

## **June 4, 2003 – Plenary Session IV**

**Professor Giovanni Berlinguer**

*President, Aprile Movement; former President of the Italian National Bioethics Committee*

The summary of the themes suggested for this session opens with a quotation from Isaiah 11:2 which underlines the antithesis between “the spirit of wisdom and understanding” and “the spirit of might.”

The summary continues two affirmations:

1. The extension of dominion over rapidly shrinking environmental resources “poses a threat to worldwide stability and security.”
2. The search for technologies “may lead to a dangerous monopoly, in the hands of the technologically rich, in the fields of energy, food production and medicine...”

The first threat is well documented in the recent book Vandana Shiva entitled “Water Wars”, which describes the existing conflicts based upon this resource, and its interconnections with oil wars and terrorism.

The second trend, deriving from the monopoly of essential information, is well documented by an article by E. Cherney, M. Pottinger and D.P. Hamilton published on 5 May 2003 in the Wall Street Journal, *SARS Research Spurs a Race for Patent Rights to Products*: “Scientific groups in Hong Kong and Canada who made crucial findings in the hunt for the severe acute respiratory syndrome have filed broad applications seeking patents on the virus itself, as well as on its complete genetic makeup.” This implies that “rights will be claimed in nearly any diagnostic test, drug or vaccine developed to cope with the outbreak.” Abbot Laboratories, Roche Holding and France Aventis are in this case the major industry players.

The obvious comment is that the same situation existing in the anti-AIDS therapy may arise, where universal access is limited by existing patents.

Another comment is that patents, whose original aim has been to protect the intellectual property of inventions, is more and more extended to discoveries of what already exists in nature. It is including the information produced by the decoding of the human DNA, and is a part of a process which, through different steps and decisions, is leading to the market of the human body: an offence which Vandana Shiva, in her contribution to the first of these symposia, has defined as “the conversion of the sacred and the commons into a commodity.”

Yesterday, Professor Latouche said that the global system we are living in “needs injustice as a condition for its development.” I am not sure that it *needs* injustice, but I am sure that it *creates* injustice.

A paradoxical situation, in relation to information, science and technology, has arisen in the last decades. Advances in epidemiology, diagnostic, prevention and therapy, which in the past were often accessible almost everywhere with extraordinary results (like in the Fifties and Sixties the use of antibiotics against microbial diseases and vaccines against smallpox and poliomyelitis) are becoming now more and more selective. Some or many can benefit or survive; other, much more numerous, cannot afford to pay and die.

The positive examples I have mentioned were the result of collective hopes and sometimes utopias, of public policies, of the limitation of patents for certain goods (Sabin and other scientists always refused to patent their inventions), of the World Health Organization, of the affirmation that health is a fundamental human right, and finally of the creation of collective health services in many countries of the world. These examples show that alternatives may exist, but are now weakened or missing, for political and economical choices and in particular for the negative changes in the field of welfare systems.

The leadership of what happened in this field has been in the International Monetary Fund and World Bank policies. Ten years ago (1993) the World Bank published its annual report, whose title was *Investing in Health*. The World Bank could not ignore that the health indicators and the figures on access to health services have always shown a superiority of national health services or universal compulsory insurance over private insurance. Nevertheless, this was the system suggested or imposed through the “adjustment policies” by the IMF and the World Bank. These measures created limitations to access to health care and injustices in the developed countries, and tragedies in the poor and under-developed countries. It was probably the greatest “human experiment” conducted in history, which was introduced without any impact assessment and any informed consent of the subjects interested.

The policies adapted were based upon private insurance combined with *compassionate conservatism*, an expression used widely by President Bush to mean the refusal or the reduction of universal care and the reliance on charity to assist the poor. The philosophy (or the consequence) is “to let the global market—and the balance of power resulting from it—determine how people are born, live and die; who should live longer and who should die younger.” (Garrafa and Machado, 2002)

I come back now to the first threat, which concerns “worldwide stability and security.”

Traditionally, national and international security was promoted (with ambivalent aims and results) against the threat of aggression across the borders. In the twentieth century, the language of security has acquired broader meanings through the public activities capable to face the risks of disease, invalidity, unemployment and the conditions of

maternity and retirement. Many other essential items were finally added in recent decades, especially food security and environmental security.

Now, the concept itself is being extended in two directions: “downwards from the security of nations to the security of groups and individuals; *upwards* from the security of nations to the security of the international system, or of a supranational physical environment, from the nation to the biosphere.” (Rothschild, 1995)

After 11 September 2001, the tragedy of the Twin Towers has shown how wicked may be international terrorism, which risks it creates, and why all forces should be mobilized against it. Most peoples have become conscious that the world is more insecure and more unjust (one condition influencing reciprocally the other), so that even the more rich and powerful may be vulnerable.

At present, we may be preoccupied for two reasons. One is practical: the risk of terrorism persists and increases in different parts of the world.

The second reason is that the main trend is to forget all other causes of insecurity for the human beings and the planet, to concentrate the efforts (with poor or negative results) only on terrorism, and only on military actions to fight it. Some deep causes which may not justify, but contribute to explain terrorism, have been forgotten. Among them distributive justice, economic and political oppression, ethnic and religious isolation, questions of identity. In this regard a human security approach that answers to questions like “security for whom?” and “what kind of security?” may offer an alternative approach in dealing with many of the problems facing us today.

The selective attitude which tends to see only “one enemy and one weapon” has deep ethical implications. Instead of a pluralistic approach to multiple and environmental needs, and instead of a response which could mobilize popular, intellectual and political energies, the attention is focused versus one enemy, and the only possible agent is considered to be the preventative war.

From the political point of view, such a restriction of the idea of security does not allow to consider the duty of the public power to face other problems, which are equally urgent, and to make possible for each human being to realise his/her essential capabilities as a free individual, and to reconcile personal choices with the universal need for security, working together to overcome the risks facing human beings and the environment.

Moreover, the restriction of the means to reach security only to the use of military and repressive strength, decided by the centralized power of states (or of a single superpower), reduces the spectrum of moral subjects who could contribute to create human security and impoverishes the kind of problematic attention which is typical of modern ethics.

Finally, the restrictive approach to the subjects of security leads to a rigid separation and opposition between who (persons, groups or states) is considered good and who evil,

between the empire of good and the empire of evil. Peoples and individuals, who have the rights to free consciousness and judgement, could be denied the possibility to make distinctions and personal judgements. On the contrary, a broad and comprehensive idea of human and environmental security, which takes into consideration multiple threats and possibilities, may be one of the most promising field for human action and moral meditation, which are more and more necessary in this globalized world.