

Varied Worlds, Plural Societies

Debora Spini*
daspini@syr.fi.it

ABSTRACT

When I first started working on this paper, I thought I would have ended up writing something on pluralism, public spaces, recognition, and so on; but at a later stage, I decided I should rather work on how the visions of the world that we carry with us shape our self perception and consequently our social and political constructions, moving from the assumption that visions of the world and conceptions of the self are profoundly linked. Human beings form a representation of their position within the world: such a perception largely influences, if not determines, what they think about themselves, their scope of agency and the meaning they assign to their existence. Consequently, different world views also have a major impact on the visions of society individuals and groups are likely to develop. In the course of this paper, I shall offer some scattered consideration on our present situation, in societies where different world views may be called to co-exist.

THE WORLD AROUND US

I would like to begin my reflections from the specific re-assessment of the mutual positioning of world, *cosmos* and mankind which is typical of modernity and of Western imaginary. At the onset of modernity, the world intended as “Earth”, the seat of human existence and history, lost its place as the centre of the *cosmos*. On the other hand, men increasingly perceived their position within the world as central. Such a re-positioning did not happen painlessly; on the contrary, it implied as well a fracture, a breaking of the original unity and harmony between men and the cosmos surrounding them. Early modernity brought a substantial change in the relationship between men and universe as it established the final authority of the self as the conqueror of the world, through the exercise of knowledge and rational investigation; the obvious reference is to Descartes. The separation from the womb of nature and from a cosmos perceived as whole and sacred plays an important role in the birth of the modern self. In fact, modernity has brought to the affirmation of an individualised model of subjectivity that could also be formulated as a project, or work-in-progress. To the rise of this new model of subjectivity corresponds the process of de-sacralisation of the world. The “world”, in the modern mind, is no longer animated, vital, and warm. Disenchanted and deprived of its soul, it has to be explained in mechanical terms: the clock replaces the body, or the living organism as the leading metaphor to explain “the world”.¹

As it was before mentioned *en passant*, the term “men” did not simply slip into the lines of this paper, but was chosen purposefully. Modernity at its inception did not include women in

* Faculty of Political Sciences – University of Florence, and Siracuse University of Florence

¹ I am aware that this is only one of the models of subjectivity emerged in the course of Western Modernity, or that the affirmation of this model of subjectivity has been more controversial than it may appear from these lines. I have chosen to highlight this aspect for the sake of the overall argument of this paper. However, I am indebted to Nadia Urbinati for calling my attention on the need of better arguing this point.



all the processes which were recalled above, assigning them, at best, a marginal or residual role. Women would not share the feeling of being “central” in the world – if not parasitically, as fellow-species. Nor, for a long time, would women be allowed to participate in that model of identity as an individualised project earlier recalled. Women’s selfhood will thus develop literally in “a world apart” characterised by the shade and silence of the *oikos*, the world of inwardness, intimacy, and of privacy.

The disenchanting world of early modernity has to be discovered and dominated, metaphorically but first and foremost physically: as pointed out by Blumenberg, the drive to the colonisation of the worlds is a typical of modernity. The world must be mapped, visually represented and thus conceptually captured; in parallel, the Earth has to be explored, conquered and occupied. The crisis of a metaphysical Cosmos opened the way for the world of geography, and consequently for geo-politics. Even though it was perceived as at least partially obscure and unknown, the World however represents, at the onset of modernity, a field of conquest laid before human initiative. The unexplored space is automatically opened to conquest: every unclaimed space is to be considered “loose fish” (Sloterdijk 2004), nobody’s property and therefore as awaiting its legitimate conqueror. Men’s political agency – Machiavelli’s *virtù* – has the strength to impose an artificial order, whilst human reason labours to “make sense” of the world through unifying cognitive frameworks, first and foremost modern science. Modern sovereignty was conceptualised within this framework. The unity of the pre-modern *oikoumene* had to be broken, the undivided space must be fragmented and submitted to the ordering power of sovereignty. Such will be the world of Thomas Hobbes, of Westphalia (of course to be understood more as a model than as an historical “fact”); later, this settlement will be theorised by Carl Schmitt in the terms of *lus Publicum Europeaum*.

