1. From The Tyranny of Merit to The Democracy of Need

As we shall see, this new and unhoped-for capital transforms into value what was once pure loss, i.e., consumption, the organism's ever-losing struggle to counteract entropy. As humanity's heritage, this new capital can now be intercepted, valorized, and redistributed among those in need, enacting in this way for the first time in human history a primacy of need over the tyranny of merit.[1] Such a shift constitutes an authentic and humanly effective way of reassessing all values. To understand the Web thus becomes a political act from digital warfare to Webfare, offering a unique chance to remedy the problems that have plagued humankind since the very beginning. How so? Certainly not for the reasons commonly cited when we speak about 'the Web,' still primarily considered a powerful communication tool. No, there is something deeper that must be brought to light. However, to do so, it is necessary to start from fundamentals that long predate the Web's appearance on the world stage.

1 Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

1.1 Nature and Society

Nature is unfair, at least for us who have the concept of 'justice,' since humans are born with different physical and cognitive gifts. Moreover, nature is not democratic. Why should it be? What does nature know about parliamentarianism or distributive justice? Humans are born ugly or beautiful, with limited or high cognitive abilities, and this disparity of conditions and views is reflected in conflicts, which are particularly sophisticated and layered, revealing humans to be infinitely more perverse and contentious than non-human animals. The claim that humans are all the same is far less credible than the claim that beavers are all the same because humans, more so than beavers, experience the pressure and speed of cultural evolution. **Culture and society, in turn, seek to mitigate injustices but introduce other even more odious ones** because they are created by humans rather than nature. Society, born not so much from the greed of the few but from the desire to remedy natural differences, succeeds to some extent. Unfortunately, in this attempt, it creates new disparities—such as the difference between haves and have-nots, and class inequalities—even more detestable than those generated by nature. Natural differences are a fact that cannot be blamed on anyone (it would be like reproaching a lion for not being vegan), whereas social differences are determined by humans fighting one another or, worse still, driven by the best intentions, the ones that pave the road to hell.

But how does one redistribute wealth and level differences if the goddess is not blindfolded? The concept of **meritocracy emerged** following the French Revolution as a reaction to traditional societies founded on advantage (or hardship) according to birth and was given its name not without a touch of polemic and irony. Its principle is foreshadowed by Napoleon's saying that in every soldier's knapsack, there could be hiding the baton of a Marshal of France. But the task is less straightforward than it appears, if only because not all knapsacks are equal, and merit is an aleatory and fickle notion that can range from the ability to solve problems to the skill of sweeping them under the rug. Even if a clear definition of 'merit' were firmly established, the fact remains that no one has

truly earned their worthiness, be it in term of physical attractiveness, intelligence, or enterprise, just as they have not chosen their parents, the part of the world they were born in, nor the neighborhood or school district. And even when individuals do possess some agency over their own destinies, by and large, the die has already been cast.

So, if there is one lesson that we have learned from the past two centuries, then it is the need to pack away and stow in the attic the myth of **perfectionism**. This myth suggests that a person is born free and somehow finds themselves in chains, or that a person is born good but inexplicably becomes entangled in ethnic cleansing operations. We are not born full of goodness and altruism. Furthermore, it is entirely possible that we may never find ourselves in the material and cultural conditions that allow us to exercise these virtues. Therefore, it is primarily on the conditions that we must focus. The human animal, like any other animal, is not naturally predisposed to being either good or bad. However, unlike any other animal (because it is the only one capable of being educated), it must be placed in the conditions to be able to afford a conscience. Only then it can decide what moral temperament to give to its thinking and acting. These conditions do not fall from the sky but depend on how value is distributed in society. Contrary to what proponents of hunter-gatherer frugality or theorists of happy degrowth suggest, poverty does not produce virtue but oppression and war. And it is only growth—economic, social, and technological—that can guarantee the conditions that foster virtuous behavior.

1.2 Need and Consumption

But if we cannot rely on the dubious virtues of merit, or dream of a perfect origin to return to, on what can we base social justice? And what hope can we offer to the many who feel devoid of merit, yet are not immune to need? The proposal I bring forth involves precisely the **transformation of need, that is, of the great equalizer that unites humans, into a productive element** capable of generating new wealth. Thus, for the first time in the history of the world, we can implement the saying "from each accord-

ing to their abilities, to each according to their needs." How? Let us start with the current situation. As much as merit is inherently undemocratic because it directly leads to the formation of an *elite*, need connects the human animal to the non-human animal and applies equally to all, much like death. There is no doubt, in fact, that the needs of billionaires and the vast resources they allocate to fulfill them, differ significantly from those of beggars. But in both cases, we are dealing with needs. Whereas, when we consider merit, particularly in the context of meritocracy, the billionaire's needs are hailed as the epitome of merit, while the beggar's needs bear the stigma of demerit, of one who has done everything wrong in life.

