

Reflections against the light on politics and its feelings: comments on the article ‘Passion and tenderness as political forces’ by Jô Gondar

*Valentina Rodolfi**

I have read and reread with great pleasure Jô Gondar’s contribution, *La pasión y la ternura como fuerzas políticas*, eagerly welcoming the signs of the unfolding of the political potential of psychoanalysis, which I have long hoped for.

Gondar not only reflects on the nature of the bonds that sustain the whole of society, a subject I will return to shortly, but she herself creates bonds through the simple act of writing and reasoning about the things of the world, by relating voices from politics, philosophy, and psychoanalysis. And she does so in that porous and vulnerable way whose need she hypothesizes, with tenderness, overcoming the passion. But it is no less incisive or convincing. Gondar does not use one word more than is required. The feeling is that she is writing to tell us something and not to tell herself something, and she does this as clearly as possible, making reading not only a low-frustration experience (even if in a foreign language) but also a rather innovative experience when compared to the sometimes unnecessary complexities of psychoanalytic literature.

The author’s proposal is clear: to use the concepts of tenderness and passion as developed by Ferenczi to understand and signify contemporary forms of social organization and politics. On the one hand, we find the passions that constitute the language of adults and are configured as strong and uncontrollable emotions, and on the other hand, tenderness, the language of children, which constitutes a more fluid and porous type of affection opening up a wider surface of communication with the outside world. Among the adult passions, we find fear and hatred, definitive and blind emotions which combined generate a paranoid-prone society, while childlike tenderness possesses creative abilities and a sensitivity superior to that of

*SIPRe. E-mail: valentina.rodolfi@hotmail.com

adults, and is able to keep itself in resonance with the world around it. Aggression finds a place both in tenderness and in passion, but the way it is expressed is different: it is a vital and necessary impulse in the former case, destructive and violent in the latter.

The world of tenderness and the world of passions are not two radically separate worlds; just as the child experiences passions, the adult, too, retains a childlike tenderness within him or herself. According to Ferenczi, tenderness is also vulnerability (but not helplessness) in the face of adult power. Judith Butler, a contemporary queer philosopher, reworking the concept of vulnerability tells us that we are all vulnerable because we are from the very beginning thrown into a world of others and that it is through relationships and not because of our own constitution that we are vulnerable, subject to loss, trauma, bad weather, recognition of the other or their absence.

According to Butler, vulnerability acquires a central role in political and social power dynamics; as far as vulnerability is concerned, there are two possibilities: recognizing it in ourselves and others with the possibility therefore of affirming it, or defending ourselves against it, hating the other, being afraid of them, denying our own and others' vulnerability.

Although Gondar speaks of Latin America and Butler of the United States, the discourse proves universal. In Europe, we are witnessing a process of normalization of the extreme right. The evolution of the Italian scenario, with the increasingly convinced affirmation of center-right coalitions led by the radical right, echoes the mutations that are taking place in Europe. I believe that much has to do with the dramatic events of the last few years: pandemics, wars, environmental issues... The climate of instability and uncertainty has deeply undermined the foundations of the wealthy West, causing a regurgitation of uncontrolled terror and the search for scapegoats and strong leaders dominated by passions one can identify with.

Conservatism today must seem too many to be the most sensible approach to a world that seems to be falling apart in every aspect. Keep everything as it is, or rather, restore order (but what order?) starting with the compartmentalization of ethnic groups via that of gender, ending with proposals to revoke human rights (*e.g.*, that of abortion) or preventing what would be their natural evolution (adoption for same-sex couples, a more convinced extension of parental leave to fathers...) would seem to correspond to what Gondar is referring to when she says 'hatred prevents me from perceiving the vulnerability of the other - as well as my own - by despising and annihilating him in every way. But, in doing so, wouldn't my own vulnerability be precisely what I am trying in my fantasy to eliminate?'

