

Abstract

THE LIGHT AND THE DESERT:

TOWARD A DIASPORIC PEACE THEORY

Dott.ssa

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Tesi di dottorato presentata per la discussione:

Programma Dottorato in 'Teoria Politica'- Ciclo XI

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A.A. 2009-2010

This research project was born out of a singular sense of urgency that connected an individual crisis to global issues. In my personal and academic life, I often found myself puzzled. Discussing different subjects and interacting with diverse persons, I observed that my own outlook often tended not to coincide with, and eventually oppose, my interlocutor's position. I could not accommodate myself in the "common way of thinking". I'm not referring just to the expression of different

opinions, I'm pointing to the deeper mechanisms of rational thinking: we do not seem to follow the same mental paths. At the same time I felt an intuitive, ancestral, unjustified, trust on the ultimate possibility of man to dialogically cope with disagreement and live peacefully. To cope with the seemingly inconsistency of my intuitive perceptions I started digging in human knowledge searching explanations to my doubts. Started by chance and curiosity, my immersion in human intelligence became actual and took a new turn when I entered the deep, borderless, waters of the World Wide Web. The primary drive of this research was the need to solve a sort of "cognitive dissonance", but on the pathway to clear my mind I had to find out and specify the general conditions under which genuine understanding and dialogue could take place. I probably should have look for a psychiatrist, instead I came out with a thesis on evolutionary communication ethics.

Following a typical methodology in social sciences, this research begun with one hypothesis, to be eventually modified, falsified or held as valid, according to subsequent theoretical and empirical findings. To be honest, my working hypothesis, summed up in the formula "Diasporic Peace Theory", came as a flash, inspired by an unknown Muse that was unsatisfied by the previous DPT (Democratic Peace Theory) acronym. My active contribution was to keep it, justify it and then develop it. I took it as a gift, as it was compatible with other pieces of knowledge I already had in mind, namely, the luminous thought of Kant (whose moral, pedagogical and political theories inform my understanding and defence of a cosmopolitan education as the tool for achieving peace) and the bright critical insights of Stuart Hall (playing with a famous advertise: the explanations of this self-asserted "diasporic intellectual" on the cultural production of identity and other issues are priceless!). My personal status of "diasporic jew" may also have played a role in the choice.

The basic idea underlying the Diasporic Peace Theory slogan is that global peace would be attainable if a “diasporic” attitude could inform the way of life and mindset of all world citizens. It resembled a utopian prophecy, but as Noam Chomsky put it “Optimism is a strategy for making a better future. Because unless you believe that the future can be better, you are unlikely to step up and take responsibility for making it so. If you assume there is no hope, you guarantee there will be no hope.” It may be viewed as a fresh contribution to the democratic peace theory debate, to which it is debtor and partially critic. In the present age the spirit of the kantian articles would benefit from a re-designed. The stance I endorse addresses more explicitly the nationalist discourse as the edifice to dismantle and advocate a decisively cosmopolitan policy.

This apparently simple and appealing model (in my imagination), immediately made sense to me; but as soon as I tried to outline it and share it, I had to face the difficulty of externalizing thoughts, meeting the very linguistic, conceptual and psychological barriers that frustrate each communicative efforts. The image I had in mind needed to be somehow re-shaped in a more complex way that would make all the underlying assumptions explicit, and therefore disputable.

George Steiner’s account of communication as a process of translation was crucial to my understanding of this aspect of language and initially made me sceptical on the achievability of mutual comprehension. In his analysis, language emerge as a code of stratified meanings; it follows that communicating practices imply a delicate process of translation-decodification, because even speakers of the same language may use a word unconsciously disagreeing on the definition they attach on it. As translators know very well, there is no table of equivalence in which words and concepts perfectly fit, therefore an hermeneutic effort and background knowledge are necessary for other’s language to be properly interpreted. There can

be no absolute certainty that the sent message will be received with the same meaning, as meaning seems to be a very flexible object, and words historically changed it as it was a dress. Misunderstandings consequently abound. Moreover, the nature of a message is also informed by the means in which the message is incorporated, as Marshall McLuhan famously argued.

