

Matteo Zanellato

**BOOK REVIEW: CAPITALISM WITHOUT  
FUTURE [CAPITALISMO SENZA FUTURO].  
BY EMANUELE SEVERINO, MILANO: RCS  
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Matteo Zanellato  
National University of Political  
Studies and Public Administration  
Bucharest, Romania  
zanellatomatteo88@gmail.com

*Capitalismo senza futuro* is a daring book of Emanuele Severino in which the author takes a more in-depth view into the question concerning technique<sup>[1]</sup>, returning to the relationship between technique and capitalism, a subject that he approached in other books such as *Il Declino del Capitalismo*, in 1993.

Before analysing the text, it is useful to introduce the author. Emanuele Severino is an Italian philosopher and academician of the National Academy of Science (*Accademia dei Lincei*). Severino is Professor emeritus of theoretical philosophy at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice<sup>[2]</sup> and a columnist for *Corriere della Sera*. For the exclusivity of his thought, he is considered the only exponent of neo-parmenidism. In fact, the author hopes to reset the philosophical tradition of the West, as Farneti explains: “the history of Western philosophy suffered some sort of original bias since Plato ‘killed’ his intellectual father Parmenides. Severino argued in an impressive array of books that the West has suppressed Parmenides’s belief that “being is, and it cannot not be” and has lived ever since under the spell— or folly—of Plato’s mystification of the original truth” (Farneti: 2010, pp.11-12). In other words, this misunderstanding of the sense of being is believed to be the ultimate cause of all the problems the West and even the humankind is facing.

The book that I will analyse has an important impact both in theoretical philosophy and in the analysis of the current economic and political crisis. Moreover, as the book is composed of a collection of articles published in *Corriere della Sera* that appear to be case studies which better explain the core thematic of the text, it is suitable both for an academic and a general public, although the author’s writing style is difficult to understand.

The core thesis of the book is that “capitalism goes towards the sunset”<sup>[3]</sup>

1 At this point is important to clarify the difference between the concepts of technology and technique. The author uses only the word *tecnica* to explain both the set of rules and also the means. Other authors, as Val Dusek in the book *Philosophy of Technology, an Introduction*, makes the difference between *technique* as the set of means-end relationship when he refers to the Ellul’ studies (Dusek: 2006, p.106) and *technology* in a broad sense. I will follow this differentiation, even if in the English translation of Ellul, *The Technological System*, the translator uses the word *technology* to define both the means-end relationship and the means (Ellul: 1980, p.33). Furthermore, in *The Essence of Nihilism* the translator uses only the word *technique* (Severino: 2016).

2 Previously he taught at the Catholic University of *Sacro Cuore* in Milan, but he moved to Venice due to the incompatibility of his thought with Christianity, sanctioned by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith -*Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei* (the former Holy Office - the institution that prosecuted Galileo Galilei and Tommaso Campanella).

3 The author uses the word «sunset» in this text to indicate the «decline» of the capitalist tradition. In other occasions, such as *Il Declino del Capitalismo* (1993), he talks about «declines» in the narrow sense. In the translation, I chose to use

not because of the contradictions that Marxism has believed to find in it, but because technological economy is marginalizing the capitalist economy” (Severino: 2012, p.23). Reformulating the thesis, Severino’s point is that the technology used by capitalism to increase profit will become the purpose of capitalist action, increasingly omitting the original purpose of capital accumulation. To better understand the philosopher’s reflections we need to conceptualize some recurrent themes in his thinking, like, in our case, technique and decline.

The first question then is: what is technique? Initially the answer seems obvious. When we talk about this subject, we use the word technology, stating that is a tool controlled and used by man. However, this is not the interpretation given by Severino. Indeed, the author recognizes that Western culture attributes different meanings to the technique, but the “authentic and extremely complex” meaning is another. From the author’s point of view, the technique is the set of behaviours held by man who needs an instrument created to fulfil some purposes. The *instrument* should not necessarily be understood as a technological object, as it can be any type of mean. Trying to interpret the author, it could be said that the technique is any organized thought that provides a relationship between means and ends. If we understand it this way, the technique becomes the meaning of Western thought, which since Aristotle, has always dealt with the action’s structure and the relationship between *means* and *ends*. Cusano underlines that these different philosophical thoughts led to different outcomes - and the author also refers to Macchiavelli, Kant and Marx<sup>[4]</sup>, in which it has always remained a firm (even if implicitly) fundamental aspect: that what is and signifies *mean* is not what it is and signifies *purpose* (Cusano: 2013, p.30).

