
COMMENTARY - TODAY'S SOCIAL BLIGHT: A CRISIS OF "GREAT DEPRESSION". THE MEANING OF BUSINESS

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While the suicides of entrepreneurs and workers continue to hit the headlines, there's no news about the involuntary "death" of businesses. The signs of a "great depression" are everywhere: chronic sorrow, lack of enthusiasm, loss of desire, and hopelessness. People do not enjoy life; they wake-up unready to face the day and meet people. They can only hope to do something worth remembering, something worth telling family members and friends.

A meaningful life depends on the meaning of one's business, not only their labor. In China, I learned that the word "business" is surprisingly written with the ideograms "life" and "meaning"; it can be translated as "the meaning of life". An entrepreneur once said to me, "I started up this business because I had something worth saying."

Entrepreneurship and labor can provide one with a meaningful and purpose driven life. When in crisis, people are dismayed, lost, and unable to see the purpose of their journey; they are overcome by their troubles.

One of the great trials facing entrepreneurs today is the temptation to give up on their businesses by selling or closing them down. However, I believe some actually do need to be sold for the following reasons: if they are too weak to spur innovation, if heirs to the business don't intend to take it over, or if they weren't based on essential needs, but on an opportunity that is now gone - in fact one can make the most of an opportunity when it first arises, and yet still profit (though less favorably) when it's gone. When these and other good reasons compel entrepreneurs to sell their business, they experience that what an old valuable library's heir does when he is compelled to sell its books. He suffers, but the books are set free to be read again in new libraries.

Other businesses, however, should close down. These types of businesses have either come to the end of their life cycle, are functionless and depend on unaffordable investments to regain profitability, or are perversely kept going solely by speculation. These businesses bring to mind Manzoni's statement about "Donna Prassede": "to say that she was dead, is to say it all". When companies shut down, the owners and institutions should protect the workers from harm. Unfortunately, protecting workers, particularly during recessions, rarely happens.

On the other hand, some businesses should carry on while they still have something to "say", stories to tell, room for innovation, and good products; sadly these also often cease their activities or are sold. These bad decisions are often due to personal and family crises that hinder the owners' belief in their business' future. Today depression strikes our entire society; people feel abandoned by the market, banks, and institutions. Personal crises are therefore amplified, becoming harsher and longer-lasting.

Many entrepreneurs are undergoing a moral and spiritual trial. They believe they are responsible for dragging their family, employees, and the community on a naïve and misguided adventure, which (they think) was built based on arrogance, pride and the failure to understand their own limits and resources. Illness, exhaustion, defamation, and accusations come along with this hardship; selling or shutting down the business seem to be the only ways out of such an unbearable situation. Thus, for the business person, the sooner someone takes this burden away the better. What was once the "meaning" of life becomes a nightmare, particularly as the crisis reduces income and profit.

When this happens, regardless of the capital's origin and investment plans, enterprises are sold to any speculator, as long as they can convince the bank and, if necessary, the labor union to go along with them. Entrepreneurs, left alone by institutions

and powerless against such adversity, are compelled to relinquish control of decades or sometimes centuries of family and community history and know-hows, which simply vanish into thin air. This is why the suicide of businesses is often followed by that of the businessmen. Records show that a terrifyingly large quantity of good companies have been irresponsibly shut down. We urge a change in conditions to assist entrepreneurs and workers who are undergoing these sorts of individual and collective trials.

Past civilizations learned how to heal similar social blights (with rites, art, and myths). We are called upon to bring about the conditions necessary for this healing process, one which will not be determined by economists, fiscal consultants, or the (indispensable) institutions, but by humanitarians, hope-filled men and women who understand and heal people's troubled souls by listening and speaking (very little) to them.

Although communities can heal, our culture has separated businesses from the rest of life, excluded gifts from contracts, and split up love into *eros* and *agape*. Moreover, we have forgotten that entrepreneurs are normal people. We are blind to the individual, moral, and spiritual trial hidden behind the crisis of enterprise. These tribulations should be treated at a much more human level than that of business plans and bank loans (which are in any case very useful). To bring our worn-out businesses back to life, we should return meaning to the companies and lives of entrepreneurs and workers.

Translated by Cristian Sebok