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Ilaria Iannuzzi

*The materialistic foundations of the social order.
Sociological anticipations in the thought of James Harrington*

The Commonwealth of Oceana

James Harrington's best known work is *The Commonwealth of Oceana*¹. In it, the author outlines the construction of an ideal republican constitutional system, Oceana, described through a meticulous overall apparatus that includes within it the entire state organization, passing from the political, to the administrative and military element up to the economic and fiscal one, examined with extreme abundance of details. It is interesting to note that the focus is on the sphere of the city and its government and not exclusively on the concept of form of government. The urban context, that is, represents one of the most important elements on which the author's cognitive efforts are concentrated.

The ideal city, from this point of view, translates concretely into the government of the same in the hands of the so-called "capital city" or "metropolis"², subdivided, in turn, into two distinct cities: *Emporium* and *Hiera*. The foundation of the entire government of the city is entrusted to the "Company"³, or a brotherhood of merchants or artisans who perform the same art. In the city, therefore, a first form of social stratification on a corporate basis is outlined. What makes the role of the Companies relevant lies in their task of ascertaining infringements and violations of the city's regulations. To them, therefore, is entrusted the guarantee of compliance with the rules and non-deviance.

Of course, for obvious historical-cultural reasons, the urban and metropolitan context is not understood here according to the meanings adopted by the authors of the following centuries – one think, one of all, of Georg Simmel and his work *The Metropolis and the Life of the Spirit*⁴ – but what it is important to emphasize, regardless of the specific content attributed over time to the city by different interpretations, it is the peculiar interest that Harrington reserved for the urban dimension, recognizing in it an area that over the years would acquire an ever greater importance, as evidenced by the enormous amount of studies – philosophical, sociological, architectural and not only – followed, in particular, starting from the nineteenth century⁵.

One of the factors that probably led to the attribution of the 'utopian' character to the Republic of Oceana is represented precisely by the abundance of details, which can be, at times, proponents of a difficult practical application, risking to slide the entire theoretical system towards the category of abstractness and, in particular, of an abstractness tending to utopia – a 'non-place', as the etymology of the word suggests – as it lacks, immutably, of the possibility of finding a concrete application.

¹ J. Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, London 1656.

² J. Harrington, *The Republic of Oceana*, FrancoAngeli, Milan, 1985, p. 277.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ G. Simmel, *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben*, Petermann, Dresden, 1903.

⁵ For an examination of the different spatialities of ancient, modern and contemporary urban contexts, see the interesting analysis by Rosario Pavia in R. Pavia, *The idea of the city. Urban theories of the traditional city*, FrancoAngeli, Milan, 1994.

A further element that may have influenced the attribution of utopia consists, presumably, in the instance of equality – albeit an equality of economic matrix and with different shades of ambiguity, as we will try to highlight later – that Harrington claims in his republic, an equality difficult to achieve and, even before that, even to think in the historical context in which the author's reflection is situated, which already in this proves to be a forerunner of the times. In his thought, inequality is an evil, as it represents the factor that leads to contrasts and, ultimately, to corruption: the two elements mainly responsible for the degeneration of forms of government and, therefore, for the collapse of political and social construction⁶. From this point of view, Harrington differs from the realist thought of Machiavelli, which constituted, for the author, a cornerstone of his training⁷. Harrington, in fact, while taking up in his theoretical setting a conspicuous part of Machiavellian realism, at certain times – as emerges in *Oceana* – considers the unity of the various interests fully achievable⁸, leaving aside for a moment the realist conviction of the impossibility of annulling within society the mechanisms linked to the exercise of power⁹.

Utopian, moreover, is his aspiration to the establishment of a society from which conflict is removed and the representation, therefore, of peaceful and pacified cities¹⁰. The ultimate good to be achieved and that his republic would have brought to completion, according to Harrington, consists in a society that has reached the condition of pacification and that has, therefore, eliminated all forms of conflict both internal and external. From this it follows that, for the author, the conflict can only be considered in its destructive capacity and represents, therefore, a pathological element that must necessarily be removed to ensure the stability of the entire system¹¹.

