

(Ri) educate to Political Participation: The Democratic Challenge

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In recent decades, an increasingly significant break in the bond that binds politics and subjects has been affirmed. An increasing number of citizens have distanced themselves from politics and its party drift and have ceased to recognize themselves in it and in its institutional representatives. This process has pushed the subjects towards individualistic orientations and privatization of the experience. The increasingly low level of political culture of the citizens, both outcome and cause of the growing disaffection and deresponsibilization, exposes to the risk of an increasingly demagogic, populist and low democratic policy. The last decades, therefore, have undermined the conditions for the existence of a “critical citizen”, a priority objective to ensure fully democratic decision-making and government processes. The goal of a full and widespread democratic participation requires training courses of political culture, starting from a rethinking and a redesign of the times and spaces of training so that widespread conditions of learning knowledge and skills elicitation for a full voice are guaranteed

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Introduction

In recent decades, a break in the link between policy-makers and an increasing proportion of citizens has been growing. Citizens have distanced themselves from politics, ceasing to recognize themselves in it and in its institutional representatives. This process reflects and amplifies the crumbling of the sense of belonging to a political community and of personal and collective responsibility for a process of improvement that has ceased to be thought as possible.

The sense of betrayal that many citizens have experienced because of what we can define the partisan drift of politics has contributed to trigger this distance from the public arena (Canfora 2022), from the *agora* as Bauman wrote in 2002, ending with the production of vicious circuits of renunciation to any forms of *vocality* (Hirschman 1983) that could instead allow a virtuous reversal of march.

One element that played a major role in the process of loss of confidence in the political system has been the progressive expropriation of the most significant choices from the political system in favour of the economic one. Thirty years ago Touraine (1997) wrote that compared with the classical formula of a political sub-system called upon to define the aims and the economic one required instead of organizing the resources for the pursuit of the ends, increasingly, it seems that the economy whereas fulfils the function of identifying ends, forcing politics to a

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dramatic run-up¹. This process of progressive contamination of the political sphere with the economic one has in parallel emptied the political community of part of its decision-making power by transferring it to the economic area. However, the economic area contains regulatory mechanisms, profoundly different from the political ones and not calibrated on the plurality and the comparison of differences², and often not tempered by a rationality with respect to the value.

The subjects found themselves increasingly poor in power and opportunities to participate in the government of the state and local communities. These dynamics have produced the further effect of accelerating the progressive distance-taking and the growing distrust towards the institutions and the loss of the sense of belonging to civil society. These processes have accentuated and accelerated the shift towards individualistic orientations and privatization of experience that expose the subjects to the risks of *blocks by strategic rationality* (Cassano 1990). As consequence, the conditions for collective action are no longer met, while the risk of *free riding* is becoming more marked. This term alludes to the entirely rational choices of abstention from participating in collective action by those subjects who, in a completely strategic way, know that they cannot be excluded from any possible benefits even if they have not borne any cost. As noted by Franco Cassano, the absence of a strong value orientation that can temper the purely rational choices ends up denying the conditions of collective action. This phenomenon of “downward participation” represents a sign of a democracy in distress (Mindus 2014).

The private withdrawal is accentuated by the low degree of political effectiveness perceived by subjects and collectively. The feeling of not being able to affect the political level, in fact accentuates the distance lived with respect to the public dimension and the idea of the common good itself.

These processes are circularly linked to the progressive impoverishment of the level of political culture³, also because of the disappearance of the role of political formation played in the past by the parties and the absence of other collective players able to fill that gap. The ever-lower level of political culture of citizens is together the outcome and the cause of this growing disaffection and de-responsibility, exposes them to the risk of an increasingly demagogic and populist policy that loses its anchorage of legitimacy in the *legal-rational dimension* to

¹“Since the 1960s and especially the 1970s, global national projects have been exhausted, paralyzed internally and attacked from the outside (...) the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (...) pushed all countries to implement structural adjustments that firstly involved the demolition of the old political controls on the economy” (Ceri and Borgna 1998, p. 28).

²“Democracy exists when all citizens participate to decide on every issue relating to the direction and government of their politeia. And of course, decisions on every issue are taken by all citizens by majority voting” (Papanikos 2022b, p. 108).