At the same time, a strong parallelism could be remarked between the need to explore and map the world outside and the need to explore and map the depth of the inner world. Scientific discourses shed light in the most remote areas of the mind. La *Carte du Tendre* is a visual anticipation of the many detailed maps of passions and affections drawn by moral philosophy and even more by literature throughout the XVIII century. A reference for all, besides the great names like Hume, Smith, or Ferguson, the entomologist’s glance that Jane Austen casts on her countryside microcosm. In mature modernity, psychoanalysis – no need to underline how much psychoanalytical discourse represents one of the highest ambitions of modern science – goes “down deep” in the regions of the “sub-conscious” just like captain Nemo in his Nautilus penetrates into the depths of the Ocean. Both the world around and the world within have to be explored, revealed, and conquered.

IMAGES OF THE WORLD

It has already mentioned how a shared understanding of “world” as the ultimate horizon of meaning is an essential factor in forming social bonds. The representations we make of “how does the world function”, and the explanations we provide for all the physical phenomena that compose our experience of the “world” play a major role in shaping our views of social processes. These representations and explanations provide the framework within which individuals and groups may develop the values and norms which will in turn orient their political and social conduct. One could be tempted to look at early Modernity as to a time when individual societies could count on homogenous views of the world; a less hasty observation captures more nuances. Blumenberg suggests looking at this process as a progressive withering of the hermeneutic and normative capacity of the images of the world – as provided by philosophical reflection – to be gradually replaced by the models of the world



created by natural sciences (Blumenberg 2001). Doubtlessly, in the XVII and XVIII century the languages of modern science and of rational inquiry cultivated the ambition to provide an indisputable and unquestionable “world view”. Yet, they were far from being unquestioned and undisputed. In the same Europe that saw the rise of modern science, witches were ecumenically burned by both Protestants and Catholics, and eminent members of the Royal Society continued to read and comment the Book of Revelation all throughout the XVII century. The point, rather, is that modern science could at least cultivate the ambition of finding, and consequently affirming, the *one* image of the world to be finally considered as “true”: these famous paintings by Vermeer, *The Geographer* and *Soldier and a Laughing Girl* faithfully represent this ambition. The geographer maps the world, and the maps he produced will be hanging from the wall of a bourgeois living room, where a soldier makes a girl laugh with his tales of adventures in far away places – the world is contained and enshrined under the glance of this young woman, imprisoned in its world model.

However, in this time we are living, be it defined as second modernity, hyper-modernity or *surmodernité*, the very possibility of sharing one and only one image – or even a model – of the World is becoming increasingly remote. The very category of “world,” meant both as a conceptual framework and as the ultimate set of boundaries, appears to be withering away. First of all, nothing is left to explore. The world has been completely conquered: the Welt is now the *Umwelt*, the environment, or the blue orange which looks so small if seen from a distance. Although nothing more is left to explore, the world has been voided of its meaning as a system of references by the combining forces of the market and of the new possibilities of communication. The design of modernity was to create borders and enclose spaces, and modern sovereignty had somehow “broken” the globe, and succeeded in subdividing its unity in separate and distinct portions of territory. Globalization could be expected to restore some kind of unity, but its processes normally defined by these terms are profoundly ambivalent. The world is becoming global, but this does not mean that it is becoming whole. Globalisation cannot be described as abolition of borders and enclosures to construct one vast cosmopolitan space. On the contrary, globalisation imposes different sets of borders, enclosures and entrenchments, although profoundly different in nature from those typical of the modern world. Either formulated in terms of “loss” – loss of identity, loss of control, loss of relevance – or in terms of “new” – new cosmopolitanism, new politics, new world – such views fail to represent the complexity of the situation. The completely explored world is now “fragmegrated,” as in Rosenau’s definition, that is to say, shaped by contradictory dynamics of fragmentation and integration. The lines of integration flow between state and state, constructing new political “integrated” spaces, and of course they flow somehow above and through the states – let us just mention the role of the much hollowed “global civil society” or of the even more hollowed “network society”. But although new political spaces are being created, fragmentation processes also mark the morphology of globalisation, as they pierce the skin of existing territorial polities: the consequences of this process are controversial. Whilst many interpreters – such as Beck, Albrow, Rosenau – hold that this crisis of the territorial states may set free social energies previously encaged by state borders, it is nonetheless evident that along these lines of fragmentation new and even more suffocating sub-spaces are being formed and enclosed. “Where am I” used to be an important dimension to define “Who I am”, and not solely from a symbolic point of view; collective but also personal identity, as a result of concrete historical practices, was largely determined by the spatial location. The list of all those who have highlighted the role of territorial bodies as identity producers is too long even to start with – Habermas and Badie are but the first references that come to mind. Territorially defined *identités citoyennes* – the typical example is the French revolution – have emerged exactly because men could identify themselves as being part of the



