

# Educating Democracy in the Global Age

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## 1. Global Challenges

Are we living through a crisis of democracy today? Rather than a *crisis*, a thesis that actually unites different voices of the contemporary debate, I would prefer to talk about *challenges* to democracy (Ferrara 2014). And above all, I would like rather to underline the lesson of Tocqueville (Tocqueville 1994): namely the vision of democracy as a dynamic and open process, as a fragile structure, always exposed to pathologies and endemic degenerations. In this regard, the concept of “disfigured democracy”, recently proposed by Nadia Urbinati, seems more appropriate to me (Urbinati 2014).

The problem then is to identify the different *pathologies* emerging in democratic societies: while taking into account, I would like to underline, the inescapable intertwining between the *transformations of the social* and the *forms of subjectivity*.

Among the many challenges to which Democracy is exposed today I would like to briefly touch on what can legitimately be defined as the two major global challenges (Pulcini 2012). Globalization, or rather what I prefer to define *the global age* - to underline the discontinuity and continuity with modernity - produces two unprecedented phenomena:

the challenge of difference,

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the ecological crisis.

### *The Challenge of difference*

The erosion of territorial boundaries and the great migrations are weakening the traditional separation between the inside and the outside and making *the other* become a new figure that, with Georg Simmel, we can call the “stranger within”, “the one who comes in order to stay” (Simmel 1950).

The challenge of difference causes negative passions and strongly erodes the fabric of solidarity, challenging the normative idea of pluralism that occupies so much space in the contemporary debate. “Hobbesian” passions, like fear, reborn in an extreme form, which are manipulated by political elites who use fear to construct an enemy (a scapegoat) through which to preserve the cohesion of society. This corresponds to the appearance of forms of *populism*, not devoid of violent manifestations, with which atomized individuals, deprived of a public sphere, incapables of criticism and true dissent, give rise to forms of plebiscitary consensus and rediscover the illusion of pseudo-participation in adhering to the “soft despotism” (Tocqueville 1994) of a charismatic leader.

In my opinion, today the fear of the other as different is the main core of this process and its pathological drifts. A vicious circle is established between *fear* of those who are different and the resentment with which they respond to exclusion and hostility, which tends to result in an escalation of violence.

### *The ecological challenge*

The second global challenge to democracy is the ecological challenge: a problem, underestimated to say the least, if not denied (take Trump for example), by contemporary democracies, and not just by the political elites.

The interdependence of events that characterizes the global age is primarily concerned with environmental risks (from the nuclear threat to global warming): they are the most striking manifestation of the erosion of borders and the planetary extension of the risk. The control of what has been called “global risks” (Beck 1992) escapes the power

of politics (understood in the territorial and state sense), which has long been subordinate to the great global powers (above all economic and financial). It is an increasingly impotent politics tending towards entropy as a sort of immune (obviously illusory) reaction to impotence. Corresponding to the impotence of politics is the indifference, if not *denial* (in the Freudian sense), of citizens worried about their immediate interests and apathetic towards these phenomena which they perceive as abstract and uncontrollable. Democracy, increasingly reduced to the management of the emergency and the defence of particular interests, loses that planning capacity and the foresighted gaze which Tocqueville recognized as one of the virtuous traits of democratic societies (just think of how the instrument par excellence of democracy, elections, today tend to shrink the time span of political choices). And this results in a *loss of the future*, paradoxically reversing the logic that had been at the very origin of the legitimacy of the modern age: that of a constant progress towards the best. A sort of unconscious intergenerational egoism prevails that endangers, if not life, the dignity of life of the future generations.

## 2. *A New Ethos for Democracy*

To cope with these challenges, democracy needs an *ethos*, or rather to reconstruct an ethos that can be up to the radical changes of the global age: and that, I would like to immediately point out, can necessarily involve *both the institutions* and *the subjects*.

Reconstructing an ethos first of all requires a trust in democracy: and this means starting from the conviction that democracy is in the first instance a “regime of possibilities” (Zagrebelski 2012), that is, an anti-dogmatic dimension par excellence, a process that is constitutively open and exposed to transformation. Second, reconstructing an ethos requires what I would call a *paideia*: a watchful eye that is able to enhance the emancipatory aspects of democracy each time and neutralize the negative ones, with an attention and a care that enhances its potential.

This was probably, once again, the intent of Tocqueville when he stated that it is necessary to “educate democracy” (Tocqueville 1994, Introduction), in the awareness that it can only be a never-ending process, attentive to the various changes and deviations, obstacles and regressions. Furthermore, educating democracy means, as John Dewey sustained, educating *for* democracy, that is, educating its members, orienting them

towards cooperation rather than individualism, to participation rather than delegation, to relationships as well as self-determination. If it is true – as John Dewey says - that “a democracy is ... first of all an associated kind of life, of continuously communicated experience” (Dewey 1985), then democratic education can only be a process of “liberation of individual capacities in a progressive development aimed at social purpose” (ibidem). If it is true, in other words, that the most authentic spirit of democracy is this openness, it is necessary to be able to seize the opportunity: and to understand that new challenges require *new paradigms*, able first of all to combine the formal and institutional dimension with reflection on subjects and on the forms of subjectivity. An ability that, as it is claimed by different critical approaches - from the *ethics of care* (Gilligan, Tronto) to the *theory of recognition* (Honneth, Taylor 1995) to the *theory of the gift* (Mauss, Caillé) (see Pulcini 2018) - does not seem to belong to what for decades has imposed itself as the most influential paradigm for a normative vision of democracy: the paradigm of justice, based on purely formal and dutiful ethics (Rawls 1973).