We are certainly hating a lot these days, a hatred that consoles and comforts, that alleviates our fears. It is a hatred that redeems from vulnerability and liberates from personal responsibility. Social shitstorms (online hate campaigns) provide an extremely easy example of the

contemporary declension of what Freud theorized in 1921 in 'The psychology of the masses and the analysis of the Ego.' According to Freud, the reference to the masses is on two levels: the first refers to a disorganized and brutal social phenomenon, the second to organized and compact masses, for example, the church and the army. But in both cases what sustains the masses is, for Freud, an emotional tension and mental condition that permeates individuals in an undifferentiated way.

For Freud, the mass represents a particular type of social connection that indicates a functioning that circumvents individual thinking and drives all individuals, no one excluded, to share the dominant ideas. Social groups born or formed extemporaneously to promote online hate campaigns would belong to the first level.

According to Amnesty International, online hate speech is the term used for it and is a widespread and cross-cutting phenomenon aimed at targeting the most vulnerable on the basis of origin, religion, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and appearance. Sometimes they are incited by politicians and influential figures, in other cases the spark is ignited by news or fake news. Its legitimation is both cause and effect of a process of cultural change that leads to offline manifestations of discrimination and intolerance.

If hate is on one side of the coin, on the other we find fear; shitstorms, hate speech, and the whole wide range of violent expressions traceable in the virtual world would seem to function as a tool to exorcise the deep fear that the object of our hatred, the one to whom we are wishing the worst of evils, regardless of what he or she has committed (a murderer or an overly beautiful and prominent actress are basically the same thing), might not be just an external object floating out there in the world, but something that belongs to us, inherent in the innermost part of each of us. We attack the other in his or her vulnerability with the intention of denying our own.

Recently, the Italian government, acknowledging with some delay the seriousness of the phenomenon, launched a communication campaign 'Leave hate speech unspoken' (Governo Italiano, 2023), which is part of the European research project 'Innovative monitoring systems and prevention policies of online hate speech', included in the European Commission's Program - Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers - aimed at contributing to the development of principles such as equality and people's rights, to counter the spread of hate speech online.

Another phenomenon associated with the previous ones is polarization. According to theoretical physicist and journalist Morris Mitchell Waldrop, two types of polarization are usually identified: the first is opinion polarization, which consists of the division of society over specific, at times burning issues, such as gun ownership or health policies. But there is also social or affective polarization, which consists of an individual's

identification with a social group (which often coincides with a political party) so strongly that it fires up very intense negative feelings, such as anger, resentment and sometimes even hatred, toward those who are perceived to be outsiders to their group, because they belong, for example, to the opposite party. It seems that the phenomenon of affective polarization has much to do with passions, having the same ultimate and irreducible nature of emotions.

Abusive relationships occur when someone dominated by passions colonizes another person who is mostly found on a more porous affective register. This does not mean that tenderness is devoid of aggression, nor that it does not retain its sexual and death drives. Tenderness is a type of sensitive intelligence that pertains to a dimension that is distinct from reason and passion, in which aggression is expressed not in a destructive but a vital form.

While it is true that the current European political scene appears bleak, it is also true that as the biologist and historian of science Stephen Jay Gould points out, history is not made by big names alone, and the true fabric of life is actually formed by the thousands of small tendernesses that we silently and unconsciously offer one another every day.

Recent years have witnessed a flourishing of movements and activism by younger people. Generation Z (Gen Z), the first generation fully immersed in onlife (the new hybrid existence in which the barrier between real and virtual has fallen, according to philosopher Luciano Floridi), have taken on civil and environmental battles by organizing events online and then meeting in the public squares (the second level of mass configuration according to Freud. Whereas the church and the military have lost their bite, much has been gained by environmentalism with leaders like Greta Thunberg, or the LGBTQIA+ movements). These are solidarity-based battles aimed at the acknowledgment of social equality and equal dignity of all human lives, in stark contrast to the idea of an exclusive society proposed by adult politics. It so happens that in Italy in 2023 someone was unexpectedly elected secretary of a major political party after carrying out a campaign entirely focused on civil rights.

On the occasion of Safer Internet Day 2020 - the World Day for Internet Safety established and promoted by the European Commission, Save the Children released the dossier 'From likes to squares: young people and civic participation onlife' from which interesting data emerged (Save the Children, 2020).

