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GOOD GOVERNMENT, GOVERNANCE, HUMAN COMPLEXITY

GOOD GOVERNMENT,
GOVERNANCE,
HUMAN COMPLEXITY

Luigi Einaudi's legacy and
contemporary societies

Edited by
PAOLO HERITIER and PAOLO SILVESTRI



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CONTENTS

PAOLO HERITIER – PAOLO SILVESTRI, <i>Introduction. Luigi Einaudi: poised between ideal and real</i>	Pag. VII
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PART ONE

THE EINAUDIAN LEGACY: GOOD GOVERNMENT AND THE RELATION BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC

MASSIMO L. SALVADORI, <i>Luigi Einaudi. Reflections on the lifelong journey of a great Italian</i>	» 3
FRANCESCO FORTE, <i>The architecture of Luigi Einaudi's good government</i>	» 13
FRANCO REVIGLIO, <i>Government and market failures in Luigi Einaudi and to-day</i>	» 33
GIUSEPPE GAROFALO, <i>Luigi Einaudi and Federico Caffè: outlines of a social policy for good governance</i>	» 45
PAOLO SILVESTRI, <i>The ideal of Good Government in Luigi Einaudi's thought and life: between law and freedom</i>	» 57

PART TWO

GOOD GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC GOVERNANCE

ALESSIO LO GIUDICE, <i>Patterns of identity in the perspective of European governance</i>	» 101
JÁNOS FRIVALDSZKY, <i>Good governance and right public policy</i> . . .	» 119

CONTENTS

ROBERTO CARANTA, <i>Good administration in the age of governance</i>	Pag. 143
ANDRÁS ZS. VARGA, <i>Legal control of administration: premise of good government</i>	» 155
ALESSANDRO CIATTI, <i>Freedom of contract and good government</i> . .	» 173
ALBERTO ANDRONICO, <i>The dark side of governance</i>	» 189

PART THREE

GOVERNANCE AND LIBERTY: THE COMPLEXITY OF THE HUMAN

FLAVIA MONCERI, <i>Rethinking 'good governance'. Complex societies and individual differences</i>	» 207
MAGDA FONTANA, <i>Policy in complex social systems</i>	» 221
FRANCESCO DI IORIO, <i>Mind, market and open society in Hayek's thought</i>	» 235
ENZO DI NUOSCIO, <i>The laic chooses critical reason</i>	» 251
GRAZIANO LINGUA, <i>The economy of images, or the symbolical horizon of social exchange</i>	» 261
PAOLO HERITIER, <i>Useless non-preaching? The critical point and the complex anthropology of freedom in Luigi Einaudi</i>	» 275
PAOLO SILVESTRI, <i>After-word. Invisible cities: which (good-bad) man? For which (good-bad) polity?</i>	» 313
List of contributors	» 333
Index	» 337

GRAZIANO LINGUA

THE ECONOMY OF IMAGES, OR THE SYMBOLICAL HORIZON
OF SOCIAL EXCHANGE*

1. Sending to press his collection of essays entitled *Il Buongoverno* [*Good Government*],¹ Einaudi chooses to insert in the body of the text some details about the Sienese fresco by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Effects of Good and Bad Government on Town and Country* [*Effetti del Buon e del Cattivo Governo nella campagna e nella città*] (1338-1340). The exact intention of this gesture is not fully apparent. However, it makes one think that this is not just a decorative decision, but that it has something to do, in a profound way, with the theoretical objectives of the volume and, more generally, of the statesman's thought. Now, faced with Einaudi's decision two interpretive lines are open to us. The most immediate one is that of reading and decoding the image in its relationship with the text; of analyzing the content of the fresco, the historical reconstruction of the environment and the sources of the painting; and eventually comparing how much more or differently (with respect to the ideal of good government) the image can express something that the essays contained in the collection do not. Going in this direction one might find the analysis of Lorenzetti's work by P. Schiera, N. Rubinstein, Q. Skinner useful. These scholars have highlighted the merging of politics and theology in the painting.² There is, however, a second reading, more radically philosophical, which consists not so much in an interrogation of the painting, but in the interrogation of the gesture of putting the artistic image in a collection of

* Trans. by Marika Josephson.

¹ L. EINAUDI, *Il buongoverno. Saggi di economia e politica (1897-1954)*, E. ROSSI (ed.) (Bari, Laterza, 1954).