Above all, even if a significant portion of a magnate's merits can be automated through artificial intelligence systems, just as Hercules's feats were automated by the steam engine, the needs of a billionaire just as those of a beggar will never be replaced by a machine. There will always be some human in need, seeking solace in a tuna can or a trip into orbit, while no stone or machine will ever be able to cultivate a desire that even remotely resembles such needs (nor, indeed, can it experience that state so typical of organisms: desiring, striving, having intentions). The analogy between the needs of the rich and the poor (including, of course, the rich and the poor in spirit) does not merely concern the fact that "need" is something inconceivable for a machine or an inorganic being—stones do not have the need to fall to the ground; they simply obey the law of gravity, as Aristotle believed. It also concerns the fact that, **for a need to be fulfilled, in the specific case of the human form of life, a connection with one or more technical apparatuses is required**: the can that contains the tuna, the can opener, the rocket, the space capsule. In other words, insofar as the human lifeform is systematically connected with technology, human need is essentially rooted in consumption. This ranges from the most trivial material consumption to the highest form of consumption of cultural goods. Precisely because it is composed of organisms systematically connected with mechanisms (including symbolic and social apparatuses that qualify human nature as second nature), humanity is inherently ***technohumanity.***

Humans are organisms driven by needs and metabolic urgencies, just like any other organism. However, unlike any other organism, humans rely on technological supplements to compensate for their deficiencies. These enhancements began with flint and have now evolved into the indispensable role of silicon so important to the Web. Yet it must be clearly understood that nothing has changed in our essence: We are what we are not in spite of technology, but because of it. For instance, thanks to the keyboard mechanism I can write these words, leveraging decades of study and education, instead of running through the savannah while pursued by animals more formidable than ourselves without too many free decades (actually, not even a second) to dedicate to contemplation and learning.

This is a point that humanity tends to forget, especially when our attention is fixated on personal concerns or pressing global issues like the environment, war, and artificial intelligence. Amid such preoccupations, the topic of consumption may appear trivial or tangential, but this perception is unfounded. In truth, it is undeniably clear that **consumption is the element that shapes the very essence of the human form of life**, for better or for worse. If there were no competition for resources among humans, not only would conflict cease to exist (a timeless truth), but the looming specter of an environmental crisis would also disappear. After all, this crisis stems from the colossal effort by eight billion people upon our planet and its finite resources, and therefore has organic need as primary cause, starting with the most basic one of sustenance. This is the most conspicuous aspect.

But upon closer examination, consumption (and the needs that fuel it) emerges as a defining element of human existence, in contrast even to the world of machines. The latter, in fact, exhibit tremendous energy demands (the computer I am using to write these words, and then the system that will transmit them, consumes more energy than my fingers and brain). Yet, their need for energy is far less pressing than the one that I, as an organism, must deal with. After all, the computer can power down without any regrets or concerns, primarily because it lacks consciousness to cultivate such emotions and because it can always be revived, even after a week or a month or a year without energy supply. As

for me, like any other organism, there is no such leeway: If I shut down, I simply cease to exist, and I do so permanently. The very fabric of the human life-form is shaped by this circumstance. **We have hopes, fears, and urgencies, precisely because we have needs, and these needs can ultimately be traced back to the need to respond to the demands dictated by our metabolism**.

During the early stages of Brexit, for instance, the looming food crisis in the UK caused by long queues of transport vehicles awaiting new customs controls became a genuinely serious and pressing issue. The gravity of these problems lay precisely in their impact on the urgency to fulfill organic needs. Neither the Metaverse nor ChatGPT would be seriously threatened by a food crisis, and both can patiently endure a power outage, provided, of course, that there are surviving humans interested in continuing to use Artificial Intelligence. We realize, thus, that the so-called virtual world to which we have supposedly graduated, leaving behind material existence, is far from being an *on-life* freely roaming the world like an aethereal spirit. Instead, it remains undeniably grounded in materiality, albeit in two different ways, depending on whether it concerns mechanisms or organisms.