The theoretical structure of the author is permeated, however, also by components of profound realism. Following this approach, the utopia in Harrington would be, in fact, only apparent, since, in his works,¹² he would have theorized a system that, in reality, manifests a concrete capacity for translation at a practical level, to the ¹³point that the concepts expressed in

⁶ N. Matteucci, "Machiavelli, Harrington, Montesquieu and the 'instructions' of Venice" in *Political thought*, Year III, N. 3, December 1970, p. 353.

⁷ P. J. Badillo O'Farrell, *The Filosofía político-jurídica de James Harrington*, Publicaciones de la Universidad de Sevilla, Sevilla, 1977, p. 19.

⁸ Unity of the various interests understood as the collective recognition of the existence of a common interest more valid than one's personal interests and prior to them. Interest, that is, is nothing but reason, as opposed to passion. Reason represents moderation, rationality, while passion is identified with misery and unhappiness. Just as there are many interests – private, state, of humanity – so there are many reasons, but since man is a creature superior to other animals, he must subordinate private interest to the interest of the whole. The institutions take over the submission of private interest. P. Zanardi, *Philosophy and politics in the thought of James Harrington*, University of Ferrara, Ferrara, 1989, pp. 49-53.

⁹ N. Matteucci, *cit.*, p. 353.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 359.

¹¹ Harrington is clearly a child of his times in the desire and will to aspire to a harmonious and balanced political and social context, if we consider the profound disturbances that the English social order was experiencing, resulting from events such as the beheading of Charles I, the abolition of the House of Lords, the brief republican experience of 1648-1649 and, finally, the protectorate Cromwellian. A. Strumia, *The Republican Imagination: Sparta and Israel in the Philosophical-Political Debate of the Age of Cromwell*, Le Lettere, Florence, 1991, pp. V-IX, 1.

¹² See the Works of the Author: *Pour enclouer Le Canon*, London 1659; *Seven Models of a Commonwealth, Ancient and Modern, Or Brief Directions Shewing how a Fit and Perfect Model of Popular Government May be Made, Found, Or Understood*, London 1659; *Art of Lawgiving*, London 1659; *Political Discourses*, London 1660; *The Use and Manner of the Ballot*, London 1660.

¹³ P. Treves, *The political thought of James Harrington in Studies in memory of Gioele Solari*, Ramella Editions, Turin, 1954, p. 106.

Oceana, were discussed in Parliament thanks to the will of some Harringtonian deputies such as Neville and Captain Beynes and found a fertile ground for debate within the *Rota Club*¹⁴. Harrington himself, finally, considered his work as the portrait of the English political and social situation to the point that, in his work, every element, albeit with fantasy names, is nothing more than the mirror of the people and organization really existing in England of his time. On the first page of his book we read: “*Quid rides? Mutato nomine de te fabula narratur*”,¹⁵ to indicate, therefore, that a minimal change of name would have shown the reader not an ideal model not susceptible to implementation, but simply the manifest reality.

A possible sociological reading

A first element that makes Harrington a thinker in some ways ahead of his time is represented – in the opinion of the writer – by the research method used by the author. He adopts the experimental scientific method introduced by Bacon in the study of facts¹⁶. In particular, Harrington adopts the methodological approach for which it is possible to use the same cognitive categories, and, above all, the same cognitive process used by the natural sciences also in the non-natural sciences and, that is, in those that we could consider, for the time, as the humanities and which will develop, later, under the name of social sciences.

Harrington considers it fundamental, for epistemological purposes, to adopt a cognitive process based on comparative historical-empirical observation of phenomena. Observation – typical of the natural sciences – represents, in the first place, the initial phase of knowledge. Subsequently, the comparison, which for Harrington takes place by comparing the constitutions of the various States on the basis of the essential historical fact, is the passage that allows us to go to the bottom of the understanding of the causes and effects of the facts¹⁷. The author adopts an inductive method that from the fact and from his observation goes back to the beginning and takes sides against the deductive method used by many thinkers of his time and previous eras, including Hobbes who, according to Harrington, employed an abstractly deductive method and derived things from geometry without, therefore, they were reflected in history and experience¹⁸.