Every action in the Western tradition<sup>[5]</sup> involves the use of means in order to achieve its supreme purpose. One of the means is the technology. Even if technique is a mean used to realize the purpose of Western traditions, it is not said that it is not able to fulfil its own purpose. In this context, the second question arises: what is the purpose of technique? According to the author’s definition, its aim is “the will to indefinitely and unconditionally strengthen the ability to achieve ends” in other words, ability to achieve goals means the ability to fill the gaps, to solve problems, to eliminate needs (Cusano: 2013, p.15).

Returning to the thesis of *Capitalismo Senza Futuro*, the author explains the reasons why technical globalization is designed to replace the economic one, and he also rejects the idea that the solution to the current crisis can be achieved through an economic, moral, religious or political rehabilitation (Severino: 2012, p.5). As mentioned above, technique is the basis of Western thought and all Western traditions use technologies as a mean, making technique to reach *world domination*. The world domination of the technique is the *destination* of the «decline» of capitalism. Decline is the second term that we need to examine more profoundly. In

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the same definition for both cases, meaning «decline».

4 Aristotle in Nicomachean Ethics says that wealth should be a mean and not the end. Macchiavelli argued that the end justifies the means. In the Metaphysics of Morals (Vol 2) Kant argues that man should always be seen as an end and never as a mean. Marx argues that capitalism transforms the good-money relationship by transforming money into the goal of capitalist *praxis*.

5 The author refers to Christianity, capitalism, Marxism, democracy, etc.

the introduction, the author first explains how *decline* does not mean destruction - or, using his words, abandonment - of a tradition, like the capitalist one; rather it means abandoning the will of the latter to be the supreme purpose of some or all peoples. In this context, as regards capitalism, decline does not mean the disappearance of private profit, but the abandonment of the reach of profit as the ultimate goal of a group of peoples or, indeed, of global society. Even if he uses the word «destination», the author specifies that the book should not be understood as a discourse to give advice, but it wants to show what people are condemned to want (Severino: 2012, p.7). The purpose of *Capitalismo senza futuro* is therefore to provide a prediction on the future of the world, even if not a scientific, nor prophetic, one<sup>6</sup>. This prediction, purely theoretical, is based on the logical assumption of the erosion of purposes by means.

Trying to analyse the text, my opinion is that the author sees at the basis of Western thought a struggle to conquer hegemony between different traditions, or systems, which use technologies to win against other traditions. However, as Cusano underlines, as technique does not have *excluding purposes*, it differs from all the other systems and it becomes the *system of subsystems*, in which all the *subsystems* use the technique to impose its purposes excluding the ends of the other *subsystems* (Cusano: 2013, p.16).

To illustrate the struggle between different *subsystems*, the author explains the relationship between democracy and capitalism in the third chapter. Severino objects to those who argue that the coexistence between capitalism and democracy is *natural*, by claiming it is conflictual. These two Western traditions have different purposes and they want to become the ultimate goal of society. Specifically, capitalism has as its ultimate purpose the indefinite increase of profit, while democracy has as its ultimate purpose the right harmony between freedom and equality. In order to survive the struggle, democracy wants capitalist *efficiency* not to compromise the *solidarity* useful to the harmony between freedom and equality, while capitalism wants *solidarity* not to compromise *efficiency*. To make each purpose practicable, both traditions rely on the technical apparatus. In chapter 8, *The Destination of Capitalism Towards Decline*, the author explains how the decline of capitalism takes place because capitalist action is no longer able to pursue its original purpose. Refusing the possibility of pursuing *complementary ends*<sup>7</sup> by the capitalist system, the author points out that in order to fulfil its purpose, the increase of private profit, it changes the action, destroying the capitalist system. If the opponents of capitalism, in this case democracy, had increased their technical apparatus more than the capitalist system did, capitalism would be destined to perish in favour of democracy, which would become able to realize its ultimate goal, relegating capitalism as a mean. To gain the struggle against its opponents, therefore, capitalism must recognize that its purpose is also to strengthen the means. It will give up part of its original purpose to increase the means - the