same “country” or, in different terms, of the same “state”, thus overruling pre-existing determination of identities such as ethnic groups, religious confessions or cultural-linguistic membership (Badie 1999). Globalisation undermines that specific layer of identity, the identity provided by a polity linked to a given territory. But although it has been interpreted under different angles of observation, this process still can be re-conducted to a somehow similar result. Besides Habermas and Badie, other names could be brought to the attention: Sloterdijk points to the fact that the “global” condition is essentially conducive to a self without spatial determination and to a space without a self (Sloterdijk 2004), whilst Geertz has pointed to the consequences of “nations” beginning to understand themselves independently from “country”; the crisis of the somewhat artificial cocoon of “state” and “country” strengthens the appeal of a different set determinations of identity, such as “ethnicity”, “religion” or “culture” (Geertz 1999). A different perspective of observation, such as that elaborated by Beck, rather underlines how globalisation is decoupling society from territory; consequently, Beck adopts what he calls methodological “sociological” cosmopolitanism. This methodological option for cosmopolitanism, however, does not hide the fact that increasingly atomised societies witness severe trends towards re-entrenchment, making it sometimes difficult to follow Beck’s analysis when it shows the emergence of a new generation of persons truly capable of casting a “cosmopolitan glance” over the world (Beck 2006b). Indeed ambivalence is the key word also to understand globalisation, regardless if it is interpreted as a hypermodernity or as a postmodernity.

If globalisation is not yet transforming the world into a cosmopolis, other forces are restoring some kind of unity, although of a more tragic nature. The world can now be defined as a “community”, but a community of a special kind: a community of destiny embracing all humanity. Such a community can’t be formulated in the same terms as in the early Modern school of *Jus naturale* (i.e., on the ground of a shared reasoning capacity) nor can be rooted in some form of *philia* or natural sympathy. The frame of reference is completely different. Humanity is a community of destiny because the world is today at risk as such, as a whole: this is the unprecedented nature of global risks and of global challenges (Cerutti 2008, Pulcini 2009). Of course the debate on what is to be understood by global risks and global challenges is very wide, but there is a substantial agreement on identifying in global warming and the possibility of nuclear destruction the two properly “global” risks. Besides other issues can be identified as being essentially super and trans national in their nature, such as all those connected to environment and sustainability. The basic point is that now humankind has in its hands the possibility of destroying the world – temporal and spatial dimension are now joined into the same crisis, the possible annihilation of all “where-s” and of all “when-s”. The question that remains open is how much this vision of the world is actually rooted in the mental “something-scapes” at least in our democratic polities, and if it has completely replaced the traditional “modern” view of the world. The young woman in Vermeer’s painting was able to combine her most intimate dimension of private and domestic life, with her image, or rather model, of a world hanging on her wall – she could count on instruments to guarantee the authenticity of that image she had on her wall. We are not any longer in this condition. We cannot trust anymore the tool box of modernity: instrumental rationality, modern science, the box where political agency could find the instruments to make sense of the world or, at the very least, we have to continuously adopt an attitude of reflexivity.

