

Democratic Ethos, Imagination and Emotions

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Abstract: The paper is focused on Alessandro Ferrara's attempt to overcome the limits of proceduralism through a reconsideration of some normative sources able to mobilize and to motivate people on the double level of ethos and of political imagination. In particular, on the subject of the thematization of imagination as a political force able to mobilize the people, the author tries to show that a deeper consideration of the emotional dimension might even prove to be useful for the basic aims pursued by Ferrara on the methodological level. The same can be said for the thematization of the democratic ethos proposed by Ferrara: this ethos is in fact first of all based on specific "passions", and represents in general the "affective basis of a democracy". The author attempts then to test whether some possible lines of research into a theoretical development of these topics related to the emotions would be productive.

[**Keywords:** Alessandro Ferrara, Political Emotions, Martha Nussbaum, Democratic Ethos, Imagination]

Democracy is a *personal* way of individual life [...] it signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life. Instead of thinking of our own dispositions and habits as accommodated to certain institutions we have to learn to think of the latter as expressions, projections and extensions of habitually dominant personal attitudes.¹

This quote from John Dewey, which Alessandro Ferrara has placed at the beginning of his *Democratic Horizon*, shows one of the basic aims pursued in this latest work: to go beyond the limits of proceduralism, in order to "make the definition of democracy hinge on the idea of a democratic ethos that underlies and enlivens the procedural aspects of democracy" (*DH*, p. 13). If this point of view does not radically overturn (as in Dewey) the relation between the ethical dimension (dispositions, habits and so on) and democratic institutions, does firmly anchor democratic procedures to an ethical basis:

¹ A. Ferrara, *The Democratic Horizon: Hyperpluralism and the Renewal of Political Liberalism*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2014, henceforth *DH*, p. 1.



Democracy is then an ethos on whose basis certain procedures are adopted and followed, not simply the format of these procedures. Dewey's fragment [...] forcefully and concisely expresses this idea. At the center of this book is the attempt, among other things, to identify the contours of this democratic ethos and to highlight one aspect of it, which thus far has remained out of the limelight: democracy's intrinsic relation to openness as a public value (*DH*, p. 5).

This basic aim that seeks to overcome the limits of proceduralism is also reflected in the task of devising the normative sources able not only to find "good reasons", but also to motivate and to mobilize the people. From this, two fundamental arguments proposed several times by Ferrara follow: a) "good reasons convince, but only good reasons that move the imagination mobilize people" (*DH*, p. 42); b) "Politics at its best is the prioritization of ends in the light of good reasons that can move our imagination" (*DH*, p. 38). More concretely: "No transformative democratic and progressive politics can exist that does not draw on the imagination's capacity to motivate and harnesses it to good reasons" (*DH*, p. 13). It is also evident as in *Democratic Horizon* that Ferrara draws on and carries on his already long ongoing research, which aims to analyze specific normative sources that are not limited to the general framework of rational discussion and democratic procedures and institutions. I mean first of all those "aesthetic sources of normativity" that Ferrara has already examined especially in the fields of exemplarity, judgment and imagination.²

It is precisely this attempt to overcome the limits of proceduralism through a reconsideration of the *normative forces* able to mobilize people's ethos and motivate their imagination that I would like to consider in these pages. I will concentrate solely on this line of research, leaving the very many issues and topics discussed in the book aside, as well as the articulation of these normative sources in the general framework of Rawls's liberalism. More precisely, I will try to shed light on the dimensions distinctive of the role that Ferrara ascribes to the emotional level in relation to ethos and political imagination, and I will also attempt to test if some possible lines of research into a theoretical development of these topics related to the emotions would be productive, and how. In

² A. Ferrara, *The Force of the Example: Explorations in the Paradigm of Judgment*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2008.



more detail: 1) On the subject of the thematization of imagination as a political force able to mobilize the people, I will try to show that a deeper consideration of the emotional dimension might even prove to be useful for the basic aims pursued by Ferrara on the methodological level, as well as for certain aspects that occur in Martha Nussbaum's latest work on "political emotions". 2) This attempt to look at the bigger picture seems to me after all called for by the thematization of the democratic ethos proposed by Ferrara: this ethos is in fact first of all based on specific "passions" (the passion for the common good, the passion for openness and so on), and represents in general the "affective basis of a democracy", even if these two elements are not intended as "emotions" in the narrowest sense.