² Cf. P. SCHIERA, "Il *bonum commune* fra corpi e disciplina: alle radici della politica nel medio-evo", *Democrazia e Diritto* (Sept.-Dec. 1991), pp. 31-51; N. RUBINSTEIN, "Political Ideas in Senese Art: The Frescoes by Ambrogio Lorenzetti", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XXI (1958), pp. 179-207; Q. SKINNER, *Vision of Politics. II. Renaissance Virtues*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

essays that work on one register (namely an economic-political one) apparently far from that of imagery and the aesthetic experience. This is the interpretive direction that I would like to propose, reading Einaudi's choice as an occasion for opening reflection on the role images play in the social construction of sense and, more generally, the comprehensive symbolical frame of living-in-common. In a perspective such as this, artistic images inhabit every discourse, even those which are economic-political, in a demanding way, more so than merely as an exposition of determinate contents, because they work with that which, in words, remains "off the field". They allude – outside of what they concretely demonstrate – to the relationship that society establishes with its own self-representation, offering a cue for reflecting on how philosophy can reckon with the symbolical matrices that contribute to constructing social identity.³ On this point the question that Paolo Silverstri poses in his recent study dedicated to the theme of good government in Einaudi becomes particularly interesting:⁴ Can Lorenzetti's fresco, outside of its contents, claim to have an intrinsic communicative-normative scope, or better, can this image of art not only represent an ideal form of society which escapes u-topically into the various reductionisms in which it develops the concrete conduct of human affairs, but also have a performative function for the spectator, guiding him toward a different view of reality? It is clear that replying to the question posed by Silverstri involves a deviation from the specific Einaudian legacy to a discussion that includes more about the anthropological and political significance of images. It seems to me nevertheless that to attempt a reading in this sense could contribute to clarifying the mythical-ideal dimension of good government and offer us a series of elements which the simple decodification of Lorenzetti's fresco, as an illustration of the Einaudian text, simply could not. There are at least two stages of such a reading that seem to me inescapable: in the first place there is the comprehending of sense in which images have an intrinsic truth-telling capacity even in registers of knowing that are less aesthetically minded-thanks to their symbolic potential of putting forward some-

³ A fundamental contribution to rethinking the role of the aesthetic in the social sciences and in particular in law is offered by the "dogmatic anthropology" of P. Legendre. See for example what is said in P. LEGENDRE, *Della società come testo. Lineamenti di un'antropologia dogmatica*, trans. it. and ed. P. Heritier (Torino, Giappichelli, 2005), pp. 127-167; ID., *Dieu au miroir. Étude sur l'institution des images* (Paris, Fayard, 1994), pp. 91-178. For a synthetic portrait on this aspect of the philosophy of P. Legendre see P. HERITIER, "Legendre e la fondazione antropologica dell'estetica giuridica", in P. LEGENDRE, *L'occidente invisibile*, trans. it. and ed. P. Heritier (Torino, Giappichelli, 2009), pp. 89-118.

⁴ P. SILVESTRI, *Il liberalismo di Luigi Einaudi, o del buon governo* (Soveria Mannelli, Rubettino, 2008), pp. 17-24.

thing that, if different, would remain unsaid; that is, indicating allusively to what is otherwise unavailable to us. The second stage would be comprehending in what sense the aesthetic-symbolic element could claim to have a normative dimension, that is, could have a constitutive role in the general economy of exchanges of sense that constitute the bond of a society, or better, that which keeps people together in a common identity even if that identity separates from their constitutive differences.

2. Before going directly into these two questions, an introduction is necessary: to reach the anthropological and social significance of the production and the use of images one must have some distance from the “logocentric” system that characterizes the vast majority of our social knowledge (in as much as it claims to be an expression of Science). This does not so much substitute a knowledge of images but rather implements it, *critically recognizing* the capacity that images have to put different planes into relation with one another, to create identity and ties, and to establish belonging. And this is precisely the point: if we think about being able to saturate the social transmission of sense with the word, inflecting it in many texts of juridical, political and economic doctrines, we remain impotent in understanding what is at work within the mechanisms of representation of the identities in which individuals recognize each other as subjects and collect themselves into a community. If only logic is valuable, every experience that brings the iconic back to the scene should be removed or classified as irrational, but doing so impedes us from understanding the depth of its sense.