³It is essential to be aware that culture as school or university qualification is anyway a guarantee of solid and consolidated democratic processes. On the contrary, the culture understood as knowledge and sedimented experience can create the conditions for a full affirmation of democracy. “Political ‘animals’ are able to get more education which is a necessary condition to build a better politeia. It is not sufficient though; democracy requires its ‘animals’ to have virtue. Pedagogy makes an ideal individual to be a citizen of an ideal democracy. In the meantime, and through education with virtue, political ‘animals’ can become better. Improvement is the objective of a modern politeia. Perfection and other utopias can wait” (Papanikos 2022a, p. 360).

move towards the *charismatic-personalistic* one⁴. Reciprocally there is a growing reference and reliance on individual political personalities and new leaders who, too often, move the debate from the rational level to the emotional one (Biorcio 2003).

The last decades, therefore, have undermined the conditions for the existence of a “critical citizen”, as wrote Norris (2003) already twenty years ago, a necessary and priority objective to ensure fully democratic decision-making and government processes. Democracy is suffering from a legitimacy crisis (Papanikos 2022b; Cecchi 2018, Facello 2012, Corbetta and Tuorto 2005, Tuorto 2002), starting from the betrayal of public expectations at different level due to several factors: demand (rising public aspirations for democracy), information (negative news about government), and supply (the performance and structure of democratic regimes) (Norris 2011)⁵.

The complexity of the socio-political scenarios which the subjects are called to deal with, makes it increasingly necessary a thought complex itself. Only this kind of thought is able to not indulging in mere choices of simplification that expose the subjects to the risk of heterodirect models, starting from a difficulty in developing its own political thinking. This can encourage the uncritical research of what Antonio Mutti defined as the “mediators of trust”, subjects to be trusted and that mediate precisely, simplifying, the complexity of the scenarios in which the subjects live and are called to operate their choices⁶.

In the absence of high levels of political culture, complexity becomes a chaotic universe in which subjects struggle to venture. Even if democracy is not a static concept (Papanikos 2022b), education is, today more than in the past, one of its essential prerequisite: “a better democracy requires better-educated voters; people who read and write is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition. Reading an article and recalling the message it portrays is a key issue for democracy. How people process this information becomes an integral part of the democratic process and is the necessary condition for a better democracy” (Papanikos 2022b, p. 91). Canfora (2017, p. 48) writes “How can the foolish people decide for themselves?”, resuming the debate on democracy written by an Anonymous Athenian. It is precisely for these reasons that in a more and more complex world, a low level of culture and political culture determines continues attempts to escape from complexity (Ceruti and Bellusci 2020, p. 13) and its multiple interconnections in favor of what Edgar Morin defined as the “paradigm of simplicity” (2000, 2007) become more and more frequent. At political level, citizens are frightened by increasingly global processes which they do not understand and over which they feel they have no control, with the consequence of being exposed to the risks of populist, simple and simplified solutions. A dramatic example is the increasingly

⁴According to Buskila et al. (2022) that examine Netanyahu’s political personality, also Papanikos states that, “beyond the specific political figure considered by the authors, the emotional intelligence may be used to manipulate others to meet their personal political objectives” (Papanikos 2022b, p. 92).

⁵Norris (2011) has continued to examine the symptoms by comparing system support in more than fifty societies worldwide, challenging the pervasive claim that most established democracies have experienced a steadily rising tide of political disaffection during the third-wave era.

⁶For a broad analysis of the theme cfr, among others, Carrera (2006).

widespread verbalization of hatred of those who have marked the boundaries, making them the identity markers, in the name of a newfound essentialism that, once again, exposes people to the risk of political paths guided by traditional and rigid identity models (Sciolla 1993, 2003). Certainly, identity, as an important opportunity for continuity that persists in change, appears particularly essential in the over-modernity which Marc Augé writes about. In the current fluid society, characterized by an incredible acceleration in terms of events, spaces and times, in a *fluid society* (Bauman 2000) the contact with *the other* becomes daily (Bettini 2020)⁷. In this complex scenario, the identity, represented as a threat in a clear polarity, is simplified and reassuring. It is the boundary of “we” that defines at the same time who is “other”, who does not belong, who - recalling again Bettini (2020)- “has got the wrong forest”.

