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# Keynes's Message, Method and Language in the Works of Fausto Vicarelli

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay examines Keynes's theoretical message, method and language, and traces their presence in the works of Fausto Vicarelli and in his intellectual legacy. Since the 1930s, following Keynes, the explanatory core of the business cycle has been located in the instability of the saving–investment relationship. Keynes regarded economics as a branch of logic rather than of mathematics — a way of thinking, not a pseudo-natural science. He did not write in the esoteric jargon of mathematicians addressed to a few colleagues; he used instead the language of those whose understanding and support were necessary for policy intervention. Following Keynes, Vicarelli stressed that economics is not an isolated body of knowledge but one inseparable from philosophy, psychology, history and politics. For him, economics was an important scientific discipline, yet unable, by itself, to capture the essence of human social behaviour.

**KEY WORDS:** Keynes's message; Keynes's method; Keynes's language; Vicarelli's vision
**JEL classification:** A13 – B22 – B31 – B41

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Fausto Vicarelli was a post-Keynesian economist whose economic thought, like that of Kalecki, Robinson, Kaldor, Minsky and Davidson, remained close to Keynes's. His vision of the economic system differed both from that of the "Keynesians of the synthesis" (Hicks, Samuelson, Modigliani, Okun, Klein, Tobin) and from that of the New Keynesians (Akerlof, Blinder, Mankiw, Stiglitz), who built their economic models by accepting many assumptions of New Classical Macroeconomics. This essay examines Keynes's theoretical message, method and language, and traces them in the works of Fausto Vicarelli and in his intellectual legacy.

## 2. KEYNES'S THEORETICAL MESSAGE

Macroeconomic theory begins with Keynes (1936) who, after criticizing the practical relevance of neoclassical economic equilibrium, proposes monetary and fiscal policy measures aimed at fighting unemployment and stabilizing the business cycle. Keynes observes that the cycle of economic activity, which may give rise to economic instability and to uncertainty in financial markets[1], derives from the disparity between aggregate saving and investment, while downward nominal rigidities of wages and prices may generate disequilibria in labour and other markets.

Federico Caffè (1990) reminds us that although unemployment, as a possible chronic effect of deficient effective demand, had long been asserted in the "underworld of heretics"[2], it gained full academic recognition only after the Great Depression. Until then, Say's Law dominated the economic policy literature and public opinion; but while this non-trivial proposition holds, in principle, in a

The main lines of this essay were presented to the meeting "Keynes nel pensiero di Fausto Vicarelli" organized, for the thirtieth anniversary of Fausto Vicarelli's passing, at the Faculty of Economics of Sapienza Università di Roma.

[1] This issue inspired Hyman Minsky's research (1975), which investigated the role of financial markets in the economic crises of advanced economies and, furthermore, the work of Fausto Vicarelli on capitalism instabilility.

[2] By this name, Keynes indicated a group of socialist ricardian economists, like Hodgskin, Thompson, Jones, Bray, Gray and Ravenstone in England, Rodbertus e Dühring in Germany e Saint Simon, Fourier, Proudhon e his followers in France, who anticipated the marxian theory of surplus value. They had the merit to indicate the great importance of unemployment, vis à vis which, as Dobb (1973) observes, the orthodoxy had remained blind. They, though, were unable to give a comprehensive interpretation of it and, in particular, to show how the exchange of non equivalents, i.e. the surplus value, could be reconciled with free competition.

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barter economy, the same need not apply in a monetary economy, where money serves not only as a medium of exchange but also as a store of value.

Keynes underlines that economic crises are essentially related to the level of investment produced by the economic system and to the paradox of thrift. If, for whatever reason, entrepreneurs reduce their investments, effective demand in a closed economy will fall short of full-employment supply, thus giving rise to an overproduction crisis. In this situation, moreover, entrepreneurs' expectations will worsen, investment will be further reduced as consumption declines, excess manpower will be dismissed, and household disposable income will drop.