First of all, it would be necessary to rethink the very paradigm of justice by adopting a different approach such as the one proposed by Amartya Sen: who claims that the social justice is less a question of principles, rules and ideal procedures for reducing inequalities than a concrete and pragmatic path of struggle against inequalities and injustice (Sen 2009).

But above all, we need to mobilize new paradigms (Pulcini 2018): so I will propose two watchwords that I think are now essential to face the two major challenges of the global age and constitute the possible foundation of a new ethos: *hospitality* and *responsibility*.

### 3. Hospitality

What is Hospitality? First of all it's an ethics (Innerarity, 2017), an ethic like justice; but it's something more than justice (Derrida e Dufourmantelle 1997). Moreover, it is not just a reasonable *respect* for the other (which can leave the distance and mutual separation intact) or a liberal *tolerance* (that often conceals a claim of superiority). Hospitality can only arise from our ability to put our identity at stake and to take the risk of meeting the other in their difference; in other words, exposing ourselves to *self-alteration*

-to use the term of Judith Butler (Butler 2005) - and accepting contamination: because openness to contamination is the precondition for the *recognition* of the other and acceptance of their difference.

It implies a double, concrete step: not only *policies of reception* towards the stranger as “the one who arrives” (Derrida 1997), but also *policies of integration* towards the other as the “stranger within”, “the one who remains” (Simmel 1950). Only the coexistence of policies of reception and policies of integration can defuse hostility and resentment on the part of the other (the guest), and foster mutual *recognition*.

This also makes it necessary, as Martha Nussbaum rightly claims, to ask politics *to cultivate* positive passions (Nussbaum 2015). Liberal and democratic politics has always neglected the role of the passions, indeed delivering their management to authoritarian, regressive and instrumental élites: capable, as is the case today, of manipulating the passions and using them to feed populist and plebiscitary phenomena: turning the one who is different into a scapegoat for our fears.

Cultivating passions therefore means first of all taking them seriously as necessary resources for a just and “decent” (Margalit 1996) democratic society; implementing strategies aimed at countering negative ones (like selfishness, fear and resentment) and fostering positive ones (like empathy, compassion and trust).

#### 4. Responsibility

If hospitality is the answer to the challenge of difference, responsibility is the indispensable answer to the ecological challenge and the problem of preserving the life of future generations. Faced with the unprecedented risk of the self-destruction of human kind, twentieth-century philosophy (Anders 1980; Jonas 1985) had already proposed the ethics of responsibility as the ethics for the future.

However, contemporary democracies do not seem to have the intention to take this perspective seriously, for at least two fundamental reasons: the first is the tendency to privilege and defend the immediate interests of citizens and states, as the theoreticians of the “motivation problem” explain to us asking the question of *why* we should worry about future generations (from Pontara 1995, through Partridge 1981, to Birnbacher

2015). The second consists in the difficulty of identifying and “democratically” imposing the strategies necessary to safeguard the future.

The first case takes us back to the problem of the subjects: how can we form a “virtuous” subject (Jamieson, 2012), able to overcome intergenerational egoism and to empathize with future generations? If the answer is by developing an ecological culture, it is clear that one cannot ignore the emotional dimension: first of all, the capacity for *empathy* extended to the whole living world (Singer 2011; Rifkin 2009).

In the second case, we can think of implementing strategies capable of binding our decisions to responsibility towards the destiny of humanity and the planet. A way to do this could be through *self-binding*, that psychological mechanism with which we bind ourselves so that we are protected from ourselves: from our inability to take into account the risks to which our actions expose us or others in the future, whether this incapacity is due to trivial opportunism or blindness towards the future. This is the model of *Ulysses-and-the-sirens*... In other words, self-binding guarantees intergenerational responsibility (Birnbacher 2015): like when we delegate to the institutions (whether they be legal, constitutional or educational) the necessary sanctions for our short-sighted behaviour which does not take into account its possible consequences. We already have some working examples (from the constitutional courts to the Kyoto Protocol and the subsequent climate summits, from transnational organizations to the many research institutions and think-tanks). These strategies are undoubtedly too weak and uncertain to be considered effective (just think of the summit 2015 on the climate in Paris); but they nevertheless testify to the awareness that responsibility and care are essential for the re-establishment of a democratic ethos.

What is certain, I would like to reiterate, is that educating democracy, reconstructing the democratic ethos *not only* requires *institutional measures and strategies*, but *also a process of transformation of the subjects*: in short, it requires action on both, the institutions and the subjects, to re-establish that virtuous alliance between them without which democracy inevitably slips towards pathological drifts.

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