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THE NEW FACES OF OBSCURANTISM IN WESTERN SOCIETIES

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la società contemporanea

The new faces of Obscurantism in Western societies

Vincenzo Cicchelli, Sylvie Octobre, Massimo Pendenza

The new faces of Obscurantism in Western societies: an introduction

Although the West has often seen itself as the spearhead of modernity and universal values through the vast Enlightenment movement, many of its peoples (in Europe and North America) now seem to be turning their backs on the idea of progress and appear to consider it as an outdated 20th century notion. Indeed, this exhausted notion now seems to evoke a time when social and technological progress was associated with intellectual and even psychological fulfilment on the one hand, equal opportunities for upward social mobility and the integration of the working classes and ethnic minorities on the other, and advances in civil rights, democracy and full citizenship on the third.

Converging rays of darkness

What is most striking is the convergence, in Europe and in the United States, of phenomena as diverse as the following four:

Firstly, at the political level, Brexit (Calhoun, 2017) and the rise of populism and sovereignism (Anselmi, 2017; Martinelli, 2018; Langman, 2020), with the success of many national far-right parties, some of them inspired by neo-fascism and neo-Nazism (Moffitt, 2016; Crothers, 2019; Mudde, 2019). As Arjun Appadurai (2017) stated: “*European liberal democracy is on the verge of a dangerous crisis. Democracy fatigue has arrived in Europe and is visible from Sweden to Italy and from France to Hungary. In Europe too, elections are becoming ways to say ‘no’ to liberal democracy*”. Some old democracies are now turning into deeply divided democracies, democracies at risk or even “illiberal democracies” (Runciman, 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018) led by strongmen or outright autocrats – not to mention the treat posed by anti-democracies (Russie, Turkey, Iran...) characterized by the paramilitarization of power and the brutalization of societies (Bozarslan, 2021).

Secondly, at the level of national cohesion and the possibility of a renewed social pact (Pendenza, 2024), the resurgence of anti-Semitism, the rise of Islamophobia, and the rejection of solidarity and hospitality towards migrants. Our global world, which seemed so open not so long ago, now seems to be succumbing to the temptation of identity politics and 'exclusionary nationalism' (Mounk, 2018, 199). A Manichean vision is emerging that separates 'them' (the Other, which includes all those who are different from us regardless of cultural distance) from 'us' (a local, ethnic, religious, or national shared identity). This division has become the discursive matrix that justifies hostility and violence (Bauman, 2016). This vision is inextricably linked to the rewriting of the national narratives and the erasure of controversial and painful historical legacies and memories (especially in illiberal democracies: Bozarslan, 2021). This can lead to the rise of revisionism and negationism specially in relation to the Shoah (Zimmerman, 2000; Della Pergola and Staetsky, 2020). It is also undeniable that this tendency to question democratic hope (Foa and Mounk, 2016), this fatigue with democracy and this aversion to the other are intertwined with the escalating disparities and the unprecedented increase in social inequalities in Western countries. As early as the work of Alexis de Tocqueville (2000) and Emile Durkheim (1933), it was established that the relationship between democratic social bonds and social equality is inseparable; the former is supposed to create the conditions for the latter, while progress towards the latter is supposed to be a condition for the creation of the former (Gradstein and Milanovic, 2004; Turchin, 2023).

Thirdly, at the geopolitical level, the change in the pillars of the world order born after the Second World War, with its set of multilateral institutions based on the narrative of the search for peace, on the one hand, and the end of the enthusiasm and belief in a new liberal and democratic world order after the end of the Cold War, on the other. The unexpected and tragic return of war on European soil, the return of imperialist projects (Russia, China, USA) are undeniable proof of the questioning of peace as the supreme value in the management of international relations. The global landscape in which local facts stand out has never been so open/connected/interdependent and at the same time conflictual/divided/fragmented. While there is a unification under the aegis of a global capitalist infrastructure and the transnational circulation of ideas, cultural products and the imaginary, there is also a concomitant sharp division in terms of ideology, values and politics (Cicchelli, 2019).

And last but not least, at the level of values and beliefs, the dismantling of a movement towards more freedom and liberty, cultural liberalism, and tolerance (Matonti, 2021) has a strong negative impact on the battle for the inclusion of minorities and the empowerment of citizens.

These four trends are reflected in the deep divisions of public opinion, political affiliation, electoral choices, and generational differences within

Western societies. However, the extent and intensity of these phenomena may vary from one country to another. The rise of anti-Enlightenment and anti-modern thought is worrying (Sternhell, 2009), and one might wonder whether we are witnessing a powerful swing of the pendulum in relation to the hopes embodied by the decolonization, civil rights, feminist and pacifist movements of previous generations (Eisenstadt, 2003). The return of anti-Enlightenment ideas has been accompanied by anger, resentment, and fear (Cicchelli and Mesure, 2020; Cicchelli and Octobre, 2022). Contrary to the optimistic predictions of Francis Fukuyama and others who anticipated the emergence of a definitively open, free, and peaceful world after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the contemporary era has proved to be rather gloomy. Some authors have argued that this period is better characterized by the concept of uncertainty (Beck, 1999), and even a ‘great regression’ (Geiselberger, 2017). In order to describe this context, some authors have highlighted the shift in the temporal regime that has occurred in recent decades. Whether they use the term “révolutions” (Amselle, 2010) or “retrotopias” (Bauman, 2017), they highlight that contemporary societies share a strong attraction to the past, whether real or fantasized. This fascination has led to a shift in collective beliefs, with a transition from a sense of optimism and progress toward a more nostalgic and dystopian perspective: In this sense, the solution to our collective fortunes and individual destinies alike entails a return to the status quo ante.

Value systems are increasingly being questioned, giving rise to previously unthinkable intellectual currents that are gradually gaining influence. One such current is the *Dark Enlightenment*, a term introduced by philosopher Nick Land (2012; 2022) to describe a counter-Enlightenment movement that critiques the foundational assumptions of modernity, liberalism, and progressive politics. Proponents of this movement argue that the Enlightenment’s emphasis on rationalism, individualism, and democracy has precipitated societal stagnation and disorder. Adherents of the Dark Enlightenment reject egalitarian ideals in favor of a return to hierarchical structures, authority, and traditionalism, and often express skepticism regarding the future of liberal democracy, advocating instead for more authoritarian forms of governance, based on the belief that technological and social progress should be steered by elites rather than achieved through mass participation. This ideology intersects with various forms of neo-reactionary thought, which critique the perceived failures of contemporary democratic institutions. Scholars such as Guillaume Faye (2011), Nick Land (2012; 2022) and figures like Mencius Moldbug (2017) have provided foundational texts for this movement, drawing from diverse intellectual traditions, including the works of Spengler, and broader reactionary political theory (Tait, 2019).

These thinkers, while employing the vocabulary of the Enlightenment, construct an ideological system that fundamentally opposes its core prin-

ciples, rejecting the notion of equality in political rights or capacities. This rejection of democratic egalitarianism has led to the rise of neo-reactionary movements that refuse progressive policies and call for a return to more traditional political systems, including monarchies or aristocracies. These movements argue that modernity, driven by liberalism and democracy, has eroded cultural and social values, advocating instead for systems that preserve tradition, uphold elite authority, and resist what they perceive as the degeneration caused by mass democracy. Dark Enlightenment thinkers often embrace the idea that societal progress can only be achieved through the application of specialized knowledge and technological expertise, reflecting a distrust of the general public's ability to make informed decisions, especially in a democratic context. Additionally, many proponents reject multiculturalism and globalism, viewing these forces as detrimental to national identity and social cohesion. Instead, they advocate for nationalism or even ethnonationalism, asserting that societies should be homogeneous in culture and values to maintain stability. This often translates into support for anti-immigration policies and more isolationist or protectionist stances.

As we reflect on these developments, one might ask: have we already entered the era prophesied nearly 15 years ago by Nick Land? Therefore, this special section of «Quaderni di Sociologia» is dedicated to exploring a theme that is in line with the spirit of our *zeitgeist* and that we believe we can comprehend with the concept of *new faces of obscurantism*. In fact, the future, despised for its unpredictability, unreliability, and unmanageability, is now being criticized and classified as one of society's "liabilities." At the same time, the past is being re-evaluated rightly or wrongly, as an era characterized by the absence of constraints on choice, the effectiveness of action, and the realization of aspirations. In essence, it seems that the dominant narratives of the Enlightenment, modernity (particularly exemplified by the *Trente Glorieuses*), and the post-World War II economic expansion have lost their widespread acceptance. In the context of a contemporary society where the discourse of modernity has lost much of its influence and where disillusioned, anti-intellectual, and apocalyptic attitudes dominate public discourse, the question arises of whether the narrative of Enlightened modernity has any relevance. Is it possible that we are now living with a narrative characterized by the glorification of roots, the return of the nation, and the revenge of religions (Martinelli, 2005)? How should we tell the story of the today's world, which was promised the hopes, certainties, and optimism of a protective society and Welfare States committed to the socialization of risks but seems to be receiving the exact opposite? Will we experience a more unequal, more divided, more closed world? How can equality and education for all be improved? How to understand these anti-Enlightenment tendencies in the face of the strengthening of the progressive global struggle against patriarchy, racism, and Western hegemony, especially among

the younger generations? How can a new type of citizenship be created that allows for a more direct, just, inclusive, and effective democracy? What is the fate of cosmopolitanism in this context?

Shining a light on the New Obscurantism

This section is an extension of the above inquiries into the various manifestations of new obscurantism that have emerged in Western societies. It does so through four papers that explore new theoretical and methodological frontiers in the field. In the following papers, it is as if the great narratives of the Enlightenment and the modernity of the *Trente Glorieuses* no longer represent a consensus, and that we have to live with a *chiaroscuro* narrative.

In his paper, Alon Helled addresses the new obscurantism by targeting and discussing the crisis in which the narrative of enlightened Zionism finds itself. This narrative sought a perfect synthesis of Judaism, democratic civil emancipation, and the acquisition of sovereignty. It enabled the creation of the Jewish and democratic state that later materialized in Israel's independence in 1948. This narrative is currently being challenged by the rise of neo-Messianic Jewish nationalism, which scholars have identified as a contributing factor to the changing ideological landscape of Israeli society. The convergence of this development with the escalating political extremism of religious settlers in the West Bank and the swing of the democratic pendulum towards ultra-Orthodox Jewish particularism has been interpreted as a portent of incipient obscurantism, that threatens to disrupt the established Western-style democracy. A new and disturbing trend is marked by a cultural paradigm shift, indicating a shift towards the political hegemony of idealistic messianism. This phenomenon manifests itself as both violent anarchy and obscurantism in terms of social structure and goals. This provides a tangible basis for the previously unaddressed aspects of the State of Israel, signifying an ideological seizure by certain factions that exemplifies the obscurantist element of Jewish mysticism and has profound ramifications for Israeli politics. The assertion of political sovereignty over the West Bank and East Jerusalem is a prime example of this phenomenon.

The actions in question are deeply rooted in the obscurantist rhetoric of Jewish messianism and are permeated by nationalist and supremacist colonialism. This creates "a dangerous combination of fearful paranoia and a sense of omnipotence." The author notes that these facts stand in stark contrast to the pro-Enlightenment premises that originally guided the Zionist project of uniting the Jewish people under a single political sovereignty. Israel's legal-political trajectory has been marked by constant oscillations between progress and regression, democracy and messianism. This phenomenon represents a dialectical contradiction of the

national habitus, which at the same time explains the inability to resolve the conflict with the Arabs. In this vision, any move towards universal integration is seen as a renunciation of Jewishness. Conversely, any further development of Jewish particularism is interpreted as a retreat from civilizing cooperation, anchored in the democratic process of citizenship development.

Maria Cristina Marchetti's paper uses empirical evidence to demonstrate the emergence of various forms of cultural claims in the context of nationalisms and sovereigntisms in Central and Eastern Europe. This phenomenon has led to the proliferation of identity-based political parties and the adoption of a growing number of policies that undermine the rule of law. This trend has been revealed by the reports on the rule of law in the countries of the Union prepared by the European Commission in recent years. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a clear attack on the heritage of universalist values inherited from the Enlightenment and taken by the EU institutions as the basis for the construction of a collective identity and a hypothetical European people. The question of what might happen to Europe, to its heritage in the context of an attempt at redefinition based on the frequent manifestations of sovereigntisms and nationalism as well as their authoritarian degenerations, is therefore one that the author also asks herself. To answer this question, she draws on the data from the Special Eurobarometer on the *Values and Identities of EU Citizens* (2021), which aimed to deepen existing knowledge of the roots of values among European citizens. The Special Report aims to shed light on how the values contained in Article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty, which serve as the foundation of the EU, contribute to the identity-building process of Europeans. According to the author, there has been a gradual shift among European citizens towards a "post-human rights era". This shift is characterized by closures that were once typical of Eastern European countries and are now also present in contemporary liberal democracies in the heart of Europe. This development contributes to a controversial image of Europe. While there is still a strong commitment to European values, cracks are appearing in the foundations of these values, which delineate narrow boundaries such as family, nationality, and gender.

In his paper, Matteo Finco focuses on what he considers to be the paradox inherent in modernity, namely that it functions as a structural semantic apparatus that, at the same time as it creates the conditions for the formulation of expectations and claims (of already established rights or social problems that have not yet been taken into account by politics and the legal system) in order to develop or "realize" them, also risks inflating these claims due to their great number or the exorbitant number of groups/categories that demand their benefits. Precisely because of the insolvency of claims, this situation threatens to undermine and delegitimize the very constitutive pillars of Western modernity. According to Finco, the delegitimization of the promises of modernity is due to

the nature of these claims, which are increasingly identity-based. These claims are directed more at the protection of marginalized or excluded communities, if not also aimed at the prevention of abuse and injustice against them, than at the protection of the individuality and dignity of the person. There has been a shift from demands that are characteristic of modernity—demands for freedom and equal access to resources, essentially demands for “inclusion”—to demands that are more concerned with satisfying emotions associated with the defense of unprotected and careless belonging.

However, the author argues that this does not represent a real subordination of the principles that legitimize the individual to those that legitimize membership of groups or categories. Rather, it is a semantic shift within modernity, the consequences of which may prove unpredictable. Indeed, Finco is keen to point out that the concomitant increase in the importance of the affective and collective element of the claim in relation to the cognitive and singular element in no way undermines the individual character of the claim. Indeed, the latter, in representing the collective instance of the subject, tends in fact to remain anchored in an emotionality that is itself an expression of the more ‘authentic’ specificity of the unique individual. In other words, although the demand for more individual rights tends to become less important, being replaced by the demand for more security and protection for one’s own social group, it nevertheless remains mediated by elements that distinguish the need for community and aim to affirm the individual self through affectivity and emotionality. Moreover, the various cases reported in the article effectively illustrate these theses, as well as giving evidence of the possible risks that such a transformation may entail in terms of an increase in destabilizing demands, such as those for: atonement, the elimination of cultures, the indefinite proliferation of categories worthy of special protection, the crushing of the present, new memorials at the expense of old ones, the questioning of the idea of universalism, and many others.

Finally, Emanuela Dal Zotto and Chiara Marchetti’s contribution is based on the belief that inclusive experiences, such as those implemented by Community Matching and Inclusive Universities, can lead to socially innovative and original practices. These practices have the potential to transform even the host environments and to counteract the rise of obscurantism. This process takes place as host communities, walking alongside and building relationships with refugees, gradually come to recognize their and promote their integration. In this paper, the analysis of these experiences goes beyond noting the presence of social innovation practices. It also highlights their contrast with the national context, which is increasingly characterized by the emergence of new faces of obscurantism. They appear as potential indicators of new forms of citizenship, which the authors praise not primarily in terms of their formal aspects or as the positive outcome of a process of reception and integra-

tion, but rather as the empirical expression of what they believe should be the meaning attributed to the concept of “asylum”. With regard to the cases studied, both the Community Matching and Inclusive Universities for Refugees experiences stand out as unique and highly atypical in the context of refugee integration and support activities. The Community Matching initiative has undoubtedly facilitated the integration of refugees into urban communities and promoted a more accepting attitude among Italian citizens towards issues of racism and discrimination. Similarly, the Inclusive Universities program has effectively promoted the recognition of the right to education for applicants and beneficiaries of international protection, thereby fostering a culture of inclusiveness within higher education institutions. Both seek to counter the darkness of a scenario that indicates a tendency to criminalize migrants, manifested itself in border violence and exclusion within states. Both are glimmers of light, innovative practices, examples of how, despite the closure imposed by national policies, there is still room for interventions dedicated to integration.

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Alon Helled

Between Enlightenment and Obscurantism

The Jewish and democratic schizophrenia of Israeli sovereignty

1. Introduction: The Socio-genesis of the Jewish Israeli Habitus and the roots of Israeli schizophrenia

The State of Israel could not have been established without the legacy of the European Enlightenment. Its founding ideology, i.e., European-born Zionism, acquired its political and social savoir-faire through the pursuit of modernization (Feiner, 2004). Catalysed by the rise of “scientific” anti-Semitism, as opposed to millennial-old religious anti-Judaic persecutions, Jews were not only accused of obscurantism, devil-worship and plutocracy, but above all of racial inferiority; which later culminated in their annihilation in the Shoah. The appeal of transformation, as witnessed in modern European societies, engendered either sociocultural and political autonomy in the form of social rejection (the reaction of ultra-Orthodoxy), or the desire for openness and civil equality through the assimilation of professions, life styles, etc. This changed the hitherto stratified dispositions of the ‘habitus’ of European Jewry (Bourdieu, Wacquant, 1992; Elias [1994] 2000, 2001; Sapiro, 2015) in both cultural and political aspects. This meant a structural and structuring transformation of material, symbolic and cognitive conditions that impacted general processes of collective self-regulation. The Jewish *acquis* was structurally, i.e. socio-genetically, revolutionized by dialectical interrelations in terms of positions and interdependencies in the larger society, which produced and reproduced a new status of social participation for Jews, namely political rights, access to formal education and consequently to new forms of integration. Additionally, the thickening of networks between Jews and non-Jews changed the Jewish habitus, as the second-nature traits and codes of conduct that were innate to Jewish life before emancipation now became shared patterns of identification (as well as emotions and personality make-up; many of them unconscious). Old habitus-forming normative dispositions and social traditions consequently interacted with new ideas; socialism and nationalism, in particular. Since the interdependencies that people experience with «[...] nations, classes, ethnic groups, where the bonds of identification of individuals with their group and their participation by proxy in the collective attributes are far less elastic» (Elias, Scotson, 2008, 134), the Zionist synthesis stretched between Jewishness, civic democratic emancipation and the

acquisition of sovereignty materialized in Israel's independence in 1948. The Jewish and democratic state was the fruit of these processes. Nevertheless, the excessive nation-building and the lack of social correctability in the priorities of Israel's founding fathers (Sternhell [1995] 1998) have hindered pro-Enlightenment values, due to the intractable and intrinsic tensions between Western-style democracy and Jewish nationalism. The Occupation of the Palestinian territories in 1967, institutionally glorified by right-wing governments engendered a *modus vivendi* of democratic schizophrenia regarding Israeli sovereignty in both geopolitical and legal-institutional terms. Obscurantism is usually invoked for contexts in which the visible and transparent are only the tip of the iceberg. Phenomena such as terrorism, organized crime and religious extremism are some of what is visible (Sommerer, Zaganariis, 2010). This is true for both authoritarian political regimes (whose degree of power sharing and decision-making processes are centred around a few leaders and cross secretive mechanisms) and formal democracies which are undergoing processes of democratic regression and autocratization (Cassani, Tomini, 2019). Contemporary Israeli politics is an example of such tendencies. The rise of neo-messianism and political extremism by religious settlers in the West Bank, together with the swing of the democratic pendulum towards Jewish particularism (increasingly (re)interpreted by the political participation and influence of the ultra-Orthodox) reveal the obscure and obscurantist forms in Israeli society.

