



Raul Gardini, a visionary and imperfect man

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Visionary and imperfect. Visionary and imperfect. And again, visionary and imperfect.

Hands have some hesitation as they spell the adjective “*Imperfect*”. This hesitation derives from the fact that our sympathies sometimes would like to prevail over reasons and, when they materialize, especially if we are discussing a historical figure, it is not so easy to use some adjective “*unpleasant*”.

Well, the figure of Raul Gardini has the ability to arouse sympathy, a great ability. It matters little that he hasn't been with us for thirty years or that he has made several mistakes during his life: the “*corsair*” – as a certain press of the time defined him – is still favorably remembered by many public opinion in the Belpaese.

However, continuing to remember him on the basis of mere likes – or dislikes, because they too proliferate – no longer serves the collective memory any longer. Because the hagiographies alone, so widespread in this country, almost always end up collecting little or nothing of the earthly experience of those who no longer exist.

And Gardini's human experience, whether he likes it or not, is full of lessons that would do so much good for mine and for future generations.

Imperfect. Big companies are big companies to the extent that they survive the departure of their leaders. And if that doesn't happen, it's probably because the bosses weren't bosses. Or, I add, because the leaders hadn't adequately projected themselves over time, underestimating the perils of the case.

There would be so much to say about the co-responsibility for the collapse of both Montedison and the Ferruzzi group, both led by Gardini, but this is not the right place. The fact is, unfortunately, that these two glorious companies did not survive the leader's departure, essentially crushed by the weight of debts (about 31 trillion lire, according to Mediobanca's calculations back in 1993) and by the Tangentopoli investigation (for those wishing to deepen, v. "Enimont process").

Many analysts rightly maintain that Gardini has tragically underestimated – or ignored – many risks: the national political system and its distant aims on the chemical industry; the role of Mediobanca, which has always been very attentive to the interests of Montedison and, lastly, the balance of the family. Risks that Gardini could have partially remedied through the search for a common purpose with Mario Schimberni, excellent director of Montedison between 1980 and 1987 (for those wishing to learn more, see "*A Capitalism for all. Mario Schimberni's Montedison and the dream of a public company*" by Germano Maifreda, Guerini and Associates, 2018).

There is something, however, that goes beyond the mere underestimation of the risks and is called ingenuity. In my opinion, Gardini's mistakes depend on his ingenuity and it is he himself who admits it in his autobiography when he reconstructs the failure of the Enimont affair.

"I always sin of naivety. Voluntarily. I am convinced that without a good dose of ingenuity one can never achieve anything in life. We all have a duty to be naive. And generous too. But we also have a duty to be careful and to become furious when our naivety is betrayed" etc. (see "*Raul Gardini, My way*", edited by Cesare Peruzzi, Mondadori, 1991).

Gardini, therefore, lacked that natural coolness that every garment, especially in a complex context like the Italian one, should use in some decisive moments of his career.

Visionary. In Nietzsche's philosophical vision, three metamorphoses of the spirit are identified: the phase of the camel, that of the lion and, lastly, the phase of the child.

Rereading his autobiography, I believe that the last years of Gardini's life give us children the memory of a man who, like the lion he was, wanted to become a child.

This transition, although interrupted by all the questions (human, economic and judicial) and by the many errors we know, was not useless and, with the unawareness of many, has left many traces in the contemporary era.

We basically owe two things to this man: the introduction of the bioeconomy in Italy (for those wishing to learn more, I suggest the book by Mario Bonaccorso "*The man who invented the bioeconomy. Raul Gardini and the birth of green chemistry in Italy*", Edizioni Ambiente, 2020) and, in general, the ability to interpret the changes of time well in advance, playing the role – for himself, for his companies and, finally, for Italy – of forerunner and not of pursuer.

“However, current agricultural surpluses should also be conceived as a valuable raw material for non-commercial industrial uses. The fact that for millennia an ear of wheat was seen as only a source of nourishment should not prevent us from considering the possibility of using it differently [...].

In the near future, a leading role will be played, as I have already mentioned, by the development of agrobiotechnology [...]. This new way of doing agriculture, as well as being intrinsically more ecological, will be able to supply industry in the necessary quantities with renewable and cleaner raw materials: in fact, detergents, plasticizers, adhesives, polymers, medicines, fibres, lubricants – not to mention some products – can be obtained starting from agricultural raw materials; not to mention the use of biomass for energy purposes, which in several countries already constitutes an important reality and which, under the pressure of urban pollution and the rise in oil prices, appears as a necessity – as well as a opportunity – ecological, economic and strategic now essential”.

These reflections, extracted from a 1987 speech by Gardini entitled *“Towards a new agriculture”*, heralded the advent of a new economic cycle to a civil society still little attentive to environmental issues. A cycle that, just a few years later, would have given birth – under the impetus of Montedison di Gardini itself – to the first biodegradable and compostable plastic, MATER BI, which is now widely used and used for the production, for example, of ecological bags (for more info , <https://www.makeyougreener.com/blogs/notizie/novamont-materbi-alternative-alla-plastica>).

Of course, the ethanol project with which Gardini, anticipating the imminent regulatory changes, aimed at replacing lead with ethanol as an anti-knock agent for petrol, was not as successful. However, it was a mere matter of time because, as we know, when the progress machine starts up, delays can occur but events take place anyway.

And Gardini believed in progress, and how if he believed in it. In one of the final passages of his biography – it was 1991 and the world was changing its face – Gardini heralded the end of the bureaucratic systems, at least as they had been up to that time, and the advent of a new global order.

“It is no longer the time for fictions or bureaucratic apparatus. I believe that the bureaucratic apparatuses were the consequence of the border restrictions. Everything was much more complicated and manual. Today, having a larger space available, with faster systems, both for accounting and for acting, lightness becomes easier to possess. It was like having a small farm with a large tractor: it is much better to have a large farm with a tractor that gets through it in due time. Today, one must have the perception of space and know that it is boundless. For this you need the minimum of fast structure capable of covering it in an orderly manner” [...].

Current words yesterday, current words today, in a time when the space of social, economic and political relations has become boundless and the lightness, that same lightness felt by our grandparents after the war, is still crucial for us kids and for everyone those to come.