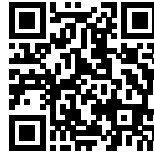




# THE PARETO VOID

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Next August will be the 100th anniversary of the death of Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) and it seems unlikely that the political class he studied with care, which is otherwise so fond of morbid commemorative rituals, will commemorate the Italian economist and theorist of the circulation of elites. We Europeans have forgotten Pareto, if we ever had him in mind. Historical memory, democratic memory, memory of the victims. Vilfredo Pareto fits none of these. You can test this out with search engines. Not a trace. At best, references to Pareto before being the great Pareto. Little Pareto, yes. Big Pareto, no. Economist Pareto, mathematical Pareto, statistical Pareto... Harmless Pareto. Pareto optimality, Pareto 80/20 law, Pareto efficiency law. But no trace of the Pareto whom [James Burnham](#) placed—along with Machiavelli, [Michels](#), [Sorel](#) and [Mosca](#)—among the neo-Machiavellian "defenders of freedom." There are, of course, exceptions. If not, then read [the article](#) by Jerónimo Molina Cano dedicated to the political class.

It would be fair to call this—in order to compensate for such a great injustice, a new social legality bearing the name of our egregious political theorist—"the Pareto void." The Pareto void prevails in that society, regime and/or public opinion in which the teachings on the political class by Vilfredo Pareto or, as the case may be, by some other member of the so-called Italian elitist school (Mosca, Michels) are ignored. In such a society, and in accordance with Pareto's void, the level of political freedom and control of the rulers tends to zero, while corruption, incompetence and nepotism of the ruling class tends to infinity, thus fully complying with Gómez Dávila's aphorism: "The more serious the problems, the greater the number of inept people that democracy calls upon to solve them." Thus, every society tends, according to Pareto, to the Pareto void. And this explains the ignoring of Pareto. Regularity of the political: "We do not know what happens to us and that is precisely what happens to us" (Ortega *dixit*).

In the political assembly of a healthy republic, together with conquerors, founders, missionaries and—preferably—a scarce but necessary representation of corrupt compatriots who remember our common and sinful humanity (since there is no people or nation that can be free of it), there should also be, in a place of honor, a small but visible portrait of Vilfredo Pareto. Seeing this scrutinizer of the political class, with all its miseries and evil intentions, deputies, senators and governors would expectedly lower, at least for a second, their gaze before perpetrating their purposes of the day. The presence of this portrait would have an added benefit—to remind everyone of the mortality of political regimes and also that of their ruling elites. A portrait of Pareto is a *memento mori* for every political class. History is a cemetery of aristocracies, wrote our man with an image worthy of appearing in the Apocalypse.

## More than a Biography

If biography is never a scholarly curiosity, in the case of Vilfredo Pareto this simple truth reaches astonishing levels. On July 15, 1848, he was born in Paris to a French mother. His father, the Marquis Raffaele Pareto, lived in exile in the French capital. Thus came into the world, "*italiano ma anche francese*," Vilfredo Pareto. The date and place of his birth have a powerfully emblematic significance. According to Hayek, the century of European socialism begins in 1848, which is also the year in which the *Communist Manifesto* saw the light of day. "The most important event in the entire modern history of Europe," said one of its most astute scrutinizers, [Lorenz von Stein](#). Initiated in France, the so-called [Springtime of the Peoples](#) of 1848 spread throughout Europe. Decisive in this contagion was the accelerated level of development of communications (telegraph and railroads) within the framework of the Industrial Revolution. Pareto dedicated the beginning of his professional career as an engineer to railroads. Railroads or also "iron roads," in its French etymology (*chemins de fer*). Perhaps a nod to his future mission (as he would later call it) as a sociologist of politics, for politics also has its iron roads (or laws). In any case, returning to the indicated date, it is a known fact that the political, social and moral crisis of that fateful year probably marked a profound rupture in the order of beliefs of the old continent, constituting the political watershed of contemporary Europe.

From a pure Genoese family, Pareto's father, a Mazzinian aristocrat and typical product of the Italian *Risorgimento*, went into exile, as noted, in France because of his support for the new revolutionary movements. This explains why his son, named Vilfredo Federico Damaso, was born in Paris and began his studies there to continue them later in Turin, when his father benefited from a pardon in 1858. Schumpeter says that the same cannot be said of Vilfredo Pareto's classical education as would be said of all the educated people of his time. This is not sufficient description for "the profound knowledge of the Greek and Roman classics which he had acquired on his own, in the ceaseless toil of his sleepless nights." In any case, in 1869, Pareto obtained his doctorate in engineering at the Politecnico di Torino with a thesis on the Fundamental principles of the theory of the elasticity of solid bodies and research on the integration of the differential equations that define their equilibrium. At that time, there was nothing to suggest the birth of future research on other types of bodies.

