

Umberto Galimberti
GIOVANE, HAI PAURA?
Marcianum Press, *Dialogoi* Series

“Giovane, hai paura?” – the second book of the Marcianum Press *Dialogoi* Series – is a transcript of a conference held in Venice by Umberto Galimberti as part of a cycle of conferences titled “Comunicare il Verbo: lezioni veneziane oggi” (Communicating the Word: Venetian Lectures Today).

Galimberti is a leading Italian philosopher who had already devoted specific attention to the existential plight of today's young people in a book published in 2007 with the title “L'ospite inquietante: il nichilismo e i giovani” (The Distressing Guest: Nihilism and the Young People) but the topic continues to grip him, possibly because his long academic career has kept him close to many students and the bleakness of their future.

“Giovane, hai paura?” – which means literally “Young man, are you scared?” – is a question that goes straight to the core of the reality of millions of young men and women, not only in Italy but throughout the western world. They are the victims of a harsh economic climate, inept public policies and, last but not least, they are condemned to live a life deprived of principles and meaning.

«Once what one would learn at home coincided with the expectations of society» says Galimberti. «The principles were essentially those of sobriety, commitment and readiness to do the hard work in order to build one's future. [...] When society became opulent, a radical split occurred between the principles learned at home and the allurements of society, and the families themselves became unstable and aloof but, above all, society turned more invasive: if a boy didn't have a smartphone while his friends had it, his parents would buy it for him not to let him feel excluded. Society took over as the driving structure of young people's lives and behaviour.»

Knowledge acquired through education and parents' guidance plays an important role but, according to Galimberti, is not enough. What is at stake is a new value system which, however, remains undefined.

«Values get devalued because they are not metaphysical entities that come down from heaven [...] They are social parameters which, when shared, allow a community to live in a least contentious way. Before the French Revolution, society was built on hierarchical values, then it adopted the values of citizenship and equality. There was a transmutation of values which is not necessarily a bad thing as history proceeds through breakdowns of values and advents of new values, or else we would still be in the age of Babylonians.»

Yet Galimberti suggests that the devaluation of values is not the decisive factor bringing about nihilism which instead emerges when the breakdown of a system of values is not followed by another system. When this happens the change is into nothingness, nihilism which Nietzsche describes as the absence of any purpose, of any reason why, because all values become valueless. The ensuing feeling of emptiness does not allow to look forward to any future.

The future – argues Galimberti – means to reach out to some goals. When there are no goals, when the future promises nothing, then people breakdown and are haunted by the question: «Why am I living? What is the meaning of my life? What am I doing?»

«Have we ever wondered why young people come alive at night rather than in daytime?» asks Galimberti. «The reason is that in daytime nobody shows interest in them, nobody calls them by their name. If in daytime I am of no interest to anybody, then I'll seize the night. When the world fails to remember that I exist, making me feel a totally irrelevant member of society, then I'll start living my way. How? Getting drunk, taking drugs. Young people anesthetize themselves from a world that does not accommodate them, does not involve them, does not give them any perspective, thus rendering their life insignificant.”

Galimberti's analysis of what entails being young in today's society doesn't seem to leave room for hope but his extensive philosophical studies and his psychoanalytical practice have thought him that hope by itself is an empty word.

“Giovane, hai paura?” is a heartfelt and honest plea to young people to take

their future into their hands. «You must become the masters of your future!» concludes Galimberti. “I can't tell you how because I didn't go through your same experience. For me being young and moving forward to a professional career was an easy thing to do, almost a natural development. I don't know what strategies you should follow, but you must stand up for your future. You must arm yourself with this inner strength.”

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