67% of the teenagers who responded to the survey say that social media are the channel through which they get their information, and they are active with respect to social, civic, or political issues (followed by school at 65%). Among the topics that receive the most interest are: climate change and safeguarding the environment (60%), the fight against discrimination, bullying, and stereotyping (53%), immigration (25%), school issues, and children's rights (18%). More than half of active online teens also translate

commitment into direct citizenship actions in order to make a concrete change by participating in awareness-raising events or collective mobilization related to the issue of interest.

Gen Z, but also Millennials, are now very clear that the foundation for a healthy society lies in the possibility of recognizing and acknowledging differences. The project of an inclusive world that goes beyond ideals of conformity and deviance must inevitably be organized around the idea that everyone is just themselves, unique, unrepeatable, wonderful, and horrible at the same time, but no less worthy of enjoying their lives.

Vulnerability as an inescapable human condition and its safeguarding within ourselves and in others is the basis on which all these movements rest in a nutshell, carried out with energy and courage by the same young people who mostly shy away from entering the logic of party politics (abstainers from political voting in 2022 were 42 percent in the 18-34 age group) and by which, in turn, they feel ignored. Gino Strada, who knew a lot about vulnerability, once said 'Rights either belong to everyone or they are called privileges'.

Individualism and competition seem to be rejected today by most children who no longer identify with the logic of their fathers and of politics. The idea that in order to exist, to find one's place in the world, one must focus on increasingly extreme performances is slowly but surely withering away in the generation of children. Life is inherently worthy, and its value can no longer be calculated through performance, grades in school or college, type of work and earnings, or the social background of the family to which one belongs. It seems that young people no longer have any desire or time to waste in identifying their classmate (perhaps homosexual or of another ethnicity or disabled) as the enemy to be fought against, subdued, and humiliated because, for these young people, proximity to the great human variability is the norm. Much more so than it was for the previous generation, which instead had to learn to deal with otherness as it went along, starting with the first great migratory flows in the late 1990s, the great achievements of the queer movements of the last two decades, and the progressive rebalancing of the position of women within the socioeconomic system.

In November 2012, Magistrate Elena Paciotti concluded her report 'Europe is for human rights', for the European Parliament Information Office thus '[...] Rather, we should try to persuade ourselves that fighting against economic inequalities, fostering the integration of immigrants, and guaranteeing equal dignity and equal fundamental rights for all (guaranteeing 'freedom from fear and need') is not an act of generosity on the part of those who enjoy greater goods and more solid guarantees, but a duty and a common interest, to safeguard a model of coexistence that has guaranteed peace and made Europe the region in the world where human rights are best guaranteed'.

SITOGRAPHY

- Governo Italiano. (2023). Communication campaign ‘Leave hate speech unspoken’. Available from: <https://www.governo.it/it/media/campagna-di-comunicazione-lascia-l-odio-senza-parole/22520>
- Save the Children. (2020). Dossier ‘From likes to squares: young people and civic participation online’. 67% giovani segue cause sociali in rete. Available from: [https://www.ansa.it/canale_legalita_scuola/notizie/speciali_eventi/2020/02/10/67-giovani-segue-cause-sociali-in-rete_84e86491-53da-426c-8bc5-cc54fc3e3915.html#:~:text=Tra%20i%20temi%20che%20maggiormente,diritti%20dei%20minori%20\(18%25\)](https://www.ansa.it/canale_legalita_scuola/notizie/speciali_eventi/2020/02/10/67-giovani-segue-cause-sociali-in-rete_84e86491-53da-426c-8bc5-cc54fc3e3915.html#:~:text=Tra%20i%20temi%20che%20maggiormente,diritti%20dei%20minori%20(18%25))

Conflict of interests: the author declares no potential conflict of interests.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: not required.

Received: 16 May 2023.

Accepted: 2 August 2023.

Editor’s note: all claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, editors and reviewers, or any third party mentioned. Any materials (and their original source) used to support the authors’ opinions are not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

©Copyright: the Author(s), 2023

Licensee PAGEPress, Italy

Ricerca Psicoanalitica 2023; XXXIV:802

doi:10.4081/rp.2023.802

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits any noncommercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.