As an engineer, as already mentioned, Pareto began a successful professional career in the Italian railroad sector. This fact is also fundamental for the long series of disappointments that marked his life. Pareto, son of disappointment. Our man could have embodied the new elite defined by the [Saint-Simonian creed](#), but it seems that he ended up eluding this self-image at the same time that he moved

away from the humanist and enlightened convictions of his father. These convictions also describe his first political commitments, which were also eventually disappointed. A defender of economic freedom against the protectionist enemies embodied in a decadent, weak and cowardly bourgeoisie—the favorite target of his diatribes—Pareto gradually began to make a name for himself in the area of economic thought, eventually occupying no less than the chair of Leon Walras in Lausanne.

By then, Pareto, disgusted by the climate of transformism (*gatopardismo*) of the elite perched in the bureaucratic apparatus, had already given up the political illusions of his youth. He would devote the rest of his life to teaching and study. Like other Europeans disenchanted with politics, he settled in Switzerland. Thus, he remained for history, portrayed as the loner of Celigny, a Swiss commune where he enjoyed his last years before his death in 1923. From his period as an economic theorist comes his imposing, *Manual of Political Economy*. As a result of his tireless dedication and work, came about his last works, *Les systèmes socialistes* (*The Socialist Systems*) and, above all, the monumental *Trattato di sociologia generale* (*Treatise on General Sociology*). Professor Arthur Livingston, who translated the *Treatise* into English, summed it up with a powerful formula: two thousand pages, one million words. As Raymond Aron would later recognize, "*The Treatise on General Sociology* occupies a special place in sociological literature. It is an enormous book, in the physical sense of the word, outside the great currents of sociology, which continues to be the object of the most contradictory judgments. Some regard it as one of the masterpieces of the human spirit; and with the same passion, others assert that it is a monument to stupidity. I have heard these judgments from the lips of people who can be considered perfectly qualified. We find ourselves," Aron admits, "before a truly rare case."

## The First of Us

We will deal later with the reasons for this rarity, but at this point we can hazard a hypothesis about the profound significance of this singular figure. Pareto is an exemplary archetype of the metamorphosis occurring in a current of fin-de-siècle European thought. In a way, Pareto is "the first of us." That is to say, the prototype of post-industrial, post-liberal, post-ideological and even post-modern man. He announced, in his own way, the political disenchantment of the world when the enchanters were still legion. He followed in a certain way the path of critical liberalism that opened its way with Tocqueville, but Pareto's critique went further. It was the man of flesh and blood who discovered himself in the mirror behind the veil of the myth of the new man sculpted in the utopian vulgates, be they liberal or socialist. If we eliminate the religious aspect, there is in Pareto something of Pascal. Like the author of the *Pensées*, the loner of Celigny was the man capable of inventing the calculator or of demonstrating

emptiness without any of this ever quite satisfying him. Dissatisfied with the promises of rationalism and technique, there was something in him that pushed him to dive further or down deeper. Where? In the depths of human psychology, which, although ensconced in the error of lies and self-deception, continues to determine the essence of collective behavior in social and political life. It is in those regions where, if we recall Hannah Arendt's formula, thinking becomes dangerous.

Pareto has been reproached for his style (next to Marx's *Capital* it may seem a model of composition) but the unprecedentedness of his proposal goes beyond formal issues. In his sociological consideration of the influence of the irrational on human behavior, his proposal on "residues" and "derivations" stands out in particular. In Pareto's language, residues represent the constant, irrational core of human nature. It is what remains, the residue, when the veil of moralizations and false rationalizations is removed. For man, Pareto dares to affirm, rationalizes most of his acts. And this is precisely what derivations consist of. They are the camouflage or pretext; that is, the intellectual systems of justification and the "rational" alibis by which individuals or groups mask their passions. Stripping away our declared intentions, Pareto's moral translator exhibits us in our pure animality. Behind every human action presumably motivated by the noblest and most rational pretexts housed in the neocortex, there is an unmentionable, irrational residue hidden in the paleocortex. Thus, Pareto distinguished between logical actions (those of the mathematician or the engineer) and non-logical actions (those of the masses or the ruling elites). In a simple way, he was dismantling the ideological mode of thought that concealed behind the mask of science and reason, disguised under benign appearance the irrational face of human motivations. His interest in Gustave Le Bon's psychology of crowds is a significant indicator of this trend in his thinking. The Paretian theory of residues and derivations has, as can be seen, an air of family with that triangle of suspicion that brings together Nietzsche, Marx and Freud in the secret fraternity of the spoilsports of modernity. The fundamental difference is that this suspicion was not directed by Pareto towards religion, the economy or sexuality but towards the epicenter of social life—the political class. An advanced disciple of Machiavelli, Pareto distinguishes between truth and social utility. Could this political master of suspicion have subscribed to Heidegger's apothegm, "only a god can save us?" Undoubtedly, for false gods can "truly" save the people who worship them. There is no need to appeal to René Girard to understand this.

## **Marx of the Bourgeoisie?**

"Pareto thinks manifestly, and in the first place against his father (and perhaps against the convictions of his youth)," writes Aron. Indeed, like Freud, Pareto wanted to symbolically kill his father's ideas.