Following an ideal thread unravelling in disparate fields, these considerations on language and communication pushed my research in a confusing, yet fascinating, interdisciplinary adventure. Facing eternal epistemological human dilemmas of the sort of “how do I know what I know about how do I know what I know?”, I made a sort of survey and found that we are now in a much better position than previous humanities scholars: not only we can gain from their contributions, we can also count on a renovated interest in human nature by advanced scientific studies in cognition and evolution that can substantiate old insights and definitely eliminate false beliefs. In the repository of human ideas, brilliant ideas may be mixed in a box with diversions and misconceptions, thus spring-cleaning may be a useful and efficient strategy in thinking.

I investigated the origins and evolution of language and culture in their cognitive and anthropological dimensions; I reconsidered the political and philosophical arguments that historically grounded the freedom of speech, of thought and of information; I embraced the deconstructionist perspective; I broaden my knowledge of critical theory and media theory to better assess the role of communication media on individual and society; I gave a look even to quantum physics. With the help of old and new disinterested heroes of human thinking (whose works are now almost all freely available on the Internet, wherever and whenever I need them) clouds finally dissipated. I’m not arguing that the ultimate mystery of life has been solved, but at least we have a more solid idea of how we, humans, really

function. Since Kant's revolutionary turn, philosophers knew they were watching reality through a lens: what I found out is that the lens available today, thanks to technological improvements, are much more powerful than before, eventually allowing us to identify the mechanism responsible for our moral ability and to see the stars in a completely new perspective. The problem, I argue, is that not everyone is provided with the same pair of lenses, and this would explain our diverse worldviews. A representation of reality is recreated in our mind and we act upon it, but the matching between the inner and the outer world may be more or less precise. Culture, in its anthropological understanding, pertains to the system of meanings we adopt to decode external realities. Civilizations do not clash, what eventually happens is that someone fails to comprehend the other.

In my understanding (supported by many publications in the same direction), recent evolution in science and technology shine a new light on old wisdom and make room for hope in a renovated primacy of ethics. Historically, political philosophers imagined "man" (the basic unit of the structure to be arranged) as an animal with distinctive features, and theorised accordingly a political system: if *homo homini lupus* we should follow Hobbes and accept a Leviathan with absolute authority, merely to guarantee survival; if man is a *homo economicus*, selfish but rational, we could hope for a profitable social contract between members of a limited group; if man can be a *homo cooperativus*, there is room for a global peaceful arrangement. Darwinian understanding of morality considers the capacity to feel empathy toward other beings, therefore we could expect natural adaptation to act in a way that cooperative behaviours will proliferate along the evolutionary chain, while aggressive and selfish postures will be reduced. Professor of cognitive science Peter Gärdenfors argued that symbolic communication was driven by the need to enhance cooperation toward common future goals worked; one of the main functions of

language, superseding the informative one, would therefore be to coordinate for common good.

Moving the field-glasses again, I tried to illuminate the actual *Zeitgeist* and the state of the art of human evolution, with a particular focus oriented on its communicative dimension and the entailed ethical dilemmas. Globalization, the name we gave to this confusing historical phase characterised by spreading institutional, economic and spiritual crisis, poses in front of us innumerable obstacles and challenges. The pace of change is so rapid that hinders social adaptation to new conditions and deters even the human ability to tell reality from fiction. Since chaos is often both destructive and constructive, in today world amazing perspectives and possibilities are emerging. Digitalization of contents in general, and the Internet as a way of sharing, represent a discovery whose consequences on society would be more powerful than those of the fire or the press. A holistic trend in science, opposed to the previous compartmentalization of knowledge, is propelling an interdisciplinary convergence toward a new understanding of human cognition, of human relationship with nature, with technology and with other men and cultures. A new Humanism seems on its way to reach us, and philosophy (in its etymological sense) should help its course building the bridges of intercultural knowledge, exchange and active participation in the free market of ideas. While Nussbaum pointed to the imaginative empathy necessary for global public life, Apel and others presented discourse ethics as a response to the moral challenge of the human situation as such (and especially today). In my opinion, an appropriate of the Internet use would be leading to the establishment of a global public sphere, a space where ideas are shared and confronted for the sake of individual empowerment, a place in which freedom, creativity and responsibility and respect are cultivated for common good purposes and public reasons.