The history of the relationship that the West has built with images risks being a history of this continual removal. One sees it from the Platonic suspicion of art through today’s theories of visual communication. We have faced this paradox for millenia, in which we believe that it is necessary to remove images from our knowledge, in order to see better, as if we could see right there where there is nothing visible, as if the intelligible did not have anything to do with concrete forms. For this reason we tend to think of images prevalently on the register of aesthetic pleasure and not according to the epistemological register of truth and the anthropological one in which we construct identities. This is what Plato’s myth of the cave, for example, teaches us: Plato rejects images not in order to distance the concept of vision from knowledge, but in order to radically subjugate the knowledge of a different vision, purely intellectual, that has nothing to do with concrete visibility. This myth brings us to the heart of the Platonic trait of Western rationalism: the conviction, that is, that precisely that which cannot be seen with the bodily eyes is intel-

ligible for the eyes of the mind, because only these are not disturbed by the impurity of passion and the ambiguous materiality of the body.

This suspicion toward images which the West carries in its genetic code is properly articulated in a series of apparently different registers, which, even in their differences, exhibit the same difficulty of thinking about this dimension in depth. I review three succinctly, as they are useful for the discussion that follows:

a) The first register is strictly tied to the Platonic model which attributes an insufficiency to artificial images with respect to truth because they are not real objects, but imitations of appearance rather than truth (*Republic*, X, 598 b). In the mimetic trait that characterizes every image made by man there is a fictional dimension that is intrinsically illusory and that impedes looking into the face of what is really valuable.⁵ Said briefly: the image cannot tell the truth because it is ontologically empty, it doubles the real, building imaginary worlds and touching dimensions rendered opaque by sentiment and desire. If I want to know, I must distance myself from images, from appearances, from passions, as does the prisoner of Plato's cave, who, unshackled from his chains, is not contented by the shadows [*skias*], but "looks toward the light" [*pros to phos anablepein*] (*Republic* VII, 515 c).

Even admitting that already in Plato and then in another way much more clearly in Neoplatonism, images can also have a positive role, in as much as they are copies that maintain some relationship with the original,⁶ it yet remains true that the legacy of Platonism, as is underlined by François

⁵ On the suspicion of images in Plato there are some classic places other than book X of the *Republic*, in which imitative art is defined as far from the truth because it produces illusory copies of objects, including the passage of the *Sophist*, 265-268 in which Plato classifies the art of imitation in the copy [*eikastike technē*] and in appearance [*phantastike*]. The first generates copies that are homologous to their models "such that their internal proportions are maintained", while the second produces images that are homologous to their models in an apparent way because "the craftsmen nowadays dismiss what's true and work at producing in their images not the proportions that are but those that seem beautiful" (*Sophist*, 236a).

⁶ Accordingly, the position of Plato's images is ambivalent because, on the one hand, the analogical dimension of *mimesis* is thought of in degrading terms, from which we get the condemnation of imitative art as incapable of reaching the truth, on the other hand, it is thought of in relational terms (cf. *Timaeus* 28a-29b) for which the empirical reality as a manifestation of the ideal world is valued. Cf. A. VASILIU, *Du Diaphane. Image, milieu, lumière dans la pensée antique e médiévale* (Paris, Vrin, 1997), pp. 208 ff. The positive aspect of the analogical dimension of the iconic will be particularly developed in Neoplatonism, where the essential cosmological function of putting the different ontological planes of reality into relationship with one another is attributed to the image. "Every sphere of being", explains E. von Ivanka, "tends to generate an image of itself in an inferior sphere, which creates a relationship with the first like a ray of sun to a luminous source", cf. E. VON IVANKA, *Platonismo cristiano. Ricezione e trasformazione del Platonismo nella patristica*, trans. it. by E. Peroli (Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 1992), p. 50.

Dagognet in his *Philosophie de l'image*, “decides what follows” in as much as it opens the path to devaluing the illusory trait of images, of their mixture of *res factae* and *res fictae*, as a result of which one risks “no longer knowing where the real is situated”.⁷

b) The second register instead sees in the image an uncontrollable surplus, an intrinsic idolatrous quality determined by the fact that the image incorporates what it represents, and imposes it to sight. This is the Jewish legacy, by means of which we try to confront the power of images through a system of prohibition. The archetype of this position is found in Exodus 20:4-6, the Biblical commandment which prohibits the production and adoration of images.⁸ What should be noted about this, however, is that the Old Testament prohibition is not based on the ontological insufficiency of the image, but on its oversufficiency – its surplus – of the tendency that images have to shackle the gaze, to eliminate liberty, and to impose themselves as idols to adore without any possibility of critical distance.⁹