Two kinds of economic fluctuations remain of interest to macroeconomists today: first, the substantial and prolonged deviations of the unemployment rate from its long-term value; second, the set of synchronized changes of the main macroeconomic variables, GDP in particular, around their trends, which give rise to business cycles. To account for them, we need a theory that can explain and predict, through a macroeconomic model, the effects produced by shocks, whether real or monetary, on the key variables of the economic system (GDP, employment, price levels, money demand, interest rates, and so on). With Keynes, since the 1930s, the explanatory core of the business cycle has been the instability of the saving–investment relationship.

## 3. KEYNES'S METHOD AND LANGUAGE

The *General Theory* was the point of arrival of a backward journey accomplished by Keynes between the two World Wars: from the economic orthodoxy of free trade (Keynes, 1913) and Cambridge monetarism to the "Keynesian revolution"[3] — in other words, from the ineffectiveness to the revaluation of economic policy. Keynes, of course, was not born Keynesian, but Marshall's role was decisive in setting him on that journey and in leading him to conclude that it was theory that had to adapt to practice, not vice versa. This methodological position characterized Keynes's reflections vis-à-vis those of the Cambridge philosophers of his time, such as Ramsey, Russell and the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*.

It is very interesting and emblematic, though not unique in the history of research, that such a swing between contrasting theoretical positions could occur within the same scholar. Indeed, a similar process may be found, on philosophical ground, in Wittgenstein's shift from the denial of metaphysics (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) to its revaluation (*Philosophical Investigations*). Here the roles played by Keynes (1921) on the logic of uncertainty and its relation to human knowledge, by Frank Ramsey pragmatic tutorial objections[4], and by Piero Sraffa's proddings to develop the theory of language games, were utterly significant on Wittgenstein's change of mind.

In the works that testify to their theoretical revision, both scholars develop an organic analysis, based on a non-demonstrative rather than an atomistic logic and delivered in everyday language. In this sense they propose a logic of opinion rather than a logic of truth (Romagnoli, 2005). One problematic aspect concerns the relationship between meaning and truth after the final renunciation of the semantic univocity of language in favour of explanations of meanings according to their use. With the myth of the unity of language, the ideal of philosophy as a normative science also falls, and logic itself assumes the status of "a" language, not of "the" language (Wittgenstein, 1953).

[3] In this sense, the Macmillan Report together with the works of the "Economic Advisory Committee" and of the "Committee of Economists" show that, in the two years period (1930-1931), Keynes' vision of the trade policy had changed completely. The "Addendum" to the "Macmillan Report" drafted in order to face the sterling crisis on the international financial markets, stated that an employment increase could be raised either from higher exports or from import substituting production and larger investments. It refused the alternative remedies of lower monetary wages, competitive devaluations in favour of indirect devaluations realized through customs schemes and capital development: "[...] if nations can learn to provide themselves with full employment by their domestic policy, [...] there would no longer be a pressing motive why one country need force its wares on another or repulse the offerings of its neighbour, [...] so as to develop a balance of trade in its own favour. International trade would cease to be what it is, namely, a desperate expedient to maintain employment at home by forcing sales on foreign markets and restricting purchases, which, if successful, will merely shift the problem of unemployment to the neighbour which is worsted in the struggle" (Keynes, 1936, p. 382).

[4] It is famous the sentence credited to him «What cannot be said cannot be said and cannot even be whistled», alluding to Wittgenstein habit of whistling.

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In the works that testify to his theoretical revision vis-à-vis his first writings, Keynes rejects logical positivism in economics. Economic agents operate according to beliefs, opinions, probabilities and expectations, all of which may change. Persuasion and ordinary language, rather than demonstration and formal logic, therefore become the proper policy instruments. The opposite was the methodological position widely shared in those years (Popper, 1934), and it is still followed by several scholars today.

