceived in isolation from their rootedness in the land, the home, the local area, and these are sentiments that also engender devotion to the country and the spirit of sacrifice which, alone, are capable of nurturing the young shoots that will burgeon into sound states (*ibid.*: 32-34).

In these autobiographical reflections by Einaudi, we find not only the big questions about the conditions of possibility of a good society, and the issue of the *ethos* and social and community bonds that underpin every social order, a problem to which Einaudi would often return.

Most notably, we also find the analogy between the “good government of the home” and the “good government of the city”, typical of humanism (microcosm-macrocosm), and particularly recurrent throughout the Italian tradition of treatises on *oikonomia*, especially between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. To paraphrase an important interpretation of the political, normative, and ethical function of treatises on *oikonomia*, we could say that Einaudi’s search for a good society is driven by the need to understand the dynamics of those “deep-set mental structures”, those “‘unwritten’ rules on which the entire [social] organization is based” (Frigo 1985: 200, italics added).

2.2. Humanity, liberty, liberalism

In Einaudi’s thinking, the dyad ‘man and liberty’ could be expressed as ‘man is liberty’, with the clarification that he does not fall into the temptation

⁴ See McCLOSKEY 2006, 2010, 2016.

of defining man and liberty. And perhaps this too is an important legacy of that humanism which, with Pico della Mirandola, conceives man as a chameleon-like being and, therefore, *indeterminate* (and oscillating: from being a beast to being an angel), precisely because of that liberty which allows him to determine himself.⁵

In this sense, the expression 'Luigi Einaudi's liberal humanism' indicates, in general, that man is the center, the beginning and end of his thinking, and that liberty is the most distinctive characteristic of man, or, as he often writes, "liberty is man's supreme good", his very reason for being. Liberty cannot be 'de-fined', both because defining it would mean caging it, and because it is an eternal problem for man, one that arises again and again in new and different ways, something of which Einaudi was perfectly aware. For example, precisely when the first distinctions between liberalism and "neo" or "new liberalism" were being drawn, Einaudi cautioned that

liberalism is one and one alone and it endures over time; but each generation has to solve its own problems, which are different from those of yesterday and will be superseded and renewed by tomorrow's problems. Therefore even liberals must at all times ask themselves the following searching question: how should I solve the problems of my own day, in such a manner that the solution adopted serves to safeguard the supreme good that is the freedom of man? (Einaudi 2001 [1945]: 119).

Rather than defining liberty, Einaudi describes a certain experience of liberty that is intrinsically linked to *creativity*: characterized by openness towards the new and the high, or as a process of "spiritual and material elevation", which proceeds through "trial and error". However, this process indicates a "progress" characterized by a "struggle" that is by no means easy, sometimes dramatic, and whose outcomes are never guaranteed. After all, for Einaudi (2001b [1944]: 65), liberalism is "the doctrine of those who place the improvement and elevation of the human person above all other goals [... it is] a moral doctrine". Liberalism is also a "vision of the world" and "of life" which is "varied and plenteous", open to "*the uncertain unknown where one can glimpse and achieve a new and higher future*" (Einaudi 1994: 44, italics added). Let us clarify the meaning of all these quotes.

Einaudi's reflections on man and liberty are set against the backdrop of 'anti-perfectionist' Christian anthropology, i.e. the view of man as a flawed and fallible being, not perfect, yet perfectible, and therefore constantly striving to improve himself and make the most of his talents.

In a famous essay entitled *The Beauty of the Struggle*, Einaudi (2006 [1923]) explains his "mother ideas". Against any imposition from on high, or even

⁵ See CACCIARI 2019.

worse, against any surreptitiously paternalistic attempt, whether brought about at the hand of whichever petty politician happens to wield power at the time, or espoused by socialism or the rising corporatist doctrine, Einaudi re-affirms the value of the “efforts of those who desire to elevate themselves on their own and in this struggle, fight, falter and rise again, learning at their own expense how to win and to better themselves” (*ibid.*: 66).