With prohibition, the Hebrew Bible brings to the fore a position that returns every time the relationship with visual communication is in crisis: when the idolatrous risk of images is made all too evident, it discards the purifying system of iconoclasm, founded on the conviction not only that one should, but that one must do without images. We discover a secularized residue of this attitude of radical rejection in the apocalyptic-iconophobic rhetoric of certain critical theories of mass communication that are not able to do other than denounce the invasion of the image – political propaganda, trash TV, etc. – but do not know how to get outside of that denouncing, when instead the problem is the good government of visibility and the critical relation which one must learn to have with regard to it.

c) The third system, finally, is tied to the fear of impurity, of the rational non-transparency of the image. The image, much more than the word, is strictly connected to desire because it doesn't go along the path of formalization, but exposes, without mediation, forms to our passion. This is the original sin of the image, which has its archetypal figure in the sin of Eve, who “saw how beautiful the tree was and how good its fruit would be to eat” (Genesis

⁷ Cf. F. DAGOGNET, *Philosophie de l'image* (Paris, Vrin, 1984), p. 25.

⁸ A portrait of the principle problems posed by the Jewish prohibition of Exodus 20 can be found in K.-H. BERNHARD, *Gott und Bild. Ein Beitrag zur Begründung und Deutung des Bilderverbotes im Alten Testamente* (Berlin, Evangelische Verlagstalt, 1956). In more synthetic terms, see G. SED-RAJNA, “L'argument de l'iconophobie juive”, in F. BOESFLUG – N. LOSSKIJ (eds.), *Nicée II 787-1987. Douze siècles d'images religieuses* (Paris, Cerf, 1987), pp. 81-88.

⁹ Cf. M.-J. MONDZAIN, *Le commerce des regards* (Paris, Seuil, 2003), pp. 29 ff.

3,6).¹⁰ The image brings bodies to the fore and says that the intelligible is not directly accessible, but only indirectly, passing through the pulsating opacity of the flesh. Images cannot be controlled by the mind, they have everything to do with an incessant phantasmic production and lust. Tertullian, already in the second century, denounced the fact that they aroused a perverse and carnal fantasy¹¹ and this sentence would return as a refrain in every puritanical persecution of images.

In the contemporary epoch it is psychoanalysis which picks up this link between the image and desire, but, even in this case, it has not done so without ambiguity. After having recognized that the unconscious is played out fully upon images, and that therefore these play a fundamental role in the construction of identity, Freud ends, however, by claiming that the iconic material should be translated into a conscious language,¹² otherwise its effect is pathological. This because the associative logic of images does not permit a correct transmission of sense in as much as it is governed by a libidinal energy that appears irrational and that blocks communication of the subject with himself.

3. How can we, however, overcome the logocentric system that we have inherited? How is it possible to critically confront these different registers of suspicion that are often transformed into a clear negation and destruction of images? I will try to respond to these questions through a genealogy of Western tradition to see if what founds the suspicion or refutation might not dialectically transform itself into an opportunity to negotiate a positive iconic thought, which recognizes in images the role that they have in the individual and social construction of the human. To start with, a terminological clarification is useful because if we want to reinstate the anthropological function in the iconic we must see what is fully at stake in the experience of images and not just look at them as objects which interest us merely from an aesthetic point of view. Along this path the Greco-Hellenic philosophical genesis of the concept of the image proposed by M.-J. Mondzain¹³ will help. For one thing,

¹⁰ For more on this, see R. DEBRAY, *Vita e morte dell'immagine. Una storia dello sguardo in Occidente*, trans. it. A. Pinotti (Milano, Il Castoro, 1999), p. 65.

¹¹ Cf. TERTULLIAN, *De Virginitibus velandis* and *De spectaculis*. See further interesting observations by P. GOODRICH in *Oedipus rex. Psychoanalysis, History, Law*, London, University of California Press, 1995, pp. 56-57.

¹² Cf. what he says about J.-M. FERRY, *Les grammaires de l'intelligence* (Paris, Cerf, 2004), pp. 21-39.