Keynes was never tired of fighting for what he believed to be not merely necessary, but attainable. Impressive examples of his struggles concern the fallacies of composition in aggregation[5]. For Keynes, as for other critics of methodological individualism, some properties of complex systems cannot be explained, in principle, on the basis of their individual attributes, because of what Veblen (1899) had called "emergent properties". In particular, Keynes's organicism denied both Menger's (1983) atomistic view of society and the neoclassical assumption that wholes are mere aggregates. This position underlies both his paradox of saving and his theory of wages. It clearly shows that even when economic agents behave rationally, there is no guarantee that the economic system will produce rational results for society as a whole. The atomistic foundations of neoclassical orthodoxy support a solid theory of the firm and of income distribution; the rationality assumption allows rigorous deductive reasoning, which leads different approaches to an impressive and comprehensive analysis. But, for Keynes, the rational and the real do not necessarily coincide (O'Donnell, 1992, pp. 177-178).

Keynes regarded economics as a branch of logic, not of mathematics — as a way of thinking, not a pseudo-natural science — whose complexity was due to behavioural variance, expectations, errors (such as money illusion) and uncertainty, as well as to the difficulty of facing complex phenomena like the economic recessions of the late nineteenth century or of the 1930s. Keynes, like Marshall before him, made little use of mechanistic mathematical economics, which can only account for a foreseeable world[6].

For this reason, the failure of the "Keynesian" economic policies of the 1970s was due not so much to the inadequacy of Keynes's model as to the inability — or perhaps the refusal — of that generation of economists and policy-makers to take into account the necessary, though demanding, conditions for combining high employment with low inflation. The achievement of these two conflicting targets required either institutional changes or adequate economic policies, such as incomes policies (Romagnoli, 1984), in order to regulate social conflict and direct it towards the widening of the productive basis, rather than towards aims different from the declared ones. Disbelief in such changes lends strength to the Kaleckian argument that only high unemployment can discipline social conflict. The inability of many of Keynes's epigones, and the more or less conscious short-sightedness of the policy-makers who depended on their advice, in dealing with the unsustainable tensions that full-employment Keynesian policies imposed on the capitalist system, drove Keynes's model first to its extremes and then to its theoretical disestablishment.

For Keynes, a certain amount of academic consensus was a necessary first step towards action, and this aim required persuasion, in the awareness that the risk of adopting the apparently boldest choice is generally lower than the risk of inaction (Harrod, 1951). But since he preferred action, he did not write in the esoteric jargon of mathematicians addressed to a few colleagues; he used instead the language of those whose understanding and support were necessary to undertake the intervention: politicians, bankers, civil servants, journalists and the general public who read him. While writing, he did not survey everything that had been written on the issue at hand (though the economic literature of his time was not as sizeable as it is today); only when his analysis was complete did he confront it with those of his predecessors. In this way he overturned the theory of saving and the economic reasoning that linked the formation of sizeable savings and investments to distributive inequality. The *General Theory*, borrowing from Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, turned a private virtue (saving) into a public vice, and a private vice (consumption) into a public virtue (Keynes, 1936, ch. 23).

As early as 1919, Keynes's *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* marked a radical change in his thought: from the nineteenth-century idea of an "automatic" economic progress, supported by liberal institutions, to a vision of the future in which economic prosperity is the outcome of a hard struggle against the unfavourable circumstances created by the war. Keynes also turned the old idea of the incompatibility between a fair income distribution and progress into the revolutionary doctrine that saw the former as a

[5] These fallacies emerge when a characteristic of a phenomenon is erroneously inferred on the base of its single elements. To this wide problematic, which concerns aggregation, is tied the need to elicit the theoretical foundations which throw light on the relationships between the effects of individual and aggregate behaviours.

[6] We have awarely entered the age of uncertainty when, between the Twenties and the Thirties, the hypotheses either on economic and social stability or on present and future states of the world have revealed themselves precarious and not associable to *a priori* knowable objective probabilities.