In Einaudi’s view, ‘man’ is indeed a *homo faber fortunae suae* (a ‘man who is the architect of his own fortune’), but ‘not a self-made man’ who considers himself self-sufficient or self-reliant. On the contrary, as we have seen, “man, the family, were not conceived in isolation from their rootedness in the land, the home” and the wider community. Such a man considers himself free precisely because he recognizes a debt, a lack, a limitation. Einaudi’s ‘man’ is someone who leaves home but also knows how to ‘return’ to it, and who knows that no ‘father’ – corporation, law, state or welfare state – can shelter him from the unlimited contingencies of life (and he knew this very well, considering that he lost his father at the age of thirteen). Hence his recurring anti-paternalism.

In Einaudi’s discourse, the struggle has two main dimensions: one individual, the other social – that is, the one more closely linked to the economic, social, and political dimensions of community life⁶ (we will return to this aspect in section 3.2).

The individual dimension of the struggle is the struggle that each individual must wage with himself for “material and moral improvement”. In this regard, Einaudi goes so far as to argue that

Liberty – true human liberty in its entirety, not merely its economic or political aspects – is the supreme good, without which life is not worth living. To renounce liberty is to renounce the very reasons for life itself, which is a continual liberation from evil, a struggle, a suffering, an aspiration upwards toward moral perfection (Einaudi 1947: xvi).

2.3. *A humanistic economics for a humane economy*⁷

After Adam Smith, Einaudi was probably one of the last great humanist-economists of the twentieth century (along with a few others, including Wilhelm Röpke and Friedrich von Hayek). Einaudi’s economic ‘humanism’ has several characteristics and peculiarities, but here I will limit myself to highlighting four aspects. First, his conception of human action

⁶ See also LEONI 1964.

⁷ In this section, I revisit and expand on some reflections made in SILVESTRI 2026.

in the economic sphere; second, his methodological reflection; third, his use of rhetoric and narrative style; and fourth and finally, an aspect that encompasses the first three in a sort of organic synthesis: his placing of the economic process within the broader vision of the moral foundations of good government/good society, and his ability to narrate its *ethos* (a point I will return to and clarify in the conclusions).

Einaudi's conception of human action in the economic sphere is closely linked to his vision of human liberty and creativity, which can be found in a speech, *Economic Science and Economists in the Present Moment* (Einaudi 1950), delivered when he was already President of the Republic and on the day he left the university due to reaching the age limit, as a final farewell to colleagues and students and as the inaugural speech for the 1949-1950 academic year at the University of Turin.

Economic science studies human 'economic' activity. This activity is intrinsically dependent on scarcity, but, according to Einaudi, scarcity has a profound anthropological meaning: man as a "finite" or mortal being, deficient and fallible ... since the "fall from Paradise" (*ibid.*). Scarcity is also dependent on (and related to) the human dynamic of *desire*. This means that, on the one hand, the economic can never be reduced to the sphere of needs and, on the other, that desire is something infinitely greater and beyond our (however necessary and important) rationality and calculation.

The fundamental economic principle was and will forever be the limitedness of means suitable to achieve the numerous and ever-changing and constantly proliferating goals men set themselves. [...] Even though technical and scientific advances daily push back [...] the obstacle of the limitedness of means which thwarts satisfaction of human desires [...], man's desires race faster than does science [...]. In fact, *if man's gaze were not directed towards the new, and upwards, then how would humans be distinguished from animal species?* (Einaudi 1950: 23, italics added).

Secondly, Einaudi's long and troubled methodological reflection⁸ touches on various aspects of the role and function of both economics and economists. Suffice it to recall here that in times of prevailing scientific positivism, he fought a long battle to rehabilitate value judgments in economics (Einaudi 1943 [1942-1943], 2017), and that until the end of his life he continued to "proudly" claim economics as one of the "humanistic" disciplines (Einaudi 1959: ix),⁹ and that in his spiritual testament he

⁸ See, above all EINAUDI 2017 and SILVESTRI 2017a, 2017b.

⁹ On this point, see SILVESTRI 2018.

maintained that “the office of the economist, who is not only an expert in one or more areas of economic and social knowledge, is also to see the links between economic activity and political, moral or spiritual activity” (Einaudi 1962: 248). Last but not least, he strenuously defended his belonging to the class of “*literary* economists” – a label Pareto used in a derogatory and contemptuous sense, in contrast to the supposedly superior “*mathematical* economists” (Einaudi 1938: 256-257, 2017: 38).¹⁰

Furthermore, the importance of Einaudi’s methodological reflection can also be understood through certain similarities with Röpke’s thinking.¹¹ Einaudi and Röpke were bound by a deep mutual respect, by their common struggle to prevent the divorce between economics and the humanities, clearly seeing the dangers of the ‘scientistic’ drift of economics, and by their common search for a humane economy. Let us take a closer look at these aspects.

