

Emotions and Politics: Educational Implications

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Abstract

Review Article

The fact that emotions – and not reason – are at the basis of our choices and our social and political action is today widely proven and recognized in many areas of knowledge: from neuroscience to psychology, from biology to philosophy and sociology. However, it is a fact equally evident also the manipulation of emotions by politics: we need only think of the “social construction” of fear on immigration issue, or disgust on the topic of sexual orientation. Knowing the value of emotions and, at the same time, knowing the danger of apathy, of emotional indifference, for a healthy democratic life is an educational responsibility, if it is true that the vitality of a democratic society depends on how its citizens were educated. In Italy, civic education has always been lacking and has not been able to define its objectives well. The result has been increasing electoral abstention and political disinterest on the part of young people. Understanding the role that emotions play in the active involvement of the younger generations in the socio-political problems that affect them can help education to build more effective political education projects.

Keywords: Emotions, socio-political experience, education.

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STARTING FROM THE ORIGINS

In his reconstruction, on a biological basis, of human evolutionary history, Humberto Maturana traces back to education – which he means as a process of inserting young people into adult life – the origin and expansion of harmonious coexistence between individuals, based on cooperation, reinforced by the sharing of food, sealed by the game and by the 'caresses'. When, he argues, within small groups “this happened, and when this way of living together was preserved from one generation to another through the apprenticeship of young people, our lineage was born as a way of living together in mutual care, in the pleasure of being together, in physical proximity, in sexual intimacy and in play[1]”.

The fixing and summing up, in this form of common life, of recursive and participatory acts must have produced the language, as an instrument of coexistence and conversation, which integrates young people and adults and which characterizes us as *lineage* not only biological, but also cultural, “of bipedal primates, centered on the pleasure of closeness, participation and sharing[2]”.

Now, since the cultural dimension of the human lineage is subject to more sudden changes than the biological dimension, as these can occur already in

the transition from one generation to another and not over millennia, it is legitimate and appropriate to look at the becoming of humanity as a cultural becoming, in which “we human beings can adopt and preserve any cultural way of life that does not eliminate adults before that way of life is learned by the young people of the next generation[3]”. Thus, the biologist and philosopher of complexity observes,

“For the biosphere, the earth, the cosmos, it is indifferent whether we live or not, whether the human lineage is preserved or not preserved. At the same time, for the biosphere, the earth, the cosmos, it is indifferent what cultural lineage we live, whether we live in love, collaboration and well-being, or in submission, in fear or in the endless suffering of continuous cultural denial. It is to us human beings that it cannot be indifferent if we live or live together in one way or another, because we exist in networks of conversations in which we can reflect and ask ourselves if we like or do not like the coexistence we live in[4]”.

It is from this question, according to Maturana, that our socio-political consciousness takes shape. Our way of living, no matter how aware it is or not, *politically* directs the society we live in, because it makes society take on a certain form. It is a form

generated by the emotions that underlie the answers to the question of whether we like or dislike the kind of cohabitation we have established and within which we find ourselves living. At the same time, it is a form which will also have an educational value, because it will work on the formation of the feelings of young people “who directly or indirectly live with adults, whose living and coexistence inevitably leads them to accept or reject them [5]”.

Countering indifference: a political and educational responsibility

Understanding the interconnection between politics and emotions and between politics and education means, therefore, for Maturana, reconstructing the origin of the associated living: a living characterized, to use the words of the Chilean scholar, by “recurring interactions”. By recurring interactions he means social behavior stimulated by an emotion: in the absence of such an emotion, there is no history of recurring interactions, and there are only random encounters and disintegration.

Two pre-language emotions would make such a story possible: rejection and love, given that “rejection constitutes the space of behavior that denies the other as another legitimate in cohabitation; love constitutes the space of behavior that accepts the other as another legitimate in coexistence [6]”.

These two emotional states, however, “are not alternatives, because the absence of one does not imply the presence of the other, and both have indifference as an alternative [7]”. These are two opposite conditions with reference to the consequences they entail in the context of cohabitation: “rejection denies it, love constitutes it. Rejection constitutes a space of recurring interactions that culminates in separation; love constitutes a space of recurring interactions that expands and can stabilize itself as such [8]”. It is love, therefore, that opens up spaces for coexistence, where there may be those ‘coordination of shared behavioral coordination’ which, in the history of development, have produced human language and, subsequently, democracy. According to Maturana, one cannot think of democracy in terms of a “design of social order, because democracy, in fact, is a *conspiracy* based on the desire to live together”, while claiming to design a social order means “opening the space to tyranny”, claiming to establish the having to be social[9]. More precisely, he speaks of *ontological conspiracy*, not in a metaphysical sense but by referring to the authenticity of the human being, which manifests it in that:

“Freedom of action that is achieved by sharing a desire, which serves as a reference to guide the activity of conspirators in coexistence. Every time we establish an agreement to do something together, so that there is no need for mutual control, because we act in sincerity by accepting

and respecting each other, we act within an ontological conspiracy [10]”.