However, the one killed here was not God, nor capitalism or patriarchy, those favorite scapegoats of emancipatory and revolutionary ideologies. Pareto assassinates with his father the humanitarian dogmas of the new democratic religion and, with it, the anthropotheism of secular dogmas. "Adversary of all those who have believed in man and in the peaceful and humane future of societies, he becomes"—Aron added—"the adversary of all the political religions of the nineteenth century." After Pareto we can no longer write "Reason," "Progress" and "Democracy" with capital letters. On Pareto's keyboard almost all capital letters are erased and those that remain are under suspicion. This is something we can thank him for.

It has been said of Pareto that he is the Marx of the bourgeoisie. An emphatic but misleading and mischievous formula. Marxist ammunition designed to hide the fact that the author of the *Treatise on General Sociology* drowned with his demystifying gesture the hegemonic critique of established intellectuals (and especially that of Marxists). As Schumpeter writes, "I doubt whether a man who wasted no opportunity to express the great contempt he felt for the ignorant and cowardly bourgeoisie can rightly be called 'bourgeois.'" In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx wrote that "all historical movements have hitherto been movements of minorities for the benefit of minorities." For what other reason than theological or metaphysical would the proletarian revolution escape that rule? Magic or sorcery, perhaps. As Julien Freund, who dedicated a monograph to Pareto, writes, "with a lucidity as insightful as it is profound, Pareto saw that Marx's concept of ideology was also ideological." It is not Marx who explains Pareto but Pareto who explains Marx.

There are many reasons, as can be inferred, that made Pareto an accursed man in the history of ideas, but we cannot avoid the one that has to do with his presumed condition of inspirer of the first fascism. It is speculated that Benito Mussolini attended his classes during his Swiss exile. Emilio Gentile credits him for this. The only certainty is that, after the march on Rome, Pareto was appointed senator for life. A photo finish in a black shirt? Nothing worse could be imagined for the reputation of a skeptic. Certainly, shortly before his death, Pareto wrote that "Mussolini has now revealed himself as the man Sociology can invoke." However, it is easily forgotten that the political situation in Italy at the time led other important disenchanted liberal thinkers such as Benedetto Croce, who would later become a fierce enemy of the regime, to support Mussolini. It seems unlikely that the declared enemy of nineteenth-century political religions would become an adherent of those born in the twentieth century.

In *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, a work of unavoidable reference, Raymond Aron places Pareto alongside Montesquieu, Comte, Marx, Tocqueville, Durkheim and Weber; that is, alongside the great

founders of the discipline. Let us not forget that Pareto also figures among the ten great economists in Schumpeter's work of the same name. However, the courageous recognition of the sociologist Pareto is far from uncontroversial. Pareto never managed to be fashionable, even if sociology was. Perhaps the reasons must be sought in a significant difference of approach. Mainstream sociology allowed the historical dimensions of social facts to be silenced. In Pareto, on the other hand, the comparative-historical method comes into its own. Faced with the predominance of invariant structures of long duration that transcend all epochs and with the microscopism of social facts analyzed synchronically at the margin of all historicity, Pareto's sociology returns, dodging its rationalist reduction, all its protagonism to the anthropological-vital. It is the basis of the theory of circulation, which in Pareto is essentially the circulation of elites. While the dominant sociological method eludes facts, chronologies, biographies, metamorphoses and political events, eclipsed by the everyday, the practical and the economic (present without past or future), Pareto's sociology reverses the chain of fundamentals by raising historical becoming in an interpretative key. Instead of transforming history into sociology, Pareto recovers history for the cause of sociology. By insisting on the determinant role of elites, Pareto enhances the role of ruling minorities as opposed to an anonymist type of sociology that is only interested in the cold aggregates of mass as resulting from the impersonal interaction of individual atoms. Moreover, before the fashions of interdisciplinarity made their way into the academic Tower of Babel, Pareto's work shocked those who refused to build bridges between disciplines or rejected anything that would widen the scope of economic reductionism or social unilateralism. It is impossible to pigeonhole him, Schumpeter points out again, because he did not worship any -ism. All this explains, perhaps, why Pareto is, as Julien Freund says, "an irritating, sometimes unbearable author."

Not much will be said about Pareto on the centenary of his death, but his validity is indisputable. And the void he leaves is like the elephant in the room. If Pareto had not existed, today he would be born again. He, who had already denounced in his day the "absurd mercy for the evildoers" of the bourgeoisie of his time, would today better than anyone else expose the dark interests hidden behind the veil of that malicious philanthropy represented by the victimocratic ideologies promoted by a decadent political class and given to the myth of the Big Other. Pareto would be to sociology today what the Houellebecq of *Submission* has been to literature.

Franz Borkenau, one of his early biographers, writes that it is not known whether he had children, for even that part of his biography remains obscure. Perhaps we Europeans do not yet deserve to be called Pareto's children. We can only hope for the day when we recognize him as our father. A father whom we could not kill without, at the same time, committing suicide.

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