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basic condition of the latter. This view might have become the basis of a radical economic programme, had he so wished. But he preferred a different direction: the socialization of investment and a policy of low interest rates designed to stimulate private investment, or at least to slow down its fall, even though these measures might favour the euthanasia of the rentier. Keynes was not hostile to the basic elements of the private economic system: these were minor evils for him, and he was prepared to lose something on the side of economic freedom if this was the price to be paid for full employment and economic prosperity.
In this sense the *General Theory* was at once the obituary of a past world and the perspective of a new one, marked by uncertainty and imperfect knowledge, which required a continuous search for the best possible equilibrium rather than for a notional or natural one. Nonetheless, Keynes conceived all this within the existing political framework. To attribute the unemployment of a laissez-faire economy to the levels of saving or of the interest rate was tantamount to lifting responsibility from other actors and economic entities. Keynes let entrepreneurs pursue their interests without taking charge of the social problem of unemployment — although, in his time, he was referring to a parsimonious, capital-hoarding bourgeoisie rather than to the consumerist one that would prevail after the Second World War. He likewise lifted from the trade unions the responsibility for the unemployment due to excessive wages, in a world where capital was scarcely mobile and the winning of international trade shares did not necessarily imply beggar-thy-neighbour policies. In particular, his advice on the need for symmetrical adjustments between deficit and surplus countries, on the regulation of raw-material production aimed at stabilizing the international cycle, and on the discouragement of speculative capital movements, remains valid. By and large, however, it went unheeded, with dramatic consequences for a fair and peaceful world economic system (Romagnoli, 2023).

## 4. FAUSTO VICARELLI'S VISION

On these same convictions Fausto Vicarelli carried out his research on several issues — employment, capital accumulation and the allocation of saving in an open economy (Ciocca, 1994; Gandolfo,1999; Marzano, 1999) — where theoretical and empirical analysis and economic policy prescriptions were always intertwined with ethical concerns. His relevant contributions on these issues addressed the interactions between domestic and international markets, industry and finance, savings, investment and income distribution (Vicarelli, 1977).
His applied analysis was not restricted to connecting the analytical model to quantitative and institutional data in order to validate it, according to the paradigm linking theory, information and knowledge. For him, the production of goods was only the basis for the expansion of resources, including the infrastructures necessary for the development of welfare. His growth model therefore embodied relevant social aspects as well (Vicarelli, 1979; 1981). Like Keynes, he did not look at economic problems in isolation from their real context, but as elements of a unitary system. In this light one may find his explanatory key to the Keynesian controversy, which highlighted the limits, and settled the conclusions, of what he called "the traditional Keynesian model" associated with the works of Hicks, Modigliani and Klein (Vicarelli, 1974a; 1974b; 1980).
For Vicarelli, as for Keynes — and, we may add with Kaldor (1955-56), already for Ricardo — attention to income distribution was due not only to an interest in the distributive shares per se, but to the idea that distribution theory was the key to understanding the whole economic system, i.e. the forces which regulate the growth rate, the incidence of taxation, the effects of trade policies, and so on. In brief, the use of income depends on its distribution.
Vicarelli's thought emphasized that any explanation of the economic process, whether in advanced or in developing countries, must consider how its parameters are bound to international economic relations and to the institutions designed to stabilize the international cycle and to promote the development of poor countries.
In the climate of financial and monetary instability, inflation and unemployment of the mid-1970s, Vicarelli devoted his analysis to the relations between firms and finance in Italy. Moving from Keynes and Minsky (1975), he concentrated on the instability of the capitalist system (Vicarelli, 1983). His in-depth analysis dealt with the contrast between investment and financial wealth and with the operating behaviour of the owners and managers of productive capital. His basic hypothesis was that in imperfect capital markets the uncertainty tied to investment returns cannot be reduced to a risk calculation (Gnesutta *et al.*, 2008).
This hypothesis deserves closer scrutiny, for it is the point at which Vicarelli's fidelity to Keynes goes deepest. Its foundation lies in the distinction, drawn by Keynes (1921; 1937) and in parallel by Knight (1921), between risk and uncertainty: risk is measurable, since the possible events are known and each can be assigned a probability, whereas uncertainty in the proper sense concerns events for which, in Keynes's words, there is no scientific basis on which to form any calculable probability whatever. The investment decision, which commits capital over long horizons and in irreversible forms, belongs constitutively to the second domain.

