

Roberto TOSCANO

## GUILT: AN APOLOGY

The modern world, and to a larger extent the post-modern world, are characterized by a clear aversion toward the concept of guilt. Guilt, indeed, has been identified on an intellectual level, and also in popular culture and conventional wisdom, as the main source of unfreedom, psychological repression, authoritarianism, practiced both within families (by patriarchal authority) and within religious communities.

In Western culture the onslaught against guilt has been a very important component of anti-religious (specifically anti-Christian) polemics, in the sense that implanting guilt feelings through the concept of “sin” has demonstrably been one of the most powerful instruments of the power of religious hierarchies and institutions over individual believers. From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, progressive thought has challenged such power and the premises on which it was founded.

Indeed, pre-modern thought was intrinsically based on the belief that events, even natural events, could be explained by attributing responsibility to human agency. Where we today see causality, our pre-modern ancestors tended to see agency, imputation. Hence phenomena such as the persecution of witches “guilty” of natural events such as droughts or famines.

The attack on guilt, in this sense, goes well beyond the challenge to religion, clerical power, pre-modern prejudice. The shift from imputation to causality, indeed, is one of the main characteristics of modern society. Science, starting from Copernicus and Galileo, refutes the centrality of humans in the cosmos, and at the same time - from a psychological and moral point of view - relieves them of responsibility, and not only for natural events, but also for their own behavior. Agency is replaced by causality, and guilt, of course, does not fit anywhere in a causal chain.

The XX century, with Freud, imparted the most powerful blow to the concept of guilt. With Freudian psychoanalysis (which quickly moved beyond science and therapy to become a part of popular culture by inspiring literature and in general the arts) not only

was the power of both patriarchy and religion, largely founded on fomenting and exploiting guilt, challenged, but the target was identified inside the very core of psychic reality: the Superego, the internalized repressive, guilt-inducing patriarch.

It is impossible to overestimate the impact of this radical cultural shift, modifying deeply-rooted traditional patterns at first for educated elites and then, through the effect of mass cultural products and the media, becoming - at least in the most developed and today “globalized” parts of the world - hegemonic.

Together with the shift from agency to causality, a second characteristic aspect of contemporary culture is pushing toward the weakening, if not the disappearance, of guilt: “present-ism”. Indeed, both the past and the future have been superseded, as essential dimensions of the psychological and moral world of individual, by an exclusive focalization on the present. The “carpe diem” of Roman wisdom has been turned into – to quote a Woody Allen film – “take the money and run”: literally, since the traditional cycle of capitalism – saving, investment, production, profit – has turned almost marginal in a situation in which money is supposed to produce money now, immediately; but also intellectually and psychologically, since immediacy in the economy has its exact counterpart on one hand in the relentless onslaught of news and information (soon replaced and forgotten in a mechanism that fosters a very short attention span) and on the other in the frantic pursuit of consumption both of material goods and of personal fulfillment, from power to sex. The fact is that the growing irrelevance of the past and the impatience with the projection of our desires toward the future leaves no space for ethics. How can there be a space for ethics, including a space for the awareness and acceptance of our own guilt, if both the reference to memory (and to our past action) and to the future (with the acceptance of responsibility) are absent? Guilt certainly does not fit anywhere if we live in immediacy and impatience.

We must never forget what burden, which amount of human suffering and repression was produced by guilt throughout the history of human society. Individual lives were warped, often destroyed. Human potential was wasted, crippled by a both external and internal moral blackmail equating freedom and enjoyment with the breaking of sacred rules and the trespassing of impassable moral borders.

As we acknowledge and salute this remarkable feat of human liberation, however, we must also be honest in our assessment of the consequences, and the pitfalls, of this profound cultural shift.

The substantial weakening of guilt has also fed upon a third trend: a growing and powerful narcissistic drift. Indeed, narcissism demands the demise of all guilt feelings, since they would interfere with the idolatric love and approval of ourselves whatever we might have done. Narcissus sees in himself only beauty and goodness. He is beautiful and good “by definition”, so that there is actually no need to evade or suppress guilt, since it is non-existent as a category.

But let me move now from the individual to the group. The individual as such - with the exception of the Marquis de Sade and few more such sociopaths - rarely openly claims the right to absolute power over the Other and explicitly rejects any limit, thereby reaching the annihilation of guilt. The same cannot be said when collective identity and the reference to a group come into play.

The phenomenon is definitely not a new one. Throughout history, moral partiality has been one of the most fatal flaws of humanity, producing intolerance, conflict, racism. We are all familiar with the saying “My country right or wrong”, but we could make a long list of statements indicating moral partiality: “my religion right or wrong”, “my tribe right or wrong”, “my party right or wrong”, “my family right or wrong”, down to “my soccer team right or wrong”.

What is new today is that the same concept of “wrong” (previously admitted but condoned and accepted) has de facto disappeared. Today people tend not to condone - on the basis of primary and unquestionable allegiance - the misdeeds of their family, tribe, nation etc., but to deny them. Our cultural and political world is more and more one of “zero guilt” for ourselves and “maximum guilt” for others. Guilt, in other words, has not really disappeared, but has become a concept that has its validity on when it is applied to the Other.