The article traces the three orders of Israeli schizophrenia from a process-analytical perspective that enables to delineate the dynamics between dispositions derived from Judaism, democracy and the combination of the two. By doing so, the obscure and obscurantist elements are sociologically contextualized in what appears to be a progressive autocratization and democratic precariousness. Inspired by historical sociology and sociology of law, the proposed analysis delineates the religious, ideological and institutional features in Israel. It processually and empirically locates key events, socio-political identity-relevant dispositions (such as the corpus of legislation in Israel) that are capable of showing how religion, state and regime intersects in a long-term perspective. Not only does the reconstruction of socio-cultural and legal-political dispositions unpack the Israeli habitus in the light of the dispositions that dialectically emerged from and affect society, but it also allows for broader social identification of the meaning and interpretation of sovereignty that Israeli democracy has produced.

2. The Long History of Jewish Obscurantisms

In his book "Ancient Judaism", Max Weber (1952, 390-391) showed the organizational and institutional transformation of ancient Hebrews

into an inter-local, essentially urban, landless people under Pharisaic leadership which accrued the role of rabbis, surpassing the hieratical aristocratic class of priesthood, after the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Social order was thus entrusted to the normative codification of traditions, while the divine remained occult in the practices of faith but not in the hierarchical figures of God's chosen servants, namely the Aaronic priesthood. Moreover, the figure of the prophet was already extinct; perhaps defined as «the purely religious demagogue [who] was spokesman and his oracles highlighted obscure fates of the future like lightning out of somber clouds» (ivi, 271). However, the legacy of the Hebrew prophets left margins for «[E]soterics [that] could emerge at best when joined to the visions of the prophets which partly were obscure and the original contextual meaning of which had been partly forgotten and which promised a better future to His stricken people» (ivi, 398). Sociologically, it is noteworthy that Judaism, with neither a structured priesthood, nor a centralized place of worship, became a dispersed non-hierarchical centrifugal religion. Religious authority was scattered and gave rise to autonomous Jewish communities, linked by networks (trade, correspondence between rabbis, kinship etc.). This means that, despite the hard core of Jewish halakhic norms, Jewish life in Palestine and the Diaspora was polycentric. As a result, interpretations and modes of action began to diverge. Therefore, Judaism has always had a Janus-faced spiritual existence, alongside the normative “dry” application of rabbinical precepts. According to the prevailing views in traditional Judaism today, the Torah is divided into two: 1. The outer part of the Torah, visible to the eye of the learner, which has been handed down from generation to generation by reconstructing¹ the Bible and the Oral Torah that has been written down (starting from the time of the Sages and includes the Talmud (the central text of rabbinic Judaism), the Shulchan Aruch (the Code of Jewish Law) and its interpretations, the Mishna Torah of Maimonides, the 12th-century Jewish philosopher and his exegeses, etc.); 2. The inner part of the Torah, which is considered occult. This includes the Kabbalah, which is mainly based on the *Zohar*, a treatise attributed by tradition to Rabbi Simon ben Yochi, who lived towards the end of the 1st century AD but which modern scholars believe to be a 13th-century compilation, and the Hasidic doctrine which celebrates the wisdom of the hidden¹. After the spread of the Hasidic movement, the

¹ For a long period of time, the study of the occult was forbidden to anyone who did not complete his studies in rabbinical schools (hence competent in the study of the *Poskims* (Jewish exegeses) and who did not pass the age of forty (the possibility has always been opened to men, never to women). During the time of rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572), the situation changed, when he declared that «it is a mitzvah to reveal this wisdom» and his various students began to spread the teachings of Kabbalah. See Scholem (1941).

study of the occult expanded, while among those who opposed Hasidism, the so-called “*Misnagedim*” (lit. the ‘opposers’), the prohibition of the study of the occult is still in force. In the Hasidic movement (mainly in Chabad Hasidism), the permission to study Kabbalah is emphasized². The struggle of the Jewish community established in Hasidism included boycotts and persecutions, and sometimes even denunciation before the local (Christian) authorities. They culminated in three notable polemics between 1770 and 1805. The divergence over mysticism was one of the reasons for the social, religious and ideological schism. Tensions between Hasidism, which sought to give more space to new forms of spirituality, hence linked to mysticism and prayer, and the Misnagedim, who promoted the normative study of the Torah, were reproduced both in the Jewish diaspora and in Palestine, where divisions persisted throughout the Ottoman and British rule as well as in independent Israel.

That said, both Hasidic and misnagdi ways of life were overtly averse towards Jewish Enlightenment. The so-called Haskalah (1770s-1881), an intellectual movement among Central European Jews, with some influence on those in Western Europe and in the Arab Mediterranean which promoted a new synthesis of Jewish law and secular ethico-cultural principles. Since the Jewish Enlightenment defined ideological worldviews, based on rationality, its anti-spiritualist material teachings challenged those preached by the traditional Jewish establishment. While the adepts of the secularizing ideals waged a culture war for the sake of their right to enter civil society in the countries in which they lived, the latter reinforced their particularist exclusivism, in order to maintain a nitid separation between Jews and gentiles. Within a few generations Jewish communities, dispersed in different countries, began to adopt tongues and cultures of the “general society”, while at the same time attempting to adapt their lifestyles, both individually and collectively. The zeitgeist of a common fate of land and people, strengthened by the ideals of the French Revolution, encouraged the Jewish maskilim (the followers of the Haskalah) to embrace lifestyles that would facilitate their legal (post-Napoleonic) emancipation and social assimilation. Yet, while assimilation made Jews invisible, progress revealed its harmful side. The form of racial hierarchization of humankind, based on pseudo-scientific evidence, strengthened the anti-Semitism that violently accompanied the traditional anti-Judaism rooted in the Church and the sociocultural accusations of a plutocratic conspiracy for the domination of the Jews as well as their revolutionary

² These two latter streams in Jewish orthodoxy are present in Israeli politics, and compose the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox party coalition the “United Torah t Judaism” which is a union of the Hasidic “Agudat Israel” and the Lithuanian Misnagedim’s “Degal Torah”. This political arrangement was first experimented in 1992, and reached its greatest electoral success in April 2019 (with eight MKs out of the total 120).

subversion against the social order. This incoherent alloy, deriving from the conservative right and the radical left respectively, was the processual trigger for some Jews, especially in Eastern Europe, to embrace Zionism. The normalization of the “Jewish question” in terms of statehood gradually gained ground.

Less obvious are the obscurantist aspects associated with Zionism. Although very different in either their ideological idealism (socialist vs. capitalist, secular vs. religious), or their application on the ground (cultural vs. politico-pragmatic), the goal was pretty much the same, namely the formation of a modern Jewish peoplehood in the Promised Land of their ancestors, Israel/Palestine. By promoting a European-style society, the evolutionary process of the Jewish people was attributed to its emancipation from the misery of the Diaspora, leading to the construction of the nativist ‘Sabras’ with a romantic, utopian intent to it. The socio-cultural fusion aimed at creating a new Jew, and was based on voluntarism and social necessity (Almog, 2000). Nevertheless, even the “utopian realism” that characterized the *savoir faire* of the Zionist pioneers (Gorny, 2015), stemmed from the religious and spiritual heritage of Judaism, centred on the Bible and anchored in the nationalist identification of people and territory of reference. Various internal contradictions of meaning illustrate the articulation of mundane and visible elements vis-à-vis those concerning the primacy of the religious creed. For instance, the above-mentioned Hasidic and misnagdi century-old refusal to open up Judaism to Jewish Enlightenment and to emancipatory Zionism still stands. It has been the only argument of convergence towards Jewish Statehood, since only the Kingdom of God could ever revive the Hebrew Kingdom. Israeli politics, secular by definition, is thus for them an arena for promoting communal needs and interests rather than being a source of collective identity. The historically anti-Zionist religious population, in contrast to the national-religious political streams and parties throughout Zionist history, accepted the State as a means of securing their cultural autonomy (education) and assure the religious status quo. The exemption from military service and the instrumentalization of politics (with intense antagonism between coalition and opposition) created a functional relationship between the Haredi population and the State. This point lies at the heart of the Israeli complexity which results in a kind of societal schizophrenia, especially once juxtaposed the certainty of democratic politics against matters of faith.

The almost Janus-faced elements of Jewish democracy as well as of the mirrored democratic Jewishness may seem deceitful. The romantic ideal-typical edifice of being equally Jewish and democratic contains a political utopia that characterized the early stages of Zionist entrepreneurship but was later transformed into a cultural, scholarly and/or trade-oriented habitus to a more “muscular” upon arrival in Palestine, hence based on land-work and on its Jewish collective possession. The

romanticized utopian pioneering and the rebirth of Jewish political sovereignty in the land of the ancestors became a quest for territorial might, increasingly institutionalized to a significant extent via the acquisition/occupation of land with very little regard either for international law or for the rights of indigenous Palestinians. Since then, the legal application of state law, especially after the 1967 Occupation, has been conditioned by chronic tensions between the two ideals, hence revealing a structural bipolarity between the universalist culture of democratic self-determination and Jewish particularism. The societal (dis)order of Israel has witnessed a political regime that treads a precarious balance between the poles of 'ethno-democracy' and that of 'ethnocracy' and possibly even 'theocracy', thus casting doubt on its qualification as a liberal democracy. The inherited cultural identification with the land, which was embodied in the existence of Jewish statehood, has shifted towards the messianic all-devouring spiral of Jewish supremacy. The neo-obscurantist hallucinations of the latter started crippling the democratic intentions of Israeli institutions, thus going beyond any romantic patriotism. The roots of the Israeli symbolic universe are stratified as two opposing and divergent cultural worlds: that of the secular Enlightenment of the Haskalah, and that of ultra-Orthodox religious fundamentalism. Hence, the Israeli institutional socio-political order depends on the polarized axis of these competing 'socio-moral milieus', formed by the convergence of structural dimensions, namely religion, cultural and ideological orientation, as well as the socio-economic situation of the social strata that are represented by the intermediary groups who are active in democratic politics (Lepsius, 1966).³ Certainly, such a phenomenon is not unique to Israeli politics. The world's most populous democracy, India, has experienced similar ethno-religionization through political Hinduism, hence the rise of Hindutva, personified by the current Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Damodardas Modi (Jaffrelot, 2021). Another similarity is the growing involvement of American evangelists in party politics in the United States, where neo-conservatives have allied with Protestant white fundamentalists under Trumpism (Sokhey, Djupe, 2024). However, Israel seems to have anticipated some of these phenomena. A historical political example is the messianization of the 1967 occupation/reunification of Jerusalem during the Six-day War (whose name itself echoes the spiritual significance of the Genesis). The reiteration and expression of religious fervour, anchored in the rediscovery and renewed ancestral sovereignty over the Jewish «axis mundi» (Eliade, 1954, 1957) has thus progressively merged

³ Furthermore, Lepsius distinguishes between democracy, elaborated according to the classical Weberian concept of political regime) and ethno-democracy and ethnocracy, which can be considered as deviations from the Weberian concept. See Wendt (2017, 1-21).

into politics, justifying the Israeli occupation, such as in the case of the Gush Emunim settlers' movement (Aran, 2013).

Apartheid-like policies in the post-1967 occupied territories of the West Bank and the segregational siege of the Gaza Strip from the rest of Occupied Territories (the so-called "Green line", i.e., the 1949 armistice border) have been implemented and added to forms of «democratic deficit» (Merkel, 2004) that shape and transform Israel into an increasingly Jewish-based ethnocratic regime (Smootha, 1997, 2002; Yiftachel, Ghanem 2004; Yiftachel, 2006). Over the years, many scholars have insisted on the bloody and bitter reality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that challenges Israeli democracy, namely the discriminatory double-standard of human and civil rights regarding the so-called "Israeli Palestinians" (also known as the 1948 Arabs)⁴. A «tyranny of the majority» is, indeed, a spurious dilemma (Dahl, 1989) that makes Israel increasingly illiberal. The rise of neo-messianism and political extremism by religious settlers in the West Bank resulted in a "revisionist besieged society", capable of producing only securitarian politics (Del Sarto, 2017), while the shift of the democratic pendulum towards Jewish particularism transformed old sociological categories into new variations of ideological radicalization. Put differently, the religious and theological identity underpinned the political, and eventually forced its powerful appeal on Zionist observant Jews in Israel. Therefore, the once state-led religious Zionism would face transformations in its original socio-cultural fabric, witnessing religious Zionism moving to Zionist religion, as the occupation consolidated its hold (Aran [1990] 2004). In this sense, Elias's connection between the pacification of the habitus and the pacification of the territory, as theorized in the «The Civilizing Process» ([1994] 2000), does not seem to take into account the impact of religious, emotional, irrational stands, such as the messianic extremism that has inflicted Israeli democratic promises, as envisaged by and desired in the country's Declaration of Independence. The primacy of religious dispositions has grown stronger in its potential of appeal compared to those anchored in democratic policy-making, namely the jurisprudence of the Supreme Court, the Laws of the Knesset, the principle of egalitarian citizenship and so on.

One example of such transformations has been the increasing (re)

⁴ The term "Israeli Arabs" refers to the inhabitants of British Palestine (approx. 156,000), either Muslim or Christian, who had remained within the 1949 armistice borders of the nascent State of Israel. After a long period under martial law (1949-1966), Israel granted citizenship to this population. Other non-Jewish minorities include the Bedouin (approx. 400,000 people), Druze (approx. 140,000), and Circassian (4,000 people) communities – considered "non-Palestinian" – who receive differential treatment by the State. The Arabs constitute circa 21 percent of Israel's population (Occupied Territories excluded), or roughly 2 million people of the entire 9,354 million populations (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

interpretation of political participation by the ultra-Orthodox. Despite their historical opposition to Zionism, which mistakenly secularized and anticipated the divine redemption of the Land of Israel, their exclusive authority within the rabbinical establishment of the state (antagonistically reaffirmed vis-à-vis the Conservative and Reformed streams in Judaism) has given them with contractual power in the governing coalition. However, their position as “king maker” is not the only novelty. The supremacy of God in Jewish thought also entails the subordination of the political (and democratic) to the obscure aims of religious fanaticism. The new stream of the national ultra-Orthodox (better known with the acronym “Haredolim”, or national Toranim) demonstrates the combination of religious conservatism and nationalist aspirations. The label designates some of the national religious, as a separate group, whose conservatism is identified with a high level of halachic strictness (compared to other within observant Israeli Jews) on the one hand, and a fervent belief in the role of the state on the other. Their worldview facilitates the identification with Zionism and nationalism, and supports compulsory service in the IDF; from which most ultra-Orthodox Israelis are exempt under the historic ‘*Torato Umanuto*’ arrangement⁵. Yet, national Jewish Ultra-Orthodoxy has no clear political affiliation. According to Yair Sheleg (2020), the main characteristic of this group is the particular strictness with which commandments are observed and the lack of openness, sometimes outright opposition, to modern mainstream culture (whose values have historically been at the heart of Zionism). Of course, the national ultra-Orthodox do not only affect the religious Zionist sector which they belong. The growing numbers and potential political affiliation raise questions about societal aspirations, either through cooperation with state-based political elites (as it is the case with the majority of the ultra-Orthodox), or through conflict and conquest of a hegemonic position. In the latter case, due to the absolute authority ascribed to the Torah and Halacha (Jewish law), the universal human rights and democratic rules might be challenged.

⁵ Literally meaning “His Torah, His Art”, the term describes a person whose main occupation is the study of Jewish Torah, and who is thus given a special status in Jewish law (Halakhah). In Israeli media, the term refers to an arrangement, according to which young people whose only occupation is studying in a yeshiva (traditional Jewish schools), receive a deferment of their obligation to serve in the IDF until after graduation. In fact, this arrangement permits most ultra-orthodox men not to serve in the army at all, or to serve an extremely shortened service (four months of service, called Phase B). For years the arrangement was anchored in a regulation by the Minister of Defense, but following a High Court ruling, it was anchored in the Tal Law (2002), which was later cancelled, following another ruling (2012). Opposition to the conscription of yeshiva students also arose in 2024, following the High Court ruling and efforts made by the Israeli Ministry of Defense in August 2024 to bring about a partial conscription. Ultra-Orthodox acts of resistance included mass demonstrations in Jerusalem and around military bases.

The so-called “Hill Youth” is another relatively new stream that testifies to the consequences of the national messianic trend in religious Zionism. The label, invented in 1998, after then-Israeli Defence Minister Ariel Sharon urged settler youth to “take the hilltops”, it describes young Jews, mostly religious, who live in isolated outposts or makeshift structures in the West Bank. Their aim is to expand Jewish strongholds, beyond the state-initiated settlements, while claiming full Israeli sovereignty in Judea and Samaria (considered the cradle of United Kingdom of Israel)⁶. The mystical role of the Promised Land branched out from its roots. According to Mash, Ben David and Bruckental (2018, 120): «The phenomenon itself is subject to deep controversy, as some see these youths as law-breaking anarchists, and some see them as the future generation of the country». Between idealistic messianism and violent anarchy, the obscurantism of these groups in terms of social structure and objectives is one of Israel’s blind zones. Notable is the role of the Israel Security Agency (ISA; better known as Israel’s General Security Service, or simply Shin Bet), whose Brigade for Countering Terrorism and Political Subversion among Israelis and Foreigners (usually referred to as the “Jewish Department”) tracks illegal actions against the state and its democratic regime (including the armed forces) and Jewish terrorism. It is responsible for preventing espionage, and investigating Jewish underground movements, especially in the West Bank settlements⁷. In 1984, this branch of the Shin Bet uncovered a Jewish terrorist organization that had carried out a series of attacks since 1980. Following the recommendations of the Shamgar Committee to investigate the Cave of the Patriarchs massacre (1994), the Brigade was expanded. Notwithstanding, the ideological influence of the obscurantist underground of Jewish mysticism has had a dramatic impact on Israeli politics. The rites of *Pulsa Denoura* (Imperial Aramaic: “The Lashes of Fire”⁸), which have allegedly been invoked against several contemporary political figures, including those performed by right-wing

⁶ According to estimates from 2021, there are about 400 hill boys, spread over in about 50 outposts and about 30 farms. They are often involved in violent acts against the Palestinians. A report by the Ministry of National Security in 2021 affirms that the “Hill boys” were involved in 308 such cases, eight of which were defined by the Shin Bet as terrorist attacks. See as reported in the Israeli media: https://www.mako.co.il/news-israel/2021_q3/Article-9c73cd8d9e73b71026.htm.

⁷ The original concerns of the department were mainly related to the Communist Bloc. It shrank after the fall of the Soviet Union, but grew again in importance in response to Jewish terrorist activity that began in the early 1980s. In 2003, the Bat Ein Jewish underground was exposed, after its members attempted to plant an explosive device near a girls’ school in East Jerusalem. In the middle of the second decade of the 21st century, the Shin Bet formally declared that it had stepped up its activities against Jewish terrorism.

