



THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII

One of the famous street mad of stons in Pompeii

* by Franco Zavagno

Man fears death and tries to exorcise its presence through rituals and refined philosophical constructions or, more simply, by trying to "ignore" it; in nature however, life and death represent a single unit that is difficult to break down and separate, thanks to which life is able to continue. Some historic episodes show with great effectiveness the attitude that man often adopts in the face of incumbent danger: the musicians who continued to play on the sinking Titanic in an

attempt to abstract themselves and others from what was happening or, perhaps even more dramatically from some points of view, the guests in Hitler's bunker (according to some film versions, which nevertheless have an intrinsic plausibility), when the end was imminent, numbed themselves with surreal partying. Louis XVI and his court did not seem or want to realize the approaching storm that was to blow them away, whilst around them, the world that they wanted to stay the same

was changing too quickly and radically. If, in the first case, there was not much more that could be done, in the other two episodes we can see how, in the face of a serious and immediate danger, more than being driven towards a logical reaction to what was happening, men preferred to look elsewhere and dedicate themselves to having fun. This behaviour seems to follow a script that has always existed, perhaps congenital in the genome of our species and appears again today with

respect to the drastic changes that are foreseen and, to a certain extent, have already occurred, in the earth's ecosystem. The impression is of conduct that is essentially schizophrenic: loud voices claim that the situation is close to the threshold of irreversibility and at the same time there is a stubborn call for economic growth which does not take into account the physical limits of the planet. In other words, there emerges the inability to proceed with decisions and changes conse-

quent to the premises, that can determine a change of course of the process under way; thus, in the face of a situation which in words is defined dramatic, we continue as before, according to a drift that is obtuse in its apparent inevitability. Apart from becoming aware of the danger, plausible hypotheses must be formulated for the future, if we still want to think about a future: in this regard mention must be made of the work of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, an economist whose ideas are strongly critical of the paradigm which is today dominant in economics. In particular, I would like to quote from a book published in Italian by Bollati Boringhieri in 2003, edited by Mauro Bonaiuti and with the significant title of "Bioeconomics", in which the foundations of Georgescu's thought are summarized. Absolutely original, he radically distinguishes himself from the ecological way of thinking which can be recognized in the theorization of sustainable development: this theorization appears inadequate to face up to the challenge of survival and coherent with the general context in which it is placed rather than questioning it as, on the contrary, apparently should be done. It is hardly surprising that the book's subtitle is "Towards another ecologically and socially sustainable econ-

omy", which is not founded on the axiom of all-out growth which today has taken on the connotations of a genuine idolatrous phenomenon. This axiom infringes the laws of physics and becomes even more dangerous in relation to the exponential characteristics of the process, which further reduces the time available to change the course. Georgescu places specific attention on the fact that the dominant economic theory contradicts the laws of thermodynamics: for example, every productive process takes place at the expense of an increase in the entropy of the system (in this case represented by the planet Earth). In other words, it entails a gradual reduction in the quantity of matter and energy present in a free form, accessible and usable for productive purposes; looking towards the future, this translates into a drastic reduction of opportunities for future life. To break out of the vicious circle triggered off by technological man requires a radical change in the paradigms that lie at the basis of living in society; in this regard Georgescu speaks explicitly of the need for a new ethic that allows transition to bioeconomics. This, in extreme synthesis, can be defined as "sustainable economy through forms of organic agriculture and thanks to the supply of energy from the sun's rays".