FOR A MORPHOLOGY OF THE GLOBAL SELF

The fact that the “world” can no longer be hanged on a wall as our frame of reference also has a major impact on individual and collective self-perceptions. It may be helpful, at this point, to



go back to the parallelism between “the world around us” (as we defined before, the vision of the world as composed of physical and social phenomena) and the “world within”, meant as the perception and construction of identity, which was mentioned above in this paper. Becoming aware of identity is a process which may be expressed making use of spatially-related terms. “Who am I?” is a question that may also be expressed in terms of *situatedness*², and through the twin question “Where am I?”. Formulating identity in terms of “situatedness” also throws light on the fact that identity is somehow indebted also to a moral perspective. Answering the question “where am I” necessarily implies being accountable for one’s whereabouts, and consequently being “somewhere to be found”, thus constituting an implicit acceptance of responsibility. But the temporal dimension as well can be crucial to highlight the moral, and even social and political implications of identity. This nexus is evident in Paul Ricoeur’s category of *identité narrative*. The narrative act forces on the narrator to “make sense” of his-her story to be understood by the listener: his-her specific, existentially unique narrative has to open to the eye of another, has to be translated, explained. This act of translation signifies, at the same time, an acceptance of responsibility and the possibility of a full self-consciousness.

It is therefore hard to say what can be the specific condition of the global self. This installation by Juan Muñoz, *Staring at the Sea* (1997) perfectly captures the darker side of the global self³. These two masked figures are trying to stare at the sea, but in reality they look at themselves in a mirror – yet they are masked, so it is only their masks they can see. A self without space? In some cases it is: this is the condition of those *élites* that according to Bauman live now “in a bubble”. Very often, the global self seems to be affected by the same pathologies as the modern self, although brought to the highest degree (Pulcini 2001, Pulcini 2009). In some cases, the global self is a self under attack, desperately clutching to nostalgic determination of identity in the desperate effort of resisting the stream. It is also very hard to determine the specific condition of the self hanging in between the continuous present of the stock markets on the one hand and the complete absence of meaningful historical hopes on the other. The global self is Janus-faced: at the same time the born-to-shop dweller of *non-lieux* such as shopping malls, or the young man from Londonistan dreaming of a virginal society, and longing for a pure and untouched golden age. As far as rich and advanced societies are concerned, the dark side of the moon is represented by the atomised individual, which, like a bird before the snake, stops paralysed by the contemplation of the endless, and therefore frightening, scope of possibilities opened before him or her. And as far as the other “world” is concerned – second or third it does not matter – the world that has not access to credit cards, virtual money, internet, the world that still labours in the sweatshops, the question is harder to solve, as in that world time or leisure to even inquire too much about a self.

Something new is stirring in the post subjectivity of our second-modernity societies, and new sensitivities and new forms of solidarity, concern, and commitment are flourishing over and above the old state boundaries, and are often hastily – and superficially – labelled as the rising “global civil society”. Social sciences have not yet completely mapped this new planet, and there is a real need for sociological enquiry on the dimensions of Agape, and of gift (Boltanski 1990). This new energy which is evidently roaming around the planet could be like a pawn, of a different bland of “global self”. It could represent an anticipation of a new model of self capable of weaving solidarity bonds across cultural differences, and of perceiving the dimension of interconnectedness of local phenomena. But whatever that is, it cannot be

² I use this term *grosso modo* in the same sense as in Braidotti 1994.



separated from the darker side of the global self. Global challenges are constructing a “world in common”, and giving new meaning to the very notion of humanity, for a long time cast away amongst old Enlightenment relics. Even a notion such as that of a “common good for humanity” comes back by force to the fore front of attention. Recently, Elena Pulcini has opened the way for a reflection on the category of “global fear”. And even more, Pulcini is helping us to realise how becoming aware of our vulnerability may provide a motivational basis to form new bonds of solidarity and to take responsibility for the world (Pulcini 2009) Of course, solidarity strategies are evident and ready. On the contrary, deeper cleavages may be opening up in matters of global justice and redistribution (D’Andrea 2008). It is not clear, yet, if we have already acquired the words to talk about this world, or if we are just left speechless by the magnitude of the issues. Perhaps, another aspect of the global self that deserves attention is its trend towards denial, or, in other words, the incapacity to bear the responsibility of meeting such immense challenges. It is indeed very difficult to create “public spheres” on issues of such complexity as climate change, as they often require a high level of information and knowledge. Sliding into a kind of technocratic slumber, or into various forms of denial, is a constant temptation of all our democratic polities. Nonetheless, it is now evident that knowledge, even when widely spread and made publicly available, does not necessarily and/or automatically transform itself into a motivation for political attitude.

