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Politics as Generative of Belonging
Francesco Viola 3 June 2020

The age of rights is now demonstrating its limits more clearly and more starkly[1]. One begins to realize that rights are not enough to cover the whole spectrum of social good. When rights purport to identify themselves with social good, they can be destructive of social relations and ties that are necessary for social cohesion. Nevertheless, one also needs to recognize that the expansion of rights in an individualistic sense was made possible and, in some ways, so even requested, by the crisis of collective identities through which one obtains those goods that rights cannot provide.

The Constraints of Second Nature

The radically social nature of human beings requires a relationship with others to recognize oneself and, at the same time, requires the definition of a sphere of otherness that is easily identifiable and that it is one through which human beings can cooperate in order to face the instances and necessities of human life. In the long run, this generates a form of membership that becomes essential to the narrative that constitutes the Self. Without loyalties, starting with one's own family, there are no roots to cultivate and without roots no story can begin. There is no history.

It is understood that the identitarian configurations of the past and relative social relations have been eroded, becoming less important for future generations and, in some cases, to the point of even seeming oppressive. Certainly, this is relevant primarily to the globalized and digitalized West, but also more cohesive and stable collective identities are under attack now. Therefore, a call to return to belonging must

negotiate with its profound crisis if it does not simply want to appear as wishful thinking. The gravity of this crisis is such that it produces at times a rejection of belonging in and of itself. On the other hand, after having taken our leave of "human nature", the question is why one should be tied to one's "second nature", that of culture and customs. Identities as a matter of fact can be rejected and others can be freely chosen, as identities "by will". Consequently, these become rights to exercise at once own discretion, but the void left by the crises of traditional identities cannot be filled by rights that do not generate duties for their subjects. How will this gap be filled?

The topic of identity is very delicate because it risks generalization. Collective identities are myriad, and until recently they tended to lean one against the other and coagulate in a certain unitary manner, but now they seem to diverge and with a multiplication of "belongings" there is a weakening of collective identities. One only needs to look at the past cohesion between cultural, religious, and political identities at least in western Christian countries. However appropriate this divergence may seem, one must be mindful of its consequences.

One consequence is that cultural identity weakens insofar that it was interwoven with religion, or in any case closely related to it. For political identity, the decomposition of cultural unity was a solid blow in so much as it needed a basis in pre-political elements to constitute its physiognomy and stability. Secularism, if strictly understood, is the full-scale acceptance of ethical pluralism, otherwise it becomes a new form of intolerance. It refuses the hegemony of a particular form of life with all the consequences that this entails on communal practices. Certainly, it is right to talk about a "culture of secularism", but we are very far from the uniformity of the past: we are now in a terrain of tension and conflicts, a terrain in which rights flourish though, as mentioned, they erode relations and ties with a resulting proliferation of fear.

Consequently, political identity built at the same time on cultural and religious identity shatters. An attempt at resuscitation on the same terms

as the past would be futile, aside from being completely ideological. Therefore, Politics is reduced to bureaucracy and institutional apparatuses and puts all its appeal in presenting itself as a system of guarantees. This, however, is not enough to render it relevant for our lives.

Personal Identity and Collective Identity

When one legitimately appeals to "belongings and loyalties", one must then directly confront the crisis they are going through, otherwise it is nothing else than the nostalgia of a not always so desirable past. The question is: do we have to reject political identity? Do we have to renounce political community? Because this is precisely what it is: collective identity is significant if it generates a form of community.

We must not lose sight of the fact that what we aim for is always ultimately personal identity. Collective identities are functional to identifying the self, otherwise they become forms of depersonalization. They are ways through which the person recognizes the self and through being recognized by others. It would not make sense to talk about collective or group identity if at the end it does not flow back to the topic of personal identity. We must protect different cultures in order to safeguard personal identities. The ultimate roots of a need for identity can always be traced to the personal.

We can define *personal identity* as the vision each person has of him or herself, of the fundamental characteristics that define the person in comparison to, or related to, others. Personal identity answers the question "Who am I?" rather than "What should I be do?" or "What can I do?". It is apparent that the priority is *to be* rather than the duties or rights that it entails. If there is no answer to who we are, self-respect would be impossible to establish, and it is a fundamental political value. It would also be impossible for us to orient in the world, to identify our place in the world and recognize a context as one's own as well as to be able of distinguishing good from bad in one's own life choices.

