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Social Action and the Power of the Irrational

At the intersection point of social and cultural anthropology, comparative politics and classical political philosophy we can situate a particularly important aspect of political modernism, the inspiration behind and effect mechanism of a certain irrationalism that is extended into the heart of the modern idea of political action and power. This modern reappearance of irrationality is not without precedents and historical background, but it only became a dominant feature of the modern condition. Modernity, on the one hand, is a pure fantasy world, with no connection to reality; even more, it is based on a deliberate escape from and rejection of reality that nevertheless is projected as being 'more real' than reality itself. However, on the other hand, alternating with utopian delusions it always manifested a very subtle receptivity, a keen apprehension of rational thinking; so much so that actual according to the modern phantasy world also pretends to be rational action itself. The apparent contradiction can be resolved by pointing out that both these are rooted in irrationality, in the alienation from existing bonds or the real, expressed by the incommensurable.

The irrational expresses the incommensurable characteristics of transformation or transmutation process (see rites of passage). The consequence is that, due to the mimetic nature of irrationality and the easy reversibility and transference of imitative processes (for e.g. a model can become an object, and vice versa; see René Girard), an extremely delicate and manifold relationship develops between sensation, subordination and procreation: just as genuine love cancels individuality in the happy union with the beloved one, sensation can be used to subjugate and enslave; and even subjugation can be desired and loved, if one happens to be in such a desperately unsettled and terrifying situation that otherwise the anxiety of existence seems to be irresolvable. This holds the key for the peculiar developmental dynamics of the irrational: long latency and insignificance; then a sudden multiplication, threatening overall dominance; and then a just as sudden disappearance. But once must beware of downplaying this entire process, as if nothing has happened: the irrational only vanishes once nothing remained to be emptied out or desired.

Irrationality, where events happen that are never ending and actions are taking place that cannot be exactly calculated is a forbidden territory of knowledge. Classical philosophy was built up on the opposite ethos: that objects powerfully inhabit reality, whether animate or inanimate, and whatever fills the space between these entities is irrelevant, being empty and so irrational. In the language of classical philosophy, it belongs to non-being, a bizarre, alienated knowledge. Since the pre-Socratics - but it must have been formulated even before - entities are considered as given in their

unity, with each thing having a character, space and time coordinates that is always the same, culminating in their rational ethos. It took no account of any breakage or fraction (Deleuze 2004: 238),¹ while reality (being) in its fullness is primary evidence of every living being. However, both these primary and primordial standards are questioned by irrationality, where unity becomes weak, relations hazy, order suspended, thus beings finding themselves in a relative go-between, with the decomposed entities standing in incommensurable relations to each other in an ever expanding world. In his recent 2001 book *The Cunning of Unreason* John Dunn expressed his opinion about the limitations of man, especially concerning the limits to knowledge and rationality—in particular considering modern politics (Dunn 2001). The true radicalism of the irrational, pioneered by the incommensurable liminality, lays in the reversal of the evidence of a reality.

In being, there is a balanced and harmonious relationship between every part; this is what is called ratio. This is the meaning of rational, derived from Latin ratio, which does not mean reasoning, rather proportionality, still present in English with the exact same meaning; and also present in the idea of ‘rational’ numbers, which means that the number can be written as a ratio of two natural numbers. In liminal incommensurability, as in non-being, the primary reality is the void. Objects only take up an uncertain, relative position within this empty space, which dissolves meaning. They are still experienced, though devoid of unity (deprivation from unity is the well-known expression used by Gregory Bateson for the schismogenic processes). But why is this apprehensibility such a particularly suitable though forbidden vehicle for knowledge?

The Forbidden Knowledge

The alchemical-cosmological aspects of the world, initiated by Maimonides, Fibonacci, Cusanus, Copernicus, Kepler or Boyle, these crucial in-between figures, culminated with the world-view of Isaac Newton, inaugurator of the new canon characteristic of the Enlightenment, in particular through the significance attributed to the liminal void as a ‘prime mover’ of events. But how the modern revolutionary tradition capitalised on the significance of Newton’s rediscovery of the void, through the seductive sensibility central for the revolutionary mentality, already pioneered in the etchings of Callot, which – just as the philosophy of Newton – merely and literally expanded the liminal void, giving it as a meaning of a new understanding of restored measure and harmony, is a completely new story. The entire scholarship of Hobbes, as documented by Quentin Skinner, is a restoration work concerning the void, and the new politics of human rights and social contract as championed by Hume and Rousseau were never about anything else than this. Kant’s category of universal morality is based on the inner void of humans, characteristic in particular of mere spectators or observants, and their consequent need for experience and learning of moral laws. It thus offers the human equivalent of the Newtonian world of quantities and particles bumping into each other in the void, or crowds and masses, increasingly dominating politics

since the end of the 20th century. The pioneering analysis of the manner in which such crowds select their leaders is offered by Gustave Le Bon, a visionary figure comparable in certain respects to Nietzsche, and continued by Gabriel Tarde, especially in his 'laws of imitation' and the concept 'passionate interests'.² This is the background out of which the demagogy of the totalitarian politics of the 20th century was born, using and perpetuating the crisis situation of a liminal void into the desired precondition of re-birth and the formation of a new, perfect social order. Political action as such became diverted from the individual qualities of their bearers. However, by Max Weber a contrasting idea to crowd psychology was coined, with his pioneering introduction of charismatic seduction into political sociology.

