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Matteo Santarelli



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- 1 The crisis of democracy is among the most compelling problems of our times. This crisis has prompted and provoked heterogeneous theoretical answers, of which the deliberative and the agonistic models represent two of the most important responses. The first proposal – as an example I will take Habermas's version – states the importance of a mutually recognized normative background, which allows for the construction of a ground level of agreement and makes democratic discussion possible. The second proposal asserts – from Mouffe's version in this case – the primacy of conflict as a defining and inescapable feature of the political dimension. Leszek Koczanowicz's new book represents an interesting attempt to move beyond both attempts, and at the same time to keep and rephrase the most convincing insights offered by each model.
- 2 Koczanowicz develops his proposal by means of an original comparison between two different theoretical perspectives: American pragmatism – notably John Dewey and George Herbert Mead – and Russian philosophy of language – in the person of its leading representative, Mikhail Bakhtin. The author draws on these two sources in order to articulate the two main features of his theory: the definition of democracy as a way of life, and the assertion that understanding, and not agreement is the necessary condition for democracy.

- 3 The anti-formalistic understanding of democracy as a way of life is one of the peculiar traits of Mead's and Dewey's political theory. Mead stresses the continuity between the political dimension and the level of communicative social interaction. Democracy as a political form is then a development and articulation of the potential universality expressed by the communicative interactions which permeate everyday life. As Koczanowicz clearly explains, this idea should not be understood as an over-optimistic conception of politics and social interactions. In fact, Mead clearly acknowledges the existence of situations in which personal and particular interests clash against each other, making the emergence of a common social interest impossible. However, he is equally aware that the human being is endowed with the capacity to resolve these conflicts by means of a mutual readjustment. This means that a social, shared and communicative reconstruction of interests is a possible, even if uncertain, outcome.
- 4 The conception that democracy could be potentially ubiquitous in everyday life is also present in Dewey. Specifically, the nature of this potentiality is well expressed by Dewey's distinction between the Great Society – that is, modern society as characterized by technological progress and the exceptional progress of “the physical tools of communication” – and the Great Community – i.e. a society in which individuals are able to share not only impersonal information, but also their “thoughts and aspirations.” The achievement of the Great Community could be achieved by the realization of a real democratic community, that is “a living entity” that presupposes “undisturbed communication among its members” (32). This lack of disturbances should not be understood in purely negative terms. Overcoming of dualism between society and the individual through open communication between particular interests is contingent on the active participation of the individual. It requires the institution of democracy as a way of life which permeates our everyday interactions.
- 5 By quoting Bohman, Koczanowicz maintains that the pragmatist concept of democracy is based on a process of “multiperspectival” common inquiry. The full development of this multiperspectival shared inquiry does not require selected and extraordinarily gifted individuals: it is the outcome of education and the extension of “everyday human communication” (33). Furthermore, such inquiry is not a purely cognitive task. Rather, it contains “emotions, sentiments, and even prejudices as well” (33). The parallel task of creating democratic individuals and a democratic community is an achievement, rather than a presupposition. At the same time, as explained by Mead, this achievement is possible in concrete terms, as long as it is an extension and a refinement of traits already present in common interactions – the universality of meanings, and our capacity to take the attitude of the other. Therefore, the political construction of a democratic way of life does not take place in an extraordinary and privileged place in social life – as argued by those authors asserting the autonomy of the political dimension (Schmitt, Harendt, Laclau among others).
- 6 However, this wider process of shared communication between plural interests should not be understood as a universalization of consensus and agreement. Neither an increased capacity to take the attitude of the other (Mead) nor expanded communication between plural perspectives and interests (Dewey) will involve the homogenization of society into a fully shared consensus. Democracy “is a system in which all voices should be respected” (36), rather than a system where all voices say the same thing. This is the precise point where Koczanowicz proposes to integrate the pragmatist perspective and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of language. Through this

connection, the author aims to distinguish between consensus/ agreement on the one hand, and understanding on the other.