¹³ The observations that follow are from M. FISEROVA, "Image, sujet, pouvoir. Entretien avec

the Greek term *eikon* is not just a noun, but the residue of a verbal form of the present participle: when Plato or the Christian thinkers of the first millennium speak of *eikon* they do not designate a thing, an object, but a “mode of appearance in the visible spectrum”.¹⁴ When speaking of visible objects, the figurative works, the neuter *eikonisma* is in fact used in Greek. The more correct translation of *eikon* would therefore be “the similar”: a reality that acts by resembling what is other than itself, which appears and makes itself appear as the form of “as if”, that is, an illusion which imitates, but is not that which it represents. What interests us is not therefore the objective dimension of the image, but its operational force, its capacity to generate ties to what is other than itself, a capacity that is precisely of the image in a different and more intense way from what is of the word, because the image exhibits its own content not through abstract codification, but through the reproduction of a visible similarity. In this sense, the Greek term shows as image both, first of all, a system of analogous relation, and then only successively an object, as a specific modality through which this system acts on the person who produces and uses it. This dimension – both fictional and analogous – of the image is a weakness for Plato because it is not possible to construct a knowledge on that which seems, on that which appears to be other, but *is not* in and of itself. In this way, the image has a derivative ontological consistency which, along the lines of the copy, resembles, but is not what it resembles, and has scarce noetic value, because it tends toward illusion (*Republic*, 598c). It happens differently in Christianity: in Christian thought, hinging on the doctrine of the incarnation, according to which God himself becomes the visible image in the Son, this functional and analogical dimension transforms itself into an opportunity. The incarnation represents the fundamental theoretical system for a general justification of visibility as a place of grace, therefore as a place of presence and as a figure of the immanence of truth in its image, because the Son, in the moment in which he is *eikon tou Theou*, image of God (Colossians 1:15), he is also the only way given to man to see God, since in Him and only in Him the Father renders himself visible (John 14:9): “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”.¹⁵ Instead of constructing an obstacle, in Christianity,

Marie José Mondzain”, *Sens public. Revue électronique internationale*, 1 (2008), available at <http://www.sens-public.org>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁵ Note that “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” from John 14:9 is Christ’s answer to Philip’s request “Lord, show us the Father, that is all we need”. It should not be surprising, therefore, that the concept of the image would be thought of in early Christianity in relation to complex theological questions on the nature of intratrinitary relations, because it is in the particular relation-

the analogical nature of the image becomes the indispensable instrument for rendering visible and therefore experimentable that which is absent and invisible. In it the resemblance of the form does not simply install the *simulation*, but the space of a play of forces which hinges on the *symbolical exchange*. In such a perspective the difference between the image and its model does not represent a loss and a consummation of the original truth, but the horizon inside of which a return to what is outside of simple visibility is established.

This symbolical quality is an element that allows a Christian theory of images to confront, in a different way, the other two registers of suspicion which share a fear of the power of the image. From this point of view the emblematic moment in which they jettison the bases for a valorization of images is the iconoclastic crisis of the 8th and 9th century, where an encounter with the legitimacy of icons becomes an occasion to build a general theory of visible representation, valid not just for sacred images. The object of contention in such an iconoclastic encounter is the idolatrous risk that inhabits not only the cult use of images, but also their political use and their social relevance. The iconophiles win their battle because they are in a position to demonstrate that the image is not an impure object which magically incorporates the proper model, and in doing so produces a fusion with the spectator, but is a transitive space which refers outside of itself and therefore constructs a reserve of freedom offered to sight to negotiate a sense of the visible world. Only in this horizon, as many contemporary authors have highlighted,¹⁶ can one comprehend the fundamental role for all thought, following from the dialectic which is established between idol and icon. Idols do not allow one to distinguish between representation and that which is represented – whether it be God, or some sovereign power – for which outside of imagination there is nothing: the image is simply swallowed by the gaze, consumed, because it wholly coincides with its sense. Even in this case that which iconophile theologians call *eikon*, icon, is not first of all a particular type of religious image (a meaning that we today attribute to the word), but rather the particular transitive quality that every image must have in order not to produce idolatry. As we read in a passage of Basil of Caesarea, among the most cited in the iconoclastic encoun-

ship of identity in the difference between Father and Son that a positive idea of the iconic relationship matures. On this, cf. G. LADNER, “The Concept of the Image in the Greek Fathers and the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy”, *DOP*, 7 (1953), pp. 1-34.