Imagination and political emotions

In the thematization of the imagination as motivational force that is reintroduced and developed in *DH*, Ferrara again takes the aesthetic model of a work of art by virtue of the fact that the exemplarity may be able "to reconcile 'is' and 'ought', 'facts' and 'norms'": also to reconcile the normative dimension with the descriptive dimension (*DH*, p. 38). This political function of imagination is fulfilled essentially thanks to its capacity to disclose new *visions* that mobilize the people:

All the important junctures where something new has emerged in politics and has transformed the world – the idea of natural rights, the idea of the legitimacy of government resting on the "consensus of the governed", the inalienable right to the "pursuit of happiness", "liberté, égalité, fraternité", the abolition of slavery, universal suffrage, human rights, the Welfare State, gender equality, the idea of sustainability, the idea of the rights of the future generations – were junctures where what is new never prevailed by virtue of its following logically from what already existed, but rather by virtue of its conveying a new vista on the world we share in common and highlighting some hitherto unnoticed potentialities of it. Like the work of art, so the outstanding political deed arouses a sense of "enhancement of life", the enriching and enhancement of a life lived in common, and commands our consent by virtue of its exemplary ability to reconcile what exists and what we value (*DH*, p. 38).

This capacity of the imagination to "disclose a new political world for us" also turns on the force that is ascribed to the dimension of "vision"; in this regard, the reference to Thomas Kuhn's theoretical model, in which the role of vision is indeed at the center,



also corroborates that point (see *DH*, pp. 39-40). However, in so doing, the overall thematization of the imagination's political role seems to me in some ways biased towards the cognitive side rather than the emotional side. I mean that if Ferrara insists that the political dimension must be anchored to the imagination's ability to mobilize and to motivate the people, this ability is however disjoined from the capacity to trigger and to elicit emotions in the narrowest sense, as seems to be so in the case of enthusiasm and progressive politics:

Democratic politics at its best will be argued to be one in which the priority of certain ends over others is established consensually on the basis of good reasons that move the imagination. The domestic and international political scenes abound with imaginary projections that elicit enthusiasm while being supported by no good reasons whatsoever or, conversely, with uninspiring good reasons that mobilize no one – a contrast in which often the clash between the right and the left is reflected. To understand is the first step toward changing the world. Even Marx's Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach does not exclude, but presupposes, that in order to change the world we must begin by understanding it differently. No transformative democratic and progressive politics can exist that does not draw on the imagination's capacity to motivate and harnesses it to good reasons. When this exemplary combination is missed, we are left either with the uninspiring reasons of routine administrative action that mobilize no one or with the delusional enthusiasm of the populist imagination (*DH*, p. 13).

But if we now take into account that one of the basic aims of Ferrara's theoretical proposal is to overcome the proceduralistic approach through the enlargement of those normative sources that are able to give political force to "good reasons", even the emotional dimension may also prove important. In this regard we can think for example of the recent work *Political Emotions*,³ in which Martha Nussbaum, on the methodological level, pursues a basic aim very similar to that pursued by Ferrara: to enlarge the normative dimension in order to give motivational force to the "right reasons". And to this end Nussbaum seeks to expand and to complete Rawls's theory exposed in *Political Liberalism* through a theory of "political emotions":

Rawls imagines how emotions arising initially within the family can ultimately develop into emotions directed at the principles of the just society. His compelling and insightful

³ M. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2013.



account, in this respect ahead of its time, employs a sophisticated conception of emotions similar to the one I shall be using here, according to which emotions involve cognitive appraisals. Rawls later bracketed this section of the book for rethinking, along with other material in *A Theory of Justice* that he thought too closely linked to his own particular (Kantian) comprehensive ethical doctrine. In *Political Liberalism*, he no longer seems to endorse all the details of that particular account. But he insists that he is leaving a space for a needed account of a “reasonable moral psychology”. In effect, the present book aims to fill that space, with reference to an account of a decent society that differs from Rawls’s in philosophical detail, but not in underlying spirit – although its focus is on societies aspiring to justice, rather than on the achieved well-ordered society.⁴

By so doing, Nussbaum reconsiders the political role of many single emotions, and also enthusiasm, amongst other emotions: “if society is to be stable for the right reasons, its basic principles must somehow be embraced with enthusiasm. More generally, the political enlargement of the normative dimension is achieved by means of a direct recourse to moral sentiments and emotions: Nussbaum ascribes to these factors “an essential motivational role”.⁵ In fact, when the emotions are reconnected to specific symbols, even through the use of imagination, “the symbols may acquire a motivational power that bare abstractions could not possess”.⁶