Röpke, a German economist and sociologist of the twentieth century, is best known for his contribution to the theory of the social market economy and for his pursuit of a “humane economy” – which is also the title of the second volume of his renowned trilogy (Röpke 2017 [1942], 1948 [1944], 1960 [1958]). He presented this idea as a new “third way”, positioned between socialist collectivism and unregulated capitalism: an economic model grounded in human dignity and in ethical, social, and cultural principles. According to Röpke, a humane economy must strike the right balance between freedom and responsibility, between market and community, between growth and social sustainability. His vision underscores the importance of an economy at the service of the human person, in which market dynamics are embedded within a solid cultural and social framework.

Einaudi wrote a long and enthusiastic review of Röpke’s first book (and likely read the proofs of the second when the two met in person during Einaudi’s exile in Switzerland). Einaudi emphasizes how the degenerations of capitalism were not to be attributed to “the economics of competition” but to “failure to observe the rules of the game of competition” (Einaudi 1942: 64). Hence the “crucial importance of an ethical-legal-institutional setting suited to the principles of the economy itself”, where the pride of place awarded to “ethical” suggests that the “legal-institutional” aspect itself presupposes values.

Einaudi appreciated Röpke because he understood that “those who seek economic remedies for economic problems are on the wrong path,

¹⁰ For a reconstruction of this debate see SILVESTRI 2017a: 14 ff.

¹¹ See FORTE 2009 e GIORDANO 2018.

which can only lead to disaster. The economic problem is one aspect and a consequence of a broader spiritual and moral problem" (Einaudi 1942: 71). Röpke appreciated Einaudi because he understood economics "as a human and moral science, as *political economy*", recalling how Einaudi's (1962) (aforementioned) spiritual testament was a warning to "young economists against the aberrations of a barbaric expertocracy" (Röpke 2005: 184).

To paraphrase Böckenförde's (1986 [1967]) famous paradox, one could say that both understood very well that the economy lives on (moral) premises that it cannot itself guarantee. Furthermore, both knew, in Hayek's words, that "nobody can be a great economist who is only an economist – and I am even tempted to add that the economist who is only an economist is likely to become a nuisance if not a positive danger" (Hayek 1967: 123).

Thirdly, several studies have rehabilitated Einaudi's language, prose, rhetoric, and narrative style,¹² not only because he is one of the very few economists of his time whose writings appear in literary anthologies. It should be remembered that in his textbook *Principii di Scienza delle Finanze*, Einaudi (1948) often included a 'methodological' appendix, expressly addressed to his students, intended as a small compendium of rhetorical figures and fallacies of reasoning.

Furthermore, in Einaudi's writings we do not find the *homo economicus*, but rather the sometimes metaphorical use of "human types" and the narration of their deeds, resorting to the language and ethics of virtues (and vices): the "wise", the "patriarchs", the "innovators", and the "crazy" "builders of their own land", the "speculators", the "inventors", the "busy bees", the "savers", whom he contrasted with the "egoists", the "envious", the "slothful", the "wastrels", the "squanderers", the "lazy drones" (see, for example, Einaudi 1949: *passim*).

Fourth and final aspect, we have seen how both Einaudi and Röpke insisted on the need to understand the moral foundations of the economy. In their vision of a good society, a crucial role in building these foundations was attributed to the *oikos* or family, the elementary and fundamental nucleus of every society, and the place where some of the most important habits, virtues and moral values necessary for social life are learned and cultivated: a sense of duty, justice, and sharing; mutual respect; respect for promises and agreements; relationships of authority, freedom, equality, and bonds between brothers and sisters; neighborly relations; intergenerational relations; the value of hospitality and, therefore, of the circulation of good received and reciprocated.

¹² See DELLA VALLE 2010; SILVESTRI 2012b, 2012c.