Identity is one of the keys that more than others could be an effective reducer of complexity, understood in the Luhmanian sense. Within the current socio-political scenarios, identity can fulfil the function of simplifying processes, of strengthening borders, of being a criterion of sense and choice. But it can be translated into its most extreme version becoming a real “identity obsession” (Bettini 2020, Appiah 2019). Populism is often sustained by the dissatisfaction of ordinary people who do not know what to do, by their exasperation towards complexity. “Populism is at the same time a determinant and an effect of the crisis of the political parties as representative bodies” (Fruncillo 2022, p. 285)⁸. It is “an ideology that considers society as being divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt élite’” (Mudde 2004, p. 543).

The philosopher Slavoj Žižec states that in many cases, this incompetence to govern complexity, takes the form of the “mysterious figure behind the scenes” whose presence can explain everything is happening and that otherwise seems meaningless. It is the conspiracy culture which Arendt wrote about (2004)⁹, which represents a sort of effort to *normalize* reality (*à la* Harold Garfinkel), the attempt

⁷The identity, writes Bettini (2020) is actually a lexical bubble. The identity of a person, of a community, of a place is a process of continuous changes, a flow that is consolidated from time to time in norms, values, models, even words, but that soon exceeds becoming other and in need of new words that are able to account for it. But to accomplish its task, this trait is concealed in favor of fixity.

⁸One of the traits used by Domenico Fruncillo to define populism rests with its positive assessment of the figure of the strong leader, which shows not only what populism opposes, but also what it favors. In the logic of populism, the leader does not simply represent the citizens’ interests, but actually personifies the people and incarnates their hopes, expectations and fears. The leader can take decisions quickly because he or she has a direct connection with the people and is not conditioned by the structures of representation, rules and procedures which govern decision-making in representative democracy. Populism thus presents itself as a form of democratic government, but without the parties (Fruncillo 2022, p. 287).

⁹“The modern masses do not believe in the reality of the visible world, their own experience; they do not trust their ears eyes, but only their imagination that can be affected by what is seemingly universal is in itself coherent [...] what the masses refuse to recognize is the randomness that pervades the whole reality and they are predisposed to all ideologies because they explain the facts as simple examples of certain laws and eliminate coincidences by inventing all-encompassing omnipotence that is supposed to be the root of every totalitarian propaganda thrives on this escape from reality in fiction, from coincidence in coherence” (Arendt 2004, pp. 485–486).

to report what appears meaningless within known conceptual frameworks that make plausible and normal what is different from the reality taken for granted.

The Intelligence of Complexity

Gastón Bachelard writes that *the simple* does not exist, it is instead *the simplified*. There are not simple phenomena because every phenomenon is the result of a network of relationships¹⁰. It is necessary to recognize the deep distance that separates the modern complexity made of bonds, of interactions, of integration, of emergency of unbreakable connections from what is rather only “complicated”. It is because of this changed scenario, that each theory is called to test itself not for its ability to reduce complexity to simplicity, but rather for knowing how to translate complexity into a theory from a later approximation aimed at defining always dynamic equilibrium levels. In this dynamic there is the echo of Georg Simmel, with his amazing capacity for analysis¹¹, who had described the need and, at the same time the impossibility, of enclosing the complexity of the world in theories and words defined once and for all. He described and named this scheme “the tragedy of life”. The continuous pattern of references and excesses between “forms” and “life” takes shape in the continuous search for new theoretical categories able to fix a constantly changing and increasingly complex reality. He started from the recognition of a progressive complexity of the reality that requires an equally progressive complexity of our theoretical and conceptual apparatus. Simmel wrote, “Every higher culture of our species is paradoxically based on this: that, in the measure of our development, we must tread, for our purposes, increasingly longer, more detailed, richer stations and curves”. The need, therefore, more than the possibility of dealing with complexity imposes a new *epistemology of complexity* capable of distinguishing and linking, going beyond the principles of identity and of “non contradiction”.