This methodological strategy seems to be far ahead of his time, showing itself as a sort of anticipation of that positivistic spirit that will make the observation of social phenomena as an initial phase in order to reach the formulation of laws – a concept later reduced to that of trends – its instrument of scientific revolution and that will take place fully about a century and a half, two centuries later through the work, among others, of Auguste Comte. The latter, in fact, as is known, believed it possible to discover the laws that are at the base of social phenomena using

¹⁴ Established in 1659 and composed of men who met in the premises of an inn in Westminster and with a ballot box experimented with secret ballot, a method then unknown in England and strongly supported by Harrington. Not even Cromwell, to whom Harrington dedicated *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, seemed to consider the author's approach utopian since, feeling his authority threatened by ideas. Harringtonian, obstructed the work from being published, until, thanks to the intercession of his daughter, Lady Claypole, Cromwell agreed to the publication stating that he would certainly not be defeated or challenged by pen work after defeating his enemies by the sword. G. Schiavone, *The figure of James Harrington: political science and utopia*, introductory essay to J. Harrington, *The Republic of Oceana*, cit., pp. 22-23, 26, 29; P. Treves, cit., p. 110.

¹⁵ «Why are you laughing? Under a different name the fable talks about you». J. Harrington, *The Republic of Oceana*, quote in G. Schiavone, cit., p. 91.

¹⁶ G. Schiavone, cit., p. 33.

¹⁷ R. De Mattei, *Introduction to Harrington J., Oceana*, Colombo Editore, Rome, 1947, p. 23.

¹⁸ G. Schiavone, cit., p. 34.

the tools used by the natural sciences, that is, through observation, experimentation and, lastly, comparison¹⁹.

What makes the Harringtonian theoretical framework particular is also the consideration of social phenomena as elements connected to each other through a mechanism generating causes and effects. The reflection on society, in fact, is as old as the history of man, but this does not mean that this reflection can be considered sociological. What makes it possible to speak of sociological thought is the adoption of a reasoning that seeks and brings to light “the relations of cause and effect in the happening of men”²⁰. This characteristic is found, even if only in a hinted and germinal form, in the thought of the Author, who, while certainly remaining linked to a cognitive attitude that questions the essence of things and that reasons in prescriptive terms²¹, considers the descriptive element of equal importance and the study of cause-effect relationships of social phenomena to be of equal relevance and, anticipating positivist thought in this too, He does not consider experience a deceptive cognitive mechanism, but, on the contrary, places it as the necessary tool to understand the functioning of the political and social system on the basis of historical data.

The thought of James Harrington presents, therefore, some elements of originality, and while falling into what Comte would have defined as the theological stage of knowledge²², highlights some intuitions of what would be enucleated only later as the positivist method²³. In the theological – or fictitious – stage, the explanation of social facts finds its foundation in the presence and intervention of the divinity, which therefore plays a very important role at the social level. In Harringtonian reflection the presence of the divine and therefore, secondly, of religion is still of fundamental relevance for the political and social construction of the world. According to the author, the order in which man is placed is an order created by God, who creates the principles to which human nature adheres²⁴. Divine intervention appears in particular through the singular meaning that the author attributes to the concept of ‘form’. The task of man is to clothe with the proper form the edifice that is raised on the foundations laid by the divinity. Form, in fact, is what attributes essence, action and denomination to all things in the universe²⁵. Man, from this point of view, can be defined as a ‘religious animal’, rather than as a ‘reasonable animal’, since in all animals it is possible to discern an element of reasonableness, while the religious element can only be found in the human being²⁶. Religion, it follows, “is everywhere imprinted with indelible characters in human nature, as is reason”²⁷, but this does not automatically translate into a religious dimension that totalizes the human being. Consequently, even the spirit of a nation cannot be totally religious or totally atheistic²⁸. Therefore, the author’s position on religion appears singular, especially if we consider the messianic function that he attributes to his republican structure. The republic *must* grow: this is a moral duty. The whole republican construction of Harrington is characterized by this dimension of desirability, for which it is necessary that it be transferred to all other systems, to

¹⁹ E. Rutigliano, *Teorie sociologiche classiche. Comte, Marx, Durkheim, Simmel, Weber, Pareto, Parsons*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 2001, p. 38.