3. GOOD SOCIETY AND GOOD GOVERNMENT

What, then, are the features of the good society envisioned by Einaudi, and in what sense is it an ‘open’ society? I will now attempt to outline some minimal characteristics regarding its human-social-institutional foundations, bearing in mind that, in Einaudi’s reflection, the ‘human’, the ‘social’, and the ‘institutional’ are inextricably intertwined.

A good society is one that is: on a human scale, that is not perfect, yet perfectible, and therefore open to acknowledging its own errors and, precisely for this reason, open to the future, to the new, and to the unknown; capable of cultivating the struggle and its preconditions – social and institutional pluralism and diversity – while also containing struggle within a moral and institutional framework to prevent its degeneration; composed of good institutions, good governors, and free and responsible individuals; resistant to evil, meaning it strives to limit and contain it, and to break the vicious cycles of violence and revenge that evil tends to generate.

3.1. *Human scale*

A society ‘on a human scale’ means that it is not man who must be made for society, but society for man. We have seen how Christian anti-perfectionist anthropology stands out against the backdrop of Einaudi’s reflection on man and liberty, that is, the vision of man as a fallible being, not perfect, yet perfectible. This fallibility involves both the sphere of thought and human action. If society is to be made in the image and likeness of the man who inhabits it, then it too must be and remain not perfect, yet perfectible. In other words, it must not make any claim to absoluteness, totality, uniqueness, or monopoly: where such a claim exists, society ‘closes’ itself off because there are only (presumed) certainties, and there is nothing ‘else’ to seek, invent, or discover; indeed, there is no ‘else’ or ‘other’ at all. And if the other appears on the horizon, it or s/he is necessarily the ‘enemy’ to be defeated. A closed society sees only enemies beyond its mental and physical borders. This warning applies as much to society and the people who inhabit it as it does to its institutions.

3.2. *Cultivating and limiting struggle*

We have seen how Einaudi’s vision of the positivity of struggle has not only an individual dimension but also a social one. I must now return to and clarify this second dimension.

At the social level, the “struggle” takes the form of competition between different social and institutional actors, for example through competition (in

the market) and the battle of ideas in the public sphere (in civil society, the press, parliament). Struggle is the condition for the selection and emergence of the best, and therefore the real engine of social progress. A society that denies the value of struggle, conflict, variety, and dissent, precisely because it prevents better ideas, practices, or arrangements from emerging, ultimately blocks its own capacity for improvement and is bound to decline.

Like two poles of a magnetic field, the idea of the 'positivity' of struggle, variety, and dissent corresponds to a critical instance, equal and opposite, namely the 'negativity' of conformism, uniformity, leveling, homologation, egalitarianism, and everything that is imposed from above and is not the result of the autonomy of the individual. Hence, as Einaudi (1925: 3) writes in his *Preface* to the Italian translation of Mill's *On Liberty*, drawing on Humboldt's inspiration, "the supreme importance for man and society of a great variety of types and characters and of full freedom given to human nature to expand in countless and contrasting directions".

Liberty and diversity are important for the development of all human faculties and talents. It is on these moral foundations that Einaudi always criticized communism and collectivism and, more generally, any form of monopoly of power, whether public or private. In this regard, in his inaugural address as President of the Republic, Einaudi stated that the "two solemn principles" of the new Constitution are:

to preserve, of the current social structure, everything and only that which guarantees the human person against the omnipotence of the State and excessive private power; and to ensure that all persons, regardless of the accident of their birth, enjoy the greatest possible equality at the starting point.

The fight against inequality is first and foremost a fight against any "rent-seeking party" and privilege, parasitism, bureaucracy, corporations, and against all forms of "assault on public resources" (which is the title of the entire third part of *Il Buongoverno*), in which Einaudi sees an injustice of the few to the detriment of the many, especially the most hard-working.

Einaudi also attributes a positive function to intermediate associations and communities, as well as to institutional polycentrism (his federalist thinking, which ranges from local autonomy (Einaudi 1945b [1944]) to the planned and hoped-for European federation (Einaudi 1986 [1948]), is an example of this).¹³ Both are an antidote to authoritarianism, the centralization of power or, in a word, absolute sovereignty.

