

by **Lorenzo Battisti**

In recent days has developed on social media a vivid debate about the vaccine against Covid. A debate that sees on the one hand those who for various reasons refuse to undergo the vaccination and on the other those who consider it essential. Those who for mistrust, conspiracy thesis or simple misinformation refuse the vaccine find answers drawn from the scientific literature by those who see in the vaccine the end of this long year of global pandemic. But the discussion seems more a debate between two deaf: despite a century of history of vaccination and the almost unanimous opinion of scientists, the opponents do not change their views and indeed they increase in number as the vaccination approaches.

Continuing to respond to those who oppose vaccination with different arguments on the goodness and usefulness of vaccines means not having understood the root of the "disease". You are basically trying to treat a tumor with an aspirin that at most masks the most obvious symptoms, while unfortunately the cancer silently devours the body.

In fact, the opposition to vaccines supported by arguments that are clearly weak if not totally fanciful is only the latest episode in a series of resistances that began before the pandemic but have become evident and socially dangerous after the spread of the virus. The logical path has to be reversed if one wants to make a correct diagnosis and look for a suitable therapy. The opposition to the vaccine, as well as to masks before, and before that to social distancing, to the closure of bars, restaurants, gyms, cinemas and theaters, to that of discos, or to the many bans that have arisen in recent months is in fact an opposition to limitations as such. Freedom is understood both as absolute freedom (i.e. as the absence of limits) and as a consequence of the conception of the individual as a monad that is self-determining through its own will implemented through the maximum capacity to act. Nothing can limit absolute freedom: it would be unacceptable and the effect would be that the individual would be determined by choices made by others (or even just together with others).

It is interesting to see how on Facebook the almost unique conception of freedom is the one that sees any limitation to it as a sign of dictatorship. This tendency is not new, it was already present before the pandemic. But with this pandemic this idea of freedom had to clash with objective facts that required a drastic downsizing for the protection of a collective interest, the public health, the health "of all". In front of this, absolute freedom has generated monsters. The explosion of conspiracies (the epidemic is a plot to restrict freedom, so it is right to rebel and defend absolute freedom), and denialism (denying the existence of the virus or its virulence, or the effectiveness of the measures taken to limit it) is the direct consequence. Decades of libertarian ideology have led to the inability to process reality: everything depends solely on me, on what I do, on what I decide "for myself", so there is no need to know where I come from, or where others go. The only reaction, in the face of this inability, is the denial of reality itself and the subsequent generation of fanciful theories, extemporaneous interpretations of scientific

data, fake analysis: we invent ourselves virologists, epidemic experts, pharmacologists in order not to recognize a reality that requires to limit the freedom of each for the good of all. In essence, we do not recognize society, we do not recognize "the others". As Thatcher said: society does not exist, individuals exist.

Out of that comes the rejection of lockdowns. Then the denial of masks; and later that of lockdowns; and then against restrictions; and then against the vaccine. And the result is a logical inconsistency that, however, does not affect the support for these denials of reality: those who were against lockdown and supported herd immunity in March, now deny that herd immunity exists to oppose mass vaccination. But to show this inconsistency is to treat a tumor with an aspirin: the problem is not whether herd immunity exists or not, the problem is the refusal to any limitation of freedom, even when socially necessary, and ultimately the refusal of the recognition of the Other.

This type of thinking is the fruit of the past decades and is now in obvious decline. The pandemic will give it a coup de grace. It must be acknowledged that Toni Negri's thought (but also the whole new Nietzschean Left of the 1970s) has contributed to its diffusion on the Left, all oriented towards the liberation of desire: an anti-oppressive and anti-authoritarian libertarianism that has led a part of the Left to see in the limitations linked to the pandemic a new dictatorship against which to rebel and organize a new resistance.

All of this leads to not understanding China. And in general the East. We have seen in these days the images of the New Year in Wuhan and in China, and we have seen them without masks, festive and happy. This was possible because two elements operated in China:

- the State, which has set in motion structures, public spending, which has planned the response by equipping itself with the tools to do so;
- Chinese society that responsibly acted in a coordinated and cooperative manner to deal with the consequences and to limit the damages.

Both of these elements are the result of a different conception of society from that of the West. Better yet, they are the consequence of the fact that we recognize the existence of supra-individual aggregates to which we adhere even without wanting to, and which determine the existence of individuals in a way that is extremely greater than individual choices. It is society as a whole that can determine the life or death of a person, depending on whether or not it has the means to respond to the pandemic and whether or not each person acts by doing what is necessary. In essence, people's freedom is limited not only by the freedom of others, but by their self-awareness that they are part of society and responsible pro-rata for the collective response. Just the fact that one recognizes that society exists, that "the other" exists, and is aware of the influence it has on collective life, the social sanction for misbehavior is very strong: society sanctions those who do not recognize it, sanctions those who place their own freedom above that of others and above the general freedom of society itself.

A conception that in the West appears oppressive and authoritarian. But above all, it is unknown in the West and therefore it is not recognized: as if there were a missing program in our

computer, Chinese behaviors are not understood. The result is that this lack, combined with the total defense of absolute freedom, leads, even in the case of China, to deny reality: the reaction to New Year's Eve in China was the revival of the conspiracy theory. China lives normally not because it has given a collective response to the pandemic, a response that through a limitation of individual freedom has guaranteed the collective right to life, but because it has invented the virus and therefore has the antidote. It is useless to answer rationally that these same people denied until December 31 the existence of the virus, or that since March, China announced that it would offer its vaccine to the whole world for free, while in our country, for months, there are significant portions of society that rebel against vaccination. China, and more generally the East, have reacted better to the pandemic because there is a society beyond individuals.

It will still take time for the crisis of the libertarian vision to come to its end and for us to return to a more balanced vision. We will have to recognize that freedom without limits turns into its opposite. We will have to re-cognize others and re-cognize ourselves as a collective. We will have to re-discover that only a small part of our existence is determined by our choices, while most of it escapes us or is over-determined by collective choices: the fact that I was born in Italy and not in an African country has determined my existence more than any of my individual choices; the collective responses to the pandemic, the delays or poor implementation caused by individual reluctance or economic interests conflicting with the necessary measures, have decided the life and death of people I know or do not know and will never know, but whom I re-cognize as part of society and of the human community.

Exasperated hedonism, the recognition of one's own desires and their enjoyment as the sole and inalienable goal and objective, achievable through unsuppressible absolute freedom have caused death and poverty, without even the ability on our part to recognize or see it. The pandemic has exasperated these behaviors and decreed their decline. The pandemic will represent the limit to a reality without limits. We will rediscover that society, that "the others", are not a limit to my freedom (as in the liberal conception), a limit to be erased or ignored, but an essential condition for its realization.