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NOTE DE L'AUTEUR

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- 1 In this ambitious essay, Salvador Giner displays his elegant and suggestive prose, as well as his magnificent cultural background, keeping the reader captured until the last page.
- 2 Giner defends that moral principles which rule over human societies have a social origin, that is, they arise through historical and social processes. This fact would entail that sociology must play a key role in the reflection on ethical and moral problems. However, an important part of contemporary sociology would be victim of the “amorality fallacy”. Giner criticizes the pretension of building a sociology that is neutral in ethical and moral terms and defends sociologists’ social commitment, which he views as compatible with the scientific requirements of rigor and objectivity. In this sense, he argues that “the most accomplished [sociology] is, and not by chance, that which has issued a moral judgment about the human condition and the civilization of its time” as well as that “human sciences” must be linked to the reflection on what must be the *good society* (p.165).

- 3 Having set these general principles, the author addresses the topic of the “social production of morality” in the framework of current liberal democracies. Giner states that, in our societies, morality is the outcome of negotiation and contractarian processes. Moral norms which legitimate and proscribe certain behaviours are the result of agreements and pacts among corporations, professional associations, trade unions, and institutional or sectorial social movements which try to impose their interests. Examples of this kind of disputes would be the regulations on abortion, homosexual marriage, euthanasia or minimum wage.
- 4 According to Giner, despite that the liberal model of social production of morality is better than others in the past, such as absolutism, we should not be satisfied. The current historical process drives us to the destruction of human civilization. At least three processes move us towards this fate: destruction of the environment, excessive demographic growth and the impossibility of perpetual economic growth. In turn, Giner points out a series of “endemic tergiversations”, as for example the “intrinsic amorality of capitalism”, which would be behind the aforementioned processes.
- 5 Giner’s conclusion, however, is optimistic. The enormous changes occurring worldwide in the last decades, such as the spread of liberal democracies or the globalization of civil society, have set the grounds for a universal morality which is already emerging.
- 6 According to Giner, we are in a period of “moral transition”. While until now morality was socially produced, today the conditions exist for a “moral production of society”; for moral principles guiding the production of society and not the opposite.
- 7 The main content of this universal (republican) morality consists in the Kantian categorical imperative, the injunction to treat the fellow man as we would like to be treated, and to recognize him as a human being equal to us in dignity and freedom (p. 392). Although the imperative emerged in a particular historical and social context, it is also “asocial” in the sense that it is anchored in our nature, that is, human beings have moral intuitions and we do not need theoretic knowledge to determine if something is right or wrong.
- 8 In this way, Giner encourages us to listen to our conscience and to exercise our civic virtue to make possible “the dream of our civilization: that of making each individual, without exception, a rationally autonomous and morally sovereign being” (p.373).
- 9 Despite the fact that, overall, the essay constitutes a very ambitious work which deals with a multitude of topics and is full of interesting intuitions, from my point of view, it also contains some weakness that I would like to address now.
- 10 In a general way, I think the main virtue of the essay also constitutes its weakest spot and the origin of the problems comes from what, paraphrasing Jon Elster, we could call its excessive ambitions. In what follows, I will first mention some specific problems and then express some doubts about the main thesis.
- 11 The text has a certain number of problems that, despite being relatively serious—in part because of their recurrence—do not greatly affect the main argument. Given the limitations of space, I will not address all of them here and will limit myself to briefly discussing three of them which in particular have called my attention, without any intention of exhaustiveness.
- 12 First, Giner states (p.28) that his approach is fundamentally *methodological individualistic*. As is well known, methodological individualism is a methodological principle according to which all social phenomena can be reduced to individuals,

individuals' properties or relationships among individuals (see Jon Elster, 1982, "Marxism, functionalism, and game theory", *Theory and Society*, 11-4, p.453-482).

