

Postscript
DOES EVERYTHING HAVE A PRICE?

One day Balzac exclaimed “God should have made men out of gold so they can buy and sell themselves to each other better”. Today, it seems even more obvious that all men, like everything, have their price. Business has become so frenetic that “culture” has become a word people like to use to explain themselves, in terms like “commercial culture”, “financial culture” or “company culture”, hence disconcerting those who like to retain the strict meaning of words. Since the mists of time, the word “culture” has referred to agricultural activity. Since the sixteenth century, it had described the application of intellectual faculties. Since the end of the eighteenth century, it has referred to lifestyles and ways of life in human society and it has even been redefined in the twentieth century to refer to the exercise of the human body, in the term “physical culture”. Now it has been taken hostage by the economic community.

Too bad! We’ll just have to get used to it. Such is the destiny of so many words which, caught in a whirl of innovation, are called upon to express something more or different to their usual meaning. Take Winston Churchill, for example, who many years ago used the words “iron curtain” in a speech of his. He was not referring to fire curtains in a theatre or the shutters protecting shopfronts but rather the line separating the two rival European blocs.

This is how language lives and it shouldn't upset us, except that these changes in meaning sometimes create misunderstandings with unpredictable consequences. Montaigne, in his "Essais", noted that "most occurrences of trouble in the world are grammarian". And Gaston Bachelard, much later, forewarned of the Second World War by observing the semantic misunderstandings that polarised people, convincing them that the words they were using had an opposite meaning to the same words used by others. Even today, one man's hero is another man's criminal.

In view of the prestige it conveys, the word "culture" is used in many senses with little nuance. But we needn't go imagining that someone with a commercial, financial or business "culture" automatically has what we call a "general" culture. Conversely, it cannot be said that an economic culture is incompatible with a general culture. Culture, in truth, is a vast field of knowledge and thought which is open to all disciplines. And no one has a monopoly on it. This is why culture can be defined as a place where questions asked constantly lead to other questions, hence clarifying our knowledge, thoughts and conduct.

And this is why we return to the question of the price of things. Because in the avid, frenetic world we live in, we know intuitively that each thing has a value, use and price. We have a general impression, but a step away from certainty, that we live in a world where everything is implicitly labelled and bar-coded. Nothing could be less certain however. Happiness, pleasure, desire, joy, delight, sorrow, and pain: are all such emotions labelled? Do they too have a price? Of course, they do, but a symbolic one, because everything obtained or felt must be "paid for" through effort, sacrifice, patience, hard work or an act of will. "Pay" the slightest attention, and it's plain to see this price is not the same as that of bread, of a television or of a voyage. And to realise this, you only have to replace "pay" by "buy". You cannot buy happiness, it has to be obtained by special means. Desire cannot be bought, it has to be sought out, discovered it

and roused. And so on. Nor will you find sacrifice, patience, hard work or willpower in a price list or a catalogue. Instead of using bank notes, cheques or credit cards, ethereal things are paid for with gestures, behaviour, attitudes, and thoughts, which are equally immaterial. And the measurement of such riches is necessarily of a different order.

It is obvious that riches are not all venal in nature. In 1936, the Provençal writer, Jean Giono, for example, called one of his books “The True Riches”. Knowing what we do about Giono and judging from the use of the adjective “true” applied to “riches”, we can guess what he meant: bread, the forest, the sky, closeness to nature, craftsmanship, conviviality, all riches which, in turn, give pleasure, sweetness and the joy of life.

But over and above material riches, linked to possessions, money or power, and “true” riches celebrated by Giono, what other kinds of riches are there? There are those that come from knowledge and the imagination that incited the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, a known lover of word play, to say that “enjoyment” means “enjoying what is meant” and this means taking pleasure from the waves we receive from things revealed to us.

The writer and sociologist Jean Duvignaud wrote a small book on the subject: “The Price of Priceless Things” (which was only small in the number of pages it contained). The title was inspired by a work from the economist François Perroux. In it, he questions the reader about the creative imagination, scientific inventions, and political and social innovations, as well as games, pleasure and dreams. He makes us understand that we are confronted by values with no “official” price but which are nonetheless extremely valuable and even sometimes invaluable.

They are priceless, says Duvignaud, because they cause “the insurrection of possibility in real life”. In other words, they manifest our revolt against the ban on invention, imagination and creativity of which we feel victim. Duvignaud incites us to become aware of one of the essential riches of the human being (in each of us) that is our capacity – of which we are too often

unaware or feign ignorance – to cross boundaries which are sometimes real and tangible (laws, rules, frontiers), but which are also sometimes pure inventions created by our own worries, fears, anxiety or fantasy. He also incites us to brush away such inventions and open the doors of our imaginations and the floodgates of our senses. His implication is this: who or what can prevent us from being imaginative, creative, inventive, loving or even contemplative?

So we must understand that, if in the course of our existence, with our upbringing, education and training, we have been able to grow and develop, we are nevertheless still hindered, bridled, inhibited and even submissive when it comes to daring to deploy our personalities and the capacities stored within our deepest selves.

