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HOMO SOLIDARIUS. The role of solidarity and altruism in social and economic life

PROLOGUE

In this work, we will argue that empathy and compassion lead us to act altruistically—that is, thinking of others, especially of those who suffer the most. The consequences of this kind of connection are infinite. Rubén Lena, for example, composed “Pobre Joaquín” after reading on a bus a news item that briefly described the death by cold of a person experiencing homelessness. Frans van der Hoff, a Dutch Catholic missionary, initiated the first fair trade experiences after witnessing the hardships faced by Latin American farmers in selling their coffee to multinational corporations. Che Guevara, coming from a well-off family, joined the ranks of Cuban revolutionaries after traveling across the continent by motorcycle and observing the misery in which the vast majority lived. The civil rights movement for the Afro-American population in the United States was galvanized by the segregationist violence suffered by Rosa Parks. In 2013, #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) mobilized thousands of people who empathized with the cruel treatment of a young Black man by the police. More recently, Greta Thunberg emerged in 2018 with her Fridays for Future movement, deeply moved by the impact of climate change on the planet’s life. Regarding the labor movement, it is widely known how many of its leaders have committed themselves to this cause driven (co-moved) by social injustice in the world of work. These and many other events arising from empathy demonstrate that the world is not always guided by selfishness and that collective action often stems from an empathetic understanding.

On an individual level, it is not selfish actions, but altruistic ones, that make us feel good. Why? Because we are people living in community, and it is this community that gives meaning to our lives. Notice that good people often sleep better than those burdened by a guilty conscience. There is substantial scientific evidence showing a correlation between narcissistic and selfish behaviors and higher stress levels as well as lower psychological well-being, which—as one can understand—also affects our sleep. Indeed, studies show that oxytocin (a sort of empathy hormone, also known as the love hormone) plays a role in regulating sleep. We will therefore insist that prosocial behavior and the cultivation of empathetic values lead to better societies and better individuals. We do not need to be superheroes to accomplish these tasks. All of us are called to practice them through small daily acts. This reminds us of that beautiful phrase, sometimes

attributed to Galeano: "Many small people, in small places, doing small things, can change the world."

In these pages, I will share with readers the idea that human beings have a good side that has brought us this far. The fact that every act of solidarity or cooperation does not become news may be explained by the widespread tendency among us to hold a negative view of the world we live in. Partly, this is due to the "negativity bias," which makes us more sensitive to negative information than to positive. If we examine this closely, we may realize that even this reaction is rooted in our compassionate spirit. Partly, it also stems from how we teach in our educational systems. It has been proven that if we teach future professionals in economics and business using theories based on the homo oeconomicus paradigm, those students end up behaving accordingly. The challenge, then, is to educate and communicate more effectively about our true human nature.

A nature in which goodness expresses itself through acts of solidarity, cooperation, altruism, and compassion. A nature that must be recognized and nurtured, while acknowledging that we can also act selfishly, competitively, and violently. We have the genetic predisposition to behave in the best possible way, and we also have ample capacity to discern and, based on such discernment, build more just societies—and, why not say it, more humane ones as well.

Such a purpose places this work not merely in the academic realm, but also in a hopeful perspective. All of us have ample evidence of how poorly humanity and our societies are faring. But it is important to recognize that we are capable of doing better. Biologically and sociologically, there is sufficient evidence to remain optimistic.

For decades, I have worked on the challenge of showing how another economy is possible—helping to make visible solidary behaviors and rationalities, theorizing about the role of cooperation, mutual aid, and reciprocity in our societies, or even participating in collective actions within the framework of the Social and Solidarity Economy. I have also worked from the communitarian paradigm, insisting on the need to discuss the scope of virtuous societies. Following Martin Buber, I believe that a good society is one that fosters "I-Thou" relationships. Or, following Emmanuel Mounier, who draws from the ideas of Charles Péguy, I understand the person as an end in themselves, but in a relationship of solidarity. Within this framework, my aim here is to advance our understanding of the role that altruism, empathy, and compassion play in each of us, and how they operate beyond us, positively impacting human societies—whether through actions that transcend selfish rationality or through experiences

that show how cooperation and altruism manifest in the creation of transformative institutions.

I have divided this work into seven chapters and over 100 paragraphs, in which I explore various aspects of a theory of altruism and its implications for social and economic life. I have deliberately avoided overusing citations and references in order to make this material more accessible and easier to read. It is well known that academic writing follows certain formal conventions, which I have chosen to relax here in favor of a more digestible text.

I thank the Universidad de la República for granting me a sabbatical year to dedicate myself, among other things, to completing this work. And I thank the thousands of researchers over the centuries who have generated evidence showing that prosocial behaviors are an essential part of our human identity.