In the more mature writings of *Prediche inutili* [*Useless Preachings*] (1955-1959), struggle becomes the distinguishing mark of an open society: "only

¹³ See MORELLI 1990; CRESSATI 1992 and SILVESTRI 2022.

through struggle, only through never-ending endeavors and experiments, only through successes and failures can a society or a nation thrive. When struggle comes to an end, this signals the death of society” (Einaudi 1957: 241)

Also, the struggle rises to become a “method of freedom”, whose foundation is the “principle of trial and error”, both in economic and social action, and in thought, public opinion, and criticism. Those who apply this method, writes Einaudi,

recognize from the very start that they may fall into error and desire that others may attempt to demonstrate the error and discover the proper way to truth [...]. Trial and error, the possibility of making an attempt and going wrong; the freedom of criticism and opposition; these are the characteristics of free regimes (Einaudi 1974b [1956]: 60).

Last but not least,

in a regime where freedom reigns, *debate* and *action* proceed through the method of *trial and error*. This is the emblem of the superiority of the methods of freedom over those prevailing under tyranny. A tyrant is never racked by doubt: a tyrant marches straight ahead on the chosen path; but the path leads the country to disaster (Einaudi 1974c [1959]: 351).

Therefore, the good society, the liberal society desired by Einaudi, is ultimately founded on, that is, it stands or falls on, a dual “recognition” that must be granted “from the very start”: the recognition of one’s own fallibility and the recognition of the reasons of “others”. This implies, in fact, a willingness to listen and, above all, a willingness to change. Recognizing this fallibility also means recognizing one’s own limitations. Only in this way can society open itself up to the possibility of change and improvement.

One of the most comprehensive reflections on the requirements of a good society, and above all on the meaning of its ‘openness’, can be found in the essay *In lode del profitto* (*In Praise of Profit*) (1956), where “profit” becomes a metaphor for openness to the new and to the future, always fraught with risks, yet equally fraught with promise.

A socially stable society must seek to provide safeguards so that life offers security for the overwhelming majority of men, who do not love and are incapable of tolerating uncertainty, who do not wish to run risks and would be at a loss as to how to cope with them. [Hence the importance of] public services, [the welfare state and] social insurances.

[However] the men of the minority are necessary because the economic, social, moral and intellectual mechanism of a vibrant and progressive society is

necessarily subject to risks; because *life* itself is *change*, it is continuous variation, it is a succession of crises, of high and low points, continuous transitions.

A “society without risks” is a society condemned to death or inevitably on its way towards a “totalitarian” system. It is precisely for this reason that

the risk-related profits of entrepreneurs must continue to exist if the economic system is to be elastic, capable of withstanding the jolts of the never-ending variations of technical change and of industrial inventions; if, in other words, we wish human society to undergo *transformations* and *grow*. Profit is the price that has to be paid in order to allow thought to advance freely towards the conquest of truth, and in order for innovators to have a chance to test their discoveries, for enterprising men to *constantly break down the frontier of the known, of the already experienced, and move towards the unknown that is still open to the material and moral advancement of man* (Einaudi 1974a [1956]: 192, italics added).

3.3. *Good institutions, good rulers, and free men*

To understand the link between the social and institutional levels, it is important to emphasize that in the ideal model of society sought by Einaudi, a crucial role is played by the middle class, according to the ancient ideal of good government understood as a ‘mixed constitution’ or ‘mixed government’, where the middle class is the principle of order and balance, both at the social and institutional levels. As he writes in *Lezioni di politica sociale* (*Lectures on Social Policy*):

Tyranny is close when there is a significant disparity in the fortunes and incomes of citizens, so that alongside a few very rich people there are multitudes of people with nothing, and there is no large and prosperous middle class; so that the tyrant can emerge either from the few who desire to have a means of economic domination, or from the many to whom the ambitious demagogue promises the plunder of the wealth of the few in order to gain absolute power (Einaudi 1949: 104).

Furthermore, Einaudi hopes that the middle class will produce an *élite* capable of leading the nation:

Righteous and hard-working, they deemed that the most consummate art of statesmanship lay in ensuring ‘good government’ of public affairs, where ‘good government’ was to be understood as that wise and prudent manner of administrating which they adopted in private affairs (Einaudi 1933: 400).