This process of identification needs to employ an intersubjective dimension in a two-fold manner. We can identify ourselves "in relation" to others and "with the help" of others. The person is an epicenter of relations and not only a source of autonomous choices. It is precisely relations that make choices possible. In fact, the value of a good does not lie only in the utilities that an individual believes derive from it, neither is measured in subjective preferences, it must also be recognized at an intersubjective level. The individual must be able to refer to others to control if the value at stake is not an illusion. For this reason, recognition is an ethical-political request. One is a "self" only among other "selves".

Personal identity thus understood differs from the subject of the decontextualized rights of liberalism but also from the fully rooted and contextualized subject of communitarianism. Therefore, it is wrong to consider belonging as a property that is mine, but that is not "me" (having is not belonging), as well as to consider it as that "me" that I cannot help but acknowledge (belonging is not being of). In the first case, community relations are purely extrinsic and presuppose a self that has already formed before entering social life, which is completely unrealistic. In the second case, the process of identification is purely constative and not constructive, and relations severely limit or suppress choices, something that today is particularly unacceptable. Consequently, in the first case, rights prevail over belonging as political value and one cannot discuss "community", whereas in the second, belonging overrides rights as political value and therefore personal identity is already "given" more than knowingly attained, and it is confused with the collective identity of the community. As we have seen, the crisis of collective identities pushes personal identity towards rights, thereby depriving it of the stability afforded by relationships. How can we break this deadlock?

Politics as a Community of Life

If we now turn to the question of political community, we have to note that the destructuralization of political identity, as previously

mentioned, has the advantage of cleansing the political sphere. Politics as a community of life should not be confused neither with a cultural community nor with a moral community, even if it is fed by both, though this was truer in the past than today. Today, the commonality of culture is diminishing, and communities based on the comprehension and implementation of fundamental values are hindered by pluralism.

Over the Centuries the commonality of the political community has challenged the ever-growing diversity of its members, with the aim of bringing them together in a significant way (not as a simple *modus vivendi*). Here we can surmise that political commonality relates to belonging very differently than cultural or religious commonality. The main difference is in fact that Politics notwithstanding its conflictual side, and perhaps exactly because of it, generates belonging, whereas cultural belongings receive us as already constituted communities. Certainly, the ties generated by Politics become, in the long run, factors of cultural cohesion, as is the case with nations, but in this way the new diversities, inevitably supervening in the history of a political community, solidify and become by definition exclusionary. But in political belonging, exclusion, emblematically represented by citizenship, is provisional and offers the possibility for an integration and enlargement of diversity in view of a creation of future belonging and a more comprehensive citizenship. Therefore, when appealing to belonging as an antidote or complement to rights, one must distinguish a generative concept of belonging such as Politics, from a vision of belonging as an already consolidated product, such as the cultural one.

We asked ourselves if Politics is able to present itself as a bona fide community of life and now we are better able to understand the reasons for this concern, now that the crutch of religion and culture are evermore insecure. If Politics ceases to be a community of life, or at least ceases its aspiration to be one, then harmony among citizens is no longer a political value, the common good is lost sight of and fear and hatred find a way to take root. Such a policy will not be able to generate belonging, but on the contrary, it will use membership as a weapon for exclusion and struggle.

If we desire that the term "community" be not only vaguely evocative, we must specify what should be understood by a "political community".

Of course, there is always a pre-political base from which to start. There is no starting from scratch. A commonality of language is necessary, a common space of public conversation in which the definition of the keywords is the same for me as what they are for us. According to Wittgenstein, agreement on meanings is the basis of agreement in judgments. And each discourse requires a common grammar. This brings with it a shared social practice, because commonality in meanings is sharing understanding and articulating fundamental values of associated life. However, as we have seen, it is precisely this sharing that is questioned by ethical-political pluralism. Then a common discourse is activated to redefine those meanings around which there is no longer agreement, though still within the shared horizon of the fundamental values of associated life. This is the moment, then, for Politics.