Weber on seductive power

The problem of how societies managed to solve situations of crisis was a central concern of sociology since its beginnings. Max Weber posed this problem in the language of 'out-of-ordinary' situations, whether due to natural catastrophes, warfare, invasions, or economic reasons, and placed the emphasis on the need for charismatic leaders who could solve such difficulties. Emile Durkheim used the contrast between the profane (ordinary, everyday) and the sacred. But ever since the works of Durkheim and Mauss, and of those anthropologists on whom they relied, the link and priority between irrational rituals, myths and actual events was a central question. The term irrational, and its extension to social and political events, can provide a way out not simply in solving the theoretical problem, but also for extending these concepts to the analysis of contemporary politics and society, as the term builds on but also moves beyond Weber and Durkheim's explanation. The crucial significance of the irrational, as it has been hinted at Plato in his analysis of the 'in between' (metaxy),³ is that it has an extremely wide range of applicability in its precise and technical capturing of the imprecise and unsettled situation of transitoriness. Any situation where borderlines and boundaries that previously were stable and taken for granted are dissolved generates an irrational situation which needs a solution, as the elimination of such boundaries generates tensions in which life becomes impossible, returning the world into chaos – a central preoccupation for the Greeks. On the other hand, however, the dissolution of borderlines has its own attractiveness, exactly by being connected to an 'oceanic' feeling of freedom from previous structures, and the possibility of giving a free rein to one's own wishes and desires. The situation of irrationality has a seductive power – or, to be more precise, it is nothing else but this strong, elusive and easily deluding attractiveness or seductiveness. It is enough to refer here to all we know about art, whether theatre or poetry, all vehicles of seductive sensitivity, whether by duping or deceiving, or by being cathartic.

Interpretations of the modern condition motivated by personal experiences, animating the works of Hölderlin, Nietzsche, Weber or Heidegger, are central for understanding the contemporary world. But sensation also establishes a relationship of subordination, which can subjugate and entrap the sensor into one's own feelings.

Such sensual entrapment was promoted through the identification of political party leaders with party members and even the population at large under totalitarian systems, presumed to share, at least originally, the same position of outcast sufferers. The acceptance of such instrumentalisation of sensation was due to the system of 'passionate interests' (Tarde and Latour), connected to the rise of capitalism as a solution for the period of civil wars, and then by the liminal conditions that emerged, especially in Eastern Europe, after World Wars; conditions that were purposefully perpetuated through staging a sacrificial system. While totalitarianism disappeared as a force, contemporary political life is increasingly reduced to a politics of victimhood and suffering, where the search for the good life is replaced by the double negation of eliminating all suffering from the world – an effort that only produces the opposite result, while public reality becomes torn apart by sensual scandals, confirming Foucault's insight about the investment of desire and enslavement to sexuality (Foucault 1980), bringing out the typical liminal figure of the lustful Trickster (Horvath 2013).

Charisma or Trickster

Weber's studies on charisma gave a rationalistic account of the way charismatic heroes emerge, through an almost automatic causality, to solve liminal crises. This view was symptomatic of our era, which rendered modern politics vulnerable to the appearance of a series of strange, Protean figures, 'liminal authorities', created by the two World Wars, and who increasingly managed to overtake the political scene, at first culminating in the various totalitarian regimes, but currently threatening, in a mutated form, contemporary democracies as well. The success of these movements is based on a joint play with sensuality as a result or release of the void and techniques of sacrifice. Sensuality is a particularly strong liminal force, emerging in the in-between, or the 'metaxy', as analysed by Plato in his discussion of Eros in the Symposium, erasing the boundaries of the self, thus comparable to self-sacrifice, as if echoing Bataille's 'Eroticism opens the way to death', over a more than two millennia distance (Bataille 1998: 24).⁴ It is this same seductive sensuality that totalitarian movements require from their adherents, promising a bright new world, a perfect social order where all individual needs and desires will be fully satisfied, thus luring the incautious to leap into the unknown. The promises will not be met, but at this moment, instead of a blissful state of happiness, a sacrificial mechanism will be set in motion, capturing those hooked and misled into abandoning care. At this stage the trickster logic shifts gear, and instead of depicting an attractive, positive image of a perfect society, emphasis is displaced on a double negation: the search for eliminating all suffering and unhappiness in the world; an aim which is similarly unattainable, but which is paradoxically never-ending, as here any failure – in contrast to the failure of positive utopias – will only reinforce an ever more dogged and obsessive belief in the need to persist, as the failure, the continuous presence and even proliferation of suffering, increasingly produced by the very effort to eliminate it, will be physically ever-present,

in contrast to the elusive utopias. It is this, at once self-fulfilling and self-destructive spiral, which is captured by the expression ‘transforming weakness into political capital’ (Simone Weil), so similar to Havel’s famous ‘the power of the powerless’; or in the works of Roger Griffin about fascism,⁵ which introduce the similar term liminoidality.