To complete the picture of a good society/good government, two more specific notions of good government are needed: ‘the rule of

law', understood as a limit on the arbitrary exercise of power, and 'the government of good governors'.¹⁴

In Einaudi's thinking, these two concepts are not opposed. This is because the experience of the rise of fascism within the framework of liberal institutions had taught him two bitter but important and complementary lessons. First, that institutions can at best be a "necessary condition", but not sufficient to guarantee freedom (Einaudi 1994: 45-46); and second, that this is all the more true if men are always ready to choose "the short way" (Einaudi 1954c [1944]) instead of the "longer", more arduous, and risky way of struggle, that is, if they are always ready to trade liberty for security and protection. If men do not want freedom, no liberal institution can give it to them, much less guarantee it.

Freedom, which is a requirement of the spirit, which is a moral ideal and duty, does not need legal institutions that ratify and protect it [...]. Freedom exists, if free men exist; it dies if men's souls are enslaved (Einaudi 1949: 239).

[The] social and political organization [of a society] are not the cause but the result of freedom or the lack thereof. If there exist a sufficient number of truly free men in a society, it does not matter what its social or political economic organization is. The letter cannot kill the spirit (*ibid.*: 241).

Einaudi's reference to Saint Paul's distinction between the "letter" and the "spirit" of the law can be understood in this way. The fate of a good society, of a truly liberal society, depends as much on good governors as it does, and above all, on *adult* citizens, that is, free and responsible citizens. A good (or bad) society depends on their ability (or inability) to keep that spirit alive, and their ability (or inability) to not let themselves be "killed" by those institutions that they created to serve and not to subdue freedom.

To the neo-institutionalist mantra that 'institutions matter', it should always be added that good institutions and good rules are not enough because they are not automatic, they do not work by themselves: sometimes they need someone to stand up for them, other times they need someone to say "no!", "they are unjust!", in order to change them. Still other times, they need a figure of authority, a good elite – such as that sought by Einaudi (1953 [1936]) – who is so authoritative as to convince us to resist evil, or at least not to give in to the temptations of evil, to "recriminations" and to vicious circles of revenge.¹⁵ It is these men who keep the spirit of the law alive.

¹⁴ On these two meanings of good government in Einaudi's thought, see EINAUDI 1954e [1920], 1953 [1936] and 1940 (Ch. 12) and SILVESTRI 2008: 267 ff.

¹⁵ See SILVESTRI 2017b.

3.4. *Resisting evil*

These men are sometimes capable of keeping the spirit of the law alive even when the law does not exist, or is in the process of being discussed and enacted. This is precisely what Einaudi (1947) did in his speech to the Constituent Assembly on July 29, 1947, on the ratification of the Paris Peace Treaty, a speech that came in the wake of many “recriminations” over Italy’s mutilated borders, the loss of territory (and resources), and the loss of international prestige. It is a speech that shows all his stature as a statesman, his sense of history, his sense of ‘decision’ – and, therefore, of what is ‘decisive’ – in the *hic et nunc* of the supreme hour. Einaudi had himself become a living example of the good élite he had long sought. That speech is considered one of his most famous speeches on the need for European unification, but also one of the most important speeches delivered to the Constituent Assembly.

A few days earlier, Benedetto Croce – the most important Italian intellectual and Einaudi’s comrade in the ranks of the Italian Liberal Party – had called on the members of the Constituent Assembly not to accept the treaty “so as not to disgrace the future generations of Italy that will not die”.

Einaudi presented his speech as “a humble appendix” to Croce’s speech, but precisely because he cared deeply about “the future generations of Italy that will not die”, Einaudi intended to look “no longer to the past, but to the future” (Einaudi 1947: 686). Einaudi wanted to prevent Italian society from “closing in on itself” and becoming trapped in a vicious circle before it could be reborn. On the contrary, he wanted it to “open up” to the possibility of new virtuous circles so that it could be reborn:

let us not recriminate those who acted badly; because *resistance to evil is always a miracle, which we must humbly acknowledge could not have taken place*. But let us say loudly that we will only be able to save ourselves from the Third World War if we take up the sword of God for the salvation and unification of Europe, instead of the sword of Satan; that is, instead of domination by brute force, the eternal idea of voluntary cooperation for the common good (*ibid.*: 690, italics added).