Cooperation as a Good in Itself

In this perspective the political community is presented as a community of discourse, or more precisely, a cooperation with the aim of understanding one another. It is cooperation that makes the political community, not the uniformity of judgments, as held by communitarianism. In fact, John Rawls defined political society as "a fair system of social cooperation" and added, perhaps somewhat more fittingly, that cooperation is also an end in itself of social life.[2] To say that cooperation is a political good in itself is a risky statement for those, like Rawls, that believe in the primacy of justice over good. Cooperation creates commonality and generates trust even among those who have different visions of what is a good life. Political cooperation requires conscious participation, a sense of dialogue and respect for people and their opinions.

It is not a question of aggregating preferences through exhausting negotiation, but of having a common idea of what a decent society is,

even if one does not have, or can no longer have, a common idea of what constitutes a good life. A society is decent if it can demonstrate an order in the liberties that guarantee the stability of social relations. Only in this way a collective identity can be significant in the edification of personal identity. One cannot be happy in an unjust society, or one paralyzed by reciprocal vetoes, if not with a healthy dose of egoism. This means that social and, in particular, political relations must be taken into account when formulating one's life plans. The fact that different visions of what constitutes a good life are now formed outside of the political community makes them predisposed to mutual intolerance, interested only in rights and not in duties, intolerant of the diversity with which one can only negotiate when forced, but certainly cannot deliberate.

Deliberation itself is a form of cooperation and requires willingness to learn from diversity and, therefore, to change one's opinion during public discourse and to adopt a critical attitude even towards one's own orientations, in order not to close the door to continuous revision and innovation. Alessandro Pizzorno rightly spoke about this "liberty to convert" as a possibility of modifying one's own choices (political, cultural or identitarian), arguing that this characterizes public discourse in democracy far more than specific representative institutions, which are now also present in authoritarian or pseudo-democratic regimes.[3] If this freedom is exercised on the basis of valid justifications and not on a whim or interest, then the political community will show a generative openness that is very difficult to find in the hard-set communities of identities of the past.

The original identities are adjusting towards each other becoming real forms of cultural mestizo as well as through a process of unconscious negotiation, which, however, takes a long time.[4]

For example, in the case of immigration, one cultural identity does not only ask the recognition of another cultural identity, but also and perhaps more importantly, of the political community which it is entering. The request for recognition is at its core to participate fully in

common life, it is a request for commonality. The "other" in order to be recognized needs to belong to the common. The recognition of the particular is only possible on the basis of a common horizon. Nonetheless, a political community is certainly not a universal horizon but is still a particular form of common life. The aspiration of multicultural societies is precisely to generate a community that is inclusive of the different identities that inhabit it, even if not a form of cosmopolitanism. Each multicultural society has its own particular physiognomy that depends on the circumstances in which it was formed at its foundations and through the process of integrating new cultural identities.

Finally, I would like to highlight another aspect of political cooperation. It not only combats all forms of exploitation or enslavement, but also, by defending itself, it protects the stability of the relationships which form it. This happens by helping those that find themselves in difficulty or the weakest in the cooperative relationship. This is the political principle of fraternity, which cannot be mistaken for mere benevolence, but is a way to bend inequality to justice.

<u>The Limits of Politics</u>

Politics as a community of life must face the question of delimitation, that is, of its domain. It is a question of taking into consideration two areas: that of skills and that of the people involved. As Silvio Ferrari pointed out, within the public sphere three different levels must be distinguished: the common space, the political space, and the institutional space.[5] Obviously, this is an abstract distinction, because in reality there are often intertwined plots. However, it is useful because each level has its own linguistic structure and its own specific contents.

The common space is that of civil society, in which the initiatives of private individuals, citizens and non-citizens, and their associations flourish freely with their only limit being public order. This can be exemplified by the "road" where there must be free movement without restrictions on the direction to be taken and the way of pursuing it. The

political space is that of public debates in which public opinion is formed and discussions on the fundamental values of associated life, and their interpretations, are held, thus preparing the groundwork for the identification of the common good. Today, this is perhaps best illustrated by television debates or more generally through means of communication. The institutional space is where binding decisions are made for all citizens, such as courtrooms and parliaments. I have indicated only the least controversial places, but there are also borderline cases, such as workplaces in the common space, meetings in the political space, public schools in the institutional space.