Now, it is within this democratic conspiracy that the Constitution and the laws are born, as “norms that allow us to correct the mistakes that are made in the common intent” and that allow us to “always act responsibly with respect to the desire that unites us [11]”.

Far from being an expression of a merely procedural justice, the Constitution is an expression of the desire for a common project of coexistence in which poverty, abuse and exploitation “are errors to be corrected and corrected because we wish to do so”. This is why indifference, as the absence of a desire for coexistence – the absence of “political emotions” Martha Nussbaum would say – is an enemy to be opposed, both for the survival of democracy and for the very survival of the humankind. According to the American philosopher, in fact:

“There are two tasks for cultivating public emotions. One is to generate and sustain a strong commitment to valuable projects that require effort and sacrifice: for example social equity, the full inclusion of marginalized or excluded groups, environmental protection, aid to other countries, the national defense. [...] The emotions directed at the nation and its objectives are often of great help in inducing people to become more open minded and to commit themselves to the common good. The other task related to the care of public emotions is to control that tendency, rooted in all societies and, ultimately, in all of us, to protect a fragile Self by denigrating and overshadowing others [12]”.

So far the message of the Chilean scholar and the solicitations of political philosophy. Taking into account these indications, it is interesting to ask how the emotional state of the citizens appears in Italy today.

A look at the Italian reality

The sociological observation on the emotional state of Italians, in particular of the younger generations, with reference to political momentum or desire intended as participation in the construction or maintenance of good coexistence, has been showing, for over twenty years, a photograph of marked disinterest and disengagement, well expressed by the widespread electoral abstention.

The political commitment of the new generations is becoming increasingly scarce, intermittent and superficial. This tendency is so evident that it has led to the attribution to the new generations of labels such as that of an ‘invisible generation’ or ‘daughter of disenchantment’, characterized by the

eclipse of politics and by a progressive reflux in the private sphere [13].

Some causes of this phenomenon are to be found in the structural peculiarities that characterize Italy and determine, more than in other countries, the slowing down of the socio-economic independence of young people and therefore the inclusion in the social and working world, a prerequisite for a full and conscious exercise of political and civil rights. This delayed acquisition of social and economic stability would affect the constitution of the individual's identity and the definition of subjective interests, resulting in a deferral in the assumption of social, civil and political responsibility by the new generations [14]. Furthermore, the increasing precariousness of the employment condition would favor an increase in *distrust* for the social and political institutions, perceived as distant and scarcely interested in the problems linked to the youth condition[15].

However, it would be incorrect to speak of the absence of political participation. It is a fact that social interest today is expressed through unconventional forms of participation compared to traditional ones, recognized in joining a political party and electoral participation [16]. The new forms of mobilization concern protest activities, volunteering, public demonstrations, critical consumption and, although they do not involve the majority of the Italian youth population, they constitute an indicator of emotional vitality in a political sense that avoids the danger – for the survival of democracy and in general for the survival of human society – the prevalence of the emotional state of indifference.

And yet, in this scenario, the problem, as the sociologist Francesco Raniolo observes, is that the new multidimensional character that political participation has assumed in our democratic society implies an ever increasing incongruity, found in the fact that “citizens participate less in politics to engage more in the social and voluntary work [17]”. In other words, their political involvement is “ineffective if it is not possible to see any correspondence between the intentions of the participants and the results of their action on the decisions of the rulers [18]”.

Towards a definition of the educational problem in politics

In order to restore effectiveness to political participation, it seems necessary, therefore, to redirect the emotional impulses towards social justice on the tracks that lead to the truly effective processes of incidence in the choices of government: the processes that lead to a conscious and responsible voting.

This does not mean inclining towards what, often hastily, is indicated as education to a democratic citizenship of a procedural type, for which what matters

is the formal adherence to the institutionalized rules of the social game: in this sense, the adjective ‘procedural’ is synonymous with emotional coldness and formal participation in the life of society. On the contrary, this means recovering in that procedure all the affective vitality that still makes the Constitution a living and emotionally strong document, revealing that “desire for a project of coexistence” mentioned by Maturana.

Since the sixties of the last century, psychology has been shedding light on how our emotions work, and therefore we can no longer afford to set them against rationality in a simplistic way. The tripartite model, which emerged from Magda Arnold's first cognitivist studies [19], is a model that is also recognized as the basis of political actions and gives them meaning:

“The individual orientations include various components, including: *a) cognitive orientations*, that is knowledge, exact or not, of political objects and beliefs; *b) affective orientations*, that is to say feelings of attachment, commitment, rejection and the like towards political objects and *c) evaluative orientations*, that is judgments and opinions on political objects[20]”.

In the continuous interaction between knowledge (true or false), affects and evaluations it is possible to see the role of an educational action in this context: that of creating the conditions, through an integrated work of promoting in-depth knowledge, encouraging the expression of emotions and a guide to evaluation and self-assessment processes, for political choices without conditioning, prejudice or external manipulation. In other words, for free and authentic choices aimed at the interest of coexistence.

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