The problem of war, fueled by the principle of state sovereignty, could only be overcome by

[a Europe] open to all, a Europe in which men can freely assert their conflicting ideals and in which majorities respect minorities and promote their aims [...] Italy must be prepared to sacrifice part of its sovereignty for the creation of this Europe (*ibid.*: 691-692).

It was necessary to abandon once and for all the myth of the absolute sovereignty of states, from which derived so many absolutist myths and idols and the consequent struggles for living space, borders against migrants, customs barriers, “pestilential nationalistic myths”, and warmongering. Italy had to rejoin the international community, “therefore, even though my heart bleeds for the violated Alps, I will vote in favor of ratifying the treaty”.

Thus, Einaudi concluded,

What does it matter if we enter the international arena after having been defeated and in a position of economic inferiority! If we want to *put a tombstone on the past*; if we want [...] to be invited to participate on an equal footing in the enjoyment of those goods of the world to whose creation we too will have contributed, we must not be afraid to defend the ideas that alone can save Europe. *The power of ideas is still today [...] the power that ultimately guides the world. [...]. One man, Mahatma Gandhi, gave his country freedom by preaching the gospel not of force but of passive resistance, unarmed against evil [...].*

By defending our ideals openly, by returning, with the intention of defending them openly, to the association of free peoples, and by taking part with that intention in the debates among the powerful of the earth, we will have fulfilled our duty. If, despite this, Europe wants to return to savagery, we cannot be reproached by future generations of Italians for not having fulfilled to the last our duty to save what is divine and human in our troubled society (*ibid.*: 693-694, italics added).

In obeying this law of “duty”, Einaudi shows that he truly knows how to look to the future and to “future generations”: a future illuminated by “utopia”, guided by the “power of ideas” and by a good *élite* (such as Mahatma Gandhi and Einaudi himself), which “makes possible” that good society in which good emerges and becomes visible, above all, as that which “resists evil”.

4. BEST WISHES FOR AN OPEN AND WELCOMING SOCIETY

To summarize, one could say that the good society dreamed of by Einaudi is a society that is ‘open’ to that freedom that can only proceed by trial and error. It is a society open to struggle and to the recognition of its own errors, open to human fallibility, open to diversity, social pluralism, and institutional polycentrism, open to the future and to the unknown. The ideal society envisioned by Einaudi is therefore a model that is not perfect, yet perfectible, and which, proceeding by trial and error, sometimes in the dark, strives to keep its gaze directed towards the new, and upwards, in search of a possible good. A possible good that is nevertheless impossible without the “supreme good” of freedom. In this sense, a good society or

good government can only be conceived as a quest, always unfinished, and as that 'task of freedom' that Einaudi entrusted to "every generation".

Therefore, a truly Einaudian conclusion is a non-conclusion: it cannot but be an *open* conclusion.

Perhaps the work that best encapsulates, in a truly concise and symbolic manner, the characteristics of the good society outlined in this article is *Il padre dei fratelli Cervi* [*The Cervi brothers' father*] (Einaudi 1954b), Einaudi's narrative masterpiece, written and published when he was President of the Republic, and inserted at the very last minute, just as *Il Buongoverno* (1954d) ('the good society') was about to go to press, at the end of the first chapter, also entitled *Il Buongoverno* ('the institutions and people of a good society'). It is an article that draws our attention to the foundations of a good society, and with which Einaudi perhaps made his own personal 'return home', recalling the good *oikos* and the good *nomos*.¹⁶

In the background of this really peculiar 'message' of the President of the Republic, there was a post-war Italy that was called upon to rouse itself to action and reawaken to 'new life', get to its feet and start walking on its own legs again. This was the Italy that needed to heal not only the wounds inflicted by the war, but also those resulting from the *Resistenza* and the 'civil war'. In his capacity as President of the Republic, Einaudi held up to the Italian people the image of a symbolic resource, leveraging on his great storytelling capacity. During the commemorations held on January 17, 1954, in which the nation celebrated the memory of the seven Cervi brothers put to death by the fascist firing squad in Reggio Emilia in December 1943, the President received the aged father of the Cervi family at the Presidential Building, immediately entering into warm conversation with him and establishing a sort of bond of affinity, almost a form of kinship; this friendly exchange of talk and feelings continued for quite some time.