Mechanisms are composed of matter and alimented by matter: Even the most immaterial of algorithms relies on a computer to run it, along with the often-scarce materials from which it is made, and, as in the case of Blockchain and AI in general, it requires enormous quantities of electricity. **Matter and its sustenance exert an incomparably stronger hold on organisms than on mechanisms, precisely because these are metabolic needs that cannot be postponed**. In both cases, beyond the allure of the virtual, the posthuman, and the immaterial, what dictates the law is need and its most tangible manifestation, namely consumption.

This is the crucial point that hasn't received enough critical attention, as for decades consumption has been subject to unfavorable scrutiny under the banner of capitalism, rising to the status of the eighth cardinal vice and serving as the synthesis of the other seven, from gluttony and greed to lust, with the possible exception of sloth (the abstention from action which might, perhaps, find its place within a program of happy degrowth). This is because consumption is immediately linked to 'con-

sumerism,' a byproduct of the industrial boom that shaped the upbringing of the baby boomers and was subsequently passed down to later generations. Consumerism is a distortion as well as a hyperbole and a parody of consumption—an unchecked, greedy, and wasteful binge.

Granted, consumption can indeed be excessive, it is squandering, and is driven by vanity. However, it is important to remember that consumption is the antithesis and, above all, the purpose of production. **We produce in order to consume**. Although it might seem more important and noble to be a producer rather than a consumer, one can well imagine a producer of low-quality, dangerous, silly, or futile objects just as one can imagine a consumer who indulges not only in exquisite foods and wines but also in works of art and philosophical theories. Most significantly, what is unimaginable is production in the absence of consumption. This is a pivotal consideration. At a time when AI seems poised to supplant human endeavors across the board (albeit hypothetically), there is one realm which it cannot infiltrate: the simple act of watching a film, savoring a pizza, or yearning to attend a live concert.

Let us never forget this: **It is our needs, much more than our products, that make us who we are as humans, right from the start**. When the newborn wants milk, this act does not only mark the beginning of all future feeding behavior, but also the emergence of intentionality and will, the seeds of consciousness. This becomes even more significant as automation continues to render *homo faber* increasingly obsolete. While humans are being replaced or become replaceable as bearers of strength, patience, precision, and soon, in many cases, even of intelligence, there is one area where no substitute can ever truly stand: consumption. Just as the lofty philosophical saying reminds us that no one can die in place of another, it is equally true that no one can eat on behalf of another. Our needs and material activities form a fundamental economy detached from income.[2] It is an unavoidable urgency that also presents an opportunity for a new economy based not solely on production but on the capitalization of consumption.

2 Joselle Dagnes and Angelo Salento, eds., *Prima i fondamentali. L'economia della vita quotidiana tra profitto e benessere* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2022).

1.3 The Sorcerer's Apprentice

To achieve this, we need a sorcerer's apprentice: technology. Unlike other organisms that inevitably succumb to death, **only humans possess the unique ability to defer death through technology. This is precisely why humans are the masters of technology as it would be devoid of meaning without humans**. But if we were to ask someone whether technology is more akin to alienation or to revelation, the answer would likely lean toward the former; this not only because it is unclear how the concept of 'revelation' relates to technology, but because one of the first things that we are taught is that technology is alienating.

Now, upon closer examination, in order to argue that technique alienates us, we would have to accept a rather challenging premise: that human nature was created by God (be it the traditional deity or the new goddess, Mother Nature), and therefore endowed with virtues, intelligence, and vigor. Consequently, any departure from this state can only be seen as a decline. The once perfect being becomes imperfect, is expelled from the garden, gains awareness of good and evil, and resorts to a technological supplement represented by the fig leaf, which serves as a precursor to the myriad of other supplements that will accompany it on its newfound endeavor: work. Or, if we were to secularize the story, the Noble Savage becomes a liar driven by greed and a scheming oppressor. Consequently, as innocence fades away, he begins to seek solace in reinstating a sentimentalized imaginary past, for instance, through vacations immersed in a nature that is considered more natural the wilder it is, or in meticulously manicured French gardens. Yet technology and society persist even within these environments, ultimately leaving one with an overwhelming sense of alienation and exile from one's authentic self.[3] But isn't it paradoxical that those who claim to hold

3 In the U.S., Leo Marx has offered an acute analysis of the "American hero's" alienation in the face of technology: *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 364f: "In the end the American hero is either dead or totally alienated from society, alone and powerless, like the evicted shepherd of Virgil's eclogue. And if, at

life-and-death power over nature also perceive themselves as enslaved to technology? They see themselves as entrapped in a complex system of apparatuses which that very same weak and maladjusted animal has created to protect itself in a hostile environment? Once we recognize the implausibility of this tale, we can embrace an alternative narrative, one in which the notion of 'revelation' will seem far less obscure.