OPENING OR EXPLOSION?

As society and space are in fact independent from each other, different visions of the world – sometimes overlapping, sometimes openly clashing – are today competing for space within individual societies, as different collective identities are thrown together in a post-national order. The simple fact of being forced to live side by side does not necessarily imply that different groups, and the individuals within them, may come to share the same mental landscape: on the contrary, the continuous need to rub elbows may be conducive to those trends to re-entrenchment mentioned before, and now all the more evident in many European contexts. The processes of globalization do not always “open up” common spaces; on the contrary, they are often conducive to dynamics of fragmentation and to a sharpening of conflicts. Contemporary democracies are faced with the challenge of how different mental landscapes may coexist within the same political space. This challenge can be articulated in a twofold perspective. On the most evident level, questions arise concerning the daily functioning of our democratic societies. On another, and much deeper, level, the fact of pluralism throws back into our faces the question whether western democracies are truly living up to those standards – respect of differences, openness, etc. – that they proclaim to stand for. Among the strategies available to answer this challenge, western political thought has elaborated that “art of separation”, embodied by different brands of liberalism. The rawlsian version of political liberalism insists on the separation between dimensions of identity that may be considered as “personal” and those who constitute a specifically political identity. But practicing this art of separation comes natural to those individual or groups which have developed within the framework of Western tradition – or to be more precise, within a specific stream of such tradition, but may be hard, if not impossible to other. Not every individual or group may be able or willing to comply with the requirement of separating whatever makes “identity” – culture, history, language – from those capacities which make “good citizens”. But the art of separation is difficult to practice not solely for those who did not share the past itinerary of modernisation; it is very hard to practice even for those same western societies that have produced it. Our political imaginary is not entirely dominated by impartiality, fairness and reasonableness. This is testified by many aspects of western political vocabulary:



to quote but one, the permanent nostalgia towards a “natural” dimension of politics. It is not by chance that the language of “brotherhood” with its entire unsettling links with references to birth, blood, and nature, has been one of the most long-lasting paradigms used to signify the nature of political ties. The conception of citizenship elaborated by Western polities is also profoundly influenced by many unspoken assumption: to begin with, gender. The very presence of different identities within the walls of our polities has brought to light and exposed how deep-set, are the cultural and imaginary roots of modern political citizenship and how largely un-thematized are its symbolic and mythical dimensions.

Moreover, the possibility of distinguishing between a “private-cultural” dimension of identity and a “public-political” one rests on another and deeper separation, that between the public and the private sphere. And yet, the distinction between a “public” and a “private” sphere is not something that can be taken for granted. On the contrary, it is extremely problematic: first of all because this distinction is a specific feature of western modernity, and also because it is constantly challenged even in that extreme version of modernity itself, such as the time we are living in. Issues that used to be part of the strictest field of intimacy, to life, death, sex, and body are now brought to the full light of public discussion, blurring boundaries between private and public.