Dioguardi writes, “the great variety of interdependencies often not evident and the total effects usually unpredictable, (...) determine a state of complexity (...) that cannot be understood starting simply from a Cartesian analysis carried out in a partial and reductive form on the individual elements. It is essential to make an observation on the global behavior of the system, thought of as unitary, even in its composition of partially autonomous variegated parts” (2017, p. 135).

The reference is the “ecological thought” about which Morin (2000, 2007) writes. Interaction and integration need to be understood not as sum, overlap of technologies, but as system of organization of knowledge: “The structure of knowledge, which functions as principles and rules (...), involves operations of

¹⁰“There are no simple phenomena; the phenomenon is a plot of relationships. It hasn’t a simple nature, a simple substance; the substance is all a tissue of attributes. There are no simple ideas, because a simple idea, as Dupréel has noticed, must be inserted, in a complex system of thoughts and experiences, so that we can understand it” (Bachelard 2018, p. 131). For a deepening of the Bachelardian themes cf. among others, Polizzi (2015) and Castellana (2020).

¹¹Jürgen Habermas defined Georg Simmel a “zeitdiagnostiker” by commenting on his ability to analyze the incoming modernity makes him able not only to understand his time but also to identify its lines and trends of development.

interconnection (conjunction, inclusion, implication) and separation (differentiation, opposition, selection, exclusion). The process is circular and goes from separation to connection, from connection to separation and then from analysis to synthesis and from synthesis to analysis. In other words, knowledge entails, at the same time, interconnection and separation, analysis and synthesis. Our civilization and, consequently, our teaching have favored the separation more than the interconnection, the analysis more than the synthesis. As consequence, interconnection and synthesis are remained underdeveloped. This is the reason because of what both separation and accumulation, without the interconnections of knowledge, are favored more than the organization that interconnects knowledge” (Morin 2000, pp. 18–19).

Therefore, generating this competence of complex thought becomes the difficult but necessary challenge that is faced by every democratic project. At every territorial level, in fact, the governance of processes presupposes a systematic and capable of interrelationship thought.

The goal of exploiting differences and different points of view is the basis of democratic pattern and requires learning processes of knowledge and skills to govern complexity. In this perspective, skills for complexity are necessary both for citizens and for administrators (Bobbio 1985, 2007). The growing need for a rethinking of public administration structures, based on a different training of officials and managers is focused on a new kind of responsibilities for the governance of complexity. This complexity has been improved by the need to include citizens within the decision-making processes through participatory, widespread and inclusive paths.

The world of second modernity, overwhelmed more than ever by that pathology of acceleration that already authors like Simmel, Benjamin, Nietzsche, recognized as the founding character of the modern era, has become the place of the multiplication of possibilities, without that the previously selected possibilities can however be the guiding criterion for the subsequent choices. In this perspective, a complex thought, necessary more than useful for the governance of complexity, has to be interdisciplinary and contaminated by *other knowledge*. It is the critical knowledge, the critical awareness able to avoid the risk of the *semiculture* from which Theodor Adorno warned in the last century. *Semiculture* could be defined as a large body of information that does not consolidate in critical knowledge and exposed to the dangers of speeding up the experiences denying the conditions for the process of knowledge that instead requires time for reflection. Subjects are increasingly overwhelmed by “a flood of information, without the time to succeed, if ever possible, in elaborating them all, sucked as we are in the vortex of an accelerated life” (Ceruti and Bellusci 2020, p. 12).

The complex nature of political thought is intimately linked to the conditions for a full affirmation of democracy, understood as plurality of voices that do not degenerate into fragmentation and chaos (Prigogine 2014).

In order to return to “take over the world” (Cacciari 1976), we need to reconstruct cultural and material conditions in order to generate a complex thinking capable of ecological approaches able to accept the risk and the limits to confront differences and interconnections. We need an *intelligence of complexity*,

a competence to exercise a complex thought that knows how to connect and welcome nuances, that is able to give shape to what is not simple, to grasp the gap between the complexity that is made of bonds, of interactions, of integration, of emergency of unavoidable connections, and the complication made, instead, of accumulation, of differentiation, of decomposable and sampleable compounds.