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 10.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² A. Comte, *Cours de Philosophie positive*, Rouen Frères, Paris, 1830-1842; italian edition edited by F. Ferrarotti, UTET, Turin, 1967.

²³ E. Rutigliano, *cit.*, pp. 44-45.

²⁴ N. Bettoni, *Political aphorisms by G. Harrington*, Departmental Typography, Brescia, 1802, p. 154.

²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 42.

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 134.

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 45.

²⁸ This is because, according to Harrington, «The people are for the most part unable to go for if same in terms of religion», but, at the same time, he cannot be completely atheistic by virtue of that divine imprint present in every human being. *Ibidem*.

guarantee them social and political stability. War is also seen as a philanthropic function of liberation and peace assurance²⁹. In this sense, however, it is not specified through which instruments the republican institution should be transfused and, from this point of view, Harringtonian reflection opens different margins of possibility, giving way to a certain generality and indeterminacy.

Also interesting is the organicist vision that Harrington adopts in his works and, in particular, in *The Republic of Oceana*. He compares the body politic to the human body and compares the study of politics with the study of anatomy, to the point that he himself speaks of real ‘political anatomy’³⁰. Politics, that is, can be considered a demonstrative science on a par with anatomy, and the human world, the object of³¹ politics, presents, according to the author, laws analogous to those of the organic natural world, the object of anatomy³².

The Harringtonian body politic differs, however, from that of Hobbesian matrix, in which it is the subjects who together form the body of Leviathan³³. In Harrington, although there is a holistic vision of society, according to which the individual exists only as a function of the State and the good of the³⁴ whole always comes before the particular good, citizens are not gathered in a single body, since they are bearers of a series of freedoms that differentiate them from the condition of subjection present, instead, in Hobbes’ political construction. The political is a body not as a set of the bodies of individuals, but as it acts as an animal body, in which each organ performs its task so that the proper functioning of the whole organism is guaranteed, and it can continue to live in a condition of harmony³⁵.

The biological organism and the political organism are united, in Harrington, not only by a similarity of functioning, but also by the principle of differentiation. Just as biological organisms evolve by differentiating and causing the number of their internal mechanisms to increase, in the same way the political organism grows and evolves by differentiating itself and bringing within it a greater number of structures suitable for its survival³⁶. This happens, in the author, in singular affinity with the organicist thought that will be developed in the mid-nineteenth century in particular through the thought of Herbert Spencer³⁷. From this point of view, Harrington also frequently uses the concept of ‘adaptation’, specifically in reference to the economic element – which will be discussed a little later – and to the necessary accommodation of the superstructure to the structure, an indispensable practice to guarantee the evolution of the organism and preserve its survival.

It is no coincidence that it has been preferred to speak, in this context, specifically of political and social ‘system’, since, in fact, the Harringtonian construction, particularly in *Oceana*, is nothing more than the elaboration of a model of which the set of components is meticulously

²⁹ N. Matteucci, *cit.*, p. 359.

³⁰ P. Zanardi, *cit.*, pp. 33-34.

³¹ A. Strumia, *cit.*, p. 15.

³² *Ibidem*. There are, in fact, numerous similarities with the natural world in the work of James Harrington. For example, he borrows from astronomy the concept of rotation of the planets to adapt it to his idea of rotation of public offices, as well as that of the movement and perpetual renewal of natural life employed to explain the necessary renewal to which superstructures of a political nature must undergo. G. Schiavone, *cit.*, p. 33.

³³ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan or The Matter, Form and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civil*, 1651; italian edition edited by T. Skinny, Publishers Gathered, Rome, 2005.

³⁴ P. Treves, *cit.*, p. 134.

³⁵ The author states: «the parliament is the heart, which consisting of two ventricles, one filled with denser matter and the other with thinner matter, sucks and pumps Oceana’s vital blood through a perpetual circle.». J. Harrington, *The Republic of Oceana*, quote in G. Giarrizzo, “English thought in the age of the Stuarts and the revolution” in *History of political, economic and social ideas*, VOL. IV Thomo I, 1987, p. 253.

³⁶ E. Rutigliano, *cit.*, pp. 22-25.