⁸ The ancient Kabbalistic ceremony in which the Angels of Destruction are invoked to block heavenly forgiveness of the subject’s sins, allegedly causing all the curses mentioned in the Bible to fall upon him resulting in his death.

rabbi Yosef Dayan against Israeli Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin before his assassination (4 November, 1995) for his betrayal in giving up parts of the Promised Land in the Oslo Accords, and against Ariel Sharon around Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005, have not only engendered public discourse but also shaped parts of Israel's national traumas. The difference in civilizational terms between Gaza and the West Bank is significant. Whereas, Gaza had been, according to the biblical narrative, was the capital city of the Philistines, the sworn enemies of the ancient Hebrews, and consequently a land identified with danger, the West Bank, identified with the Judean Kingdom, was an integral and interdependent part of Jewish identity, and thus rightfully "owned" and largely deserved in terms of sacrifice (including government commitment and human lives). The obscure side of the Eliasian sociogenetic construction of the claim to political sovereignty over the West Bank, in addition to East Jerusalem, is therefore imbued with the obscurantist rhetoric of Jewish messianism; not to say, saturated with nationalist and supremacist colonialism. It is the combination of both fearful paranoia and sense of omnipotence.

3. Law but no constitutional order: missing the antidote against forms of obscurantism?

Israeli statehood and society were modelled on the assembly of a non-native population whose members shared only a historically perceived common identification with a reference territory from which their ancestors had been uprooted. Zionism, despite its internal ideological differences, aimed to solve the problem of persecutions against Jews by re-establishing the Jewish people as a sovereign collective. The Zionist approach implied a remedial action, i.e., a thaumaturgical gathering of all Jewish exiles. Inasmuch as it attributed an almost prophetic role to those who would participate the mystical return. It placed the gathered, and thus collectivized, Jewish people within the logic of European nationalism. Therefore, it proclaimed the entry of the Jews into emancipatory modernity in which each individual Jew must free himself/herself from the precarious conditions of statelessness through the socio-cultural and political "negation of Exile". The sentimental sense of commonality, combined with personal fulfilment and social engagement, lay at the heart of the Jewish political, social, and cultural revival. The latter, did\does not necessarily reckon either with the non-Jewish population of Israel. The dichotomy of otherness between two peoples, Jewish and Arab, has given rise to a politics and, consequently, policies, that are heavily conditioned by nationalism. The excessive nation-building and the lack of societal rectification in the priorities of Israel's founding fathers (Sternhell [1995] 1998) have hindered pro-Enlightenment universalist values, due to the

unresolvable and intrinsic tension between Western-style democracy and Jewish nationalism. This is the Eliasian socio-genetic origin of Israel's schizophrenia in terms of habitus. Given the diversity of viewpoints and ideological agendas within Jewish society in Palestine, as well as the urgency to formalize the independence of the Jewish entity in the face of an impending war, a solemn declaration was rapidly drafted, proclaimed by Ben-Gurion and signed by 37 dignitaries⁹, on Friday, May 14th, 1948, at 4:00 PM; just eight hours before the end of the British Mandate over Palestine and Israel. As stated in the Declaration, the Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people, a land that shaped its religious and political identity, – and thus made it a nation. The latter was revived by Zionism and the ingathering of Jews in the land of their biblical forefathers. Yet, the Declaration also lists “freedom, justice and peace”, which would ensure the «complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants»; thus, the founding declaration of the state conjugates the dual characteristic of being both Jewish and democratic. In this sense, the ultimate “sovereign” of the state may well be God, often referred to in Jewish tradition as the “King of Kings, Sovereign of the Universe”, but this interpretation and identification is not transversal, inasmuch as it is dominant amongst ultra-Orthodox communities or among nationalist settlers in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, who seek to redeem the entire biblical Land of Israel for the coming Messiah. This religious vision is diametrically opposed to the principles of European republicanism and the separation of powers. While the former identifies itself with the rule of God, which is materialized only through Jewish settlement, ordained by an atavistic messianism, the latter anchors the fate of the state to its democratic procedures and institutional strength, as in other democratic nation-states that bridge both the Westphalian conception of territorial sovereignty, namely the state's legitimate monopoly on violence and international recognition, and the social contract based on popular consent. The fusion of the two components aimed to revive the Jewish habitus and mould it into national statehood¹⁰. The latter meant prioritizing the state over the land. Yet, this initial logic in guiding the integration of political principles relating to the Israeli national habitus would be overturned after the Occupation of the Palestinian territories in 1967, revealing the precarious balance between the mental picture of the democratic State of

⁹ The thirty-seven signatories to the Declaration of Independence were members of the People's Council. Twenty-five of them signed the scroll at the state proclamation ceremony, and 11 council members, who were unable to come from besieged Jerusalem to the ceremony, as well as a representative of ultraorthodox Agudath Israel who was then in the United States, added their signatures later.

¹⁰ The complete official translation into English of the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel is available on: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-declaration-of-the-establishment-of-the-state-of-israel>.

Israel and that of the messianic territorial one of 'Ertez Yisrael', i.e. the religious aspects over state norms; the schizophrenic tension of Israel's civilizing process as a Western-style democracy. One of the lacunae in this respect is the lack of a common constitutional pact between the state and the citizens.

The declarative document, signed at the moment of the proclamation of independence, was not followed by a written constitution along European lines, in order to avoid ideological divergences among the representatives and delegates. Consequently, the Declaration, with its paradox of universalizing and particularistic, left its fundamental principles to future generations to postulate and define through progressive legislation. Greater steps towards the legal integration of citizens, namely, personal freedoms and principles of equality and justice, were expected. The new nation-based order remained unresolved. Nevertheless, the founding fathers of the Israeli legal system were fully aware of the tensions and disagreements within public opinion. The difficulty of drafting a constitution after the establishment of the state, led in 1950 to the so-called Harari decision (also known as the Harari compromise). It was a decision by the first Knesset, initiated by MK Yizhar Harari of the Progressive Party, not to engage in a constituent attempt to codify a constitution. Consequently, Israel had to equip itself with pseudo-constitutional laws (the so-called "Basic Laws") in order to secure its dual socio-cultural profile and to normatively contain the tensions between its Jewish heritage and democratic legitimacy. The resolution, passed on June 13, 1950, stipulated that the First Knesset would not adopt a constitution for the State of Israel, and that the constitution would be written only in chapters that would eventually be incorporated into the overall state constitution. However, the position of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and the government he led was that the Basic Laws should not be given a different legal status from that of any other law. On the other hand, Menachem Begin, who wanted to guarantee opposition rights to his own political base, wrote in those years that the Basic Laws should be given a higher legal status. As a result of this decision, the State of Israel has never codified a European-style written constitution. Hence, Israel had to conceive a legally acceptable alternative. The process of drafting the Basic Laws, chapter by chapter, was slow and gradual political compromise, with interruption from one law to the another. Early Basic Laws dealt with the structure and separation of powers and institutions (nine Basic Laws were enacted by 1992), while human rights were left behind or even avoided. It is noteworthy that with the completion of the Basic Law, The Knesset (1958), the Knesset's Constitution, Law and Justice Committee announced that the next Basic Law would deal with human rights. Yet, the Israeli parliament made no progress in fulfilling this promise. In response, MK Hans Klinghoffer submitted the Basic Law Bill: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1963) to the Fifth Knesset (January 15, 1964), but his proposal

was rejected due to government opposition. Similar attempts and proposals were regularly rejected. It is noteworthy that in the weakness of the secular rationality of the positivist law, the confessional Hebrew law was adopted in the personal status of Jewish citizens, i.e. marriage and divorce, based on the assumption that there was a correspondence between Israel's identity, its historical roots and the state's juridical-democratic system (Lipschitz, 1999). This exemplifies the schizophrenic nature of the Israeli legal system, in that it must acrobatically bridge between the religious and the secular, Jewish particularism and democratic universalism.

Moreover, Israel's "democraticness" changes over time, as it does in its geographical space, with various degrees of sovereignty, translated into expansionist territorial settlement and military control (Ariely, 2021). Beneath these changes, there are several articulations of Empire in the region. Zionism transcended the diplomatic attempts under Ottoman imperial rule, matured in Palestine under the British Mandate, and justified increasing territorial settlement. Therefore, Israel is not a classic colonial settler society. Neither was it guided by the material exploitation of a newly discovered territory for the benefit of a distant motherland, nor by the systematic elimination of indigenous population. It was the political re-actualization and re-identification of the Jews with the biblical land that Zionism operated and concretized through reborn sovereignty. The political identification with this territory, beyond the religious and cultural attachment to the 'Promised Land', laid the foundations for the claim to sovereignty, while facilitating an ethno-religious compartmentalization between Jews and non-Jews in Palestine (de Swaan, 2015). Thus, the Israeli paradox is based on exclusive Jewish ethno-national particularism and the universalizing integration of citizens into democracy has been an ever-present challenge to the country's geopolitical and social order. Considering this contradiction, it may seem that Israeli democracy, established in an exceptionally tense geopolitical context, "came too early", insofar as the unsettled relations between nation-state, religion and democracy had not been normed (Spierenburg, 2006; Mennell, 2020). Such dialectical contradictions in Israel's national habitus, divided between Jewish and democratic premises, explain the schizophrenic impossibility of ending the Arab-Israeli conflict. Any step towards an inclusive, namely civilizing, universalizing integration of minorities into the dominant Jewish society would be considered as an abandonment of the Jewishness; while any institutional drift towards Jewish particularism would be seen as a retreat from the civilizing process of constitutionalization, so important in democratic state-building; both principles rooted in historical Zionism.

The constant friction in values has also been a fertile breeding ground for anti-political and anti-elite sentiments. The prioritization of who decides what in the name of the people in the only republic without a written constitution has fostered forms of "judicial populism" against the

procedurally elitist democratic rule of law, i.e. the guarantor of human rights and equal civil rights for every minority in Israel (Blokker, Mazzoleni, 2020). The shifting between populist discourse and egalitarian delusions is closely linked to the *raison d'être* around which left and right in Israel have been articulated. The primacy of the land, accompanied by a securitarian and religious arguments, supported by the right or, on the contrary, that of the state, which guarantees Jewish existence within the framework of civic republicanism and democratic pluralism, – idealistically promoted by the Israeli left (an apparently minority position, given local party politics). This line of division, although occasionally blurred, exemplifies the political (and conceptual) universe in which people and territory are intertwined (Mazzoleni, 2024, especially chapter VII, 97-111). With the populist promise of redemption, which justifies the fervent struggle for religiously authentic renewal in the biblical 'Promised Land', the native territorial space of the freed Heimat (with regard to the Palestinians) binds together a spectrum of declinations that do not clearly distinguish the "nation-will" and the "nation-destiny"; at least in its normative and electoral capacities (Campi, 2023). It is noteworthy that political fragmentation and democratic discontent in Israeli society, two phenomena which are not unfamiliar to mature democracies elsewhere, were rooted in and built around the socio-genetic divide between Jewish secularism, and the rationality derived from it, and the theocratic irrationality associated with messianic spirituality. In this sense, neither the profane, nor the sacred escaped over-politicization and dichotomous polarization. The salience of the State of Israel and the Land of Israel, religious particularism versus democratic inclusiveness with regard to transformations and phenomena in the global era, was the driving force behind the last wave of protests against the legal reform, which had been promoted by the Israeli government before the tragic events of October 7th, 2023.

About a week after the formation of the 37th government, which will be sworn in on December 29th 2022, Justice Minister Yariv Levin presented his plan for significant reform in the current judicial system, based on the jurisprudence as developed in the 1990s and strongly identified with Supreme Court Judge Aharon Barak. Described by opponents of the plan as a "regime coup", that would harm Israeli democracy and the country's system of checks and balances, the reform included four major changes: 1. the disqualification of laws that circumvent Supreme Court rulings; 2. the increase of number of member in the judicial selection committee, passing from nine to eleven members with 7 of them representing the governing coalition, while the nomination of Supreme Court judges will be subject to a public hearing before the Constitution, Law and Justice Committee of the Knesset; 3. the removal of the reasonableness clause for the disqualification of instructions received in accordance with the law; 4. the appointment of the Attorney General and ministerial legal advisors will not be binding on the government. These points became the central

motivation for the fight against the reform, considering the Netanyahu's obvious self-interest in light of his triple corruption trial (alleged bribery, fraud and breach of trust). As a result, tangible backsliding political measures were uncovered in the government-led legislative process and policy-making was exposed. Opposed by a wave of mass protest against the current thirty-seventh government, the exclusionary legislation of the so-called "judicial revolution" reveals the fragility of Israel's national cohesion and the challenges to a renewed social pact within the limits of liberal democracy. The democratic alarm bell has rung. A possible democratic regression towards a procedural illiberal democracy, shaped by a determined majority, was the main concern of the protesters against the consolidation of the extreme right in the Israeli parliament (the Knesset). The protest has brought together the cleavages and divisions that persist in Israeli society over the democratic and institutional cadre on which Israeli society should be built upon. The protesters can be sociologically profiled as lay educated middle-class individuals who often refer to themselves as "the burden bearers of Israel", Israeli citizens who form the productive engine of Israel's economy, – the self-proclaimed 'High-Tech nation'¹¹ – pay their taxes and, most importantly, serve and send their children to serve in the army; in contrast to the majority of ultra-Orthodox who are exempt from military conscription and largely benefit from social subsidies. Nevertheless, the reaction to the reform, and its obscurantist side, shows that the democratic component of the Israeli habitus still retains its national character. According to News13 opinion poll published on February 20, 2023, 55% of Israelis were against the legal reform. Despite of undoubted forms of nationalist banalization (Billig, 1995; Helled, 2018), it is difficult to argue that the Israeli national habitus, formally as Jewish as it is democratic, has fallen into an omnivorous trap of melancholia (Lepenes, 1992). However, the psychosocial and socio-political paradox of the mental dispositions, (re)produced by the habitus, engender schizophrenic transpositions from religion to politics and vice versa.

4. *Conclusions: The Three Orders of Societal Schizophrenia in Israel*

The article has focused on the contradictory elements in Israel's social infrastructure and socio-cultural fabric. Concepts such as habitus and identification help us to understand the rich spectrum that ranges from

¹¹ More than 130 high-tech companies adhered to the protest, while high-tech employees also initiated a website for others to join the protest, <https://democratech.net/>. An internationally important economic sector (15% of national GDP via 54% export), Israeli high-tech numbers 10.4 % of Israeli employees, according to the Israel innovation Authority 2022 Report; see <https://innovationisrael.org.il/magazine/6193> (in Hebrew).

the secular teachings of the Jewish Enlightenment, namely the democratic republican form of statehood – always in relation to the destiny of the Jewish people –, to the obscurantist forms of extremism and messianic particularism in cases of exacerbated nationalism. In outlining some of the inherent socio-historical phenomena in Judaism and in Israel's own form of statehood, the analysis can be summarized in three orders of societal schizophrenia that have characterized the far-flung ideal types of state-citizen relations that occupy Israel's reality. The first schizophrenic configuration dates back to the schism between Hasidim and Misnagedim within Jewish Orthodoxy, – two groups whose only common denominator was the reluctance to embrace enlightened secularization and, consequently, Zionism. The latter gave rise to antagonism, mistrust and divisions whose obscure poles are messianism and right-wing extremism. The same is true of the "Zionization" of religion and its penetration into institutional politics and discourse.

The second form of schizophrenia concerns the ambiguities and paradoxes surrounding Israel's Jewish and democratic characteristics. The absence of a codified and solid constitution has never been truly mediated, leaving Israel as a vulnerable political subject whose profile as a modern democratic polity remains shift and deficient at best. The third order of schizophrenic interpretation concerns the general fragility of democracy as such. The political phenomena of populism, demagoguery and polarization are no unique to Israel. Nevertheless, the complexities and contradictions arising from any democratic discontent are compounded by the decivilizing forms of Jewish particularism and its ambivalence towards universalizing democracy.

The multi-layered articulation of Israeli identity in the face of contemporary reality cannot be fully understood without looking at the processual transformations that emanated from the country's substrate. The combination of Jewish culture, beyond the normative precepts of Judaism, with the lessons of modernity reveals its uniqueness. Yet, the exceptionality of Jewish statehood is simultaneously challenged by geopolitical circumstances. An ideal comprehensive legal and institutional solidity is a subject of great controversy and internal struggles. Full, transversal and inclusive characteristics clash with tendencies to prioritize the identitarian weight of Jewishness.

In the absence of a written constitution, Israel's institutional and political plasticity vis-à-vis binding constitutional (and international) law has allowed for considerable variation and articulation of state sovereignty. This is a highly controversial feature of Israeli legal and political civilizing attempts towards greater integration and universal citizenship. The Israeli case thus reveals structural lacunae and a juridico-political trajectory that oscillates between progress and regression, consolidation and disintegration, transparent normative certainty and obscurantist underpinnings. As such the dialectical contradictions in Israel's national habitus, divided

between Jewish and democratic premises, thus explain the impossibility of ending the Arab-Israeli conflict. Any step towards an Eliasian, more inclusive, i.e. civilizing, universalizing integration of minorities by law into the dominant Jewish society would be seen as a renunciation of the Jewishness of the people, whereas, any further institutional drift towards Jewish particularism would be a regression from the civilizing interdependencies, anchored in the democratic process of citizenship building. The tragic events of October 7th, 2023 and their continuing violent aftermath provide the dramatic and eventful backdrop to social processes in which the schizophrenic obscurantist elements of the abovementioned tensions are unfolding with dreadful repercussions.

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Identity and values in the European Union: towards a new form of obscurantism in European societies?

1. *Introduction*

An article published by *«The Economist»* in 2023 opened with the title: «Western values are steadily diverging from the rest of the world's». The author, commenting on data from the latest World Values Survey, emphasized that Western values were increasingly becoming a minority compared to those prevailing in the rest of the world. Indeed, according to the cultural map developed by Inglehart and Welzel (2005), «there are two major dimensions of cross-cultural variation in the world: traditional values versus secular-rational values and survival values versus self-expression values». In relation to these four dimensions, so-called “Western values” would be a minority even within Europe, concentrated in Anglo-Saxon and Northern European countries, alongside a vast area of Catholic and Orthodox Europe. The rest of the world – Africa, Latin America, the Far East – would, according to the map, move within a sphere dominated by traditional values and survival values.

This is not the place to analyse the theoretical and methodological foundations of the World Values Survey (Alemán, Woods, 2015); nor is it possible to delve into the much more complex relationship between Catholic/Orthodox Europe and “Western values,” or, in general, the interrelationships between the different dimensions considered in identity construction processes from a postmodern perspective.

In the European context, the gap with Western values has turned into an internal opposition between the European Union and Europe as a whole. Through the actions of the European Union, the so-called “emancipative values” of the Enlightenment tradition have become an integral part of the European identity, as enshrined in article 2 of the Treaty of Lisbon. This has generated an internal confrontation that has fuelled the many forms of cultural claims that have underpinned nationalisms and sovereignisms in Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, this internal conflict has encouraged the rise of identity-based political parties and the adoption of policies that lead to the dismantling of the rule of law, as the Commission's Rule of Law Reports over the past five years have shown.

The result is an overlap between what we might call the “two Europes,” which, while playing out at a cultural level, ultimately has implications at the political level, but above all for the future development of the integration process.

2. Europe as the “Cradle” of the Enlightenment

Sociology, through the work of Max Weber, has made a significant contribution to defining the key features of modern Western culture, to the point of contributing to the ideal-type construction of modernity, from which subsequent critiques and alternative interpretations have developed. Indeed, it is from Weber that the idea that modernity is identified with the West begins to take hold, and that in classifying societies as modern or traditional, the latter, must adopt the Western economic, political, and social model in order to become modern (Cotesta, 2010). For Weber (1988), the process of rationalization constitutes the defining feature of Western modernity, although, at the same time, it is in the West that this process has reached its highest level.

