

The shell of the snail*

by Giorgio Agamben

Whatever the profound reasons for the decline of the West, whose crisis we are experiencing is in every sense decisive, it is possible to summarize its extreme outcome by taking up an incisive image from Ivan Illich which we could call the “snail theorem”.

“If the snail”, states the theorem, “after having added a certain number of coils to its shell, instead of stopping, continued its growth, just one further coil would increase the weight of its house by 16 times and inexorably crush the snail.”

This is what is happening to the species that once defined itself as *homo sapiens* as regards technological development and, in general, the hypertrophy of the legal, scientific, and industrial devices that characterize human society.

These have always been indispensable to the life of that special mammal that is man, whose premature birth implies a prolongation of the infantile condition, in which the young are unable to provide for their survival. But, as is often the case, there is a mortal danger that lurks in precisely what ensures their salvation.

Scientists, like the brilliant Dutch anatomist Lodewijk Bolk, who have reflected on the singular condition of the human species, have drawn conclusions that are, to say the least, pessimistic about the future of civilization. Over time, the growing development of technologies and social structures produces a real inhibition of vitality, which is a prelude to the possible disappearance of the species. In fact, access to the

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adult stage is increasingly deferred, the growth of the organism is increasingly slowed down, and lifespan—and therefore old age—is prolonged.

“The progress of this inhibition of the vital process,” writes Bolk, “cannot exceed a certain limit without compromising the vitality, the strength of resistance to harmful influences from the outside, in short, the existence of man itself. The more humanity advances on the path of humanization, the closer it comes to that fatal point where progress will mean destruction. And it is certainly not in the nature of man to stop when faced with this.”

It is this extreme situation that we are living through today. The limitless multiplication of technological devices, the increasing subjugation to legal constraints and authorizations of every kind, and the complete subjection to the laws of the market make individuals increasingly dependent on factors that are entirely beyond their control.

Gunther Anders defined the new relationship that modernity has produced between man and his instruments with the expression: “Promethean gap” and spoke of a “shame” in the face of the humiliating superiority of things produced by technology, of which we can no longer consider ourselves masters in any way. Perhaps today, this difference in level has reached the point of maximum tension, and man has become completely incapable of assuming control over the sphere of the products he created.

Added to the inhibition of vitality described by Bolk is the abdication of the very intelligence that could somehow curb its negative consequences. The abandonment of that last connection with nature, which the philosophical tradition called *lumen naturae*, produces an artificial stupidity that renders technological hypertrophy even more uncontrollable.

What will happen to the snail crushed by its own shell? How will it survive the rubble of its house? These are the questions we must not stop asking ourselves.