



## The Balance Sheet of the Parallel Action carried out by the Secretariat of the Soul and Precision, 100 Years Later<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*Exactly 100 years ago, Austrian writer Robert Musil's book "The Man Without Qualities" foresaw the cultural challenge that Relativity and Quantum Theory would pose to the Newtonian mechanistic worldview of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His book anticipated the transition that would eventually compel a deterministic, reductionist science of predictability to enter into dialogue with the emerging subjective and intuitive perception of uncertainty, complexity, freedom and creativity, which promises to revolutionize our way of thinking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Musil anticipated the reconciliation of science and the arts – universal, immutable, scientific truth and dynamic, indeterminate human nature. This essay traces the evolution of Economics from a deterministic material science seeking to emulate the mathematical precision and predictability of Physics into a human-centred social science compatible with indeterminism and uncertainty. The notion of Newtonian equilibrium in Economics is rapidly giving way to dynamic, evolutionary disequilibrium.*

Economic thought is heavily conditioned by cultural paradigms. An economist's thoughts concerning Musil could arouse some surprise. Central Europe, the breeding ground of ideas, therefore constitutes great interest for my discipline and the reflection on Musil is an example of this.

Interest in Musil is born from the fact that, like contemporary society, economics too is troubled by problems of uncertainty and radical change. Economists today are searching for a new definition of wealth so as to be more precise about the common objectives to be achieved and the means for realising them.\* Trieste has a very special cultural tradition which has the taste of what Prof. Johnston calls "Skurrile", which is absorbed right from birth along with mother's milk.†

Musil was closely linked to Geneva. It was at the foot of the Salève, the last spur of the Jura which serves as a frame for the city where Martha, Musil's wife, scattered his ashes in 1942. Musil, in fact, spent the last years of his life in Geneva, in two different houses, one of which no longer exists: It stood along the Rieu road that goes towards Carouge, where a series of modern buildings now stand. Earlier he had lived in Grangettes Street where a clinic with the same name and its car parking area are based. Next to it there was an old house

\* The author lives in Trieste, an Italian city in Central Europe, and is proud of hailing from a Central European city.

† See Vienna, Budapest Prague...., p.9, PUF, Geneva, 1988.

which was later used as a store room for materials belonging to the clinic. It was here that Musil lived. He provided lots of details on this place in notes published in French some time ago.<sup>2</sup>

For the purpose of completing this review, I would like to recall a dialogue that introduces the ideas that I put forward here.<sup>3</sup>

My thesis principally concerns an assessment of the balance sheet which is the plot of Musil's book *The Man Without Qualities*. It involves a fairly paradoxical balance sheet, pretty typical of Mitteleurope, given that it means examining something that has never had a beginning and has never really existed. Ulrich's projects are assessed. He is the protagonist of Musil's book, who in 1913 was charged with creating a Secretariat that dealt with precision and the soul. What was the purpose of the initiative for establishing the Secretariat?

It was the month of August 1913 and at that time some German patriots came up with the idea of celebrating the silver jubilee anniversary of Wilhelm II. To clearly underline the fact that they were not completely captivated by the allure of Prussia and Germany, Austria wanted to organise large demonstrations to celebrate. Franz Josef would celebrate 70 years of his reign as Emperor in 1918 – an impossible initiative when one considers the fact that when Musil wrote the book the Emperor and his Empire no longer existed.

But why then evoke the balance sheet of a Secretariat and its activity?

Musil's novel ends up fading away from the reader's mind little by little like sand that dribbles through the fingers and is scattered. The reason is that, paradoxically, what basically was a mere project is today a Secretariat that can boast a positive balance sheet 100 years later.

On what is my thesis of a positive balance sheet based? Here are some points in support of my belief.

The basic idea of celebrating the seventieth anniversary of Franz Josef's reign concerned the possibility of overcoming the cultural barriers which at that time (though in part still today) divided what Musil in his novel calls the two half truths. On the one hand was a world based on the "scientific" ambition to find certainties through physics and mathematics; it is the world of science understood as the realisation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century utopia that aimed at assuring society of a future made up of certain definitive and absolute knowledge. On the other hand however, Ulrich, the protagonist of the novel, is condemned to impotence because human reality and what it is to become are often based on more or less irrational intuitions and ideas (it is not possible to relate them to defined certainties in the Cartesian manner), thus challenging the mechanistic and deterministic expectation of the inevitable. Is Musil, therefore, as many have superficially defined him, the expression of a form of European decadence that leaves only a half part of truth to deterministic science? I am not of this opinion; quite the contrary. Musil opens up the way to a new culture in which science is no longer only deterministic but postulates a dialogue with indeterminism which is rooted in the soul, in human nature. Seen thus, he represents the beginning of a possible European rebirth. This thesis is supported today by many.<sup>4</sup>