SHARING WORLDS

Almost inevitably, these issues almost naturally call for the presence within the public space of actors, languages and modes of actions which are not those typical of the traditional conception of Western politics. Again, the expression “public space” that should not be taken for granted. In the history of modern political thought, the public space was understood as the breeding ground for “public opinion”, and consequently as the point of origin of democratic legitimacy, under the form of popular sovereignty. The model of the democratic “public space” presented a forum where men (once again, not forgetting inclusive language!) engaged in communicative practices conducive to the elaboration of a common will – ultimately, it represented the ground for the exercise of moral and political autonomy. Here the profoundly contradictory nature of second modernity reveals itself under the shape of yet another avatar. On the one hand, from Sennett onwards, a noble genealogy of literature has pointed to a generalised decline of the relevance of public spaces. On the other hand, this explosion of new groups, NGOs, movements and networks, which is actually stretching over and above the old borders that was just mentioned a few lines above indeed deserves to be taken seriously. Defining this galaxy as an emerging new subjectivity, capable of carrying a world inside and to cast a cosmopolitan glance, as does Ulrich Beck means probably to overlook some of its dark sides. Nonetheless, as it was already said above, something new is stirring, and not only at the level of the so-called global civil society, but also within those public spaces that used to belong to national-territorial states. It is not wishful thinking to say that even within our individual polities more and more citizens are acquiring a sense of the interconnectedness of the world, and are beginning to read the world in all its complexity. Of course, to this brighter picture one could – rather, should – couple more gloomy snapshots of societies that are becoming more and more fragmented, intolerant, hysterical. Both aspects are true: rather they are profoundly connected. Public spaces are opening and closing at the same time. At any rate they are undergoing dramatic changes under the impulse of new themes and new actors, and the very field of politics is now being profoundly transformed. In general, political actors appear less and less capable of providing not only solutions, but in general horizons of meaning: the very space of politics is shrinking on two opposite sides. On the one hand, our public spaces seem sometimes to be wrapped in a deafening silence. Politics move back under



the apparently peaceful offensive of a growing trend towards technocracy – whereby the role of political “decision” appears to be void of meaning, if not clearly obsolete. “Experts” – mostly from the field of economy – plead to be left alone to work in peace, without being disturbed by incompetent politicians and/or publics. So, whilst on the other hand the gentlemen’s agreement of “global governance” runs smoothly and quietly, or at least pretends to do so, on the other, public spaces are becoming at times extremely noisy. Voices are often raised in tones of horror and deprecation, although these voices are not the same that used to resonate in the public sphere of modern democracies. In other terms, a specifically political space seems to wither away under the assault of different modes of agency, first of all religion. The ultimate frontiers of public decisions are advancing so much into fields such as life and death that the traditional actors that used to fill our public space often seems to be left speechless. And moreover, traditional political actors find themselves to be conceptually and practically unequipped to deal with the new global challenges. Conceptually, as they find it hard to provide categories to “think” politics in this condition of reflexivity, and practically, because individual polities simply do not have enough strength to articulate effective policies, thus encountering major crisis in legitimacy. Public spaces therefore become less and less political, and more and more encumbered by references to ultimate ethical values. The challenge of making different vision of the world co-exist, and to get different inner worlds in communication needs to be situated within this framework

In this context, the “challenge of pluralism” becomes more and more complex to handle. How to share worlds within a democracy is a question that involves not only the individual but more specifically the collective dimension of identity. The paradigm of recognition has often been evoked as a conceptual framework for a democracy which is not blind to difference. And in fact, the paradigm of recognition frames the issue of identity – in the language used before, of “the world within” – in a dialogical, intersubjective perspective, as in this paradigm identity becomes inextricably linked to the encounter with otherness, as well as providing a “grammar for social conflict”. This paradigm has then been applied to social conflicts, as in Honneth and Habermas: political struggles are reconceptualised as struggles for recognition. In its Hegelian root, recognition is essentially a dialectic – and therefore necessarily dual – relationship that allows for the self-awareness of subjective identity; the emphasis being on the word *relationship*: every individual is in him-herself the result of a inter-subjective process. Collective identities as well are not monoliths, but the result of a great chain of dialectics of recognition: every collective identity carries in itself a reflexive element. This is extremely important for the political dimension of identity: recognising its reflexive character makes it evident that collective identities can never be completely conceptualised as ascriptive, and highlights their intentional/projectual element. At a critical glance, individual biographies reveal themselves as made of plural, overlapping and often conflicting inner worlds. Men and women, in post-conventional societies, are in their very personal identity a crossroads – if not a battlefield – of different experiences and of frameworks of references, and experience the challenge of reconstructing their own biography as a meaningful narrative. Yet this is not how it works: in the best case, our contemporary democracies look like Munoz *Five seated figures*, made deaf by the never ending background noise of isolated voices. In the worst case the battlefield of identity is not a metaphor to describe plural selves, but a tragic *de facto* condition.