Initially, in the story Einaudi seems to identify with the description of the sons as portrayed by the Cervi father, who tells of the experiments and innovations they introduced in crop management practices and land irrigation. Indeed, Einaudi himself was a great innovator who introduced a number of novel experimental methods on his estate.

Yet Einaudi also seems to hint, delicately, that despite the terrible tragedy and grief that has befallen the family with the death of the seven sons, something seems to 'rise to new life' upon the entry of a new figure into the family circle, a "nephew". He was the son of the Cervi father's brother, and he had come to give a helping hand to the widowed daughters-in-

¹⁶ I quote SILVESTRI 2012b below up to the paragraph ending with "the transcendence of life over death".

law. Einaudi, prompted by curiosity, asks whether the nephew now forms part of the family and whether he has a share in the family's "assets" (the question concerned the nephew's financial status within the family and whether he was recognized as a "relative"). The "nephew", answered the Cervi father, "*is not a son of this family but it's as if he were*" (Einaudi 1954d: 144, italics added).

We perceive here the replay of a story that harks back to the past: Einaudi had worshiped his uncle "like a second father", and here there is an uncle – the father of the Cervi brothers – who welcomes a nephew into his home "as if he were a son". Einaudi seems to be spellbound by the story about how the father rearranged the question of the family inheritance after the death of his sons, granting this new son a "place" in the family and bequeathing him a share in the family's property and possessions.

The President [and the others present at the scene] listened to the father with astonishment. [...] Was he a rustic countryman from our parts, a Homeric hero or a patriarch from the Bible? [...] As they gazed at the father, they saw in him the patriarch who, in the shade of the sycamore, was dictating the inheritance rules for his family. They were witnessing the formation of the law, almost as if the Civil Code had not yet been written (Einaudi 1954d: 144).

"Almost as if the Civil Code had not yet been written". This pre-judicial and pre-political, but also pre-economic dimension of human relations, this unwritten rule – whose origins date back to the ancient and original meaning of the 'nomos' of the *oikos*, that is, 'to divide' and 'to share' (according to measure and justice) – embodies the 'sense' of the foundation of the good society imagined and narrated by Einaudi. The 'heritage' that is handed down from generation to generation is not (indeed, is never) only 'genetic', nor is it (ever) merely economic but rather, as this story testifies, highly symbolic. In the remarkable story of a father and a family that 'withstands evil', of a father who *welcomes* a nephew into the family home as if he were a son, of a nephew who leaves his own home, moved by *compassion* for the death of his seven cousins and to come to the aid of their widows and the (new) uncle-father, Einaudi testifies-tells-transmits the rebirth of life, the transcendence of life over death.

The Italian President offered the Italian people the image of a symbolic re-source, a source of future and regeneration, capable of going beyond, even beyond the tragic past. Einaudi transforms the 'commemoration' of a tragic death and unspeakable suffering into the ever-tellable celebration of an 'always possible rebirth'.

If you think that all this is nothing more than one of Einaudi's many 'useless preachings', then open his book *Prediche inutili* (Einaudi 1974 [1955-

1959]) and read his short *Preface* to the end (Einaudi 1955). There you will find his signature at the bottom, complete with place and date, written as follows:

Luigi Einaudi

Roma, nel giorno di Natale del 1955 [Rome, on Christmas Day 1955].

And please, note the significance of his reference to the holiday par excellence dedicated to the Nativity, to Children, to new Life, to a new Beginning. Note, Einaudi's implicit "*Auguri!*" ['best wishes!'], which in Vulgar Latin and then in Italian mean a 'desire for good', a positive wish.

How else could a *good* society begin if not with a wish for the *good*? How else could a good society continue to exist and move forward without these "good guys" of good will – such as Einaudi – who, despite all the ends and deaths they witnessed, "keep trying" and "don't give up"? (McCarthy 2006: 137).

Well, I believe that Einaudi, on the occasion of his 150th birthday, would have wanted to tell us about his dream of a human-centered society, a humane society, not perfect, yet perfectible, supported and protected by good institutions, made up of and made by a sufficient number of free men who do everything they can to resist evil; a society open to the new and to the future, and always capable of protecting, preserving, cultivating, welcoming, and, yes, celebrating the possibility of eternal rebirth.

Happy birthday, dear President.

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