

Tourists and frontiers

by Adriano V. Autino

The vacation of Mr. Denis Tito on the ISS, quickly pushed through, has forced NASA to make, as they say, the best of a bad job, and to receive the strange group on board the International Space Station. Whichever way, irony is both allowed and required. But I think that this episode should be read in a deeper way, using various keys, political and anthropological.

If, on one side, we owe to criticize the insufficient attention of the Russians for the reliability and the safety of the space flight, on the other side, we have to consider that this episode puts the feet into the dish of techno-bureaucratic American pomposity.

A beautiful paradox, indeed: as the heirs of one of the worst bureaucracies that ever infested the planet (the Stalinist one) score against the champions of the market freedom. It also succeeded 40 years ago, with Yuri Gagarin, but then we were in a cold war, and the enterprise was completed by that bureaucratic state apparatus, that showed us all its ambition of worldwide technological supremacy. Also under the fascist regime in Italy (another case of extreme authoritarian collectivism) several remarkable aeronautical enterprises were undertaken: for instance, a Vercelli aviator flew, in the 30's, from Vercelli to Tokyo in a single-seat biplane, obviously assisted and re-supplied by Mussolini's Navy. The now considerable history of astronautics counts several successes of the collectivist regimes, also the most abhorrent ones, like the Hitlerian National-Socialism, in which, between others, the genius of Von Braun was born and was developed. The social harm that these regimes caused doesn't take away the merit, the magnanimity or the heroism of Von Braun, Gagarin, and others.

But no consideration of any regime is to be considered here, and neither is any personal magnanimity of the protagonists. From the anthropological point of view -- as the case of the telecommunications satellite re-positioned by means of a lunar assist demonstrated, the greater facility and economy of space transport vs. terrestrial ones -- anyone can travel to the space station without several months' preparation for the mission...

It is as if the Russians were saying to the Americans, to NASA, to the entire world: "Hey, look, anyone can decide, with a warning of one or two months, to spend a weekend in orbit." What notice is needed, if you decide to spend your holidays, lets say, in Sardinia, in order to find a place on a ferry? Denis Tito paid the ticket for the Russian ferry: 20 million USD. This is a feasible cost, for several

terrestrial billionaires, and not only in the post-industrial West. In this case we are not speaking about an ideological victory, but perhaps of a combination of the following conditions:

- An extreme need (given the current economic situation of Russian society).
- Inherited possession of functioning space technology.
- Reduced safety scruples.
- The existence, in Russia, of a kind of normative far-west, in which courage-endowed people (as demonstrated by the heterogeneity of the Tito's travel companions) can succeed to organize space travel in the twinkling of an eye.

We are also entitled to raise our finger, criticizing all of the above: the normative far-west, in which any gangster can be a master on the skin of poor people and of the less overbearing ones, is surely not a social condition that some new-humanists - not even the most libertarian ones - can aspire to. In fact freedom is for us a social condition that must necessarily be accompanied by ethics and mature and aware self-government. In such a context, the self-governed society must hold the antibodies necessary to prevent gangsters and criminals from causing harm.

Russian society is not one that has evolved through gradually more mature social experiences until reaching self-government, but is a society in which ethics and human feelings have been smoothed by 60 years of bureaucratic power, in which the trivialisation of the human relationships was brought up to ignoble and extreme peaks, and in which the former state-bureaucracies have been recycled directly by the mafia. On such an economic substratum an armed capital is being formed, which is pitiless towards the weak.

We can also make our wise comments about the rationale of the improvised Russian space tourism agency, but consider that the rationales of many of our home entrepreneurs are not so far from the rationales, ancient, like the world, of those Russian entrepreneurs: "*Cicero pro domo sua*".

It remains however the very important fact, that the circum-terrestrial orbital space has entered the destination-decision space of tourists, even if, only for those tourists who can afford to spend 20 million USD for one vacation. Adventurers try this tourism, like in other historical times, people with few scruples equipped with haphazard means but also with courage and luck.

Reading again Dale Gray's articles, we notice that, in just such a way, historical frontiers were opened in the past...!