The philosophical foundations of this path go back to the dawn of modernity, encompassing the Protestant Reformation, the birth of modern science, and ultimately finding their fullest expression in the cultural climate that, paved the way for the Enlightenment in England and France. By the end of the 18th century, the idea that what had seemed to be a cultural trait specific to certain European countries, and through processes of migration, to the “New World” emerging overseas, had come to be identified with modern Western culture as a whole, and that this cultural model had taken on a universal paradigmatic value. This is the reflection with which Weber (2008) opens the “Preliminary Observations,” that precedes *The Sociology of Religion*.

A product of modern European civilization, studying any problem of universal history, is bound to ask himself to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having *universal* significance and value (Weber, 2008, 99).

Art, science, the modern state, and capitalism are all products of Western culture and the process of rationalization that it introduced with modernity. At the level of values, we witness the progressive affirmation of universalism-oriented values, which have been translated into a series of civil, political, and social achievements that still form the foundation of Western societies today.

In this context, it is not possible to trace the key features of modernity without risking oversimplification. Suffice it to say that modern Western culture finds its founding principles in individualism and rationalism. These, in turn, have given rise to phenomena that, despite their diversity, can be traced back to them: the critique of tradition, the role of science, the processes of democratization, capitalism and the emergence of the market economy, the process of industrialization, the structural differentiation and functional specialization of spheres of social life, and social

mobility are all epiphenomena of a cultural model that places the autonomy of the individual and the rationality of action at the centre of social and political processes.

The Enlightenment represents the culmination of these long-term processes, leading to the sharing of common values based on equality, human dignity, liberty, the rule of law, and tolerance, which have come to be regarded as achievements of the whole of humanity. Their spread has led to the establishment of societal models in which the free self-determination of the individual prevails over ascribed affiliations; where the rational order of reality takes shape in law, politics, economic organization, and the state; where science replaces religion – and earlier, magic – as the form of knowledge about reality.

The result is a dichotomy between «modern societies» and «traditional societies», that has long underpinned theories of modernization (Martinelli, 1998) and reflects the idea that the decline of the West involves the reintegration of cultural identities into the history of the contemporary world (Huntington, 1993, 1996). On this basis, the foundational categories of many disciplines – community and society, tradition and modernity, industrial and agrarian societies, development and underdevelopment – have been established and have long influenced the analysis of social and political phenomena on a global scale.

These are rigid dichotomies that do not take into account the diversity that the process of rationalization presents, nor the different degrees of internal adherence to which Weber himself refers to. In fact, there is an increasing distance between those immersed in rational techniques and orders from their rational basis, which remains hidden from them, just as the meaning of the shaman's magical procedures remains hidden from the savage (Weber, 1958).

In reality, the emergence of modern Western culture is marked by a path that is less linear than it might initially appear. There have been setbacks that, at different times, have challenged the project of modernity. An Anti-Enlightenment tradition developed alongside the rise of the Enlightenment (Sternhell, 2010); various artistic movements challenged the rationalism of Western art; and finally, when modern Western culture came into contact with societies that had not been involved in its development – except through the colonial project – the model itself went into crisis (Martinelli, 2005, 2008). Critics, including those who later revisited Weber, stressed the “Eurocentric” nature of a cultural model that viewed Western modernity in a universalistic way. They emphasized the underlying imperialism that led the West (which increasingly identified with the Anglo-Saxon and American versions) to set itself up as a model for the rest of the world, according to a dichotomous opposition between “the West and the rest,” from which emerged the need to “provincialize Europe” and diminish its centrality in the world (Chakrabarty, 2000).

Theories have emerged that see the trajectory followed by modern

Western society itself as marked by various national variants (Dumont, 1983; D'Andrea, 2007), but above all, they distance themselves from the idea of a single, universal modernity. Eisenstadt's notion of «multiple modernities» is providing increasingly apt in describing the diversity of contemporary social and cultural processes and in explaining the history of modernity. Modernity was born in the West, but as it spread to other parts of the world, it gave rise to different forms of modern civilization (Eisenstadt, 1993, 1999, 2000, 2003), some of which reproduce the original ideal type, but most of which modify and adapt it to different contexts. This aspect only partially negates the Weberian perspective, since Weber himself, in defining the characteristic features of modern Western society, noted that these traits are not exclusive to this part of the world but have reached their extreme manifestation in this context, thus acquiring universal value.

These criticisms do not leave the original core of modern thought unscathed; it, too, is forced to confront them, even on the internal front. The values of modern Western society are not only been challenged in their universalistic scope but are also experiencing a crisis within Europe itself, as the continent finds itself fragmented and weakened in the face of global challenges. The “open society” that modernity gave birth to is proving to be weak and unable to withstand criticism except by reaffirming the universality of a value system that many see as non-negotiable. This trajectory, which some interpret as a form of capitulation, raises inescapable questions about Europe's role in the world: How can the cosmopolitan vocation of the values inherited from the Enlightenment be safeguarded without risking its confusion with a hegemonic function?

3. Europe vs European Union

The European continent has been most affected by the criticism of the values of modern Western culture, largely because of the colonial past of many of its countries, but also because of the existence of internal divisions that have never been reconciled. Contemporary Europe inherits an internal division that runs along the North/South and East/West axis, rooted in religious, cultural, and political factors, on which the division created in the 20th century by the Cold War was grafted.

In this context, the creation of the European Community, and later the European Union, redefined the space of common belonging, starting from the presumed identification between Europe and the European Union. This process not only raises objective difficulties at the level of culture and identity (and even geography) in defining Europe's borders, but also affects the way European citizens perceive the supranational reality and the role of its institutions.

The heritage of universalist values, inherited from the Enlightenment,

has been taken up by the institutions of the European Union as a foundation for building a collective identity, capable of underpinning a hypothetical European people. As will be emphasized later, this results in a common cosmopolitan identity, which over the years has fostered the idea that unification projects since 1950 have considered Western Europe as the entire Europe (Crainz, 2023). Common expressions such as “entering Europe,” referring to the process of enlargement to other states, have contributed to the creation of an overlap that on the one hand recovers a common dimension, and on the other denies the existence of fractures and variants within European culture. From this perspective, the European Union seeks to present itself as the world’s first (or perhaps last) bastion of the *universalist values* of modernity, and to base its identity on these values.

Even the adoption of the motto “unity in diversity” risks being reductive with respect to the complexity on which it is based¹. As Delanty (2018, XI-XII) assesses:

The notion of unity in diversity, while appealing in itself, fails to capture the fact that the units in question interact with each other and, as they do so, they undergo change. My central analytical argument is that the specificity of the European dimension of culture is in the entanglement of these cultures. The cultures of Europe are not separated but have been shaped in close interaction with each other and with the non-European world. Furthermore, Europe is not only shaped by its nations but also by relations with the rest of the world. Nations are not therefore unique, exceptional, or fundamentally different from each other. The outcome of such intermingling is a multiplicity of ideas of Europe that serve as shared cultural reference points. The plurality of Europe is reflected in the plurality of Europe and should not also be mistaken for divisions.

The motto also takes for granted the existence of European citizens and their ability to participate in public debate and act as a single body. An attempt to overcome this thesis is the notion of *democracy* introduced by Kalypso Nikolaïdis: «The idea of European democracy is seductively simple: a Union of peoples who govern together, but not as one. However much shared *κράτος* or power to govern, we must contend with the plurality of *δῆμοι*; but also crucially, however many *demoi*, we need a common *kratos* to define and deliver, through mutually agreed disciplines, the responsibilities we owe to one another» (Nikolaïdis, 2013, 351-352).

However, the process of constructing a common European identity is

¹ «It signifies how Europeans have come together, in the form of the EU, to work for peace and prosperity, while at the same time being enriched by the continent’s many different cultures, traditions and languages», https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/symbols/eu-motto_en.

deeply rooted and evolves in tandem with the progress of integration and the debate on citizenship (Delanty, 1995, 1997, 2002).

The European institutions have repeatedly tried to contribute to the definition of a European identity. Starting with the Declaration on European Identity, signed by the nine Foreign Ministers in Copenhagen on 14 December 1973, the emphasis was on the diversity of cultures within the framework of a common European civilisation. In an attempt to define the content of European identity, it was stated:

The Nine wish to ensure that the cherished values of their legal, political and moral order are respected, and to preserve the rich variety of their national cultures. Sharing as they do the same attitudes to life, based on a determination to build a society which measures up to the needs of the individual, they are determined to defend the principles of representative democracy, of the rule of law, of social justice – which is the ultimate goal of economic progress – and of respect for human rights. All of these are fundamental elements of the European Identity.

In these terms, the issue of European identity is closely related to that of Europe's founding "values" or "principles" and to Europe's role in the world and its foreign policy, to which the Declaration devotes considerable attention.

The reference to "common values" appears for the first time in the Maastricht Treaty which refers to the «defence of the common values, fundamental interests and independence of the Union» (Article J.1). Article 128 states that: «The Community shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore».

In the wake of the Treaty of Maastricht, the Treaty of Nice refers to the closer cooperation aiming «at safeguarding the values and serving the interests of the Union as a whole by asserting its identity as a coherent force on the international scene» (article 27/a). A further institutional step forward was the approval by the Nice European Council of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which entered into force with the Treaty of Lisbon.

The reference to common values becomes more explicit in the Treaty of Lisbon. In the Preamble, the introductory formula is better defined, with the addition of a paragraph «drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law».

But it is in article 2 that the reference to the Union's founding values takes centre stage:

The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including

the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

In this way, the values enshrined in article 2 define not only the cultural identity of Europe, but also the constitutional identity of a legal system that considers these values to be common and indispensable for a given society (Cavaggion, 2023).

In addition to article 2, the reference to values in the Treaty of Lisbon is explicitly present in article 7 (concerning the procedures to be followed in the event of a «clear risk of a serious breach by a Member State of the values referred to in article 2») and in articles 3, 8, 13, 21, 32, 42, 49 (the latter concerning the accession of a new Member State).

The Commission chaired by Ursula von der Leyen took a step forward in defining European values, making them part of the European agenda, through a new formulation of the European identity in terms of a “European way of life” (Tidey, 2019). Indeed, in choosing the composition of the past Commission, the President has in fact entrusted the Commissioner for Migration Policy and Vice-President of the Commission, Margaritis Schinas, with the task of promoting the “European Way of Life”.

The protection of the “European way of life” also returns in the Commission’s Six Priorities Policy Paper 2019-2024, which was presented in July 2019. Finally, in a tweet on 12 September 2019, President von der Leyen returned to the topic, identifying the content of the concept of the “European way of life” in article 2 of the Treaty of Lisbon.

In this way, European values are configured as a principle of conditionality, contributing to the process of building the Union’s identity as a “community of shared values,” which defines the way in which the Union positions itself on the international stage (Akaliyski, 2019; Toggenburg, Grimheden, 2016; Oshri *et al.*, 2016), but also internally. The European Union increasingly presents itself as a “value entrepreneur”, whenever the political goal of the Union is not only to promote economic integration, but also to shape European society (Gerhards, 2007, 2010).

There is thus a contrast between the “emancipative values” of the European Union, which in turn have their roots in the Enlightenment and in Western culture, and the values of European society, which are much more differentiated and adapted to the political cultures of the member states (Coman, Leconte, 2019).

In defining European identity, European institutions have indeed favoured the “cosmopolitan paradigm,” which is an integral part of a broader «process of building a cosmopolitan citizenship at the global level based on human rights» (Cotesta, 2011; Beck, Grande, 2006; Pendenza, 2017). The question remains: what will become of this legacy in the context of what has been called the post-human rights era? Indeed, the attempt to redefine the notion of sovereignty on the basis of the culture of

human rights is currently forced to confront the frequent manifestations of sovereignty and nationalism and their authoritarian degenerations.

With regards to relations with non-EU countries, in particular with the Eastern neighbours, the emergence of a kind of “clash of civilizations” is hypothesized (Akaliyski, Welzel, 2020). This element was strongly expressed in the State of the Union address by President von der Leyen on September 14, 2022, about six months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. She assesses: «This is not only a war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine. This is a war on our energy, a war on our economy, a war on our values and a war on our future. This is about autocracy against democracy. And I stand here with the conviction that with courage and solidarity, Putin will fail and Europe will prevail».

The political developments in Poland and Hungary over the past decade are the most evident manifestation of this latent conflict within the EU, specifically challenging the value of the «rule of law» (Merdzanovic, Nicolaidis, 2021), but also extending to the values of freedom, equality «in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and equality between women and men prevail» (article 2).

Since 2015, the European Commission has kept the governments of Poland and Hungary under scrutiny, repeatedly intervening with recommendations and seeking dialogue with the institutions of both countries. In 2017, the European Commission opened a procedure against Poland under article 7 of the Treaty of Lisbon, which deals with case of «a clear risk of a serious breach by a Member State of the values referred to in article 2». The procedure was supported by the European Parliament in a resolution in March 2018, and the Parliament also initiated the same procedure against Hungary in September 2018. In particular, Hungary was cited for violations of the rule of law, the rights and freedoms of LG-BTIQ persons, and children’s rights; with regards to Poland, reference was made to the legislation adopted in the country on the renewal of the Supreme Court, the ordinary courts, and the National Council of the Judiciary.

To monitor compliance with European values, in particular the rule of law, the European Commission will publish an annual *Rule of Law Report* from 2020. From 2021, the EU budget will have an additional layer of protection in cases where violations of the rule of law principles affect or risk affecting the EU’s financial interests. This is due to a general conditionality regime for the protection of the EU budget, also known as the “conditionality regulation,” which entered into force in January 2021 (EU 2020). This principle provoked protests from Poland and Hungary, which were directly affected and subsequently filed a complaint with the European Court of Justice, which was rejected.

More recently, in a resolution adopted in April 2024, Members of the European Parliament expressed strong concern about the further erosion of democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights in Hungary, in par-

ticular through the recently adopted “National Sovereignty Protection Package,” which has been compared to Russia’s “Foreign Agents Law.”

4. *Identity and Values in the EU: towards a new form of obscurantism in European societies?*

The centrality accorded by the European institutions to the values set out in article 2 has prompted an internal reflection on the extent to which they are shared by European citizens. In fact, the events that have taken place over the last decade have in fact called into question the rootedness of European values even within the Member States, giving rise to a latent conflict that pits EU values against European values.

The desire to deepen knowledge about the real roots of European values among citizens is at the basis of a survey conducted by the Special Eurobarometer 508, *Values and Identities of EU citizens* (European Commission, 2021b). The survey is part of a wider international debate on the role of values and identities in political processes (Castells, 2003). Also in 2021, the European Commission sponsored a report for decision-makers on the role of values and identities in the political process (European Commission, 2021a).

The data collected in the Eurobarometer survey are grouped into three sections: a) *Personal values of European citizens*, b) *Identities of EU citizens* and *EU citizens* and c) *Attitudes towards European Union values*.

In terms of the theoretical underpinnings of the survey and the methodology used, the survey draws on the established global literature on values studies, first and foremost the World Values Survey and the associated cultural map by Inglehart and Welzel (2005). The data collected is in fact grouped into four overarching values: *conservation values*, *openness to change values*, *self-enhancement values*, and *self-transcendence values*.

The three sections into which the survey is divided aim to highlight points of contact and discrepancies between the different value references of European citizens and the way in which these affect the process of identity construction; at the same time, they help to understand the multi-faceted nature of the process of constructing a European identity. A general reading reveals a first question: to what extent do the values contained in article 2 contribute to the process of constructing the identity of European citizens? How do the three dimensions underlying the survey relate to each other?

a) *Personal values of European citizens*

With regard to the personal values of the European citizens, the respondents are asked to identify themselves, with a series of human behaviours on a scale from 1 to 6 (“Now we will briefly describe some different

people. Using a scale from 1 to 6, please tell me how much these people are or are not like you”). They state that they put importance on being in charge of one’s own life decisions (78%); on taking care on close ones (78%); on the ability and freedom to form one’s own opinions and views (73%); on feeling safe and secure (72%); caring for nature (71%), and the availability, worldwide, of equal opportunities for all (70%) (European Commission, 2021b).

The Eurobarometer interpretation traces the value of “taking care on close ones” back to the more general Anglo-Saxon notion of “benevolence,” which in turn can be traced back to the category of self-transcendence values, which also includes “to take care for nature” (71%), “equal opportunities in life” (70%), “understanding different people” (64%).

“Taking care of close ones” can also mean a closing yourself off within your own circle to the considerable exclusion of those who are alien to you. “Taking care on close ones” could refer to one’s own family, one’s own nation, to those who are closest to one, effectively excluding strangers, foreigners, people who think differently, in line with the category of conservation values.

The structural variables – age, gender, place of residence, social class, educational attainment, professional status – show in some cases significant differences, while in others they give homogeneous results. In particular, “taking care on those who are close to me” reaches 80% among people aged over 55 years and with a left-wing political orientation, while it does not show significant variations for the other variables.

The values of European citizens therefore seem to oscillate between the need to close off “inner circle” and the need to claim autonomy in the choices they make about their own lives. Equality of opportunities moves to a global level (70%) and the readiness to understand different people falls to 64%.

b) Identities of EU citizens

The next section, “How people identify themselves”, focuses on the values on which European citizens construct their identity. It is in this section that the first aporias appear, suggesting the existence of “two Europes”.

In this case, respondents identify family (81%), nationality (73%) and gender (72%) as the three main elements on which European citizens build their identity; being European (56%), political orientation (54%) and religion or beliefs (53%) come at the bottom of the list. Societies characterised by a long-term process of secularisation and a significant disaffection with politics find in the family and in the country of origin a reference point that can hardly be traced back to an adherence to values of self-transcendence. From this point of view, we are a long way from a

cosmopolitan model of identity, in favour of a primary sense of belonging, linked to family models or to the nation.

Here the data for individual countries are interesting: Portugal (94%), Spain (93%) and Hungary (90%) have the highest percentages of identification with the family; Poland with gender (80%) and Greece and Malta with nationality (80%). Identification with the family is higher than 80% in 12 countries; in addition to those mentioned above, there are 9 others, spread evenly across the Union: Slovakia (88%), Bulgaria (86%), Denmark (86%), Austria (86%), Italy (84%), Cyprus (83%), Germany (82%), Latvia (82%).

c) EU citizens and attitudes towards European Union values

The previous two sections introduced us to the everyday universe of European citizens, their values and the processes through which they construct their identity. The last section examines “the attitudes of European citizens towards European values”, included in article 2 of the Treaty of Lisbon. A greater effort is required here, both in terms of the methodology used in the survey, and in terms of the respondents, who are put in the position of being confronted with the ways in which European values materialise in their daily practices, both at a social and institutional level.

Here too, the measurement tool of scales was used, in which respondents were asked to rank themselves in relation to a list of principles that could be important for our societies and that are an emanation of article 2.

From this point of view, it is not so much an abstract definition of the values contained in Article 2 that is decisive, but rather an operational concept that allows the principles to be broken down into their constituent elements.

Independence of the judiciary (82%), equality before the law and the right to a fair trial (82%), and freedom of conscience (freedom of thought, expression and religion) (81%) are the three values preferred by the respondents. The differences between the various countries are significant in place: the principle that “the law should treat everyone equally and everyone should have the right to a fair trial by an independent court” reaches 94% support in Denmark, but falls to 70% in Italy.