¹⁶ Other than the work of M.-J. MONDZAIN, *Image, Icon, Economy: the Byzantine origins of the contemporary Imaginary*, trans. Rico Franses (Stanford, Stanford University, 2005) to which we will return, the analysis of the idol/icon pair offered by J.-L. Marion is fundamental, *The idol and distance: five studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York, Fordham University Press, 2001); ID., *God Without Being* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991).

ter: “The honor given to image rightly passes over to the prototype”¹⁷ that is, the analogical dimension of the image permits an analogical path that takes one from visible reality to the invisible reality of the represented.

That said, the question becomes how images can acquire this iconic quality? To say that an image capable of generating a difference – a margin between the representation and that which is represented – is iconic might not be enough to redeem it from the ancient testamentary prohibition, or to counter the suspicion with the opaque “materiality” of images. The economy opened by the incarnation of Christ requires negotiating an inseparable link between the visible and the invisible for which, once the difference has been given, must also describe their relation. For a Christian, thinking of incarnation means not being able any longer to conceive of the invisible as intelligible, as such, without passing through the mediation of corporal reality, nor simply condemning images made by the human hand as intrinsically idolatrous, or as simply produced from carnal fantasy. If God chose to render himself visible, then the visibility of bodies (in their materiality)¹⁸ is a space for the manifestation of truth, and artistic images are an instrument for rendering visible Christ, the Mother of God, and the Saints. It is not possible here to reconstruct how Christianity – Patristic first, then Byzantine – would have been able to apply the notion of *eikon* elaborated in the Christological and trinitarian debates, without a solution of continuity for artificial images. It should, however, be remembered that this passage has never signified a total triumph of visibility, but has generated an inseparable dialectic between the iconic dimension and the idolatrous dimension of sacred images and as a consequence of the images *tout court*. This dialectic makes it such that the image is never far from the risk of idolatry and that, rather, it needs a precise canon that regulates the production and individual and communitary use of it. To combat idolatry means to combat the simple submission to images and to make the symbolical exchange generate a difference not just between

¹⁷ BASIL OF CAESAREA, *De Spiritu Sancto*, 18, 45 (S. Ch. 17bis, p. 406). Note that Basil refers in this case to the image of the emperor and not to a sacred image.

¹⁸ See for example what John of Damascus says about the positivity of the material: “Is not the thrice-precious and thrice blessed wood of the cross, matter? Is not the holy and august mountain, the place of the skull, matter? Is not the life-giving and the life bearing rock, the holy tomb, the source of resurrection, matter? Is not the ink and the all-holy book of the Gospel, matter? [...] Either do away with reverence and veneration for all these or submit to the tradition of the Church and allow veneration of images of God and friends of God, sanctified by name and therefore overshadowed by the grace of the divine Spirit”. See JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *Contra imaginum caluniatores orationes tres*, I, 16 (Berlin - New York, Ed. Kotter, De Gruyter, 1975, p. 90, eng. transl. by A. Louth, *Three Treatise on the Divine Images*, New York, Saint Vladimir Seminary Press, 2003).

what is seen and the invisible, but also between the spectator and the image. Only if man is not incorporated and seduced by the power of the image will he be able to cultivate a critical sensibility and not be a servant of vain idols. But to do this he must not only recognize this difference, but also govern it.

The most consistent legacy of this foundational moment for the theory of the image is this: the register with which one governs images and their role in society should not be one of simple prohibition, nor one of their ontological devaluing, nor one of puritanical condemnation. The aesthetic experience in its most full sense is a fundamental anthropological experience because it allows the elaboration of a relationship with itself and with others, on the condition that the images preserve a space for freedom in which it would be possible to construct a critical gaze. This is how one enters into the heart of the problem of the anthropological and social function of images which can justify the affirmation according to which a work of art like Lorenzetti's fresco of good government is in a position to say something that would remain otherwise unsayable. The suspicion of images is rooted in the incapacity to recognize and govern this difference between that which is present, and that which is absent, between the user and the image, and, more fully, between society and its symbolical foundation. A re-evaluation of the iconic in social knowledge comes from an awareness that this critical difference is the construction site of the relationship between the symbolical relation and additional sense, or, to use an expression from Pierre Legendre, the space of a construction of relation to Reference,¹⁹ from which not only individual life but also every social bond is established.