But let us proceed in an orderly fashion. In the first place, it should not be forgotten that Musil spoke of “two half truths” because he knew them both well. He had written a thesis on Mach, was an engineer and liked mathematics. Moreover, in the novel Ulrich himself often recalls that mathematics represents the field in which he seeks to fulfill his aspiration toward precision. However, right from his previous book *The Confusions of Young Törless*, one sees that Musil finds the irrational and instinctive aspects of the human being very attractive. Despite this, he does not allow himself to be influenced by the stereotypes and the atmosphere of Vienna at that time. In fact, the judgement that Musil often expresses on Vienna – everything is documented – is that Vienna is a provincial world, decadent, incapable of arranging its own survival in contemporary reality. The place one had to go to at the beginning of the twentieth century in order to find a more consolidated European culture was Berlin. Musil, like Karl Kraus, is often pretty caustic in his criticism of Vienna of that time. *The Man Without Qualities* begins with the account of how strange things were in the kingdom of “Kakania” (Kakanie = Kaiser und König). A world which no longer had enough self belief to fight and to offer the synthesis “of the soul and precision”. Ulrich would end up alone and lost. The whole of Europe would be lost in its mad attempt to transform a half truth into an increasingly totalising whole truth.

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*“A civilisation cannot truly give itself or create for itself a future if it schizophrenically separates the ambition for scientific precision from human cultural ambition.”*

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Little by little as the novel develops we realise that what Musil is trying to free is the New Man, the man who will arise in the crisis situation in which Europe finds itself, a Europe seen as the extrapolation of the Viennese world of the Austro-Hungarian Empire of 1913 on which few hopes could any longer be founded. At that time there was no longer the spirit to give birth to a new culture, a new model capable of dealing with uncertainty rather than being subjugated by it. Another proof of Musil’s positive and optimistic will is found in his pretty severe criticism of Oswald Spengler and his thesis concerning the crisis in the West. This crisis, terrible though it was, was not inevitable according to Musil; it was not envisaged among inescapable “scientific events”. We should understand that we are not *one* absolute truth, that man is not complete, that man is a project and that a civilisation cannot truly give itself or create for itself a future if it schizophrenically separates the ambition for scientific precision from human cultural ambition, in the broader sense. There is then an unbridgeable gap into which it becomes dispersed and disappears.

Why then do I today allow myself to suggest the idea that the Secretariat succeeded? If we think of what the humanistic disciplines, particularly economics, have tried to do till now, we would not have the impression that this was the case. Even today my fellow economists try to be taken as seriously on the scientific level as a physicist, a chemist or a biologist. They believed in this possibility when many years ago some Nobel prizes were awarded for economics. Until very recently this discipline’s ambition was to try to offer a clear and certain identifica-

tion to the socio-economic analyses as was the case with the natural sciences. The big innovation from the beginning of the century, from Musil's time, was the fact there was a reversal of positions in the natural science field, and particularly concerning physics. Indeterminism, the uncertain, gained greater space increasingly in the territory of philosophy and science, whether it involved Karl Popper,<sup>5</sup> another "Austrian oldie" or Ilya Prigogine.<sup>6</sup> All this took place against a background of the development of quantum physics.

*"There is no room for an absolute truth fixed in time. Even the very notion of time is changing."*

What do these great intellectuals deal with if not with the fact that the Secretariat suggested by Musil for uniting the two half truths, the scientific truth and the truth of the much more undefined and indeterminate human nature, might be able to find a meeting point? Here was the new world, culturally, socially and psychologically capable of bearing the uncertainty that gives meaning to any project whatsoever, avoiding the danger that it might become totalitarian. It is about a battle therefore to obtain greater freedom, greater conscientiousness and responsibility in freedom. Everything began when Einstein struck a bitter blow, however reluctantly, against Newton's world of reality, despite the fact that he spent a large part of the last thirty years of his life seeking to prove that physics could again be founded on certainties fixed and absolute in time and space.

So, what occurred in scientific thought? It happened that the concept of uncertainty gradually but increasingly replaced that of certainty. Today, for most scientists, modern science is no longer a kind of edifice in which a sure definition of a reality is established, one that preserves its validity in time and space once and for all.

Science is not an edifice to which bricks are added from time to time and in which every element represents a certainty that is valid forever. Every time science produces a brick, a new building material, this material makes it necessary to review the whole construction system concerned. What is needed therefore is a dynamic vision and not a vision in which an eternal, universal and immutable truth is set definitively in time and space. Truth will never be found, only a greater truth. Any truth whatsoever from the past is redefined and changed into new "truths". There is no room for an absolute truth fixed in time. Even the very notion of time is changing.