In a book called “A Wise Man Has No Ideas”, the philosopher and China specialist François Jullien laid down a form of Chinese wisdom based on not creating obstacles to new ideas in order to defend those we hold already. This is tantamount to suggesting that the limitless nature of thought and fertility of the intellect is hindered more by ourselves than by others or by circumstances.

And so we return to those people who resolutely set out to acquire a business culture to further their career. To them, we need to say that this culture cannot be complete without a broader general culture and, above all, without the will to discover within themselves the values, potential and resources, all those “priceless things” which, in a symbolic sense, certainly do have a real price.

Astrophysicists exploring space and time confirm that ninety percent of the universe is composed of a mass of black matter which is invisible and as yet unexplained. Neurosurgeons taking huge strides in the understanding of the structure and mechanisms of the brain are nigh on making similar statements. The first case deals in straightforward comparison, the second in more precise perspectives that are closer to home; what if we

decided this was all the uplifting encouragement we need to venture into our own *terrae incognitae*?

In exploring and exploiting this sometimes unknown, sometimes misconstrued world, which is our own and within us, the arts can play a very important role. Who, while listening to a sonata, a quartet or a symphony hasn't felt the music drawing him into reflection much closer to the absolute than words could ever have achieved? Who, looking at a painting, ancient or modern, has not at least once had the sensation that its forms and colours bring to the subject a sensory extra through which it is then possible to see the world around and within oneself much better? Who, when discovering or listening to a poem, has not had at least once a flash of insight, revealing the breadth, complexity and richness of feelings? Who, while at the theatre or cinema, watching an already familiar comedy or drama, has not discovered unsuspected depths, within and around him? Who, while reading a novel, one day, has not understood that the structure of the world comprises more floors, cellars and labyrinths, accessible by secret doors, than those to which he was used?

To illustrate this thesis, let us glean several quotations from one of these "secret gardens" to which are consigned such surprises which, one day, opened a window onto landscapes that, until that point, even if we had suspected their existence, we had never tried to explore them, travel to them or survey them.

"We don't inhabit a country", says Cioran, "we inhabit a language". Have you ever thought about these two mental constructs, language and land, that are sometimes so far apart (for exiles, refugees and immigrants)?

"Life", wrote Hugo, "is a sentence that is interrupted." Has anyone every better explained that life is a permanent attempt to express ourselves until the moment when death finally closes our mouth?

"The tragedy of old age", according to Oscar Wilde, "is not that one is old but that one is young". And who, reaching old

age, has not felt the pain caused by the mute presence within himself, of a youth now paralysed who should have been nurtured throughout his life?

“Don’t shake me”, confides Henri Calet, “I’m a sack full of tears”. Think honestly about it, what is rotting away in your sack that a good shaking wouldn’t let out?

Cesare Pavese exclaimed that “Hardships are not enough to turn a fool into an intelligent man”. Concealed in this droll impertinence is the inescapable truth that one should say aloud what one normally keeps to oneself!

“They say that souls have no sex”, notes Joseph Joubert who adds: “But they do!” If jealousy had ever sent you one of its arrows, you would know that even when the body is absent, sensuality remains. Complete with bedazzlement and ravages.

This same Joubert, casting a veil over cruelty, also wrote, “When my friends are blind in one eye, I look at their profile”.

In this harvest selected from thousands of eyebrow raising quotations, there are always some that, at a stroke, touch, upset, move, infiltrate and overflow within us so that, afterwards, we do not feel the same as before reading them. It must be said that they didn’t just come from nowhere. They are the fruit, to use Duvignaud’s term, of veritable “insurrections” in the innermost depths of their creators.

On a different scale, we are all creators. Each of us has the capacity to hear, see and feel everything that simmers or stews within him and only determination and clear-sightedness are required to express this everything in an adequate language with words, forms, colours, and sounds. To be a creator, there is no need to produce a play or a film, to expose your paintings in a gallery, nor to win a prize for literature. Life itself is a place where “priceless” things are permanently being produced. It is the theatre of these insurrections of the intellect and revolutions of thought of which the value, we feel and know, derives from the burgeoning that they create.

There is one more important aspect that cannot be forgotten. Such reflections cannot be wound up without reference to the question of time. Because when work, family and life monopolise you, how can you find the time necessary to wake up and use your dormant capacities? The answer can be found in a riposte from Romeo and Juliette: “Because in one minute there are many days”. And even better in one of Cocteau’s phrases from a book maliciously titled “The Infernal Machine”. “Men’s time”, he said, “is folded eternity”. This suggests that to find the time to read, listen, see and to let geysers or insurrections surge inside us, it suffices perhaps to unfold and deploy this time which seems so short to us because of the way in which we have compressed it through our lifestyles. “In a sack of apples”, remarked a sage, “one can still put a lot of rice”. Just words! you might say. Perhaps, but why not try, why not test it out?

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