On the other hand, there are two issues on which European citizens are strongly divided: the right to political asylum (66%) and opposition to the death penalty (57%). On the latter issue, support is below 50% in nine Member States: Belgium (46%), Bulgaria (36%), Czech Republic (32%), Estonia (38%), France (46%), Latvia (44%), Lithuania (43%), Romania (46%), Slovenia (36%), Slovakia (34%). The low percentages of opposition to the death penalty are a sign of a gradual shift towards what we have already described as the “post-human rights era”; in this

case, however, the signal is coming not from contemporary “illiberal democracies” (Zakaria, 1997) but from the heart of Europe.

5. *Final Remarks*

Further analysis would be needed to explore what appears to be a cultural divide within Europe, which highlights the growing need for the European Union and its institutions to address the cultural dimension of the integration process, even before the economic and political dimensions. What we might call the “two Europes” – the Europe of the citizens and the Europe of the institutions – face each other from a distance, always failing to find a composition. European society is more uniform than one might think at first glance, with little difference between the young (15-24) and the adult generation (over 55). The data paint a controversial picture of a continent that, on paper, shows a high degree of adherence to certain European values, but in reality is closed in on itself: family, nationality and gender, as the elements from which the respondents construct their identity, evoke a reference to traditional values that have little in common with those identified by the European institutions.

The attempt to construct a collective European identity on the basis of the values enshrined in Article 2 therefore seems destined to clash with the characteristics of European society, which seems less divided on these issues than one might have imagined. The European utopia based on a cosmopolitan world order and a culture of human rights is coming up against the many particularisms that run through it, leading to a “cultural backlash” that is at the root of the rise of various forms of populism, sovereignism and nationalism (Norris, Inglehart, 2019).

The data provided by the survey are probably not sufficient on their own to support the thesis of a “new obscurantism”, but at the same time there are signs on the social and political front that warrant attention. Further insights may come from the comparative analysis of data from the European Values Survey, which monitors changes in the values of European society (Halman *et al.*, 2022).

With regard to the values of article 2, particular attention has been paid to monitoring European citizens’ support for the rule of law (Special Eurobarometer, 2019; 2024). Also on the subject of the rule of law, further information can be found in the Rule of Law Reports (2020-2024), which are themselves part of a wider “Rule of Law Mechanism” set up by the European Commission to defend European democracy.

The challenges from “illiberal democracies” come not only from outside, but also from within the European Union, as the results of the last European elections, marked by the growth of far right parties, have shown. The signals coming from European society are confirmed by the political slogans of the parties that capture this widespread feeling. In

the midst of the electoral campaign, the leader of Fratelli d'Italia, Giorgia Meloni, repeatedly declared: «God, Country, Family is a Mazzinian motto that does not clash with modernity. It is a defence of one's identity, which is an identity of our society, it is a European identity».

In defence of the traditional values of the Hungarian homeland, in an ideal opposition between Hungary and the West and its values, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has also spoken out, as can be seen from some passages of his speech on the 176th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence of 1848-49 (15 March 2024):

In the Western world today, millions of people think and live as if they have come from nowhere and are going nowhere. This is why they have no regard – and are convinced that they should have no regard – for anything or anyone: they start wars; they destroy worlds; they redraw the borders of countries; like locusts, they consume everything; they scorn the dead and deny the rights of those yet to be born. We Hungarians live differently, and want to live differently. We come from somewhere, and we are going somewhere [...] The greatest thing that can happen to us is to be born Hungarian. In the Western world it is imagined that people are just who they are unto themselves: only their free choice determines what states they become citizens of, they decide whether they will be boys or girls, family is whatever they invent for themselves, and the homeland is merely a field of operation. We Hungarians do not believe in all that; we know that if you stand alone in the world you are not free, but lonely [...] This will be a watershed year. At the beginning of the year we were alone; by the end of the year we will be the majority in the Western world. Great opportunities are opening up to us. Ahead of us is a sovereigntist turn in America and Europe. Normality can be restored in both Europe and America, and we can usher in a great new era for Western nations, in which everyone can find their own way forward².

Can we speak of “new faces of obscurantism” in European societies? Probably yes, and this is a trend that needs to be carefully monitored. As stated in the European Commission Report, *Values and Identities. A policymaker's guide*, «For most of the 20th century, policies and politics in Europe (and the USA) have been viewed primarily through the lens of the left-right divide related to socio-economic interests. This divide defined the major political fault lines and policy choices. Today, by contrast, individual values, attitudes and identities predict political behaviour better than traditional class affiliations. People today are more prone to express their own preferences, feelings, ideas, and abilities, and finding meaning in their own uniqueness» (European Commission, 2021a, 23). At the same time, «the shift in values has been accompanied in many countries by the rise of polarisation, Identity politics and populism, questioning the

² <https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/speeches/>.

conventional political establishment and sometimes the entire concept of the EU» (ivi, 25).

In this perspective, dialogue seems to be the only value capable of holding others together, a negotiation based on the recognition of the fragmentary nature of individual experiences and the risk of extreme positions on identity and values that are often considered non-negotiable. The European identity, which must necessarily be open to realities other than the original nucleus, tends not to dialogue with them but to incorporate them by assimilation, without taking into account that the very process of extending its borders entails a redefinition not only of the political-institutional but also of the cultural aspects of the original project.

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Matteo Finco

Claims inflation, modern individualism and immunity

Paradoxes of inclusion in the West

1. *Introduction. The problem of inclusion*

Recently, the issue of *inclusion* – or, from an opposite perspective, but seemingly the same, *exclusion* – has gained unprecedented relevance in both the media and academic debate. Inclusion refers to a range of issues, such as social justice, public ethics, the problem of social order and solidarity, and so on. The debate is particularly lively on the issue of wealth distribution and inequalities in general (not only economic ones: access to health, education, information, services, welfare, technological resources and the digital universe, and so on).

Inclusion is claimed for individuals considered as such – as individual, autonomous, free subjects endowed with the capacity for self-determination – as well as for certain categories (often, but not always, minorities) who, for whatever reason, have been historically subordinated and victims of injustice, abuse, exploitation. Expectations and claims related to inclusion can therefore be understood as legitimate claims of individual and collective subjects who are excluded from the advantages and privileges enjoyed by a minority that holds certain forms of power, or who are substantially deprived of the resources (economic and social capital, good education, etc.) that could enable them to achieve better living conditions and self-fulfilment. This perspective is based on appeals to concepts such as equality, freedom, justice, dignity, etc., and is then strongly moralised. That is, it is based on *values* that distinguish good from evil: inclusion is good (or right), while exclusion is bad (or wrong); freedom must go hand in hand with equality (whatever one means concretely by such terms), while restrictions on freedom are unjust and create discrimination (hence inequality); and so on. It is hard to disagree on this level, but it is precisely this moral and normative level, that needs to be clarified from time to time.

A different approach, rather than appealing to morality and value judgments, focuses on the “convenience” of inclusion: in fact, exclusions and inequalities – even before they are unjust – are a social problem, because they threaten social stability, undermine trust (especially in institutions), create far-reaching problems that need to be addressed by policies (for example, mass migration), and so on. Moreover, exclusion not only hinders people (the “excluded”), but also both organi-

sations (restrictions on the freedom to profess one's beliefs limit the success and hinder the functioning of religious organisations; exclusion from the possibility of studying and strong inequalities between pupils create problems for the education system; poverty implies the impossibility of buying goods, and thus limits the circulation of money; etc.), and functional subsystems¹ (for example, restrictions on freedom of expression limit the possibilities for "development" of the arts and the possibilities of communication for the media; in the face of blatant exclusions, the courts have to deal with prosecutions that could otherwise have been avoided; families have to deal with the dissatisfaction of their members, etc.).

However, moving to a different level of analysis – not better, simply different² – inclusion could be conceived as a problem constitutively linked to the form of differentiation in modern society or, in other words, as a semantic correlate of the structure of society (Luhmann, 2005). In a society without a top and without a fixed hierarchy, free from the constraints of pre-modern societies, without a pre-established source of legitimacy (divine or temporal), inclusion is, in principle, not precluded for anyone (Luhmann, 1984a). This means that each functional system determines its own specific criteria for inclusion/exclusion on the basis of its specific (structural) characteristics. Thus, a person cannot vote if he or she is under the minimum age, nor can he or she stand for election if he or she is serving a criminal sentence; everyone has the right of access to education, but not the right to attend a particular course of study if he or she has not already completed a previous degree; everyone can freely buy and sell goods, but only if he or she has enough money, etc.

Such an approach does not minimise the importance of inclusiveness, but allows for an observation that seeks to capture the dynamics of the relationship between the essential characteristics of social systems (which allow for their highly specialised and exclusive functioning within society³) and their thematisation in communication, that is, their description. The assumption is the circularity in the relationship between the structure and the semantics of society (Luhmann, 1983): as the

¹ Regarding this concept, see Section 2.

² The adoption of this perspective does not aim to reduce the importance of the moral or ethical ones!

³ Only politics produces collectively binding decisions; only the legal system can decide on conflicts between rights and intervene when normative expectations are not met; only the economy manages scarce resources, etc.

structure changes, so do the conditions that determine communication within it, hence semantics⁴ (under the pain of “losing grip” on reality⁵).

Similarly, semantic shifts depend on how communication takes place (as long as everyone is allowed to express themselves; if there are no barriers to debate, and then new issues or unprecedented meanings have the possibility to emerge) and in turn determine the orientation of communication towards certain issues (rather than to others), thus influencing (and possibly stimulating) the structures of society itself⁶. In this sense, the code of inclusion/exclusion is crucial and constitutes the criterion for the “participation” of individuals – or rather *persons* (Luhmann, 1995b) – in the various functional subsystems.

Then claims of inclusion are not a surprising phenomenon, but an essential feature of modern society. Precisely because each system can only include in its own way, the individual becomes relevant only to the extent that he or she is able to take part in the communication of a particular system. Inclusion is therefore the inclusion of the *person* – conceived as a construct that takes into account of the human being only in terms of what could be referred to communication – which makes it possible to deal with the problem of the *double contingency* (Parsons, Shils, 1951)⁷. In other words, the “normality” of the problem of inclusion is a constant and essential feature of *modern* society, since this society (unlike pre-modern ones) is structurally and functionally differentiated. In order to continue to function, each subsystem must “discriminate” (regulate communication), and this is done precisely by reference to the person.

In this sense, inclusion is not a *value per se*: it does not respond to moral or ethical demands, but it is exclusively structured on the basis of specific codes⁸, that make it possible to maintain a highly differentiated, complex, polycontextual (meaning the coexistence of multiple codes)

⁴ The term refers to the conceptual heritage of society, that is, the whole set of ideas, values, principles, meanings – or *forms* – that can be used for selecting meanings and for communication, and that provide an orientation for observation (i.e. for certain topics instead of others).

⁵ For example, does it still make sense to give prominence to the concept of “social class”, when class membership is far from being the main factor determining the existence of individuals today, as it was in pre-modern societies?

⁶ If, for example, the debate on the problem of women’s exclusion from the labour market lasts long enough, or if a major scandal occurs, one can expect some kind of reaction from the political and economic spheres.

⁷ This is the normal social situation in which it is necessary to limit the horizon of possible behaviour in order to find coordination between communication partners.

⁸ Social subsystems are differentiated on the basis of their specific code. For example, the economy distinguishes between having and not having (money, goods, etc.), politics between government and opposition, mass media between information and non-information, and so on.

society, in which participation (or action in the broadest sense) is (in principle) guaranteed to all – which was not the case in pre-modern societies.

At the same time, *modern* society can also be described as typically *Western*, in the sense that it is the result of a process that took shape in the ancient world (Greece and Rome) and then old European historical context; a process that produced a specific kind of knowledge⁹ (and therefore also certain values). A knowledge that imposed itself (sometimes violently) precisely in the Moderne Age, which is understood as an epoch marking a historical rupture due to a series of structural changes (including the expansion of large-scale trade, the development of positive law, the establishment of the modern state, the scientific method, and the means of dissemination, etc.). This process thus continued in Europe and the United States, which presented themselves as the so-called “developed” world, the “leader” of the entire globe, imposing their own (precisely Western) ideas about temporality, history, the organisation of power, etc.

On the basis of the above considerations, the attempt to describe the most recent contradictions and developments concerning the claims of inclusion – which sometimes go so far as to challenge some of the pillars (values, principles, ideals, criteria of functioning, etc.) of modern Western society – implies the need to trace the essential characteristic of the conceptuality and devices that society itself brings into play and that make the claims themselves possible – indeed necessary. Only then would it be possible to consider the structural and semantic conditions that lead to an increase in the number of claims («claims inflation»), and, finally, to analyse the specific features of some of them – precisely those of certain minorities or actors whose membership (whether or not determined by voluntary affiliation) of certain categories limits their possibilities of participation. Possibilities that aim *not only* at inclusion, but also at *challenging* some of the characteristic elements of the modern Western tradition itself.

In fact, the demand to extend rights and access to services and benefits to a greater number of people – and to improve their quality – goes hand in hand with a critique of the conditions that produce discrimination itself, and thus of the values that underpin it. Today, this concerns in particular certain tendencies and characteristics that are considered to be distinctive of the Western world (supposedly constitutively or “structur-

⁹ This happened first and foremost thanks to the writing and printing press – and to the development of other «dissemination media» (Corsi, 2023a) – which made it possible to archive and catalogue texts and to process them in unprecedented ways, through mechanisms such as abstract thinking, generalisation, comparison, etc (for more on this, see for example, Cevolini, 2006).

ally” patriarchal, racist, tyrant, etc.) and the constructs and mechanisms that it has produced throughout its history.

Moreover, today’s claims are often made not only by individuals *as themselves* or as members of general categories – such as workers or the poor, and so on – but increasingly *as members* of particular groups, communities, categories, strongly characterised by an identitarian element (such as ethnicity or gender).

These two features (the critique against Western tradition and identitarianism) might suggest the hypothesis that the form of *individualism* itself is today evolving from its classical modern model (based on individual autonomy, self-determination and dignity) to a different one that gives more relevance to membership. In this sense, claims to equality and other rights, and, more generally to inclusion, seem to be based not so much on the recognition of the individuality itself, as constitutively different and unique. Rather, the very central interest seems to be the *personal immunity* of the individual itself: that is, the prevention and protection from abuse, injustice, traumatic events, but also from a range of (even if only potential) dangers. However, strengthening immunity can also mean a loss of personal *autonomy*. This is usually the case because membership, while providing security and protection, also imposes constraints.

In other words, one might wonder whether the process of individuality construction (individualisation) tends increasingly to privilege the moment of *identification* (especially of collectivities) over than of *individuation* (observation of a difference between oneself and others) (Gallino, 1987, 169). But this would only represent a shift away from the Western tradition. In fact, individualisation is directly linked to the functionally differentiated modern society: the latter needs individuals, i.e. *original* and *different* from the others, because only in this way could individuals themselves be integrated into the various functional subsystems. However, individualisation is not an “automatic process”, i.e. not a deterministic result of structural changes in society, but a semantic correlate of functional differentiation. But, since semantics (the attribution of meaning) depends on selectivity, that is, on the actualisation of something rather than something else, individualisation as we know it – like any other form – is not necessary, but only a particular and specific possibility.

Our idea is that the tendency to personal immunity is due to a reaction to structural changes in a society dominated by a contingency (unpredictability), which society itself is unable to cope with.

This paper attempts to analyse current claims of inclusion and their implications for the legitimation (or rejection) of the Western tradition. There are two basic assumptions: on the one hand, the existence of a direct relationship between social structure and semantics. On the other hand, the idea that “taking seriously” contemporary claims – not only from a political and civic point of view, but also (and above all) from a theoretical perspective – implies the need to grasp the historical and

social conditions that make these claims possible. Identifying their contradictions and “dark sides” should then allow for a more comprehensive description – which does not mean diminishing their value. In this sense, even if some of the authors quoted here are very critical of the contemporary claims and tendencies described here, this does not mean that we share their judgement.

2. *Modern and Western Society*

2.1. Modernity (and Postmodernity)

One of the essential characteristics of modern society is its constant reflection and self-criticism. That is to say, it is self-reflexive: society observes itself, formulates issues and problems about itself and, in doing this, self-describes itself (Luhmann, 1997b). Society makes choices to increase certainties, but in doing so, inevitably creates additional risks. Sometimes it means questioning and transforming its own premises: in this sense, modernisation – the incessant production of novelty and unprecedented emerging possibilities – is a reflexive process (Beck, 1986). This is true of the social dimension in general, but also of individuals: they too, «have no choice but to make choices; and these choices define who they are» (Giddens, 1994, 126). Moreover, this allows for a high degree of critique: each subsystem observes differently, and produces critique of others or of society as a whole, and the same is true for organisations and individuals. The fact that choices have to be made means that one could have chosen differently, and this reinforces self-criticism.

Reflexivity and the production of uncertainty thus allow for the construction of alternatives, that are different from those that already exist: this may seem paradoxical, but it is precisely through self-generated uncertainty that social systems and organisations can decide (Corsi, 2023b). In fact, choices need to be imagined, leaving the future open to change and to multiple possibilities of evolution (the latter understood as developments that cannot be predicted and that would not be necessarily “positive”).

Uncertainty (the possibility of being otherwise) and *contingency* (the simultaneous negation of necessity and impossibility) structurally characterise modern society, which is such precisely because it is free from the constraints of pre-modern societies, such as classes, corporations, absolutist political regimes, religion. These features no longer determine either a rigid social structure or individual destinies (Simmel, 1971; Luhmann, 1997b). This means that modern society is no longer differentiated by segments (such as clans or tribes) or strata (nobility, religious class, warriors, people, etc.), but it is functionally differentiated. Each function is performed by autonomous functional subsystems, each of which oper-

ates according to its own specific “logic” (economy, legal system, politics, art, medicine, religion, etc.).

Moreover, modern society is a world society (*Weltgesellschaft*), precisely because the territorial boundaries that demarcate the different regions of the globe – while retaining some relevance (especially for legal and political systems) – do not represent an absolute and insurmountable constraint on the development of functional subsystems. Then they do not define a strong separation between completely different societies (e.g., it becomes increasingly difficult to define an Italian society as opposed to a Brazilian one) (Luhmann, 1997b).

This society is also highly interconnected not only at the level of its functional systems, but also at the level of global cultural flows (Appadurai, 1996)¹⁰. It is therefore increasingly difficult to identify sharp divisions between cultures, types of knowledge, and lifestyles – one need only think of the cultural references of the younger generations, which tend to be largely shared across the globe¹¹.

But what exactly does *modern* society mean? In this sense, it should be noted that the semantics associated with modernity and modernisation point to an evolving state of affairs and then imply future changes and achievements. *Modern* (from the Latin *modernus*, a derivative of the adverb *modo*, meaning “now”, “recently”¹²) indicates what is new and closer to the present time. Consequently, by defining itself as *modern*, society identifies itself «with the help of a differentiation from the past [...] identifies itself in a temporal dimension», in the sense of a «constant creation of otherness» (Luhmann, 1998, 3). Hence a process of accelerated transformations (at the socio-political, techno-scientific, and industrial levels, but also in the rhythms of the individuals’ daily existence), with the gradual imposition of a strong orientation towards the future and the expansion of the «horizon of expectation» associated with this «new time» (*Neuzeit*) (Koselleck, 2004)¹³.