The method of complexity can show how much the whole is the result of interconnecting of the single parts, and the need of interdisciplinary approaches and of specific skills for the political culture. The complex nature of political thought is, in fact, intimately connected with the conditions for a full affirmation of democracy, understood as plurality of *voices*. It is therefore presented as a fundamental competence to be able to express *voice* choices, and the ability to know how to *vocalize* their own point of view and, with equal competence, to be able to compare themselves with other ones (Runciman 2019). This lowers the risk of individualistic *exit* choices and *free riding* behaviors which deny the conditions for collective action.

Complexity and democracy live a strong bond, and the inadequacy of thought in a scenario that Ulrich Beck defines as risky one¹² - because everyone is exposed to the *consequences of the secondary consequences of choices* -, opens up the risk of a search for monocausal explanations of events. Faced with scenarios that seem incomprehensible to us for the multiplicity of variables and interconnections that characterize them, and not being prepared for multicausal approaches and causal circularity, often the results of this simple thinking is both the mechanisms of denial of the need for change, in analogy to those analyzed by Edgar Schein¹³, and the search for scapegoats¹⁴ guilty for what lived¹⁵.

Building the Material Conditions of Political Culture

The goal of full widespread and diversified democratic participation¹⁶ requires training paths of political culture¹⁷, starting from rethinking and redesign

¹²On the concept of social context as a scenario of risk, cf. Luhmann (1996).

¹³Edgar Schein, in discussing the conditions and difficulties of introducing changes within a complex organization, identifies at least three mechanisms activated, more or less consciously, by the subjects to resist the change itself: the denial of the need for change, the minimization of the impact that change will generate, the search for the scapegoat to blame for the need to alter established routines.

¹⁴The figure of the scapegoat is complex. It indicates an innocent victim who, polarizing around him and on the design of each other, the insidious poisons of mimesis, saves the community from the internal crisis, generated by the destructive effects of rivalries that fuel the undifferentiated unanimous desire for revenge. The violence on the sacrificing victim limits a greater violence without corrective intervention and the scapegoat would lead to excess the internal crisis of the community precisely for another way, the expiatory victim, with the most the same death, He draws an unbridgeable difference between himself and his persecutors. In that empty space the catharsis of the community is realized (Girard 1999).

¹⁵Too often, this tendency is even reinforced by those who politically use fear, to orient what Mongardini (2009) calls "the community of the fearful people".

¹⁶The awareness of the diversification of forms of political participation made necessary to ensure recognition not only of the form of *traditional participation*, but also of that of *non-traditional participation* and *invisible participation* (Carrera 2010).

times and spaces to ensure the structured conditions of learning knowledge and skills elicitation for a full *democratic voice*. It is essential, in fact, to go beyond the episodocity of these paths, in favor of structured and repeated occasions over time, and also to foresee the existence of public or semi-public spaces where those paths can be realized. In this perspective the *third space* is a very strategic opportunity (Carrera 2020a). It is the set of places built *ad hoc* or re-designed for this objective, such as “neighborhood houses”¹⁸, school auditoriums, associative spaces spread over territories that can be the place for those opportunities of training aimed at citizens in an undifferentiated way and regardless of the specific place of residence, thus protecting the principle of territorial democracy (Carrera 2020b).

Third spaces are urban experiences of overcoming and crossing borders that can generate inclusive practices of encounter and cultural contamination. Bhabha (2001) already assumed them as central within the process of hybridization between differences, as area of negotiation of meanings and representations. A space able to destabilize the hierarchies and the defined and consolidated schemes, a place in which new opportunities and new possible reconfigurations of meaning can be created. Within the given city and the defined spaces, the third space is the place of possibilities, of uncertainty, it is the gap through which change can make its way. In this perspective, third spaces present themselves as a material occasion to recover the awareness given to us by Heinz von Foester when he urged us to act in such a way as to increase the number of possibilities, not only for ourselves but also for others.

In this perspective, the city and the (re)design of urban space are strategic elements for the implementation of training political processes, starting from the implementation of minimal and widespread structural interventions within the urban territory (Amendola 2000, Villanti 2006). New forms of appropriation of urban space are generated also from the need to create a new knowledge which finds physical form in cities, but that goes beyond these. Participation skills put to the test starting from the urban plan, the territorial level closest to the citizens. Cities, in fact, are laboratories that should be observed and governed as organisms in continuous metamorphosis that cannot disregard the categories and paradigms of processing and complexity; the challenge of articulating heterotopic practices from the perspective of creative rebellion for the right to the city and the transition to a new and shared urban and political future (Dos Santos Jr 2014).