The history of evolution itself appears increasingly not so much as a series of balanced situations, but as a sequence of situations of imbalance. It is the identification of an imbalance that allows us to suggest a purpose and to highlight the alternatives in which the possibilities of development are even greater. The definition of "balance", in fact, defines a purpose that can prove to be an "imbalance", if the circumstances affecting observation and perception change. Some books on mathematics can also be quoted, such as Klines in particular, that highlight how for a given problem, the sustainable logical and mathematical possibilities can offer differing, yet equally valid, solutions.<sup>7</sup> So what we discover, then, is the impossibility of turning to the ideas of the deterministic era of the last centuries on natural science in order to justify deterministic visions or visions according to which the future can be considered only within the inevitable development of an evolution whose only way out is held to be scientific.

Evolution can take different directions: These appear determined only a posteriori, while everything that happens in the future is uncertain. Fortunately. In other words, it is through the acceptance of the notion of uncertainty in the natural sciences that the rift can, paradoxically, be welded into a new union between the human sciences and the so-called exact sciences. The latter, which are actually not exact except for a limited period in time and space, are different from human sciences only in a different degree of uncertainty and in the high level of empirical verification. In this case, it is a matter of a cultural influence which appears in some publications and which justifies the idea that the Secretariat of precision and the soul suggested by Musil, through Ulrich in his novel, really has achieved its work a hundred years later. One can speak of a positive balance sheet, even when starting from an idea that was never actually realised from the organisational point of view. The two semi truths are no longer schizophrenically separate. We find ourselves in a post-Cartesian reality in which ideas are no longer eternally distinct. If they remain so they often become irreconcilable. The fact that between the field of human knowledge and another one there are grey superimposing areas is increasingly gaining consensus. There are no necessarily irreconcilable gaps between poetry, literature, economics, political sciences, chemistry, physics etc. The inspiration of the great poet meets the intuition of the great physicist. The custom of cutting up reality like slices of salame has not been a useful tool for advancing research in a number of fields. This ancient school of thought was at the base of the European disaster in the first half of the last century. Responsibility for this can be laid at the door of the exclusive nation-state and the lack of understanding of political federalism can be condemned as being “confused” because it admits and in fact stimulates and guarantees a division of sovereign powers at various levels.

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*“Uncertainty constitutes the true possibility of progress.”*

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This way of presenting the thesis on uncertainty is clearly too quick and perhaps excessively ambitious. It will probably be a long time before European (and world) culture will have enough courage and maturity to welcome and develop these ideas, to accept uncertainty without having recourse to such ideas, stupefying substances and intellectual or ideological drugs in the hope of eliminating life’s problems both in daily life and in their historic context.

Let us, however, seek to avoid building castles of a new Middle Ages in the false hope that we will be able to hide behind those walls. Others would not understand what we are doing, and besides in this way we can enjoy greater security. It is precisely through this behaviour that psychoanalysts will easily understand that we are building walls to protect us from our insecurity thus preparing our own ruin in the “unstable” reality of the contemporary evolving world. It is a question of understanding that uncertainty is within things. Uncertainty constitutes the true possibility of progress. When we run through risks by breaking the limits of particular sectors, greater survival and growth are guaranteed.

The future of Europe revolves around the level of such uncertainty: I believe that the day the full importance of Musil’s Secretariat of precision and the soul is recognised, the whole of Europe will take a step forward towards civilisation and towards its integration into a world that might otherwise forget Europe, just as it has forgotten the reign of Franz Josef of Austria.

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**Notes**

1. Robert Musil, *L'Homme sans qualités* 2 volumes (Paris: Seuil, 1979) and the many translations in several languages. The first version of this commentary was written in 1988
2. Robert Musil, *Journaux* (Paris: Seuil, 1981)
3. Orio Giarini, "Dialogue à propos d'un centre de réflexion sur l'incertitude," *CADMOS*, no. 32 (1985)
4. Marie-Louise Roth, *Robert Musil, l'homme au double regard* (Paris: Balland, 1987)
5. Karl Popper, *The Open Universe, An Argument for Indeterminism*, ed. William Bartley (London: Hutchinson, 1982)
6. Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *La Nouvelle Alliance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979); Orio Giarini, "L'incertitude de Newton à Heisenberg un nouveau paradigme pour," *I Quaderni di Ginevra* 9, no. 33 (1984) : 396-409
7. Morris Klime, *Mathematics – The Loss of Certainty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980)