Whereas the neoclassical synthesis had neutralized this distinction — reducing uncertainty to risk, expectations to probability distributions, and financial markets to efficient allocators of measurable hazards — Vicarelli takes it seriously and draws from it three systemic consequences[7]. First, liquidity preference is the rational response to uninsurable uncertainty: money, as the bridge between present and future, measures the agents' distrust of their own conjectures, and is therefore non-neutral even in the long run (Vicarelli, 1977). Second, investment decisions rest on conventions and states of confidence which may change discontinuously, so that instability is not a remediable imperfection but a constitutive property of a monetary economy of production. Third — and here Vicarelli's encounter with Minsky (1975) becomes decisive — when uncertainty cannot be insured, the liability structures through which investment is financed themselves become a source of fragility: the validation of debts depends on future cash flows that no calculation can guarantee, and the system may slide endogenously from hedge to speculative positions.

On this ground the contrast between productive capital and financial wealth ceases to be a sectoral question and becomes the key to the instability of the capitalist system as a whole (Vicarelli, 1983). Nor is the hypothesis a mere addition to Keynes's method: it is its application to the heart of the theory of accumulation, since the irreducibility of uncertainty to risk is the economic translation of Keynes's rejection of demonstrative logic. In today's context, where finance has assumed a global dimension, its predictive force has only grown — the crisis of 2008 may be read as a Minskian validation on an international scale — and those problems, which Vicarelli examined within the Italian economy of the 1970s, have acquired an importance he had foreseen rather than witnessed.

Following Keynes, Vicarelli stressed that economics was not an isolated body of knowledge, but one inseparable from others such as philosophy, psychology, history and politics. Moreover, for him there were two sets of ethical rules: those which involve human reputational capital, and whose breach causes a monetary loss to those who break them; and those whose observance depends on internal bonds, and whose breach entails no economic cost (Vicarelli, 1981). In the long run the market economy relies on both; but for Vicarelli the market could be legitimized only by civil society, since it might fail — as for Keynes — to secure the full employment of labour and of other resources. Confronted with the paradoxical contradiction of unused labour coexisting with unmet wants, Keynes suggested, some ninety years ago, that it was possible to eliminate mass unemployment — an absurdity in an affluent society.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, for Vicarelli economics was an important scientific discipline, yet unable, by itself, to capture the essence of human social behaviour. People act on both economic and ethical motives, and no separation should be assumed between them — a separation that has instead been progressively presupposed since *homo oeconomicus* became the reference of economic science, whether by inspiring the atomism of the Austrian School or through Wicksteed's claim (1910) that economic discourse ends whenever the economic agent is motivated by "tuism", i.e. by direct concern for the interests of the other party. Human rationality, unlike that assumed by pure cycle theory, includes meta-economic aims. Economics rests on effective demand, not on notional demand. Volunteering responds to the latter — and Fausto Vicarelli did a great deal of it.

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[7] It is worth noting here also his epistemological coherence with the second Wittgenstein: the irreducibility of uncertainty to risk is the economic translation of Keynes's rejection of demonstrative logic. If probabilities are not numerical, nor always comparable — this is the thesis of the *Treatise on Probability* — then economic reasoning is a logic of opinion, and persuasion, not calculation, is the instrument of economic policy. In this sense Vicarelli's hypothesis is not an addition to Keynes's method: it is its application to the very heart of the theory of accumulation.

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