- 13 In the text, however, Giner seems to confuse methodological individualism with ethical individualism (p.28) and with rational choice theory (p.168-169). In a general way, it is very dubious that his approach is methodological individualistic since he addresses many macrosocial phenomena without trying to carefully identify the mechanisms that produce them at the micro level.
- 14 Secondly, Giner seems to fall into some teleological arguments, which, as is well known, have been very seriously questioned in the last decades (see Elster, art.cit.). In Chapter 7, entitled "dysfunctionalities", for example, Giner states, quoting Durkheim, that a certain level of crime is necessary for a country to increase the level of social cohesion that reinforces its civil and criminal laws and later adds that political corruption "is structurally necessary for the common good. Some amount of transgression is functional for the political common good". Finally, according to the author, it is for this reason that corruption is endemic to democracy (p.233-234). Beyond the dubious validity of the argument, it seems to hide a teleological reasoning. However, given that, like in some other parts of the text, the argument is a bit ambiguous, it is not totally clear if Giner is suggesting that corruption exists *because* it is necessary for democracy.
- 15 Thirdly, from my point of view, the discussion on the *axiological neutrality* of sociology is not very clear. On the one hand, defending that science must be neutral does not imply at all that scientists cannot have ethical or moral commitments or that those commitments cannot guide their academic interests. For example, it is perfectly possible that a sociologist worried about educational inequality would decide to study the mechanisms that produce them in order to be able to propose policies to reduce them. However, if the sociologist wants to correctly identify the mechanisms at work, he or she cannot let his/her values, interests, passions or prejudices interfere in the research process. And, of course, if the sociologist is successful, the outcome of his/her research could be used by someone who wanted to design policies to reproduce or even increase inequalities. Thus, his/her research is neutral.
- 16 On the other hand, it is necessary to remember that much (most?) of high quality sociological research does not have clear immediate ethical or moral implications and that it does not have any relation at all with the reflection on *good society*. For example, I cannot see what the implications are in this field of debate about the mechanisms that cause status hierarchies to emerge in a face-to-face interaction context. In this sense, I think it is very problematic to state that the most accomplished sociology is that which has an ethical or moral commitment and even more so to state that this is "not by chance" (suggesting that there is some kind of unspecified causal link between the researcher's ethical and moral motivations and the scientific quality of his/her work).
- 17 Beyond specific problems, there are some elements that drive me to be relatively sceptical about the main theses of the essay, despite the brave manner in which Giner defends them.
- 18 First of all, regarding the social production of morality, it is not very clear to me what exactly is supposed to be socially produced. Throughout most of the book the author seems to refer to values and informal norms. For example, on p.22 he says that he will try to explain the "production and validity of values, norms and moral judgments". However, Giner fails to mention the debates on the emergence processes of social

norms or those on the mechanisms for the diffusion of beliefs and collective belief formation. Besides, as I said, in Chapter 6 he argues that public moral is the outcome of negotiations among corporations, professional associations and trade unions. If the author refers to the emergence and diffusion of values and informal norms, the argument not only contravenes all contemporary social theory on the topics, but is highly implausible. Obviously, ethical or moral values prevailing in a society emerge and spread through complex social processes that we do not understand well yet; they are not decided among organizations and institutions through pacts of interests.

- 19 However, given the examples that the author offers in this same chapter, it seems that Giner is not referring here to values and informal norms, but to formal rules (laws, policies, etc.) that regulate social problems with ethical and moral implications. If that is the case, then the argument is basically correct, but perhaps somewhat trivial. Of course, laws and policies are usually the outcome of agreements among organizations and institutions in liberal democracies. However, Giner is wrong when reducing these processes to negotiations and he does not take into account the role of two other mechanisms of collective decision making: voting and deliberation (see Jon Elster, 2007, *Explaining social behavior*, Cambridge University Press, Chap. 25). In this same sense, the work would be even more valuable if he dealt with some aspect of the many debates in this field in detail.
- 20 Instead of this, however, Giner tries to tackle a series of large macrosocial processes. From my point of view, this option is questionable given that those processes are too broad, that is, Giner does not respect the principle of *methodological singularism* according to which research should focus on *explananda* whose temporal and spatial contours are clearly specified (Raymond Boudon, 2012, "Analytical sociology and the explanation of beliefs", *Revue européenne des sciences sociales*, 50-2, p.7-34).
- 21 In general, Giner describes well-known processes, such as the environmental crisis or the spread of liberal democracies in recent decades, but does not make a detailed analysis of the mechanisms that link these processes. Causal relationships are, at most, postulated. For example, as I said, Giner identifies several "endemic tergiversations" which "are behind" (p.366) the most serious problems of humanity. It is not clear to me if with the expression "are behind" the author is claiming that there are causal connections between both groups of phenomena. If that is so, he should try to specify more clearly the concrete mechanisms through which that happens.
- 22 Furthermore, the main thesis of the essay that the conditions for a "moral production of society" exist nowadays and that we should listen to our conscience and exercise our civic virtue to build a society where everybody is rationally autonomous and morally sovereign, suffers from similar problems. First of all, even if building a new world based on moral principles could be feasible nowadays, this does not mean that it is really going to be built. Giner knows that, but the problem is that arguing that the way to achieve such a world involves following our moral intuitions and exercising civic virtue seems too vague to me. Giner leaves out the enormous problems of collective decision making, collective action and a long etcetera which make it difficult to achieve the objective. Moreover, the objective itself is not defined precisely enough. In this sense, proposing that the objective is to make each individual a rationally autonomous and morally sovereign being again seems too vague to me and not very informative.

- 23 In short, in spite of some problems, which are inevitable in a work like this, *El origen de la moral* is a major essay that addresses some of the main challenges facing our civilization in a brave and ambitious way.
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