As we have long suspected—and as it becomes increasingly clear today through the transformations we experience—**there is no such thing as an inherent human essence, and the source of our humanity lies not within but outside of us, in technology and culture**. The natural state of being human is one of greater disadvantage compared to that of other creatures: lacking lethal claws or teeth, vulnerable to heat and cold more than any other animal, restless by nature, and lacking a natural habitat, everywhere we are ill-adapted. But from the moment a stick was used as a tool and the first flint was chipped to make a scraper, a distinct entity emerged known as the human being, something different from the non-human animal that it used to be. Among the various technologies, social technology is fundamental, and today it stands as the great new asset of mankind that must be understood and harnessed for the benefit of humanity alongside another technology: language. Language, along with the home and its furnishings, allows us to sit down and discuss our ideas about the origin of humanity instead of being chased by a saber-toothed tiger.

In this sense, technics has been our distinguishing trait compared to non-human animals since the very beginning. After all, why would humans alone possess such formidable advantages as sociability, language, and imagination? For as long as it was believed that God had fash-

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the same time, he pays tribute to the image of a green landscape, it is likely to be ironic and bitter. The resolutions of our pastoral fables are unsatisfactory because the old symbol of reconciliation [the ideal of the middle landscape] is obsolete. But the inability of our writers to create a surrogate for the ideal of the middle landscape can hardly be accounted artistic failure. […] The machine's sudden entrance into the garden presents a problem that ultimately belongs not to art but to politics."

ioned man in His image and likeness, it was not necessary to raise this question. But once it was raised, it spawned the dangerous tendency to search within humans, especially in their brains, for peculiar faculties that harken back to the world of Molière: Opium makes people sleep because it possesses the *virtus dormitiva*, humans speak because they possess neurons devoted to this function, just as they possess neurons assigned by the Supreme Clockmaker for reading, sociality, altruism, all the way to mathematics. If that were the case, humanity would not have ahead of itself an open-ended becoming but would be destined to develop latent potentialities within its grey matter, and temper the passions dictated by the amygdala and the lower layers of the brain. Now, this is not the case: **We are what we are much more because of what is outside of us than because of our natural endowments**. In practical terms, dolphins (with their larger and in some ways more capable brains than those of humans) have remained in the water. In such an environment, one cannot do things like lighting a fire, sharing stories around it, or deciding that it would be more reasonable to build a shelter to protect the fire from being extinguished, leading to an evolution through the systematic use of technological devices ranging from digging sticks to cell phones. **That is why the division between humanism and technology has never been justified, as humanism itself is a form of technology and technology exists only as a function of human consumption**. This is crucial. Consumption is not an accessory or extrinsic element of humanity; rather, it is its essence (if there is one), preceding language or thought precisely because, unlike the latter, it cannot be automated.

As I have shown elsewhere, this is where the Web comes in with a radical innovation: the valorization of humanity as *doc-humanity*, that is, as a producer of data and values rather than just material goods.[4] Let it be restated that for the first time in history we now have an apparatus that systematically and programmatically values humans not based on their merits but on their needs. What is even more remarkable is that it recognizes need as the most sublime merit of humans. It was already the case with the market: it doesn't matter whether what I produce is bought by a

4 Maurizio Ferraris, *Doc-Humanity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022).

genius or a fool, as long as they buy it. But the Web enforces this principle not at the end of the process, but right from the start. The Web, and the automation and profiling it aims at, does not need to capture creativity or strength, beauty or intelligence, virtue, or wisdom, i.e., what makes humans different from other animals and from one another. Rather, it feeds on the continuous baseline that makes us equal even before death: the need, or more precisely the imbecility, the inherent lack that drives us to rely on technology. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the value that humans generate on the Web, which would not exist without their needs. This empowers humans immensely in their relationship with technology and its present most conspicuous manifestation, the Web.

1.4 The Need for Theory

What I propose in this booklet is a theory, or at least a theoretical proposal, whose connection to the Web might not be immediately obvious. It has been argued that the need for theory would be rendered obsolete, what with the exponential growth of data, enabled by the ubiquitous recording capability of digital technology and the increased computational power of supercomputers.[5] Why bother with such imperfect shortcuts known as hypotheses and concepts, when we have a precise 1:1 map of the empire, and artificial intelligences that can swiftly survey it in every detail? And why should we invest our time in the pursuit of causal relationships that explain the events in the world, while exposing ourselves to the possibility of error, when it is far more lucrative and intellectually less demanding to entrust machines with the search for highly effective and irrefutable correlations?