6 The world to which the author refers is the world of extreme folly, or “the belief that man, ever since he appears on Earth, considers everywhere and in every age as the more evident and indisputable Truth: the belief that things become other than what they are; and what they are they become from something else than what they are” (Severino: 2012, p.7).

7 The reference goes to the *additional burden* consisting in *healthy environment* proposed by Bill Clinton and the *virtuous circularity* between *development* and *solidarity* (Severino: 2012, p.65).

technical apparatus - at least more than his opponents will<sup>8</sup>: “this is why in order not to perish, it perishes: capitalism, in order not to perish defeated by its adversaries, perishes overcame by the reduction of its purpose” (Severino: 2012, p.62). However, we must take another consideration into account as well. In order to exist, the capitalist economy needs a scarcity of products in order to increase in value; at the same time, as we have seen before, the technique aims to achieve goals, and thus eliminate scarcity. Using the technical apparatus as a mean, capitalism then undergoes this other complication in the realization of its purpose. In conclusion, the author expresses how, in front of the technique, capitalism is destined to change its meaning: “if the purpose of an action changes, the act itself becomes something different from what it was. [...] the act is no longer capitalist; it has become or is becoming something different, that it is a question of deciphering” (Severino: 2012, p.62).

With the same theoretical assumptions used to explain the decline of capitalism, Severino explains the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, which occurred not due to a decline of socialist ideology, but because Russia was no longer able to strengthen its technological apparatus. With the stellar shield wanted by Regan, the USSR, not being able to compete with the US had to choose its ultimate goal: to save real socialism or save the technological apparatus. In a few years, the Soviet economic model collapsed, in order to save its technological level. Since 1989 the Italian philosopher argued that the scientific-technological apparatus would have survived the collapse of the USSR, and that the US-Russia competition would not have ended, continuing the bipolarity in a different form, if the Russian military arsenal would have been able to compete with the American one (Severino: 2002). Even in this case, we can explain the inversion of the means in ends: the technique should have served to the real socialism to win the struggle with the West, but, to save the technical apparatus, the USSR has abandoned its original purpose, meaning the socialist system. This is the first step towards the *pax technica*, in which every economic and political conflict is overcome, to safeguard the technical apparatus.

The last chapters of the book allow me to draw some conclusions. On one side the book reflects the author’s thought, who in fact criticizes the extreme folly of the Western thought that refers to “something that is made other than what it is” (Severino: 2012, p.204). On the other side, Emanuele Severino’s book is important for all those who want to study the impact of technology on our lives, but most of all on politics. Beyond any justified opinion that one can have in regard with the author’s thought, if we study technology and the impact of the latter in society and politics, we should not omit this author.

Nowadays, politics is considered a mean to accomplish different purposes. But if we consider politics as a mean, it is probable that in a short time the increase of the technological apparatus in political action will erode its purpose. The political action will transform into a technical government; this kind of prediction was made by the author in the second chapter of the book. An applied example could be the Rousseau

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8 Even remaining within the capitalist system, the reasoning remains valid: today the global system is composed of multinational corporations as powerful as states or more powerful than they are. To be able to compete with each other, and to beat the rivalry, companies do no longer compete on the ultimate purpose of capitalism but on overcoming their competitors on the technological level.

platform of the Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy, or the exponential increase in the use of social networks on a global scale. I agree with the author when he says that the solution to this crisis must take place through philosophy. Faced with this decline, therefore, we must inquire into the *meaning of politics*. If politics is seen as a mean to achieve goals, then we can only reflect on Severino's words knowing that the destiny is the one described by the author. However, if politics is understood as a human condition to express your own be-in-the-world, then the sunset of politics seems a little further.

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