In this context the political space is particularly important for its role as a hinge between the private-social and the public-institutional spheres. Here, Politics takes shape as a community of life, generative of belonging. Certainly, as has already been said, a horizon of fundamental values of associated life is assumed and there is discussion on how to understand and apply them. But non-citizens are not excluded from this common discourse, and indeed it is desirable that they participate in it to learn from it and to make others learn from their differences. This is possible if there is already cooperation between citizens and non-citizens in civil society, whereas the political space becomes a privileged place of education for political belonging, which among other things, even citizens are in great need of. It is right to reject both assimilation and segregation policies, but I would prefer not to talk about "places for difference",[6] because this suggests the idea of enclaves within an already formed political community. In fact, the Politics of difference is the Politics *tout-court*, it is the real meaning of Politics, which aims to generate commonality between differences and to make this commonality a constitutive element of personal identity.

Finally, in the institutional space we encounter the problem of citizenship in a strict and formal sense. I am against considering it as the central question for fear of making it an ideological shield in the absence of policies for welcoming or integrating. A political community is not created by decree or by the stroke of a pen. On the one hand, political history has demonstrated and continues to

demonstrate that we can be treated as human beings without being citizens and that we can be citizens without being treated as human beings. On the other hand, there are many citizens who do not deserve to be citizens.

In fact, there is a tendency to treat citizenship rights from a purely individualistic perspective, as if it were a right *to* citizenship. The latter is universal and belongs to the realm of personal rights. Citizenship rights, on the other hand, are not only particular in that they relate to a specific political belonging, but above all, they also contain duties: the duty to safeguard the stability of social relations, the duty of solidarity, the duty to actively participate in political cooperation and to broaden the community of discourse, preventing its exclusivist auto-referentiality. In turn, the recognition of citizenship contains an assumption of responsibility, such as, among others, the commitment that the recognition of *status equality* leads to a decrease in the inequality in the distribution of wealth (*distributive equality*).[7] If this promise is not kept, as often is not, then perhaps there will be a more open society, though certainly a more unjust one than before. Unfulfilled promises are far more unjust than promises that are never made. Rights that have been recognized already have their focus, which leads to the production of duties, unless these are nothing more than rights written onto a house of cards.

Without doubt, membership is the bearer of fundamental goods that rights alone cannot produce, but it must be a membership that is consciously accepted, creatively developed, open to difference and continually revised and renewed. It is a new sense of belonging in which we cannot lose sight of the fact that the ultimate goal is always personal identity where rights and belonging walk together.

 References

[1] In this comment on the paper by A.B. Seligman and D.W. Montgomery, "The Tragedy of Human Rights: Liberalism and the Loss of Belonging", in *Society* 59, 2019, pp. 203-209, I manifest my agreement with the fundamental way they confront a crucial current topic: the expansion of rights making it ever more difficult to

establish social duties. My critique consists primarily in the discrepancy between the first part of the article, in which belonging is presented under the rigid distinction made by Tönnies between community and society, and the second and last part, in which the defense of Politics of difference opens a new perspective, even if too timidly. In my opinion this new perspective has to be expanded, but it is very different from the past. For this reason, I will try here to revisit in broad terms the narrative of social identities in a way that I find to be more coherent and acceptable.

[2] J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, Columbia University Press, New York 1996, pp. 15, 323.

[3] A. Pizzorno, *La politica assoluta e altri saggi*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1993, p. 14.

[4] F. Viola, "Negotiation of Identities and Negotiation of Values in Multicultural Societies", in *Identity and Migration in Europe: Multidisciplinay Perspectives*, ed. by M. La Barbera, Springer, Cham (ZG) 2015, pp. 29-36.

[5] S. Ferrari, "Diritto, religione e spazio pubblico", in *Rivista di filosofia del diritto* 2, numero speciale 2013, pp. 35-48.

[6] Seligman and Montgomery, p. 208.

[7] Cf. S. Moyn, *Not Enough. Human Rights in an Unequal World*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2018.

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