The irrational has the power to take over a soft tissue through infiltration; it is a very delicate poison. Its possessive zeal could never be satisfied, as it grows with every new possession, starting a futile search for satisfaction at the level of the incommensurable by gratifying sensory pleasure. This is why its malign effect in totalitarianism, parasitism and promiscuity, or in modes of mimesis where orders, forms and principles first came to be suspended and then mimed, and where a definite sequence of actions to be reproduced could be provoked in the irrational. What is more, something automatic and mechanical grows in consequence, which was different from the general veneration a kind of ‘desiring machines’ (Deleuze 2004b: 232-234), leading to an empty consciousness (Baudrillard 2009: 27); an automatism that could be deliberately used in order to break and divide the unity of being.

These notes suggest that the charisma-trickster pair, just as any other form of emotional mobilization characteristic of modern politics, should be linked with literally irrational conditions: situations in which the previously taken for granted order of things is dissolved, the harmonious proportionality or the ratio is suspended, thus everybody is paralysed with the opposite of power, with weakness concerning what to do, and is faced with anxiety about what is going to happen. The resulting outcome will be completely different from the kind of power that is eidetic, like the one gained by involution.

Conclusion

In spite of their evident worth, the Weberian and Tocquevillean analyses of emotions and sentiments only diverts the problem towards already known or accepted statements. This is quite understandable, as analysis is at a loss in coming to terms with counter-solutions, preferring to think rather in terms of causalities. In this perspective emotions arise because there was a cause for them. However, this paper argues that a genuine proliferation of the irrationality took place with modernism, marked by its revolutions and wars, culminating in the world wars and totalitarian regimes of the 20th century that have neither causal origins nor realistic aims. What is more, exactly a detachment from reality, the liminal void nursed their appearance as alienation, penchant of a kind of resentment. This was first recognized towards the end of the nineteenth century by Friedrich Nietzsche and Gustave Le Bon, contemporaries who also shared the fate of not being taken seriously during their lifetime but having an enormous following and effect soon after. Nietzsche had a great impact on Weber’s analysis of charismatic leadership, while Le Bon pioneered

the study of crowd psychology, influencing Tarde and Durkheim, similar to Simmel and Pareto.

Irrationality so far has hardly been perceived, let alone studied by social and political scientists, even though it played a fundamental, decisive role in modern history. There are several reasons why irrationality, in spite of the crucial importance I claim it has played in all times and places, have so far not been recognized. First of all, irrationality is incommensurable with unity, order, causes and facts, and is so indeed practically invisible.⁶ Irrationality hides and disguises itself, stalking either underground or outside the boundaries, at the margins or limits of society;⁷ thus, it falls out of perception, and is even often confused with its opposite. This is not even a simple matter of choice, as every community tries to do its best in order to get rid of the irrational, pushing perceptions of weakness to the margins and keep it there, once its presence was revealed. Thus, irrationality time and again disappears, and – under the false assumption that this means its end – vigilance and knowledge concerning such conditions also vanishes, so it can strike again, provoking decomposition, and – in particularly confused and thus extremely imitative societies – might even publicise and propagate itself under the disguise of the rational.

Notes

¹ See also Deleuze's exemplary definition of schizophrenia, a 'pure lived experience' which is 'outside the logic of sensible qualities', as for schizophrenics 'lived experience does not correspond with their feeling. They feel intensity and the passing of intensities, but their body is crossing a threshold of intensity. [...] A schizophrenic is still crossing it [experience], going above it, beyond it' Deleuze (2004a: 238).

² See Latour and Lépinay (2009).

³ About this, see Voegelin (1978).

⁴ This logic concerns not only the denial of individuality, the oneness of being, but also that such violation generates Eros, 'towards the furthest bounds of possibility' (Bataille 1998: 24).

⁵ See Griffin (2007).

⁶ See Parmenides, for whom only a form could be known and recognised as an object of knowledge: 'It is necessary to assert and conceive that this is Being. For it is for Being, but Nothing is not. These things I command you to heed' (Parmenides, Fragment 5, as in Coxon (1986: 54).

⁷ About the way marginality and liminality can mutate into each other, see Szakolczai (2009).

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