- 7 Bakhtin endorses a radically social conception of language. He claims that even the elementary unit of meaning – that is, utterance – “is never complete unless it is directed toward the other” (48). Single self-expressions are always incomplete, insofar as they are separated from the responses of the other which they elicit. The basic unity of social action and communication is the act, that is the merging between expression and social answer. Paraphrasing Mead (1934: 182), we could say that according to Bakhtin the utterance is an eddy in the social stream. This eddy is the result of the coexisting centripetal tendencies (utterances belong to a common and shared language) and social “heteroglossia,” that is the “overabundance of language phenomena, as well as the richness of expressions of social and cultural life” (52). This dialectical coexistence of centripetal and centrifugal dynamics grounds the contingency of dialogue. Even though dialogue is “permanently present in dialogical relationships” (54), it is still continuously threatened by purely idiosyncratic and individualistic language (poetic language) and “unitary, hegemonic and monologic language,” which is an imposition of the ideology of the dominant class (54).
- 8 Despite its contingency dialogue is always a viable possibility for human beings. And dialogue is deeply entangled with understanding. Bakhtin’s conception of understanding is incredibly consonant with the pragmatist conception of meaning. Understanding according to Bakhtin takes place only as long as a speech act is merged with the response of the other: “Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other” (56; Bakhtin 1981: 282). More specifically: “Bakhtin approximates Mead in his insistence that the process of exchange is the most important factor in understanding. Yet he differs from Mead in proposing that the object of the exchange process is not another step towards universalization, but rather constant construction and reconstruction of both conceptual horizons” (58). Thus, the emergence of the response of the other, and more generally the encounter with the other, remains “an enigma” (71).
- 9 Given this constitutive coexistence of plurality and unity, of proximity and distance, of identity and difference, understanding represents a viable alternative to consensus and agreement. While consensus requires two or more people to share the same idea or opinion about a certain subject, understanding is fully compatible with disagreement. People can radically disagree with each other, while at the same time understanding their respective points of view. Dialogue is then an omnipresent possibility in everyday life, which can neither be reduced to a background of consensus and agreement, nor to a permanent condition of conflict.
- 10 The convergence between pragmatist authors such as Mead and Dewey, and Bakhtin’s theory of language structures Koczanowicz’s attempt to understand democracy as a condition which permeates human life, a potentiality inscribed in human communication. But Bakhtin’s contribution to Koczanowicz’s theory of democracy is not limited to his theory of dialogue. Another key role in the argumentative structure of *non-consensual democracy* is played by his notion of carnival.
- 11 But what does carnival have to do with democracy understood as something which takes place in our everyday lives? According to Koczanowicz, Bakhtin’s theorization of carnival has to do with fraternization, utopian meaning, degradation of power. During

carnival, the king becomes a clown, and he is mocked and beaten; the sacred body of power is brought back to earth. Insofar as it turns the official hierarchies upside-down, carnival can be understood as a revolutionary kind of conduct. This works not only in a negative sense – the degradation of power – but also in a positive sense, given its “capacity to build authentic bonds” (78), by means of new and unconventional social relations, which take the shape of bodily contacts. Therefore, according to Koczanowicz’s interpretation of Bakhtin, carnival is “a universal phenomenon somehow reflecting human nature and a potential of communication always harbored in human relations” (82); “an ideal form for free and equal communication embodied in real gestures of real people” (84). Moreover, carnival involves the original communicative value of frankness. Frankness is the kind of communicative value which allows for “a look at the other side of established values” (85), that is, for new perspectives and points of view beyond the official ideology.

- 12 The concepts of dialogue, understanding and carnival constitute the bedrock of Koczanowicz’s theoretical proposal. This proposal hinges on two original concepts: critical community and non-consensual democracy. Critical community is defined according to the four criteria: “1) bringing together the public and the private spheres; 2) promoting critical identification with tradition and, at the same time, fostering openness to other traditions so that particular identities can always be negated; 3) providing a basis for democracy and reacting flexibly to democratic transformations; and 4) combining universal regulatory principles with specific ways of realising them through reliance on emotions and bodiliness” (136). According to Koczanowicz: “Critical community members constantly find themselves in a dialogical tension, which makes them subject to the pressure of tradition and institutions and, at the same time, capable of shaping them” (139). The political counterpart of critical community is represented by non-consensual democracy. Non-consensual democracy is a democracy based on reflexive understanding rather than on agreement (163), on solidarity, and on the capacity of citizens to problematize “the given.” The connection and the complementarity of critical community and non-consensual democracy depicts a theoretical landscape in which citizens can acknowledge the centrality of community bonds while at the same time conserving their reflexive and critical capacity as individuals. The framework of this proposal coincides with a conception of language and communication as a field of constant tension between social/centripetal and individual/centrifugal forces. The convergence between pragmatist thinkers – such as Mead and Dewey – and Bakhtin on this issue is extremely interesting, and its reconstruction by Koczanowicz praiseworthy.
- 13 *Non-consensual democracy* represents an interesting contribution to the current debates concerning the crisis of democracy. Specifically, it fits into a current in recent pragmatist scholarship, promoting a critical discussion between pragmatist thought – especially Dewey – and new theorists of hegemony – such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.¹ Koczanowicz provides good reasons for taking a critical view of the two decisive assumptions of the aforementioned theory of hegemony: the autonomy of the political sphere and its identification with the dimension of conflict. At the same time, his reconstruction of the notion of dialogue entails a simultaneous refusal of consensus-based models of democracy. While opening the possibility of understanding each other without the necessity of agreeing with each other, the fulfilment of dialogue

is always a contingent outcome in the complexity of everyday life's interactions and in the ongoing dialogue between centripetal and centrifugal social forces.