³⁷ H. Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology*, Edinburgh, 1876-1896; italian edition edited by F. Ferrarotti, UTET, Turin, 1988.

outlined, each having its own specific function to be fulfilled and which operate jointly with each other in view of achieving a common goal and greater than the individual objectives, while maintaining their independence and autonomy. In other words, a real model of a systematic nature.

The economic foundation of society

The greatest novelty of James Harrington's theoretical framework is represented by the fundamental importance that he attributes to the economic element, since, by virtue of it, it is possible to explain the causes that underlie the functioning not only of politics – and this is the peculiarity of the author's thought on this subject – but also of the entire social order, from social stratification, social mobility and social change, to the very definition of what is meant by 'history', all traced back to a single matrix: the economy.

Harrington is the first thinker of his time who recognizes a primary importance to the economic factor, expressed, in particular, by private property. It constitutes, according to the author, the basis of the social system, that is, its structure, while the political aspect and every other aspect of society represent the superstructure. That is, the will of those who manage the government – a metaphor for the political factor – is not enough to make it work, since they depend, in the first place, on an 'efficient cause', that is, a cause of an economic nature, which is the manifestation of the degree of concentration or dispersion of wealth, meaning by wealth property³⁸. In later times, David Hume recognized the novelty of Harrington's thought and, more recently, Achille Loria has again highlighted its originality, to the point that Engels, believing that this recognition could derive a prejudice to the authenticity of Marx's reflections on the relationship between structure and superstructure, in the *Additional Considerations* to the third book of *Capital*, replied to Loria by reiterating the singularity of Marx's thought³⁹. Eduard Bernstein, on the other hand, defined Harrington as a precursor of the materialist thought approach, although, it is important to emphasize, Harrington was never a materialist thinker in the sense that this term will later assume with Marxian reflection⁴⁰.

Beyond the controversy over the alleged authorship of the idea of the concepts of structure and superstructure, in the merit of which it is not intended – and it is perhaps impossible – to enter, what is important to highlight here is that Harrington certainly sensed a new element as a possible explanation of the social system, an element that until then had not been considered in its driving scope, but only as a factor yes existing and relevant, but not able to determine those multiple balances that instead Harrington highlights well.

According to the author, the relationship that links the economic foundation – *foundation* – to political power – *legal form* – operates as the relationship between cause and effect. The relationship between the two elements is, therefore, necessary or, better, *natural* as Harrington states⁴¹. This does not translate, however, into a strong determinism, but, rather, into a dialectical process between the two, because, if it is true that the superstructure must adapt to the structure, it is not excluded a priori – even if less desirable, according to Harrington – that it is the structure that changes according to the changes of the superstructure⁴².

³⁸ G. Schiavone, *cit.*, p. 40.

³⁹ *Ivi*, pp. 40-41.

⁴⁰ P. J. Badillo O'Farrell, *cit.*, p. 56.

⁴¹ P. Zanardi, *cit.*, p. 23.

⁴² Harrington says: «When the foundations of government change, and those, which govern do not change the forms of the building raised on the ancient foundations; The people become unhappy». N. Bettoni, *cit.*, p. 125. Only through the adaptation of the superstructure to the structure, therefore, can the happiness of the people be guaranteed.

The structure is formed by private property, understood as ownership of the land. From this point of view, in fact, the Harringtonian vision is part of the physiocratic vein that considers only the earth that generates wealth which, according to the Author, is a gift from God⁴³. On the distribution of land ownership depend both the spread of power – *dominion*⁴⁴ – and the condition of freedom and equality within society. Political power is, in fact, closely linked to property, and political freedom itself is conditioned by economic freedom⁴⁵.

To ensure equality at the base of society it is necessary that an agrarian law is adopted – which ensures the *balance of property* – just as, to guarantee equality above the base, in the political sphere, it is essential that there is a principle of rotation of public offices⁴⁶. The legal basis of the state in this context cannot therefore be a social contract, but only an agrarian law, which redistributes property in equal parts by setting a maximum ceiling, but without this entailing the need to level the property, as, instead, the Levellers claimed⁴⁷. The equality advocated by Harrington might suggest his belief in a democratic principle, but it is important to point out that in his theoretical construction the most important place at the decision-making level is reserved for the ‘natural aristocracy’, the non-hereditary noble class that is identified through property and elections. Ownership, therefore, contributes to determining the social stratification of the Harringtonian republican model, in which the new social class identified as gentry plays an important role. The latter was the protagonist of a considerable process of social mobility, which allowed it to become the owner of numerous lands following the redistribution of the funds of the monasteries and ecclesiastical lands as a result of the Protestant Reformation and the Tudorian policy of the sixteenth century⁴⁸.