Novelty and diversity are thus the result of a series of structural chang-

¹⁰ That is, the «global cultural flows that can be called (a) ethnoscapas, (b) mediascapas, (c) technoscapas, (d) financescapas, and (e) ideoscapas. The suffix -scape allows us to refer to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes, shapes that characterise international capital as deeply as they do international clothing styles» (Appadurai, 1996, 33).

¹¹ There is not enough space here to give due attention to the role of technologies and media in the development of world society, and also their relationship to the semantic and structural developments of society as a whole. See the references cited in footnote 3, and Esposito (2001).

¹² Already in antiquity and the Middle Ages, the *antiqui/moderni* distinction served «to distribute praise and scorn», while from the 17th century it «has been applied, predominantly by the arts and sciences, to society or, more importantly, to its components» (Luhmann, 1998, 3).

¹³ On the relationship between social and temporal structures in modern society, and in particular the dimensions of future and temporal horizons, see Luhmann (1976).

es (some of which are already mentioned here, the main one being functional differentiation) and are described by the label of “modern”.

At the same time, it is necessary to question the alleged difference between *modernity* and *postmodernity*: adding the prefix – post would precisely mean the crossing of a threshold, leaving behind the characteristic conditions of modernity, or at least declaring that society «has lost faith in the correctness of its self-description» (Luhmann, 1998, IX).

In fact, the specific characteristics of postmodernity remain uncertain: probably because if modernity consisted of a positive connotation, indicating confidence in the future, conceived as the time when present expectations would be realised¹⁴ (and also if “modernisation” is used to indicate “progress”¹⁵ or “development”¹⁶, i.e. an improvement over the present), such optimism now seems to have waned. Uncertainty and disorientation now dominate¹⁷, and contingency (the possibility of deciding differently, an open horizon of possibilities) and complexity (the fact that there are more possibilities than can be realised) are usually described in negative terms. But is this sufficient to distinguish between modern and postmodern? If modern society is a society that describes itself as different from the previous one on the basis of a temporal caesura, a boundary, a clear separation from the past, modernity is also distinguished by the lack of a predetermined order, a universally valid common reference – precisely because of polycontextuality (the plurality of its codes) and contingency. It is no longer possible to describe society in a unique way that is accepted by all¹⁸. Modern society therefore «cannot abide a final word, and therefore it cannot abide authority» (Luhmann, 1998, 18), but this does not mean that it is disordered, unstable, without a form or without a structure¹⁹. In the same way, the novelty of postmodernity can hardly be reduced to the “End of Grand Narratives”, while clearer form of differentiation of the social structure does not seem to be realised.

¹⁴ And also in the sign of a utopian project guided by science and the rationalisation of political action (Cacciari, 2016, 92). On *rationalisation* as a distinctive characteristic of Western civilisation, it is obligatory to refer to Weber (1922).

¹⁵ «“Progress” is the first genuinely historical concept which reduced the temporal difference between experience and expectation to a single concept» (Koselleck, 2004, 268).

¹⁶ Especially after the Second World War, when “development” came to mean market orientation (economy), democratisation (politics), universal access to education, rule of law (legal system), etc. (Luhmann, 1997a, 75).

¹⁷ The sociological literature on this matter, especially from a critical perspective, is so abundant and well known that it is superfluous to refer to it here.

¹⁸ The multiplicity of possible descriptions concerns not only individuals and organisations, but also – and above all – individual subsystems: the point of view of the economy differs from that of legal system, politics, religion, etc.

¹⁹ In this sense, metaphors such as “liquidity” are confusing: it would mean that society is without form, while it has the form of functional differentiation (Corsi, 2017, 341, in footnote).

Instead, what could indicate a real break between modernity and post-modernity, is a change in attitudes towards the future, since today a shift from the «future as a promise» to the «future as a threat» (Benasayag, Schmit, 2003) is self-evident. A similar shift is taking place with regard to the past, which is being questioned for its “sins”. But there too, the question is whether this is a structural or semantics shift.

Rather, complexity and contingency are structural features of modern society: they arise from functional differentiation, and then from the possibility of looking at things differently, enlarging and expanding and multiplying alternatives. In this sense, they are modern, whatever their pre-modern constraints.

At the same time, the idea of *modernisation* – whether it is conceived as a political project or a conceptual paradigm – has shown all its inadequacies from various perspectives. From a “logical” point of view, if the future is unpredictable (because it is open-ended and not predetermined), it would be “positive” or “negative” and would in fact represent a “regression” to the past (the ongoing wars in Europe and the Middle East are only a glaring example of this). Moreover, some undeniable regional differences (primarily political and legal ones²⁰) persist in world society. Nevertheless and above all, history is full of attempts to “impose” modernisation: this is an expression of the strongly ideological use of this concept. In other words, modernisation is an ideal defended by a party that considers itself “better” and more “advanced” or “developed”. This reveals a hierarchical – i.e. inferior – conception of the “other”, i.e. everything that is not European or North American. It is precisely this aspect that is being strongly contested today by a number of protest movements, currents of thought and orientations that manifest a certain kind of claims to inclusion.

2.2. Semantics of Individualism

The fact that the tradition on which modern (self-describing) society is based is called “Western” should not be considered of second importance. Both descriptions (as “modern” and as “Western”) are self-descriptions made possible by society’s ability to observe itself (to reflect upon itself) through its communicative operations, and to distinguish itself from its environment. Thus society can cope with complexity and contingency by producing a representation of its own identity and unity and by orienting communication²¹.

In this way, by defining its own tradition as *Western*, modern society

²⁰ It is not by chance that one can identify some interesting adaptations and redefinitions of traditional Western concepts, such as the idea of “illiberal democracy”.

²¹ See Luhmann (1984b); Baraldi (2019); Corsi (2000); Esposito (2021).

defines its own identity, and establishes a difference between itself and the other(s): for example, through the West/Orient distinction. Moreover, the content of each side has to be specified from time to time, depending on the point of view of the observer using such a distinction – and the propensity to take into account the perspectives of others will also depend on it (Esposito, 1993, 349-350)²².

The reference to the Western tradition thus serves as a semantic orientation (as reference point) that can be understood either positively or negatively – depending on the specific perspective adopted: that is, it can be either claimed or criticised. In the former case, for example, one could deplore the neglect of certain traditional values, while in the latter it would be possible to highlight certain problematic aspects implied by these values (or by the struggles waged in their name).

With regard to the problem of inclusion and claims, some of the semantic constructs of the Western tradition, such as freedom, equality and dignity, are particularly relevant. Understanding their role in shaping individualism is important, because it is precisely this semantic complex that legitimises expectations and claims in modern society.

Both freedom and equality were consecrated by the French Revolution, and have been used for very different purposes, including the legitimisation of natural law (Bobbio, 1997) and the principle of free competition (Simmel, 1971). They also underpin the modern idea of *individuality*, i.e. modern *individualism*.

This term can be used to describe different ways of conceiving the individual, that emerged in different moments of modernity. If the Italian Renaissance (XIV-XVI centuries) promoted the idea of individual *unicity* and the need for personal *freedom*, the XVII century paved the way to the *natural freedom* of human beings – in opposition to the traditional limits imposed by class, corporation, religion and the “artificial” inequalities they implied. Then, the XIX century presented the idea of the personal and unique *interiority* of each individual was presented as the basis for his or her self-determination. For each different concept of freedom there are corresponding forms of individualism – of *equality* and of *difference* (*ibidem*)²³.

²² In fact, by positing the distinction, the observer already places himself on one of the sides. It is only by defining itself as the West that it could then recognise itself, creating an external space (Orient/East) to oppose (or to attempt to learn from). In the same way, postmodernism understands itself as an attempt at rupture, by trying to overcome modernity and its problems. On the distinctions through which modern society describes itself, in particular through «asymmetrical counter-concepts» (*Gegenbegriffe*) and prospective distinctions, see Koselleck (2004).

²³ It is not possible here to review a whole tradition (most notably Durkheim and Parsons) that has described the emergence and characteristics of modern individualism. It is worth noting, however, that individuality is a Western “discovery” (Morris, 1972).

If the combination of freedom and equality creates the paradoxical idea of an individual who is *different* from everyone else – by virtue of this uniqueness, his or her intrinsic specificity – but *equal* before the Law and the other functional system, and in its possibility to *be free* – this means that the modern individual is characterised by an inner and external freedom from the constraints and limits of the Middle Ages.

Equality and freedom are then essentially modern because they are socio-structural requirements: equality is a form that limits arbitrariness (differences and inequalities are possible, but no longer acceptable as the product of the whim of those in power – now they have to be justified on the basis of the subsystems involved), while freedom leaves open the possibility of participation and action in interactions, organisations and the overall society. In other words: equality and freedom are semantic correlates of inclusion.

At the same time, *dignity* is a “prerequisite” for the successful outcome of self-representation; i.e. for the socialisation of the human being understood as an “individual personality”. This makes a “good” individual self-representation possible, according to the roles that individuals take on in social life (Luhmann, 1965, chapter IV).

With the rise of the modern state and liberalism – with its ideals and values such as democracy, capitalism and so on – natural law gives way to positive law: that is, a law created by the state, but autonomous and independent of other powers; separate from both religion and morality; and subject to change. While ancient law was characterised by *duties* (obligations), the modern law (and this is very clear starting from the French and American *Declarations* of the XVIII century) is characterised by *rights* – which are mainly *subjective* rights²⁴ that can be claimed by individuals. Through them, the individual becomes a “subject of law”, guaranteed against the arbitrariness of state action and entitled to advance claims (of inclusion).

In this sense, Western modernity has made possible the emergence of a semantic complex centred on three terms: individual, subject, person – which could be defined as an *individual-subject-person apparatus*²⁵. It configures the *human being in the society* (at the same time) as indivisible and unique (but in this, similar to everyone else), endowed with an intrinsic dignity, that makes him/her different from things and animals (Esposito, 2014) (*individual*); subject to the law but also sovereign over him or herself (*subject*); entitled to participate in the various social contexts (*as person*). This apparatus shows that *modern individuality* is nothing but

²⁴ On this, see also Luhmann (1981).

²⁵ The use of the term *apparatus* refers to Foucault (1994), albeit in part departing from it, and refers to both a *conception* and *tool*, that directs the actions of individuals, the State and other powers.

a *product* of modernity itself – or, but there is no difference, that freedom, equality and dignity, above and more than values and rights, are (social) preconditions of (functionally differentiated) society itself: they represent the conditions for the open and non-discriminatory “participation” of the human being in society – that is, for *inclusion*. This implies the paradox of (modern) individuality: individuals have to find their own motivation by themselves (in their individuality) and always have to make decisions, being «the product of their own activity» (Luhmann, 1993, 76). Moreover, it means that the possibility to be a *unique* individual is only given in the (modern) society (Corsi, 2015, 196)²⁶.

This semantics – embodied in the European and North American tradition – represents a symbolic legacy which, at the level of legal and political systems, takes the form of fundamental rights (formulated in Constitutions and international treaties). It lays the foundation for a whole range of other rights and values (such as freedom of thought and speech), beliefs (such as tolerance), political principles (such as inclusion itself, citizenship, democracy, and so on).

Obviously, these rights and freedoms have a strong subjective character (Luhmann, 1981), which inevitably leaves the collective and communitarian dimension in the background. Today, the latter seems to be gaining unprecedented importance.

3. *Claims Inflation*

The fact that modernity “requires” (or rather “creates”) individuals, who can be included as persons, implies the possibility – indeed, the necessity – of formulating expectations and making claims in order to develop or “realise” oneself.

Expectations represent the «form of orientation» (forms for the constitution of meaning) by which individuals take contingency into account and anticipate their own action (Luhmann, 1995a, 269). In this way, they formulate desires, imagine future scenarios and construct possible alternatives to be pursued. When expectations become particularly relevant in terms of their possible satisfaction, to the point of endangering individuality²⁷ – that is, when the satisfaction is so important that negative outcomes are seen as problematic – then expectations become claims. They are “condensations” of expectations whose outcome is particularly relevant to *personalisation* (self-determination, autonomy, uniqueness). This means that personal involvement is so strong that it is experienced in the form of *emotions* (ivi, 270).

²⁶ See also Luhmann (1989a).

²⁷ In fact, the self-identification of individuals depends on claims (Luhmann, 1984a).

However, the legitimacy of the possibility of expressing claims must be reconciled with the fact that (obviously) not every claim can be fulfilled (due to the lack of available “positions”, excessive competition, ineradicable conflicts within society²⁸, etc.). At the same time, the impossibility of renouncing to make choices – i.e., the obligation to make choices to be able to build one’s individual *career* over the course of entire existence (to choose a profession, a religion or a belief system, a political orientation, specific lifestyles, cultural and social references, etc.)²⁹ –, in turn implies the inevitability of developing expectations, some of which will turn into claims.

Moreover, these claims may relate to rights that have already been established (even if they are not guaranteed in concrete terms) *rights*, as well as to social problems that have not yet been taken into account by (especially) politics and legal system.

All this leads to an increasingly evident tendency: the «claims inflation» [*Anspruchinflation*] (Luhmann, 1984), i.e. the increase of claims – both in quantitative terms (more rights³⁰, guaranties, access to resources and benefits of the Welfare State, that is, *inclusion* in a broader sense) and qualitative terms (for the benefit of an increasing number of people).

This leads to a kind of “super-claim”, both in terms of the need to take greater account of individuality (personal preferences, orientations and affiliations of various kinds), and in terms of the possibility of reformulating these claims at any time. One could think, for example, of the increase in claims relating not only to the “classic” areas of social life (such as work and family), but also to the more personal and private aspects of existence (such as sexuality and gender).

In this sense, the undefined expansion of individual claims – which takes on the appearance of a kind of «subjective super-right» (Longo, 2001, 290) – is a problematic consequence of functional differentiation and modern individualism. In fact, everyone could potentially be included in any functional subsystem of society (economy, legal system, politics, science, religion, and so on), but everyone has to build his or her own personal identity and successful self-representation. Moreover – and most importantly – the inflation of claims stems precisely from the fact that in the functionally differentiated modern society, there are no pre-established limits to the development of expectations, so that when they are disappointed, one can protest (Corsi, Martini, 2018, 69-70).

²⁸ Conflicts are a resource for society insofar as they represent a “surprise” or something new in contrast to the “normal” (i.e. pre-existing expectations) and enable systems to come to terms with the inadequacy of their own structures (Luhmann, 1997b, 456-472).

²⁹ And also the highly problematic awareness related on the one hand, that one could always have chosen differently (contingency), and on the other hand, that even the decision *not* to choose (explicitly) is a choice!

³⁰ Including the possibility of claiming them in court.

This tendency could be also described with a negative connotation, such as «rightism» [*«dirittismo»*]: an alleged political ideology that decouples rights and duties (one could claim them without being obliged to fulfil them) (Barbano, 2018). In a less drastic way, it does not seem far-fetched to say that the inflation of claims makes it more difficult to draw the line between *rights* (already established – at least formally – which could be claimed at the political level, or even in court) and *interests* (whose legitimacy have to be demonstrated in the concrete cases). Or, in other words, between rights to be protected and mere aspirations (ambitions, desires, goals) (Salvati, 2024).

4. *Emerging Claims against Western Tradition*

The fact that modern society tends both to produce blame and to blame itself is not surprising (Corsi, 2000, 364). This is due to the fact that each observer (systems, organisations, psychic systems) is different from the others, and therefore observes in a different way. At the same time, each observation is realised within the society: there is no communication outside the society, i.e. in its external environment (Luhmann, 1997b). In this case, observations that are communicated would stimulate the communication process (utterance, information, understanding)³¹ and could produce some effects. This allows society to alarm itself by communicating and describing “crisis situations”, that require action and decisions (Luhmann, 1984b). Criticism and protest then serve the same function: they aim at change³². They express claims, which, when they reach a certain “critical mass”, become the subject of public debate (although individual cases can also attract a great deal of attention, usually in the form of scandals³³). Protest is particularly interesting because it produces observations of society against society itself, without producing decisions but reacting against the consequences of decisions made by others (or simply fearing them).

4.1. A hypothesis on Inclusion and Individualism

If protests have traditionally come from those who suffer the consequences of someone else’s decision, i.e. from victims and the “excluded” (marginalised and poor people, and all those who, to varying degrees, suffer directly from forms of injustice and discrimination) – often attracting considerable attention from the media and public opinion (e.g., the Black

³¹ On this, see Luhmann (1997b).

³² On crisis and critics, see Koselleck (2012).

³³ Here the case of George Floyd is a shocking example. About the function of protest in world society, see Luhmann (1996).

Lives Matter movement) – today protests and complaints are increasingly supported and encouraged by those who are (or consider themselves) *potential victims*, or who denounce blatant injustices and situations of domination and exploitation by states and large corporations, without suffering any consequence (e.g., the ongoing protests on university campuses in Europe and the United States).

Even if it is not possible to speak of real protest movements (more or less homogeneous, stable and continuous), in world society there is a frequent expression of protests and claims that go beyond state borders, point out scandals and injustices, and manage to attract attention of the media and public opinion.

In this context – and on the basis of the theoretical framework outlined so far – what follows is an analysis of some recent trends relating to the inflation of claims: claims that, on the one hand seem to question (explicitly or implicitly) some of the pillars of Western modernity – either rejecting them or strongly contesting them – and on the other hand (but the two aspects are directly related) express a change with respect to the modern type of individualism.

These claims call into question the Western tradition and its conception of individuality because they give a different relevance to principles such as equality, freedom, dignity: if modern individualism is based on these values, which make it possible for each person to be unique – that is, different from others – autonomous and dependent on choices to be included – then, today protests and claims are increasingly directed at both the protection of (historically) neglected categories and the prevention of abuses and injustices. This implies, however, that classical principles that legitimise individuals as such (unique, different, original, autonomous) should, in many cases, be subordinated to the affiliation or membership or to the fact of being potentially hurt.

On the one hand, membership (formalised or not; voluntary or ascribed) of an *excluded* category or group gains in importance because of the intrinsic uniqueness recognised in everyone (simply by virtue of belonging to humanity, regardless of any other characteristic). On the other hand, the *affective* dimension (feelings, emotions, individual self-representation) of individuality gains importance when the risk of abuse depends not on an objective condition, but on the subjective sensitivity.

If this reasoning is correct, it would mean that individual “interiority” and dignity would not lose value, but rather be “resemanticised”. The inflation of claims would be just one expression of this: since there are no pre-established limits to individuality and, at the same time, given that individuals are increasingly challenged by contingency and complexity that is difficult to deal with, claims call for a “shifting” of the foundations of individuality (its successful self-representation). On the one hand, there is a shift from the “generic” dignity (on the internal side) and freedom (on the external side) (Luhmann, 1965) and from equality in terms of the ac-

cess to the various functional systems (i.e. inclusion), to the membership of categories recognised as deserving of protection and attention. On the other hand, there is a shift toward a greater relevance of affectivity (at the expense of cognitivity and normativity), since it concerns the supposedly truly personal, individual, subjective – that is, unique – character of each person.

In short, individuals – at the mercy of an excess of possibilities that is difficult to manage, together with the adaptation to the differentiated inclusion criteria of functional systems – tend to seek the anchorage and security that they need to be included in membership, while the importance of their own affectivity represents their own more “authentic” specificity. In this sense, psychological, emotional and existential malaise – i.e. symptoms of a widespread difficulty in coordinating affectivity and cognition by “tuning” them to the external environment (Baraldi, 1999) are now gaining in importance: they generate expectations which, when legitimised as claims, further feed the inflationary spiral³⁴.