Reading the press in today’s Europe one has the impression that problems and evils are always attributable to “someone else”, specifically to immigrants. We are not guilty by definition, they are guilty by definition. The political impact of this sort of

“extroversion of guilt” is every day under our eyes.

It would be misleading, however, to think that this phenomenon is only European, or only Western. Actually the claim of victimhood - “ontological” victimhood, permanent victimhood - characterizes just about every group, be it ethnic or religious, on a global scale. But of course one can be a permanent victim only if one’s own guilt is permanently exorcised, banned. Otherwise it would be inescapable to admit that even having been the victims of the most horrendous historical persecutions we can, in other periods and other circumstances, become guilty perpetrators.

One example. I recently spent two years in India, a country which, in spite of the extreme diversity of its population (different religions, different languages, different castes) manages to be a real country and, besides, one with an extraordinary potential. We are rightly shocked by periodical religious riots and massacres, yet the fact is that Hindus and Moslems, the two main religious communities, have lived together for centuries and while deeply influencing each other from a cultural point of view, so much so that India in no way can be defined as only Hindu. Yet, the radical and anti-democratic groups that, within both communities, push toward confrontation and intolerance, equally start from a strong and uncompromising claim to victimhood: the Hindus focusing on the past (bloody conquest by bellicose and fundamentalist Muslims defeating peaceful and tolerant Hindus), the Muslims focusing on the present (unfairness and socio-economic disadvantage if not marginalization of Muslims within Indian society). These two narratives, which could be proved at least in part right by history, sociology and economics are, in the rhetoric and propaganda of extremist groups, mutually exclusive insofar as each group denies guilt and claims intrinsic and permanent victimhood.

The danger of this psychological, but also political attitude is that people feel licenced by their victimhood to worry only about themselves and to draw a sort of blank check for any sort of villainy and insensitivity to the rights and the humanity of others. In short, the total elimination of guilt, which is the inevitable product of the claim to “ontological victimhood” is an ominous precursor to intolerance and conflict.

I would like here to open a parenthesis on the concept of “collective guilt”. The first thing that has to be said is that both in criminal law and in ethics guilt is personal,

individual. It is unfair and unacceptable to attribute to individuals the guilt for misdeeds committed by their ancestors or their fellow countrymen with whom such individuals have no complicity. But if it is true that collective guilt cannot be attributed, it is also true that the voluntary recognition of collective guilt beyond any individual responsibility is a noble act of generosity. Speaking in Germany on the subject of guilt - and of voluntary recognition of collective guilt - one cannot but pay tribute to this nobility and this generosity - nobility and generosity that unfortunately have not been matched by many others in the troubled and bloody history of mankind. Denial is much, much more frequent than recognition.

Facing the troubling consequences - both on an individual and on a social scale - of the weakening if not disappearance of guilt, some are tempted to try “going back” to the good old times when patriarchs and religious authorities instilled in their families and in their flocks enough feelings of guilt to keep the worst narcissistic, selfish and anomic tendencies of individuals in check. Apart from the fact that those old times were not so good - that repression was far from guaranteeing moral behavior, and at the same time it warped and destroyed human lives - this idea is only an unrealistic reactionary utopia. The jinn is out of the lamp, Pandora’s box has been opened, the toothpaste cannot go back into the tube.

The challenge today is not to pursue the absurd dream of going back to a strong and repressive eteronymous ethic but to try once more, and on the basis of a deeply changed world, to build an autonomous one. One within which guilt must play an essential role.

The concepts of “ethics” and “morals” are commonly used in an interchangeable way, yet I believe that it is important to draw a distinction. Morals is obeying to precepts that are somehow and somewhere codified, emanate from some book or authority. Ethics is the inner and independent feeling of right and wrong which, as psychologists have convincingly proved, is detectable even in toddlers who have not been exposed to any moral pedagogy. A recognition of right and wrong which apparently has a biological grounding in what biologists have called “mirror cells”, i.e. the biological - and evolutionary - foundation of human sympathy or compassion (both meaning, respectively with a Greek and Latin root, the “suffering together” with the Other).

It is normal, it is human, it is morally healthy, it is socially indispensable that we should feel guilt when we commit a breach of this recognition, of this human solidarity which is as “natural” as the urge to survive (Spinoza’s *conatus essendi*) or the drive to obtain and enjoy, from power to sex.

Last but not least, authentic recognition of guilt - totally different from the submission to someone else’s standards and moral blackmail - requires, as Immanuel Kant taught us, freedom of choice.

Let us then challenge the equation between guilt and repression, guilt and authoritarianism, guilt and intolerance, and accept that, though we might be tempted by unfettered narcissistic liberty and the heady “lightness of being” it can generate, guilt is an essential part of our moral world, and also a part of our responsible freedom as human beings.