The mismatch between structure and superstructure generates, according to Harrington, both a political and social change that jeopardizes the stability of the entire legal system⁴⁹. It is for this reason that the author perceives social change negatively, as it produces that instability and uncertainty which he so fears and tries strenuously to combat. The effects of the mismatch are, therefore, devastating and, for this reason, it is always necessary to adapt the political level to the change of an economic nature that takes place at the base, before the gap widens to the point of collapsing the entire state apparatus first and then social. This lack of adaptation is, for Harrington, the cause of the collapse of the state systems of the past and of what had happened in England in the first half of the seventeenth century⁵⁰. The two parties cannot, in fact, remain in eternal contrast “because this would mean opposing the very principle that animates and determines the historical dynamic”⁵¹.

⁴³ G. Capozzi, *Constitution, aristocracy election: the ‘natural’ republic by James Harrington*, Italian Scientific Editions, Naples, 1996, pp. 90-91.

⁴⁴ P. Zanardi, *cit.*, p. 27.

⁴⁵ R. De Mattei, *cit.*, p. 15. A limit of Harrington’s theory, in that regard, can be represented by that consideration of power, according to which, by changing the ownership structure and making it egalitarian, it is possible to ensure that power is fairly distributed. From this close link probably derives an excessive attribution of trust on the part of the author towards an egalitarian distribution of power, which does not consider that the latter can also derive from motives other than private property and considers the ‘interest’ only in terms of interest in assuming ownership of the land. From this point of view, an author such as Michel Foucault with his theory of the microphysics of power would consider such a conviction naïve. M. Foucault, *Microphysics of power: political interventions*, edited by A. Fountain and P. Pasquino, Einaudi, Turin, 1977.

⁴⁶ N. Matteucci, *cit.*, p. 354.

⁴⁷ G. Schiavone, *cit.*, p. 57. Inequality is not undermined by property per se, but by its measure, just as, at the political level, inequality is given by the lack of limit. P. Zanardi, *cit.*, p. 90.

⁴⁸ P. Zanardi, *cit.*, pp. 5-6, 14-15.

⁴⁹ G. Procacci, “Niccolò Machiavelli”, in *History of political, economic and social ideas*, Vol. III, 1987, pp. 286-287.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ P. Zanardi, *cit.*, p. 21. Dynamism, in Harrington’s reflection, gives way to the idea of static. As we said, in fact, the author’s concern for stability and social order makes his work a work of statics and not of dynamics: «Harrington’s ideal world [...] is made up of static beings, where everyone occupies a fixed place in the rigid ‘great chain of being’.

History, for Harrington, is nothing more than the history of changes in the ownership structure. From this point of view, the English Civil War, for example, would not be the result of religious conflicts, but the result of enormous changes in the distribution of property⁵². The civil war, generally identified as the cause of the political and social instability of the time, would not, therefore, be the real and oldest cause: “it was the dissolution of this government⁵³ that caused the war, and not the war the dissolution of this government”⁵⁴. Harrington’s bold affirmation, therefore, involves a reversal of the terms of reasoning, confirming once again how essential the economic element is for him in the occurrence of men and, therefore, of society as a whole and highlighting how his reflection was in contrast and clearly ahead of the thought of his time.