A further consequence concerns the fact that this change in the conception of individuality would imply a correspondent change concerning the type of sociality deriving from it: if the legitimization (recognition) of the individual no longer depends exclusively on the classical references to individual dignity, freedom and autonomy – i.e. individual self-determination – but *also* on membership, the latter (with its positive and negative sides) acquires a decisive role in establishing bonds and creating the conditions that make trust possible, understands it as the social dimension that makes it possible to deal with complexity (Luhmann, 2000).

In other words, the typically modern tendency towards *change* (novelty, progress, evolution, etc.) – which reflects individualism on the *temporal* dimension³⁵ – tends today to become less important, or at least to evolve in the direction of an increasing emphasis on both *affectivity* – where previously the emphasis was on the *cognitive* (and also *normative*) dimension – and *protection* from traumatic change.

4.2. Claims: Recent Tendencies

It is possible to illustrate extensively this hypothesis in detail by listing some trends that characterise contemporary emerging claims.

³⁴ It is not by chance that a gradual process of «sensitisation» (Flasspöhler, 2021) would today lead to an excessive *sensitivity* – or, according to the most critical observers (Soncini, 2021), *susceptibility* – to possible outside threats. As a result, *feeling* would eventually prevail over the content (*cognition*), giving rise to an «identitarian emotivism» (Belardinelli, 2022).

³⁵ In turn, modern individualism is reflected on the *social* dimension in the comparison between individuals, and on the *fact* dimension in the value of *difference* (Baraldi, 1999, 55).

(a) Claims are increasingly based not so much on a presumed constitutive *difference of each individual* (uniqueness) from the others, but on the *difference* of the specific group (sometimes a minority) to which one belongs. These groups or collective entities in general may be based on cultural preferences (such as political ideology), social characteristics (such as gender) or biological ones (such as ethnicity). In this sense, individual claims become increasingly detached from their bases in the binomial “intrinsic dignity of the human being” / “his uniqueness / difference” from all others and tend to be based on the *membership* in specific groups.

(b) Claims are increasingly focused less on positive *freedoms* and more on *protection* from potential abuses and on guarantees against discrimination (for example, gender or race sensitivity, but also reading sensitivity).

(c) In continuity with the aspect just mentioned, claims are strongly related not only to the *normative* (conformity of behaviour) and *cognitive* (related to knowledge) domains, but also to the *affective* domain. These claims aim at affirming the individual self – i.e. at protecting it from external influences: they promote, for example, respect for individual sensitivities and feelings, or protection against the risk of being harmed by potentially offensive or destabilising content³⁶.

(d) In addition to claims that challenge the present and/or seek (directly or indirectly) to bring about change in the future, “retrospective” claims are becoming increasingly relevant, i.e. claims that refer to the past, denounce historical injustices and discrimination or claim to re-evaluate past events and public figures in the light of contemporary values and morals.

These trends can be seen in various *phenomena* reported daily in the media, such as: the «culture wars» (Furedi, 2022) and *identity politics*; the so-called *politically correct* (Ricolfi, Mastrocola, 2022), *cancel culture*, and *wokeism* (which – in attempt to define it without making value judgements – could be defined as a “tendency” or “sensitivity”); the above-mentioned *sensitivities*³⁷; the fierce criticism of “evils” considered to be foundations or structural features of the West, such as “patriarchy”, “(structural) racism”, environmental exploitation (especially in relation to the so-called “ecological crisis”). These historical culpabilities would explain many cases of discrimination and violence (such as domestic and gender violence) as well as many events in which the necessary *selection* that systems and organisations have to make (e.g. in the education sys-

³⁶ While *normative* expectations concern social norms and *cognitive* expectations about the need to deal with problems in new ways (and thus imply learning and knowledge), *affective* expectations concern the personal sphere and the “inner” well-being of individuals (Baraldi, 1999).

³⁷ Just one example: the “trigger warning” in US publishing.

tems or in the labour market) is suspected of discrimination and abuse, i.e. could be the result of an arbitrary exercise of power aimed at reproducing itself.

A few brief remarks at the peculiarities of some of these phenomena would make it possible both to present some examples of the four trends mentioned, and to trace their hypothetical common roots (the critical attitude towards the West and its tradition) and tensions (the emphasis on the emotions, affections and also values)³⁸.

At the same time, it must be borne in mind that the claims are often made by (more or less formal and organised) movements (and not just by single individuals). The fact that they often focus on ethical aspects more than on economic or political ones is due to their desire to be involved, to be actors and subjects of their collective and personal lives (Touraine, 2005, 209). Their goal is not to resolve economic contradictions once and for all and to transform society, but to transform the subject (Touraine, 1998). In this sense, it is necessary to distinguish on a case-by-case basis whether a given movement expresses the tendencies just mentioned. In any case, its attention to ethics could be seen as an attempt to reintroduce morality (i.e. the distinction between good and bad) into subsystems that function only on the basis of their own specific criteria (code), and not on the basis of what is “right” or “wrong”.

4.2.1. Identity politics

The term «*identity politics*» refers to cases where political views and actions are based on identity characteristics (such as ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation, etc.) shared by a reference group that claims to be representative³⁹. Critics of this attitude argue that it subordinates individual ideas and values – i.e. autonomy and freedom of thought – to those of the reference group⁴⁰. Identity politics would then be based on a mechanism of “reducing” individual personalities to specific “models”. In this way, group identity run the risk of being highly restrictive, also

³⁸ A warning is needed here: we do not claim to be exhaustive and also both the trends mentioned above and the typologies listed below are linked – in their genesis, manifestations, and effects – by complex interdependencies (which sometimes make it impossible to ascribe certain concrete cases exclusively to a particular category or trend), that cannot be explained here. For this reason, we do not consider it necessary to refer to the (already considerable) literature on these topics, and indeed we will proceed with generalisations and inevitable simplifications.

³⁹ See Bernstein (2005) on the different approaches and definitions of this issue.

⁴⁰ «Identity politics reduces the views of an individual to the common traits of a group. In some instances, this essentialist imagination credits identities with pre-given attitudes, emotions and even epistemologies» (Furedi, 2021).

considering itself “morally superior” to any other affiliation – including the universalist idea of «humanity»⁴¹ (Furedi, 2019, 2020b).

Moreover, identity politics would trigger «culture wars» between discriminated and subaltern categories on the one hand, and the rest of society on the other. According to Furedi, underlying identity movements are underpinned by the belief that «the personal is political»⁴², i.e. the idea that individual political recognition and even personal esteem – necessary for self-affirmation – are political issues, whose legitimization depends on group identity and is essentially expressed through the language of feelings⁴³.

Such an attitude would contain some implicit assumptions: that to understand the world you have to look at identity categories, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation; that universalist values are only traps, that blind us and perpetuate injustices – justified by “rulers” who have imposed themselves through violence in the history⁴⁴; and that “political progress” depends on rejecting universal values and neutral rules and believing that the way individuals treat each other and the way the state treats individuals depends only on the group or community in which one is born (Mounk, 2023).

4.2.2. Politically Correct

If identity politics reflects two of the above tendencies – points (a) and (c) –, so does *political correctness* – points (b) and (c). It expresses claims about how to treat others. First, in terms of language⁴⁵. In reality, political correctness is about communication. It is a *form* – an attitude and an imperative to which one must conform in order not to offend the sensibilities of others, and thus to protect them not only from possible abuse and discrimination, but also from any possible threat to one’s own self-representation. It is then an instrument for the protection of the personal sphere. The paradox is obvious⁴⁶: political correctness disregards the

⁴¹ About the use of this category as *Totalbegriff*, see again Koselleck (2004).

⁴² The «slogan “the personal is political” means that politics is in essence personal, which is to say: it is about personal identity» (Moeller, D’Ambrosio, 2021, 198).

⁴³ «The rhetoric of the ‘personal is political’ and the attachment of the term ‘political’ to the emotional needs of the self were not simply confined to an individual quest for esteem and recognition. This sentiment was quickly assimilated into group identity. Identities based on wider affiliations, such as those of race, gender, ethnicity and community, came to be represented through the language of feelings» (Furedi, 2021). In this way, politicised identity becomes increasingly vocal and aggressive (Furedi, 2023).

⁴⁴ It is common here to speak of the “white, European, heterosexual, macho man”.

⁴⁵ For example, the claims for a «more inclusive» language (for example through the use of feminine declensions, the “schwa” vowel, or gender-neutrality in general, and more – with all the paradoxes and contradictions this entails, first and foremost from the point of view of the structural characters of each idiom). See Giaccardi (2022).

⁴⁶ There are many other paradoxes in this regard: how can one be sure not to offend

concrete specificity of others (values, personal history, character, etc.). What's more, it should be applied generally – i.e. always and in every situation –, because everyone has the right to be protected from possible abuse and everyone's sensitivities should be taken into account – point (c). Again, this should be especially true when referring to certain categories (deserving of protection). In this way, political correctness could become «an *intangible* weapon in the hands of minorities, whatever they may be, in the context of an asymmetrical war with majorities, whatever they may be» (Ronchi, 2021)⁴⁷.

4.2.3. Wokeism and Cancel Culture

The word *Wokeism* is derived from the English verb “to be *awake*”, and refers to an “awakening” that allows for a clear view of the world, free from the fallacies and deceptions produced by the Western cultural tradition. Those who embrace it see this as a positive attitude – if not a moral one, and hope for its potentially disruptive consequences on a large scale. For its detractors, on the other hand, it consists of an ideological and myopic view of history – point (d) – if not even in a form of extremism. In this sense, it could be considered as a new «civil religion» (Moeller, D'Ambrosio, 2021)⁴⁸. Such an attitude would make it possible to recognise the evil done by Western civilisation in the past, and this awareness should lead in the present to the protection of historically oppressed and exploited categories from further abuse and discrimination – points (a) and (b) –, with special emphasis to the emotional-affective dimension⁴⁹ – point (c).

Moreover, the recognition of the guilts to be atoned for, would imply the loss of the right to express oneself on certain subjects and in certain contexts (or sometimes in general) if one does not belong to the category

the sensibilities of others, given that one cannot know what others think? How can you be sure that others understand your true intentions? How can one think of communicating without raising doubts, in a “transparent” and clear, unambiguous way – ultimately: *sincere*. And above all: how would absolute “correctness” be possible?

⁴⁷ Political correctness is then seen as «a communicative style that performs the *abstract* equality of all speakers», based on «an impersonal, objective and ahistorical truth» that must be accepted and shared by them (Ronchi, 2021; *my translation*).

⁴⁸ Or even better, «a post-Christian secular civil religion», derived from the combination of German «“guilt pride” – a form of moral superiority generated by the public acknowledgement of inherited guilt» (the Holocaust) and «a sense of moral righteousness on the acknowledgment of the enormous sin of “white supremacy”» of young Americans (Moeller, 2023).

⁴⁹ Compared to the general case, it is assumed here that membership itself implies a high sensitivity of the subjects to potential offences (e.g. it is assumed that a non-white person is less likely to tolerate a certain kind of discriminatory language). Caution is even greater when one considers that individuals “represent” the category to which they belong – and are therefore entitled to protection and respect because of the discrimination their group has suffered in the past.

in question – and even more so if one is considered (or considers oneself to be) as a member of the category of “oppressors”⁵⁰.

From such an approach, it is also possible to move in the direction of a re-evaluation of individual historical figures (on the basis of the mistakes they are said to have made, or on the bases of their behaviors and attitudes – they were misogynists, racists, homophobes, etc. – no longer acceptable today)⁵¹, as well as of certain states and nations or the West as a whole: this is the so-called *cancel culture*.

4.3. Consequences of Contemporary Claims

The tendencies briefly sketched here have some rather obvious implications, both for public’s opinion judgement of the modern West (as a cultural tradition, a historical epoch, a specific form of power and domination), and for the forms of individualism and hence of inclusion, that it has produced. In turn, these implications relate to the ongoing transformations of both the semantics of world society (communicative themes and conceptual heritage) and its structural elements (relations between its parts – especially in terms of power, and criteria for inclusion). In fact, claims, that take shape within a given cultural and social context and that aim to bring about social transformations, by the very fact of their manifestation, demand that society change. They then stand, so to speak, at the crossroads between cultural phenomena and social processes.

4.3.1. Moralisation, Western Self-Criticism and Time

The first consideration concerns the prominent role that *morality* plays today. This can be seen in the critique of the West (understood both as a system of knowledge and as a system of power) – which would impose a reconsideration of its history and its “sins”, and even a permanent process of “atonement” or “purification”⁵² –, as well as in the judgement of individual behavior and intentions, depending on the consideration of the category to which one belongs.

The second point: the importance attached to group *membership*

⁵⁰ This attribution – which is, of course, always highly arbitrary – runs the risk of adhering to a kind of determinism (for example: if my skin is white I could be considered (and consider myself too) responsible for the sins of my ancestors, even though it means generations of poor, marginalised, lower class people, and so on).

⁵¹ Consequently, there are controversies about whether works of art should be preserved as symbols of particular institutions – or in general – or whether they should be taken down or even destroyed.

⁵² The most radical critics may think that the West can no longer propose values, but that it only has to atone for crimes (Rampini, 2021, 3). That is, it would be «the source of most of the world’s evils» and its history would be an «history of prevarication, subjugation, slavery, destruction of other people’s cultures and economies» (La Cecla, 2013, 7; *our translation*).

could trigger a process of indefinite proliferation of categories worthy of special protection. This tendency would be very difficult to manage, especially (and above all) for the institutions. Another negative effect could be what could be called “competitive victimhood”, in which the actors involved see themselves exclusively as “victims” or, on the other hand, as “perpetrators” (Ricolfi, 2021)⁵³.

Another implication concerns *temporality*. The *past* (and this also concerns collective and social memory) – in addition to claims of revaluation and distancing from tradition and historical heritage on the basis of moral judgement – is often seen as no longer relevant or as an obstacle to the construction of the future, because it is considered structurally inadequate in the present (Furedi, 2020a)⁵⁴. On the other hand, the *present* and the *future* tend to be seen as sources of potential danger: in this sense, the dimension of *conflict prevention* dimension plays a prominent role. The prevention of possible “traumas” to individual sensitivities and, more generally, to tensions in the relational or social dimension, could sometimes lead to the adoption of severe restrictions on freedom of expression, or to the sanctioning – again through moralisation – of freedom of thought⁵⁵. If “problematic” or potentially “offensive” or even excessively “sensitive” contents represent a potential threat for individuals, it is also true that attempts to prevent it (through restrictions, limitations and sanctions) could also lead to excessive restrictions on individual freedom. Moreover, this could also lead to restrictions on the future, since freedom of thought itself provides the ability to imagine possible solutions and strategies to face challenges.

4.3.2. Universalism vs Particularism and Politics

If these phenomena were to persist and become radicalised, they could have potentially problematic effects, such as:

- the questioning of the idea of *universalism* (and thus of human rights, above all the dignity recognised to each member of human race);
- the resulting temptation to “seek refuge” in “tribes” or small groups – the only ones in which one can be understood and accepted

⁵³ Moreover, the attempts to give subaltern categories a privileged position could, paradoxically, lead to the denial of the rights of majorities in favour of those of minorities (Scurati, 2023).

⁵⁴ This is true for art in general: classics in particular are at risk of being judged negatively – even if questioning them implies recognising their relevance, precisely because confronting them allows one to observe oneself and then redefine one’s own identity.

⁵⁵ Similarly, the right to be forgotten is also at stake: the claim to “re-evaluate” the past can also be applied far back in time, re-actualising facts that are no longer relevant in the present and that can sometimes be harmful (also from an affective perspective) for their protagonists.

- as an individual (Neimam, 2024). This could also lead to a potential loss of trust in institutions;
- the risk of *oversimplifying problems* and thus encouraging polarisation, and that of reducing individuals to their *membership*, i.e. to abstract categories⁵⁶ on the one hand;
 - consequently, the weakening of the idea that it is only the freedom of the man to do good or evil that can make a difference, regardless of any determinism (La Cecla, 2013);
 - the questioning of the very possibility of distinguishing between *right* (i.e. the exercise of law, the possibility of determining what is right and what is wrong on the basis of shared norms) and *power* (usually suspected of committing abuses);
 - the weakening of the belief that *injustices* and *inequalities can be overcome* (in the present or in the future), that is, that progress can be achieved through collective action (Neimam, 2024);
 - the invisibility of the fact that even and especially Western modernity *always* has criticised and reflected on itself – for example, by generating multiple institutions in order to overcome inequalities (Mascareño, 2022)⁵⁷.

4.3.3. Immunity Claims

The legitimisation of the *affective dimension* and the claims it makes is particularly relevant in that it seems to reveal a substantial change in the form of individualism. In addition to group or community membership, individuality (i.e. the process of identity and personality construction) seems to be increasingly characterised by the strengthening of individual *immunity* to the environment (everything “external” to it: other individuals, organisations, social systems, and so on). In this sense, the protection from potential traumas and abuses that threaten the emotional and psychological equilibrium of the individual would reveal not only that the “pressure” for immunity seems to prevail over the attachment to the community (Esposito, 2014, 85), but, above all, that the “immunity logic” as a specific form of modernisation, is gradually spreading beyond the normative and legal domain⁵⁸, explicitly directed towards the protection of affectivity (which is constitutively unstable, resistant to adaptation, fragile with regard to disappointments), increasingly challenged by contingency.

⁵⁶ The “reduction” of individuals to the category to which they belong implies the risk of abandoning distinctions and complexities, and of failing to take proper account of real people, with their personal histories and their concrete bodies (Saraceno, 2024).

⁵⁷ Just two examples: The Welfare State in the West and the public agencies and institutions created to protect minorities in the so-called “Global South”.

⁵⁸ The Law is the society’s «immune system», that intervenes when normative expectations are not met. See Luhmann (1993).

5. Claims, Moralisation and the Risk of Obscurantism

If this analysis is correct, the claims that challenge the modern-Western tradition *from within*⁵⁹ and promote a different conception of individualism, would represent a specific mode of response to complexity and contingency. This response – through claims – occurs at different levels:

- on a *temporal dimension*, claims aim to “correct” or at least “control” the present and the future, by the “delegitimising” or “neutralising” the past;
- on a *fact dimension*, they define what is “right” or “acceptable” and what is not – often in the name of the rights of “oppressed minorities” or discriminated groups and categories, and of the wrongs they have suffered (but sometimes also in the name of those who do not have the opportunity to express themselves in the public arena);
- on a *social dimension*, the claims aim at a generalised consensus, at making public opinion aware of their battles and of injustices and inequalities. In this way, they try to create a “common horizon” for communication.

In this case, the claims would not only challenge the Western tradition, but also attempt to “resemanticise” some of its heritage (concepts such as the individual, inclusion, immunity, but also equality, and consequently merit and so on), and lay the foundations for corresponding changes in the structural elements of society (criteria and possibilities for inclusion) – thus operating at the normative and cognitive levels. However, it is the insistence on the affective dimension that represents the most innovative and radical character of modern claims. In fact, claims draw society’s attention on the *sensitivity* of individuals: a kind of “resonance capacity”⁶⁰ – elaborated through the modulation of cognitivity and affectivity –, which constitutes an inviolable domain of the individual and which can be legitimately claimed – even when it implies the recognition of individual fragility or weakness⁶¹.