In conclusion, here on the methodological level, there arises a partial but meaningful overlap between Nussbaum and the line of research reintroduced in *Democratic Horizon*. Also in this latter case indeed, supposing that “John Rawls’s Political Liberalism has here been assumed as the framework most promising for rethinking democracy” (*DH*, p. 211), Ferrara aims to enlarge the normative sources turning to the fact that without the intervention of imagination politics remains ineffective. More precisely: “if disjoined from the force of imagination nourished by exemplarity, good reasons are only mere accountancy or scorekeeping of what should be. Thus politics at its best is the prioritization of ends in the light of good reasons that can move our imagination” (*DH*, p. 38, see also p. 212). Furthermore, the affinity between Nussbaum and Ferrara emerges, and I might say especially, because the “democratic

⁴ M. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*, cit., p. 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶ *Ibid.* See also e.g. pp. 85 ff., 189 ff.



ethos” is based first of all on constitutive elements defined literally as “passions” and an “affective basis”.

Democratic ethos between passions and indignation

The ethos that Ferrara considers necessary for the possibility of democracy to flourish, in many respects overlaps with the notion of the “spirit of democracy” or more simply with the notion of the “culture of democracy”. In fact, the author follows the pattern laid down by Weber’s notion of *Geist* (and not of Hegel’s *Sittlichkeit*). More precisely, the specific points that mark out the profile of this ethos – and which are developed starting from the traditional thematization of the “political sentiment of virtue” – are interpretable in terms of “passions” (see *DH*, pp. 6, 14, 44 ff.). These passions however, although they are set within the general anthropological and cultural framework of the “dispositional or affective roots” of the democratic spirit, are in fact intended above all in the sense of moral attitudes, inclinations and orientations; in a word: as “political virtues” (see also *DH*, pp. 62 ff., 213). These virtues are of course able to motivate the people; however, they operate above all, although not exclusively, on the *cognitive level*, as emerges for example where Ferrara writes:

the first “democratic passion” that historically begins to be understood as a condition of the stabilization of a “democracy *cum* democratic spirit” is the cognitive and motivational orientation to the common good – the kind of deliberative mood that contemporary deliberative democracy turns into a definitional moment of democracy (*DH*, p. 45).

Along the same lines, there are also Ferrara’s references to the “characteristic spirit or sentiment” of which Stephen White speaks in *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen*,⁷ as well as the “cognitive capacities and political virtues” described by Rainer Forst in *The Right to Justification*,⁸ and certainly the “list of political virtues” outlined by Rawls in *Political Liberalism* (see especially *DH*, pp. 213-214). In brief, the passions at stake, starting from the fundamental passions for the common good, for equality, for individuality and for a public culture of openness are intended in terms of “passion”, “sentiment” and “affective basis” in the broadest sense: *here the cognitive dimension has*

⁷ S. White, *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2009.

⁸ R. Forst, *The Right to Justification*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012.



priority over the emotional in the narrowest sense; the former is a dimension that in many respects is even spiritual and ideal, although certainly embedded in individual attitudes of clear moral value. It also seems to me that what emerges here, even if in an attenuated form, is the priority ascribed to the cognitive dimension that we have already seen, in an ever more radical form, with regard to the analysis of the political role of imagination.

Nevertheless, Ferrara sometimes seems to refer to the emotional character of the passion in the narrowest sense, for example where he writes:

But the point that Tocqueville emphasizes is that whereas a passion for freedom is a more general political sentiment, to be found “elsewhere than in democracies”, the passion for equality identifies the ethos of democratic peoples most distinctively: such passion is called by him “ardent, insatiable, eternal and invincible” (*DH*, p. 46).

Having said that, he moves on to what we could call the negative emotional reaction to injustice:

In contemporary views of democracy Tocqueville’s insight lives on not just in the liberal ideal notion of “free and equal citizens”, but also in a certain “recognitional” twist that the passion for equality has received. Authors such as Axel Honneth, Avishai Margalit and Charles Taylor always connect their notion of recognition with an implicit “equality” of recognition [...]. The passion for equality has shed off its possible materialistic connotations and has now become a “passion for (equal) recognition” or, to put it in the fallibilistic vein advocated from different perspectives by Margalit and Rorty, an “aversion to humiliation” and an “aversion to cruelty”. No democracy can flourish if citizens do not react with indignation to humiliation and cruelty (*DH*, p. 46).