Conclusions

In this short essay we have tried to highlight the innovativeness of James Harrington’s approach through some of the main categories of his thought. A complete and in-depth analysis of its theoretical framework is not, in fact, possible here, but the intention of the writer – hopefully fully or partially achieved – is to provide some reflective ideas in the light of a sociological interpretation. The objective that has been proposed is certainly not to include the figure of James Harrington among the sociologists *ante litteram*, since this would be impossible since, as we have tried to emphasize, he maintains throughout the arc of his thought a predominantly philosophical and historical approach. Instead, an attempt has been made to reflect, through a sociological instrumentation, on some aspects of his judgment that, over time, have proved to be less utopian than one might have thought and decidedly more realistic in their possibility of application. In this Harrington seems to have had many insights and has grasped many aspects that, at his time, were not yet considered relevant. He was also able to systematize his theoretical construction, making it not the mirror of the political element alone, but of the whole of society and introducing categories of thought that will only later be taken up, developed in depth through properly sociological methods and brought to completion in this direction. Consider, in this sense, the importance of the sphere of the city and its regulation, the attention to models, measures, spaces, control tools, methods of identification of cities.

Furthermore, the intuition concerning the importance of the economic element appears fundamental. Attributing, however, to Harrington the paternity of the idea of the change of feudal economic relations towards those of a bourgeois type⁵⁵ or particular reflections of a capitalist nature would be a decidedly risky operation, as well as scientifically incorrect. Again, to consider this author a forerunner of the modern democratic-social system would be to ignore the aristocratic spirit that permeates his work⁵⁶. In the same way, finally, to criticize his approach as incapable of grasping that the element of the earth would gradually give way to the more volatile element of money – and, therefore, that agriculture would give way to industry – would be to disregard the historical context within which his thought is situated⁵⁷.

And in each ring are placed men, whose function is to guarantee the collective statics». *Ivi*, p. 94.

⁵² *Ivi*, p. 28. Some political acts in particular, such as the Statute on the population and the Statute on the follow-up, adopted at the time of Henry VII and events such as the dissolution of the abbeys by Henry VIII, are responsible, according to Harrington, for a radical change in the English ownership structure, to the point of having caused the fall of the monarchical government. *Ivi*, pp. 28-29.

⁵³ *Ivi*, p. 29.

⁵⁴ J. Harrington, *The Republic of Oceana*, quote in G. Schiavone, *cit.*, p. 147.

⁵⁵ P. Zanardi, *quote*, p. 8. J. G. A. Pocock, *The ancient constitution and the feudal law*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1957.

⁵⁶ R. De Mattei, *cit.*, p. 29.

⁵⁷ P. Treves, *cit.*, p. 148.

The “criticism of a political writer”, says Treves, “is not made on what he has not understood, but precisely on what he has understood⁵⁸”. Following this maxim, it is believed, therefore, to be able to say that James Harrington had undoubtedly grasped many characters of the political and social that will reveal, in the future, all their scope and their many and ambiguous facets and that his thought, for this reason, has developed in multiple components in its realistic quality rather than in the utopian ideal.

Speaking of James Harrington in sociological terms might seem, at first glance, an unusual operation and, probably, also generating a certain forcing of his theoretical framework. For this reason, it is important to point out that, of course, it is not possible to include the thought of the seventeenth-century philosopher and political thinker within the thinkers of sociology tout court, understood as a discipline that will find its first complete formulation and a first recognition in terms of branch of social thought endowed with its autonomy and specificity only during the nineteenth century⁵⁹. It is possible – and, in the opinion of the writer, interesting – to highlight how in Harrington’s thought we can see elements of his theoretical construction that will be, in the following centuries, taken up, expanded and completed by other authors in the context of philosophical, political and sociological reflection, with a particular look at the dimension of the city.

It was therefore desired – even within the limits that this essay, of course, presents – to bring to light the elements of originality of the author’s thought, that is, some traces of his high capacity for forecasting – considered for a long time, for some traits, only as a capacity for imagination – in order to be able to draw ideas for a reading in a sociological key, with particular reference to that economic factor that Harrington, Among the first thinkers of his time – if not first – he recognized and emphasized as a basic component for the foundation of the political edifice.

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⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ See, in this regard, the interesting theory that Mongardini reports in his text *La conoscenza sociologica* and that dates the birth of the sociological discipline at the beginning of 1700, simultaneously with the advent of industrial society and the appearance on the social scene, as the main reference actor, of the bourgeois class. C. Mongardini, *La conoscenza sociologica*, ECIG, Genoa, 2002, p. 444.

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