Providing spaces for the encounter with alterity, providing spaces even for individual men and women to disentangle the narratives of identity and re-interpreting the world within and the world around: this is one of the main challenges set before the public spaces of our contemporary democracies (Innerarity 2006). Dynamics of recognition, however, do not happen in a vacuum; lively public spheres are a prerequisite, but also a result, of a solid



structure of constitutional rights. The need for public spheres capable of handling identities – collective and individual – in all their complexity, allowing for narrative and not only argumentative communication to develop, does not contrast with the need to preserve the normative skeleton of liberal democracies. Liberal democratic legislation – the defence of individual rights, in the richer sense – is needed to make this very exchange of narratives at all possible. Protecting rights, even when meant in their minimalist version of negative liberties, is the *conditio sine qua non* for the development of public spaces where all the process indicated before. This is the meaning of rights – and of human rights: the prerequisites that allow men and women to construct individual and social identity narratives, and to share and interact with others' narratives.

Traditionally, this function was performed by national territorial states. The challenge ahead is to construct post-national spaces which could provide a framework of meaning for political agency. We need politics, we need authentically political spaces: this is the only way to make varied worlds enter into each other orbit, instead of clashing in the no-win game of identity conflicts. Yet the very job of "politics" is becoming increasingly difficult: in more precise words, the scope of action of politics – and consequently of democratic polities – seems to be constantly shrinking.

DEMOCRACIES – FOR WHAT?

It is possible to find overlapping consensus on decisions: but if no decision can be taken politically that could really make a difference, the public space ends up being the battlefield of opposed "world views", of ultimate horizons of value that accept no discussion, no debate and that could never contemplate any sort of change. No doubt that contemporary democracies face the necessity of welcoming difference, rather than limiting themselves to practice the art of separation, and no doubt that a mere coexistence of identities, living side by side without ever getting involved with each other may be sufficient. If Western democracies have to be true to themselves, they may not deny to others the right of bringing the richness of histories and identities within their public spaces. Nonetheless, indifference does not seem to be the worst risk; rather, the danger is that the fragile life of democracies may be exposed to unbridgeable conflicts between mutually exclusive visions of the world (once, again, meant as cognitive frames that give rise to principle and values). So, democratic polities are stuck between a progressive withering away of the relevance and function of public spaces and the danger of an explosion of the public space under the excessive weight of irreconcilable views. In the meantime, the real agenda is left untouched, but the psychodrama of identity politics is going on. Every inch of women's body is fought upon, "nature" is called into question every moment, references to ultimate values "god" or "family" and "our identity": it is indeed a sort of *détournement*, taking about what we have words for rather than stopping frozen before what we do not know how to express, how to solve. Once again, we are left speechless before the magnitude of the tasks before us. This is what democratic public spheres have to be about. Providing words to talk about the world, in its fragility, its vulnerability: helping citizens to develop a sense of where they are. Only within democratic public spheres it is possible to develop ties of mutual responsibility – they are different, very different from the ties of "nationhood", and they are also very different from the ties of "community", which play such an important role in some brands of identity politics. But probably this is the time where the ties of humanities are becoming more and more real – they are not an XVIII century heritage. However, as it was argued before, recognising the world as a community of justice does not mean having a prompt solution. We are very far from finding a "just" solution to many of the conflicts of our *global Zeit*. But at least democratic public spheres may provide instruments for



individuals and groups to begin to read the world around themselves, and thus throwing new light in the world within themselves. At least, democratic public spheres – when seriously committed to a richer meaning of participatory politics, may provide arenas where different voices may articulate their claims, and hopefully, may learn to listen to each other.

Perhaps there is no just solution to the problems ahead of us – but at least, we have the responsibility to engage in its quest.

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