This brief mention of the political role of indignation as a reaction to injustice, which also occurs in two other passages of the book (see *DH*, pp. 43, 65), opens up a path that – it seems to me – could lead to a better appreciation of the forms and meanings of “political emotions” within the framework of the thematization of democratic ethos. It should also insist on the comparison with Honneth’s theoretical framework, briefly quoted by Ferrara, in which negative emotional reactions to the form of disrespect (*Missachtung*) can trigger a specific struggle for recognition. Let me recall briefly that disrespect is for Honneth a moral experience that usually triggers negative emotional reactions, and these reactions have a clear “motivational” role: “the negative emotional reactions accompanying the experience of disrespect could represent the affective



motivational basis in which the struggled-for-recognition is anchored”, that is: “experiencing social disrespect can motivate a subject to enter a practical struggle or conflict”. Honneth has also defended the thesis that the functions that

lead from mere suffering to action by cognitively informing the person in question of his or her social situation [...] can be performed by negative emotional reactions, such as being ashamed or enraged, feeling hurt or indignant. These comprise the psychological symptoms on the basis of which one can come to realize that one is being illegitimately denied social recognition.⁹

The experience of disrespect also leads to

negative emotional reactions such as shame or rage [...] the experience of disrespect is always accompanied by affective sensations that are, in principle, capable of revealing to individuals the fact that certain forms of recognition are being withheld from them. In order to give this complex thesis some plausibility, at least in outline, it would be advisable to connect it to a conception of human emotions of the sort developed by John Dewey in his pragmatist psychology.¹⁰

In short, Honneth’s thesis is that Dewey devises “an action-theoretical conception of human emotions” according to which “negative feelings such as anger, indignation, and sorrow constitute the affective side of the shift of attention towards one’s own expectations that inevitably occurs as soon as one has difficulty making the step one planned to make upon completing action”.¹¹

Furthermore, Ferrara’s mention of the fact that “the rise of media of mass communication that stimulate the growth of a global public sphere sometimes activated in terms of indignation, other times in terms of compassion or other emotions” (*DH*, p. 29), it seems to me, signals the necessity or at least the opportunity, also from this last point of view, to consider at greater length the political role of these emotions. In short, if the analysis of the democratic ethos carried out in *Democratic Horizon* aims basically “to reconstruct genealogically the sources of cognitive, existential and finally public-culture versions of the ‘passion for openness’ component of a democratic ethos” (*DH*, p.

⁹ A. Honneth *The Struggle for Recognition*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1995, pp. 135-136.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹¹ *Ibid.* On this topic see also S. Thompson, “Anger and the Struggle for Justice”, in S. Clarke, P. Hoggett, S. Thompson (eds.), *Emotions, Politics and Society*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.



54), I believe that it could also be useful in considering the emotional dimension in the narrowest sense.

Pursuing this theoretical direction, one could return to the political role of imagination, also from the perspective of the sentiments of horror and the empathic dynamics which arise for example where Ferrara writes:

Nazism horrifies us because it occurred in the very midst of one of the most developed and civilized parts of Europe. Ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia elicited moral sentiments of horror also in relation to the fact that it took place after we all thought that the lesson of Auschwitz had been thoroughly metabolized. This fact of our moral life suggests that perhaps our perspective ought to change. [...] Crucial is then the role of the imagination in enabling a moral community to take distance from a conception of the good which now appears “perverse” and from the actions performed in its name [...] Without the work of the imagination no “enlarged mentality” is possible, but only a cognitive group solipsism. Without an “enlarged mentality”, or the ability to see things with the eyes of another, different from us, nothing can pierce the immunizing armor of our collective representations (*DH*, p. 40-1).

If we then pay increased attention to the emotional dimension, we could perhaps better combine the “ability to *see* things with the eyes of another” with the ability to *feel* things as others do. More generally, an interpretation of the “passions” and the “affective structure” from this “emotional point of view” in the narrowest sense, could make a theoretical contribution to the development of an analysis of the political mode of operation of imagination and of the democratic ethos understood as normative sources, or better as normative forces that are able to motivate and mobilize people.

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