Third spaces present themselves as well as opportunities and tools to weaken the risk of resentment, a feeling that arises, as Max Scheler writes, in response not

¹⁷In these decades the conception the practices to favor the participation have been very different point from the political one of struggle of the years ‘60 and ‘70 that involving emotional with consisting in taking part in debates and simulations of conflictual situations. social media has introduced other interactive forms that are expressed at a basic level with likes, tweets, but also through blogs, Youtube, Facebook. Other important experiences have been carried out in the social artistic field to give life to architectures, urban planning, co-planning of innovative processes (De Biase 2017).

¹⁸The House of neighborhood in Turin is a very important reference for this kind of spaces and, starting from this experience, in 2010 was born the Turin network on neighborhood Houses, to the date eight, and more numerous other experiences at the national level. <https://www.retecasesedelquartiere.org/>.

only to an experienced discomfort and to the presence of *the other* perceived as the cause of that discomfort, but also to the sense of powerlessness, to the systematic inhibition of any possibility of response. “A particularly violent tension between the development of the impulse of revenge, hatred, envy on the one hand, and impotence on the other” (Scheler 1912, p. 4). The resentment that undermines the conditions of the encounter is weakened if it finds spaces - figurative and literally - to represent itself and to dilute itself in the recognition of the different identities and rights claimed. *Third space*, as a place of meeting and of expression, but also of planning and therefore of change can be the space where people can earn back their political powerfulness and, consequently, a possible antidote to the *self-poisoning of the soul* (Scheler 1912) that undermines the deepest premises of democracy.

Conclusions

Political participation, starting from the paths and skills that are functional and indispensable to create its appropriate conditions, is itself a strategic tool able to create the conditions of fully democratic contexts. Participation, in turn, requires a thought capable of complexity and therefore of interdisciplinary skills, critical awareness and political culture. This “intelligence of complexity” needs specific and structured times and spaces offering the conditions for its full realization. In this perspective, third spaces represent an important resource, capable of providing the conditions for political skills and mutual recognition meeting and difference mutual recognition in order to overcoming the idea of “the others” relegated to the role of obstacles, or even of enemies. If, as Stefano Tomelleri observes in the Introduction to René Girard’s Essays, “the fusion of two or more equally desirable gazes in a single horizon inevitably entails the risk of conflict” (Tomelleri 1999, p. 4), it is precisely the politics, the Weberian art of mediation and compromise, that can be able to govern complexity.

The enhancement of third spaces and opportunities for political skills building processes is one of the solutions related to the *double loop learning model* about which Argyris and Schön wrote. This defines the path towards the solution of an ethical refoundation or, in other words, of a cultural and political refoundation of democratic participation. This is therefore the way to build processes of (re)education to political culture and therefore to the skills necessary for a full participatory democracy.

In conclusion, starting from these political and cultural paths, the cities and their government can facilitate the perspective of “emotionalization of democracy” which Lash wrote about (1999). This means the opportunity to bring emotions, enthusiasm, identity into play. The emotional charge seen as a drive to collective action (Walzer 2001), is able to overcome the sense of futility and to pose as an alternative to the sense of duty, questioning the primacy of cognition. This means adding to the capacity of synthesis, which is already beyond the one of disaggregating analysis, the ability of keeping in play the emotions spread, creating the conditions for a full social expression of the problems and

consequently weakening the risk of resentment. Starting from the cities, we can imagine a future that is not a mere prolongation of the existent tendencies (Belli 2006) and to pursue the objective to support every urban part to extend its ability to find a role and a place in the city governance, considered as a system of interdependent parts. Creating the conditions needed by the citizens to design a personalization of the political space, starting from the urban space, means countering the risk of a wider incapacitation (à la Sen). Attacking the mechanisms that determine social exclusion means reinforcing the active role of social actors starting from inclusive participatory processes that know how to go beyond the tolerance of the different, towards models of full recognition of the right to each own diversity and to fully participate in political life.

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