In the last century many factors intermingled, creating a social turmoil. A moral and emotional emptiness, stemming from the void left by the decline of religion, afflicts Western culture. On its part, in a vicious circle, Western culture afflicted almost the whole world. Following George Steiner's examination of what he called alternate "mythologies", we may look at Marxism, Freudian Psychoanalysis, Lévi-Straussian anthropology and fads of irrationality (astrology, the occult...) as more or less unsuccessful attempts to fill that gap. A pervasive "nostalgia for the absolute" grew and deepened in modern conscience, as the decay of formal religion coupled with the failure of alternative definitions of truth. On the political level, the very declaration of Universal Human Rights fostered an alteration of the nation-states structure, triggering a potentially global, cosmopolitan-oriented and bottom-up, revolution. In my understanding this is an inescapable, necessary and healthy process, to be explained (by other arguments) as an obvious by-product of the affirmation of Universal Human Rights and the spreading of global communications.

The inclusive and pluralistic vocabulary of Human Rights and democracy stand in sharp contrast to the exclusive import that is intrinsic to the nationalistic discourse. In this conflict between words and facts, representation and language played an important role. It nurtured frustrations for betrayed expectations and a complex array of fallacies, moral conflicts and cognitive dissonances that harden the debate. The recent financial crisis definitely destroyed our blind trust in the capitalist economy autonomy and ability to fulfil its promises of wellbeing. Thus another certainty swept away, leaving an old system of beliefs with no more stable pillars and weak moral justifications. On such a miserable stage, the dramatic eternal conflict of enlightenment and obscurantism is taking place once again.

But there is good news, as the power structure is changing. The OpenSource, FreeSoftware, CreativeCommons sharing society is emerging. The impact is still to be assessed, but an explosion of creativity seems ready to redesign a colorful world on the ruins of the *Ancient Regime*. The election of president Obama is an amazing, emblematic case in communication and demonstrated the power of the Community of Internet. For my research project, it was the Messiah, announcing global ethics. The possibility of universal moral imperatives such as justice, reciprocity and human dignity as been sustained by many scholars, representing a diverse range of intercultural perspectives. Examining the values in which culture are grounded, we should compile a list of ethical principles to form the common ground from which to view contemporary issues in the media, interpersonal communication, mediation and conflict resolution.

Having investigated the history and cultural significance of this twist, in *Two Bits*, Christopher Kelty, revealed us the people and practices that have transformed not only software, but also music, film, science, and education. The practices of collaborative creation of software source code (than made openly and freely available through an unconventional use of copyright law) have reoriented the relations of power around the creation, dissemination, and authorization of all kinds of knowledge after the arrival of the Internet. Another important contribution of *Two Bits* is to illuminate the effects on public spheres and social imaginaries by demonstrating how Free Software is a "recursive public" - a public organized around the ability to build, modify, and maintain the very infrastructure that gave it life. Kelty drew on his ethnographic research that took him from an Internet healthcare start-up company in Boston to media labs in Berlin to young entrepreneurs in Bangalore, to describes the technologies and the moral vision that binds together hackers, geeks, lawyers, and other Free Software advocates. Abundant, inspiring

cases show how this practices and way of life include not only the sharing of software source code but also ways of conceptualizing openness, educate, inform and proselytize for it. Architectures, art, music, food and maths are universal language; if we could train prepared translators, thanks to the sharing of this new mindset, a Diasporic Peace could be finally established on Earth.