4. It is necessary, however, to make one further step. If so far in the discovery of the symbolical dimension, we still have not reached the heart of the institutional dimension of images, then we have not, actually, responded to the question from which we started, that is, to what Paolo Silvestri defines as the communicative-normative dimension of the image of Lorenzetti. We have simply said that the image constitutes something additional to what the word can not say, because it is an advocate of symbolical exchanges. To say it has a normative function means that we affirm that its addition does not just happen without any great effect on sense, but that it is constitutive of the same discourse that is used in economy and in politics. What I am saying

¹⁹ Legendre speaks both of the Reference and the Third symbolical to signify the unreachable place in relation to which "society is made". Cf. P. LEGENDRE, *Della società come testo cit.*, pp. 133 ff. See what P. Heritier says in the introduction to the Italian edition cited, pp. 18 ff.

is that the mythological-symbolical function of the image does not serve only as an illustration of what the word cannot say, but that it is the basis of the institutional dimension, in a broad sense, a mechanism of imaginative construction of the foundations of society. To explain this I borrow an intuition of Marie-José Mondzain that I find particularly interesting, related to the bond that, during the iconoclastic period, the Byzantine iconophiles construct between the concept of *eikon* and the concept of *oikonomia*.²⁰ The point of departure is the idea that Mondzain summarises in this way: “Whoever rejects the icon rejects the economy”²¹ that is, he who refutes the icon, does not refute just the image, but the entire economy. With this I do not mean just that he who negates the image negates the incarnation, as a providential economy of God, but also that he finds himself incapable of comprehending the totality of human exchanges, “from the commerce and circulation of signs to the commerce of things and the circulation of goods”.²² To say that the image is the point upon which the economy rises or falls means therefore attributing to it a central role in the symbolical exchange that constitutes society, actually, more radically, to affirm that without the image one does not have full access to a symbolical condition of the human. As Nikephoros of Constantinople, one of the most profound Byzantine iconophile thinkers, says, “It is not Christ, but the entire universe that disappears if there is no more [...] icon”.²³

The term *oikonomia*, as others have noted, is not a Christian invention but is taken from classical Greek, and it is a notion largely utilized by Xenophon and Aristotle in *Economy* and *Politics*. In Christianity, however, it becomes a very full term that serves to explain both the intratrinitary relations and the intrahuman relations, whose plurisemanticity can be seen from the Latin translation of *oikonomia* which is rendered both as *dispositio* and *dispensatio*.²⁴ *Dispositio*, like the Greek word *systema*, means organization: from this point of view the great organizer is God, the orderer of the world through providence [*pronoia*], with organizer being whatever sovereign instantiation

²⁰ Cf. M.-J. MONDZAIN, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* cit. Further observations can be found in Id., *Le commerce des regards* cit., pp. 69-73.

²¹ *Ibid.* cit., p. 14.

²² M.-J. Mondzain in M. FISEROVA, *Image, sujet, pouvoir. Entretien avec Marie José Mondzain* cit., p. 9.

²³ NIKEPHOROS OF CONSTANTINOPLE, *Antirrhetici*, I, 20 (PG 100, 244D).

²⁴ A reconstruction of the concept of *oikonomia* can be found in G. AGAMBEN, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. by L. Chiesa (with M. Mandarini) (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2011).

acts as God's deputy on earth. The *dispensato* instead is the trait of the patristic concept of *oikonomia* that is more properly Christian because it presupposes the idea that God spends something of himself, that he dispenses his own richness and invests the Son – that is, that which is most dear – in the world.²⁵ The *dispensatio* implies the complement and the historical unveiling of a divine plan. It therefore hinges on the idea of incarnation, that is, the idea that from the Christological event in advance, it is not possible to think of reality as an intramundane world, without understanding it as the place which God, the invisible, comes to inhabit (John 1:14). It is not the case therefore that the defense of images is founded directly on incarnation. The *dispensatio* is the crisis of the simple *dispositio*, it is therefore that instance of transcendence, that instance that challenges from the inside the reduction of the organization of the world as a simple intramundane order. The *dispensatio* is the motive for which, in organization, the power should be legitimized from an authority that is always an invisible principle. The *oikonomia* therefore becomes the good governing of the relationship between that which is seen with its functional rules and that which cannot be seen, but that even not being seen is manifested in that which is seen, in the way that the Son in flesh manifests the Father who no one has seen. We understand it this way because the image is necessary for the *oikonomia*, since the image is the place where the relationship between the visible and the invisible is not opposition, but the inhabiting of the one in the other. And one can see how far we have travelled down that road from the texts of Plato's *Republic* with respect to the *eikon*. Here the invisible is not the abstractly intelligible, but it is that which is articulated to visibility and which constitutes authority, the *exousia*. The form of this relationship is the *dispensatio* because there is no more separation between the invisible and the visible, but rather a correlation of one in the other, a reciprocal exchange. This entails spending; investment of the invisible in the visible.