- 14 Nonetheless, one point in Koczanowicz's analysis does appear open to debate. This critical point is the key role played by the notion of carnival, which is coincidentally the most original and bold theoretical move introduced by the author. According to Koczanowicz's interpretation, carnival is key to an understanding of the egalitarian potentiality of human action. Specifically, the notion of carnival "entails that democratic society is an activation of the potential embedded in all human relations" (85). This potential involves the possibility of turning upside down the hierarchical roles and the vertical power relations structuring social life, working then as a potential source of democratization. However, I would suggest that this positive universalization of carnival could overshadow two sides of this phenomenon: rituality and violence.
- 15 First, carnival is in fact something which owes its meaning to its cyclical exceptionality. The ritual of carnival is something which, by definition, takes place as an extraordinary event, confined to a special place in social life and to a special part of the year. Koczanowicz makes it very clear that in his interpretation carnival is a potential underlying possibility, rather than something which only ever occurs as an actuality. Still, this begs the question: what is the relation between the exceptional and ritual side of carnival, and its persistence as an underlying possibility of everyday political conduct? Or more specifically: could we dispense with the ritual side of carnival, without losing an important part of its meaning?²
- 16 Second, carnival is not simply an innocent opportunity to escape temporarily from existing established values and roles legitimating the dominant ideology. Rather, it is also a radical overturning of the kinds of values which limit and control violence. For instance, the history of Italian organized crime has several episodes in which carnival and its attendant disguises offered the opportunity to anonymously kill or employ violence against enemies, or even against innocent people. In this case, carnival also offers the opportunity for a temporary return to brutal and uncontrolled violence, without the limits imposed by everyday moral and legal rules. This potentially violent side of carnival does not find a place in Koczanowicz's reconstruction. But can we make use of the concept of carnival, without taking into account the possibility of violence that it apparently entails? Should not a complete account of the liberating potentiality of carnival also acknowledge the equally important potentiality of violence which so often accompanies it? To put it briefly: can we dispense with the ambiguity of carnival as a source of democratic potentiality and at the same time as a possible source of a violence (which, interestingly, is not necessarily directed against power and its representatives)? Does carnival involve other risks beyond the specific one stressed by Koczanowicz – i.e. the risk of falling prey of "the seductions of anarchy" (162)?
- 17 This is, in my opinion, the most relevant issue prompted by the reading of *Politics of Dialogue*.
- 18 Of course the import of this question goes beyond the specific interpretative issue of carnival. Koczanowicz's anti-dichotomic refusal of both consensual and agonistic models of democracy could open the path to a more detailed and insightful analysis of contemporary politics. Specifically, the focus on a non-consensual conception of dialogue represents a viable way to recognize the key role played by conflict without reducing the political dimension to the domain of conflictual insolvable relations. At

the same time, reference to carnival involves acknowledging a social and political dimension permeated by the ambiguous coexistence of liberating and democratizing potential and violence. This may be a bit of a stretch, but it is intriguing to analyze the results of recent electoral processes such as the Brexit referendum or the USA presidential elections in light of this theory. Apart from the obviously critical role played by economic and social conditions, these surprising upsets may indeed be seen to express a “carnevalesque” reaction against the “establishment,” which does not necessarily lead to the development of a more critical democratic community, nor to a widening of democratic understanding. Even if carnival dynamics are directed towards power in the figure of the establishment, they may themselves constitute the means of the establishment of new power relations. Such remarks could bring a reader of Koczanowicz’s interesting book – at least, they have brought the present reader – to ask: could a non-consensual democracy and a critical community deal with the ambiguous and potentially dangerous dimension of carnival?

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NOTES

1. See Testa 2017; Mardh & Tryggvason 2017; and Hogan 2015.

2. One might see some similarities between Bakhtin’s concept of carnival and Durkheim’s theory of ritual collective effervescence. Curiously, Durkheim’s voice is often absent from political literature discussing collective phenomena. See for instance its significant exclusion from Laclau’s reconstruction of the debate about the psychology of the masses and of collectives between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century (Laclau 2005).

AUTHORS

MATTEO SANTARELLI

Università degli studi del Molise
matteosantarelli1985[at]gmail.com