Now, the exact opposite holds true: It is **precisely because of the immense growth of data and the fragmentation of knowledge and practices characteristic of our times that we need to develop a theory.** This

5 Chris Anderson, "The End of Theory: The Data Deluge Makes the Scientific Method Obsolete," *Wired*, June 23, 2008, https://www.wired.com/2008/06/pb-theory/

will allow us to navigate what would otherwise be a chaotic landscape not only from a cognitive point of view (this is the lesser evil), but from a historical and political perspective where it is a question of deciding the future course of humanity. This is based on the belief that all the data and many of the processes described in these pages, will soon undergo significant changes. Therefore, what I offer are the reflections of a humanist who has sought to engage with technologists to the best of his abilities but is painfully aware of his own limitations. Nevertheless, I am firmly convinced that **these continually metamorphizing processes and data find meaning only within a thoughtful exploration of the characteristics of the human form of life (including technology as its integral component).** Such an exploration can help shape, make sense of, and provide political guidance for the tremendous ongoing process.

Data, indeed, is a form of life, but interpretation—human interpretation—is indispensable in order to ascribe meaning to it. The presence of worked flint could be found throughout the Somme, but it took Boucher de Perthes to recognize them as traces of an ancient technology and way of life. Just **like the book of nature on the eve of the scientific revolution, the book of mankind only makes sense to those who study it with principles, concepts, and objectives. On its own, it is just a cacophony.** Galileo did not simply observe the world, but provided interpretations and reflections which he recorded in literal books. The principle applies to the vast book of the Web, awaiting its own Galileos, Torricellis, and Stahls. **That is why, in an age where human life can be captured in minute detail through data, the need for theory, understanding, conceptual frameworks, and interpretations is more critical than ever.**

The unfolding of such comprehension brings about epistemological fractures that demand our attention. Even before quantum physics, the statistical physics of Boltzmann and Maxwell introduced a probabilistic approach to the study of nature. The vast amount of information about the human experience comprising humanity's collective heritage enables the study of humans and societies to reach a level of approximation comparable to that of the natural sciences. It may even surpass it, considering that it delves into the mesoscopic and transparent dimen-

sion of human existence. This goes beyond a mere theoretical necessity; it is an ethical imperative. The need for theory also involves teleology, the attribution of purposes or objectives. As human beings with physical bodies, we have needs, pleasures, and goals, whereas machines lack them and, most importantly, derive them from us. I have no difficulty imagining a symphony composed by an AI. However, it is inconceivable for me to imagine an AI that desires to listen to a symphony and, in doing so, experiences pleasure, anguish, or exhilaration.

What distinguishes us as humans is precisely the fact that we are living organisms. We live, die, suffer, hope, fear, plan, despair. Our intelligence is intricately woven into the fabric of these experiences. Additionally, the certainty of our mortality imposes a sense of time and urgency upon our existence. We are not mechanisms that can be switched on and off like a light bulb. In contrast, "dying" is just a metaphor in the case of cell phones. If I bring my 'dead' phone to a technician, they can repair it. But if my grandfather passes away, he won't come back to life if I take him to the maintenance desk or to the hospital. And that is precisely why, from the very first day to the very last day of his life, my grandfather had urgencies, hopes, needs, and plans, while the cell phone (just as ChatGPT) simply executes pre-written programs.

To reject theory and resign ourselves to the dominion of technology (the two go hand in hand), would mean to relinquish our role as true architects of our own history. In this submission to technology and this renunciation of theory, humans succumb to the ancient mythologies such as that of the Golem, a clay giant who seeks to overthrow his master, or modern myths that proclaim technology as the sole master of history and humanity. Let us consider the matter from a different vantage point: A nineteenth-century office clerk who spent his entire day filling out documents required by administrative procedures, was he a slave to the bureaucratic machinery or to the human intention behind those procedures? Clearly, he was a human reduced to a mere machine, compelled to execute pre-written programs. The situation is far better now that we have computers perform such tasks. The need for theory (understanding) and teleology (the attribution of purposes and objectives) is a duty that

can only be waived by a lethargic intellect. By rejecting them, we reject taking the responsibility that comes with being human.