The Byzantines realize that it is not possible to separate the iconic register from the historical register of management and the administration of the world, but doing this noticeably they enlarge the paradigm of management which is implicated in the concept of *oikonomia*, for which the image becomes an essential system, irreducible when one speaks of how a community constructs and governs the relations that characterize it. Byzantium tells us that one cannot live without images, because the making of images is at the heart

²⁵ M.-J. MONDZAIN, "Préface", in NICÉPHORE, *Discours contre les iconoclastes* (Paris, Klincksieck, 1989), p. 22.

of human existence, but at the same time, it recognizes that the image has its own economy, that is, it should be governed, it can transform itself into an idol, into falsity, into carnal temptation. This true and proper short circuit between *eikon* and *oikonomia* is revealed to be, thus, particularly fruitful with respect to the problem we are treating. The profound sense of the gesture of Einaudi can open us up in fact to a different consideration of the role of the aesthetic in human science and therefore also in economy. If the image is first of all a system with which man governs the sharing of sense, this is not only important for its content, but perhaps more profoundly for its operative dimension, for the fact that it is an essential element in the human force of giving sense to experience. According to iconophile theology, the iconoclast is he who precludes himself from the instruments used to understand the symbolical nature of exchanges, he who thinks of the exchange in terms of an equilibrium of calculations and who does not recognize that every exchange is an exchange of meanings in which what is gained is had only in as much as there is investment, when there is *dispensatio*, that is, there is an economy of excess. He who precludes himself from a relationship with images precludes himself from the comprehension of economy, that is, is not able to understand the same mechanism by which both the identity of the subject and the identity of a society are constituted in relational terms in the same act in which one identifies with the same culture that one has constructed. That is why the system for governing images cannot be one of prohibition, but one of difference, because that which the visible tells us, in as much as it is lived from the operative dimension of the image, is the demand of constantly negotiating the apparition of that which is not seen, that is, of the incommensurable overabundance of that which is unavailable to us. And only by maintaining this difference can there be a good government of exchanges, that is, a good government of the city.

5. The fact that precisely at the moment in which the images are at the origin of a conflict fought in blood – as was the iconoclastic Byzantine crisis – does the nexus between image and economy become central in the debate, and economy comes to signal how, when Western thought has made the nature of images subject, it has made them as full as they will be from an anthropological point of view. On the other hand, in the Christian thought of the first millenium the notion of the image was never thought of on the merely aesthetic-decorative level, but it always enters into play in crucial theological questions of the intratrinitary relation between the divine persons, Christology, and the set of relationships that tie the divine world and the cosmos. Particularly important, however, is that the stakes were not only theological or

generally epistemological, but their implications were immediately directed toward the political and social level. To say that the person who refutes images refutes *in toto* the *oikonomia* means to presuppose that the images enter into play in the process of social identification and in the constitution of the bonds and the symbolical exchanges to such an extent that it is important whether the images are accepted or refuted. As Marie-José Mondzain has shown in his works, the iconophiles of the 8th and 9th centuries, while defending the images from iconoclastic attack, do not defend just particular cult objects but the system that is at their back. The idea is that the image is fundamental to the construction of identity, at the same moment in which it generates a difference between that which is present and its sense, between the visible and the invisible that serves as its horizon. And in doing this they take into account the fundamental ambiguity of the experience of doing and of using images, for which the images can be the place where our relationship with the human is constituted with the originary furthering of sense. But it is also the place in which this relationship can be negated, can be made radically less, at the same moment in which a fusional relationship is established with the images and cancels the constitutive difference of sense. The encounter between the idol and the icon that makes the *cantus firmus* of the iconoclastic debate – but that in diverse forms crosses all of the Christian theology of images, even in modernity (one case above all being the debate on the legitimacy of the religious images of the Protestant Reformation) – is the nucleus around which is gathered the acknowledgment that every image contains, at the very core, some contradictory potentialities about the construction of identity.

An alternative route is an exploration of the suspicion by which the West has treated images and the dismissal which has excluded them from social knowledge. The particular nature of the iconic makes within them a place of essential reflection that sheds new light on a gesture, apparently marginal like that of Einaudi, but that is in reality extremely fertile in the sense that it can contribute to the notion of “good government”.