This implies challenges for contemporary society and its modern Western organisations and systems: in particular for institutions (first and foremost the political system and Welfare State) but also for science – including sociology⁶².

⁵⁹ Even postcolonial and decolonial critique (in and out of academia) is an internal “product” of the West.

⁶⁰ Here the term “resonance” is used in a slightly different sense than Rosa’s (2019), since we point to a process which does not necessarily imply a mutually transformative relationship between the individual and the world.

⁶¹ For example, by publicly declaring one’s psychological-emotional discomfort, without being ashamed of it.

⁶² Sociology itself is constitutively a Western “product”: it arose out of an attempt to

However, an excessive *moralisation* of claims (i.e. of communication) is itself a problem. Indeed, in modern society morality has a kind of “alarm function”, drawing attention to particularly serious problems arising from the structures of society and its form of differentiation (Luhmann, 1997b, 404). Moral communication then points out to situations that cannot be easily resolved through political debate and on which there is no consensus. In this way, by clearly distinguishing good from evil, morality provides guidance for resolving conflicts. However, when morality goes too far, when it outlines excessively rigid positions and extends itself indiscriminately into the various spheres of social life, it runs the risk of fuelling and radicalising conflicts. In other words, radical claims with a strongly moral character tend to be exclusionary, because they point to an excessive “immunity” that exacerbates the conflicts⁶³.

Moreover, moralisation often tends to “confuse” the cognitive, normative and affective⁶⁴ dimensions of claims (with particular emphasis on the latter). As a result, there is a risk of reducing the temporal horizons further to the present (not allowing for alternatives to what is considered good or right today and then irrevocably condemning the past) and thus making it difficult to “imagine” the future.

The predominance of the affective and “experiential” dimension could also lead to excessive simplifications and a reduction of the space for reflection, with the risk of leaving an open field for forms of obscurantism (restrictions on freedom, censorship – even preventive censorship, etc.).

In conclusion, the claims of inclusion that are emerging today could be seen as a threat to tradition (an attack on its founding values, principles and ideas); or, on the contrary, as an opportunity for social improvement (greater inclusion, social justice, and so on). But that would be a value judgement. More modestly, the analysis presented here suggests that expectations can be legitimised in society sometimes only through conflict. What matters, then, is to be able to contain the conflict within certain limits. And this is precisely the role of institutions. Sociology could, among other things, offer analysis, highlight manifest and latent functions and try to identify the common roots of apparently different phenomena. This is essentially what this paper has attempted to do. Thus, if a risk of obscurantism could be detected today from the perspective of

produce a (scientific) observation of society at a time when society itself was changing shape through radical upheavals and then begun to consider itself “modern”.

⁶³ It could even happen on a purely formal level, for example by discouraging those – in a typically Western way – who would like to prevent or reduce conflicts on the basis of open and “democratic” debate.

⁶⁴ One could ask, for example, to what extent it is appropriate and convenient for universities to be the scene of culture wars, or whether they should have the goal of fighting inequality (Ricolfi, Mastrocola, 2022) or, on the contrary, they should simply represent a free space for public debate (Orsina, 2024).

freedom of thought and other traditional Western values, it is also true that the trends highlighted here are only present signals of possible future conflicts, to be managed through debate and decisions. In other words, the actual future depends on decisions made in the present (Luhmann, 1994).

Finally, claims inflation and the risk of obscurantism also have an impact on the so-called “social bond”, which many consider to be in a deep crisis today. Regardless of what exactly is meant by this concept – for example: conceiving of the social bond in the various forms that it might take in the modern welfare state (Paugam, 2012) is very different from pointing to the absence of a “communitarian tension” (Pulcini, 2001) –, if we conceive of it as a bond between people and society that guarantees protection and recognition (Paugam, 2008), on the one hand, one should wonder if today modern society really does not provide them (anymore) – in contrast to a supposedly better past – and, on the other hand, to what extent the inflation of claims, cultural conflicts (sometimes very violent) and their moralisation, could constitute a serious threat to “solidarity” and social ties in general.

6. *Afterword. The Possibility of an Ethics of Contingency*

Proposing “solutions” to social problems is not a task for sociologists – but for politicians and professionals. However, putting forward hypotheses and even suggesting possible paths to follow can be seen as a *performance* of the scientific system, providing “irritations” (i.e., inputs) to other systems, which in turn can accept, reject or ignore them.

In this sense, one idea could be to shift the focus from morality to *ethics*, conceived as a reflection theory of morality or, in other words, as the application of the good/evil distinction to itself, in reference to concrete cases (Luhmann, 1989b). This means that ethics not only indicates what is good from a certain perspective, but also asks whether it is appropriate to distinguish between good and bad.

In this sense, pursuing an «ethics of contingency» could help to avoid fundamentalism, rather than the risk of obscurantism. Renouncing the pretension of being “critical” or fighting for “emancipation”, it would instead be a different modality of reflection, capable of offering suggestions and motivating to action (Mascareño, 2019, 2). Nevertheless, it would refrain from “condemning” or judging in a rigid way. It would carry out, on the *fact dimension*, an observation «of the conditions under which an observation is produced, and then determine *how* to observe *who* is observing»⁶⁵. It would allow «intervention in the conflicts between observ-

⁶⁵ Our emphasis.

ers» (*social dimension*) and between «the simultaneity and sequentiality of their observations» (*temporal dimension*) (ivi, 10). Through the «cognitisation» of individual life plans' – that is, the expansion of individual possible choices, to the detriment of normative expectations – and the «broadening of the institutional systemic framework called to respond to expectations», this kind of ethics would both increase and reduce contingency: on the one hand, by increasing the options from which individuals could benefit in order to realise their goals, and on the other, by extending the responsiveness and the selectivity of systems (ivi, 11). In other words, such an ethic is pluralistic, because the position one takes are not considered necessary, while other positions are respected because they are not considered impossible: it does not impose either necessity nor impossibility. Nor does it prevent claims that deny contingency itself, but only that these claims would generate imposition and limits for others (Mascareño, 2024).

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Emanuela Dal Zotto, Chiara Marchetti

Lights in the night from asylum: innovative integration practices and signs of a new citizenship in Italy

Introduction

When the Geneva Convention was adopted in 1951, the consensus view was that the refugee issue would be resolved gradually after the end of World War II. Contrary to this assumption, since the 1960s, situations leading to forced migration have multiplied throughout the world, and today, this phenomenon affects more than 100 million people¹.

At the same time, in Europe, both at the European level and in individual states, in the context of increasingly restrictive immigration policies, there have been a proliferation of discourses against the reception of asylum seekers and of measures that have both made it more difficult for those entitled to international protection to be recognized and undermined this right in substance.

In Italy, forced migration is not a recent phenomenon, but since 2011 and the response to the arrivals following the Arab Spring that the issues of reception and asylum have entered the public discourse in a significant way, occupying a large space in politics, the media and civil society. Although the events of 2011 provided an important opportunity to rethink reception in Italy, the following years have seen the prevalence of rhetoric of closure and the sabotage of a system that, if expanded and improved, could have led to the undermining of the framing and management of protection in terms of emergency.

The constant invocation of the categories of crisis and emergency (Calhoun, 2004; Dal Zotto, 2014), although often unsupported by data, reinforces the welding between nationalist and populist rhetoric (Marchetti, 2023) and the scenario in which the asylum system is immersed, reproducing and amplifying the protectionist and identity-based arguments that pervade public discourse. In the opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’, migrants – especially those arriving by sea – are no longer refugees in

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¹ Cf. UNHCR Global Trends 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2023>.

need of protection, but ‘invaders’ and ‘undeserving subjects’ (Marchetti, 2020a) that legitimize the declaration of a state of emergency (a rhetorical but also normative tool that, not coincidentally, was used again in 2023 after the Cutro shipwreck, just off the coast of Calabria in the southern Italy). The victims – of shipwrecks, of traffickers, of persecutory regimes in countries of origin and transit – are suddenly transformed into threats to be rejected, detained, delegitimized socially and politically, as can also be seen from a strictly regulatory and administrative point of view through the succession of measures that have dotted the last year. In this context, any movement, any action, any discourse that puts freedom of movement and the right to self-determination back at the centre is explicitly opposed, and those who propose and defend it suffer a process of criminalization similar to that suffered by migrants, effectively entering the same polarized field as the ‘enemy’.

In this scenario, we are witnessing a «darkness of hospitality» at the local level, but at the same time the emergence of innovative experiences based on community and intercultural relations, that move in the opposite direction to the dominant one, in the operational and discursive interstices that are still practicable and deployed on the battlefield (Campomori, Ambrosini, 2020). This contribution proposes to critically explore and investigate some of these experiences, which are not so much in the phase of arrival, initial reception and access to procedures of asylum seekers/refugees, but rather in the subsequent phases more related to settlement, integration and citizenship pathways. Through the theoretical lens of social innovation (which makes it possible to study the transformative dimension of practices, to the extent that bottom-up initiatives manage to merge with the mechanisms of multi-level governance), we will analyse realities such as the Inclusive Universities, which are widespread in many Italian universities, and the Community Matching program, which focuses on social integration processes and the construction of meaningful intercultural ties between Italians and refugees. The ultimate aim of the proposed analysis is to grasp, in the interaction of these practices with the context characterized by the new faces of obscurantism, the signs of possible new forms (and scenarios) of citizenship, not intended in its formal aspects, nor as the outcome of a reception and integration process, but as the basis of a broad set of rights, the substance of asylum (Ager, Strang, 2008).

This article is structured as follows: in the first section, within the theoretical framework of forced migration studies, we trace the evolution of the phenomenon and the category of refugee from the Geneva Convention to the present day; in the second section, we outline the rhetoric of closure policies that characterizes Europe and Italy. The aim of these first two sections is to highlight the shadows that have cast over the right to asylum and to provide useful elements for contextualizing the case studies described in the third section, where we describe the empirically

observed experiences of Community Matching and Inclusive University within the «battlefield» of reception and integration. In the fourth and final section, we offer reflections on the innovativeness and transformative scope of the two initiatives.

1. From the Geneva Convention to the criminalization of refugees

The mass movement of refugees, as well as the intervention of states «to define and control them» (Sassen, 1999), affected Europe in the first half of the 20th century, as a consequence of the rise of nation states and the two World Wars that turn Europe into a battleground. At the end of the Second World War – when there were an estimated 40 million displaced persons – the international community agreed on the need for a legal definition of a refugee capable of guaranteeing the right to reception and protection and this led, in 1951, to the adoption of the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, known as the Geneva Convention. The Geneva Convention, before the 1967 New York Protocol broadened its scope, applied only to events that had taken place in Europe before 1951: these spatial and temporal limitations were the result of the conviction that similar horrors could never be repeated and that the refugee phenomenon would come to an end.

The following decades betrayed this expectation with the division of the world forming into two opposing blocs, decolonization, the creation of new borders and the alteration of existing ones. And we have seen the refugee phenomenon reproduce itself outside Europe, especially in Africa and Asia, and take on an «incontrovertibly global» character (Malkki, 1995): the root causes of forced migration are to be sought in the system of global inequalities (Castles, 2003), just as the trajectories of involuntary movements have become global. However, the process of globalization has not affected protection, which has remained the prerogative of individual states, which «for various reasons of political expediency, whether internal or international, adopt more or less broad, more or less strict definitions»² (Marchetti, 2006, 35). While the labels (Zetter, 1991) defining the different situations of forced migration and the – increasingly weak – forms of protection associated with them have multiplied, the refugee status as conceived (and protected) by the Geneva Convention has become residual, making the right to asylum a privilege for the few (Zetter, 2007).

From 1951 to the present day, when the highest number of forced migrants ever recorded (108.4 million in 2022) will be documented³, social

² Translation of the authors.

³ UNHCR, Global Trend 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>.

representations of the phenomenon have undergone a transformation in parallel with the evolution of the refugee regime. Exiles, once regarded as figures of political significance, have been superseded by a more victimized perspective, with migrants often portrayed as exploiters of the reception systems and, ultimately, as threats to the physical, economic and cultural integrity of their host societies. This latter theme, which has gained traction in nationalist and populist rhetoric, has evolved in parallel with the endeavors of Western nations since the 1970s to restrict migrants' entry. The enforcement of border control, initially motivated by economic reasons, has ultimately impacted those who moved and still move in search of protection, often compelling them to undertake irregular migratory journeys (Ciabbari, 2020).

In the public discourse, the term 'illegal immigrants' is frequently used, along with the images and numbers that are commonly cited in the media's portrayal of migration. The term is often used to refer to a huge group of people. This makes it easy to believe myths, like the idea that the invasion, and feelings, such as fear and hatred for an enemy who is seen as responsible for various reasons for insecurity and discomfort, from the spread of disease, crime, terrorism to competition for work and the welfare state (Musarò, Parmigiani, 2022).

Whether they are the intended victims or the people who make money from humanitarian action (profiteers), forced migrants are described as one of the great emergencies of our time (Triandafyllidou, 2018). Applying the emergency frame to forced migration poses limitations, both cognitive and organizational (Goffman, 1974). Any phenomenon classified as an emergency is seen as sudden and unexpected in the reality in which it occurs, which obscures the underlying causes (which may instead be distant in time and space) and make it difficult to attribute responsibility. In the case of refugees, this approach disregards the underlying global inequalities that drive these movements, while also deflecting attention from the role of border closure policies in exacerbating pressure on the borders of the Global North. From an organizational perspective, utilizing the emergency framework exerts significant influence on both the normative framework and the policies and practices, where the criteria of exceptionalism and urgency take over respectively. The emphasis on the here and now hinders the planning of reception processes that support asylum seekers upon the granting of protection and the becoming part of the communities in which they live.

Finally, the emergency frame applied to forced migration is characterized by an ambivalent nature (Calabrò, 1997), combining a humanitarian and a securitarian dimension. Those in position of governance may, depending on the circumstances, choose to emphasize one aspect over the other in order to garner consensus around their actions. This dynamic gives rise to policies (and practices) that are also ambivalent in nature,

whereby the concepts of reception and control, the right to protection and criminalization become intertwined at all levels of governance.

2. Asylum discourse and policies in Europe and Italy

The evolution of Europe's migration policies, from the signing of the Schengen Treaty to the present day, serves as an example illustrating of how the gradual restriction of migrants' access to the European continent has progressively shaped the mobility, recognition and enjoyment of the rights of asylum seekers and refugees at the borders and within the Union. The activities of Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (established in 2004), and agreements with third countries (such as the one with Turkey in 2016) are some of the tools with which the EU has fueled the process of securitization of its space (Campesi, 2015), making the act of migrating increasingly dangerous and costly and migrants, pushed into clandestinely, and forced criminality.

In the context of asylum, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union established the foundations for a unified policy that aligns with the principles set out in the Geneva Convention and its protocol. Despite the establishment of the Common European Asylum System in 1999 and the issuance and subsequent updating of three directives pertaining to qualification, reception and procedures between 2001 and 2013, the rates of recognition of protection and reception measures for applicants and holders exhibit significant variation across different member states of the Union. The Dublin Regulation, a cornerstone of the European Union's Migration and Asylum policies, has been instrumental in the governance of the European Unions' policies until the advent of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum⁴. Entered into law in 1997, the Regulation stipulates that the country of entry into Europe is responsible for the reception of asylum seekers. The objective of this approach is to prevent the phenomenon of 'asylum shopping' (Moore, 2013), whereby individuals seek asylum in multiple countries within the European Union. The Dublin Regulation effectively allocates the responsibility for receiving and granting protection to the countries that are geographically closest to the European Union's external borders where illegal migration is most prevalent. In this study, we draw upon

⁴ The new Pact on Migration and Asylum was adopted on 10 April 2024. The Pact overcomes the Dublin Regulation by replacing it as a normative reference, but it does not overcome its logic, according to which migrants must apply for asylum in the country of entry into the Union and according to which reception is considered a burden (e.g. individual states can decide not to accept the relocation of asylum seekers on their territory in return for a payment of 20,000 euros to the country facing the greatest migratory pressure).

the seminal works of Brekke and Brochmann (2015), for a comprehensive analysis of the operational dynamics and ramifications of the Dublin system: our primary focus herein is its pivotal role in shaping one of the most salient anti-immigration arguments within the context of nationalist rhetoric. The theme of the Union's inability to distribute "burden" fairly between member States (because asylum seekers and refugees are regarded as a burden) is employed by leaders who advocate for sovereign control of their borders and who fuel anti-immigration and anti-asylum-seeker sentiments within their own countries (Basile, Olmastroni, 2020). A notable illustration of this phenomenon is the stance adopted by the Visegrad Group States, which in 2015, during the so-called 'European refugee crisis', opposed the relocation of migrants arriving via the Mediterranean. In Hungary, Prime Minister Orbán articulated a discourse emphasizing the imperative to safeguard borders against the purported identity threat posed by Muslim refugees arriving via the Balkan route (Mendelski, 2019). In pursuit of this objective, he initiated the construction of a border wall with Serbia and Croatia.

In Italy, the issue of reception rose to prominence in public discourse and the political agenda in 2011. The utilization of an emergency frame that year facilitated the depiction of migrants arriving from the North Africa, migrating away from the Arab Springs, and from Libya in particular, as asylum seekers and their subsequent distribution throughout the national territory within a system created *ad hoc* and designated 'Emergency North Africa'. The 208% increase in requests for protection compared to the previous year, and the time required for their examination by the competent Territorial Commissions (at the time ten for the entire country), made it necessary to prolong the state of emergency and the presence of the applicants on the local territory, in reception facilities, for over two years. The establishment of an extraordinary reception system in parallel to the ordinary Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (the so-called SPRAR, in Italian) established in 2002 and based on the principle of integrated and widespread reception⁵, on the one hand, raised protests from municipalities that considered that these presences were imposed (Marchetti, 2020b), and, on the other hand, encourage them to join SPRAR (if not already done), in order to ensure that the knowledge and efforts invested in transforming reception into integration were not

⁵ SPRAR, now known as SAI (Reception and Integration System), consists of a network to which local authorities voluntarily subscribe with reception projects that they manage with the support of third sector bodies. Reception is «widespread» in the sense that the network covers the entire national territory and «integrated» in the sense that reception, in the form of food and accommodation, is complemented by a range of support services for applicants and beneficiaries of protection, aimed at facilitating their integration in Italy.

lost, and in order to be prepared for any future “emergency” (Dal Zotto, 2022).

Italy’s ambivalence towards arrivals by sea – which was not the only illegal entry channel, but certainly the most spectacular one (Cuttitta, 2012) – continued until 2015. In October 2013, two dramatic shipwrecks, which resulted in the drowning of hundreds of migrants from countries afflicted by war and authoritarian regimes, such as Syria and Eritrea, prompted the Italian government to initiate the military-humanitarian operation, with the objective of searching and rescuing migrants at sea. The operation, which was concluded exactly one year later, resulted in the majority of rescued individuals being brought and accepted in Italy as asylum seekers (Marchetti, 2017). A smaller number were permitted to transit to Europe, albeit in invisibility, by the Italian authorities (Dal Zotto, 2020). Despite the limited expansion of the SPRAR following the North African Emergency, the highest number of presences continued to be registered in structures of an extraordinary nature. The Coast Guard’s rescue operations at sea garnered increasing controversy and protest, with media portrayals of the costs of reception and actual impediments to the arrival of new applicants emerging (Castelli Gattinara, 2017).

The European refugee crisis, with the intensification of arrivals from the Balkan route and the further tightening of border controls foreseen European Agenda on Migration of April 2015, favored the spread of the perception of forced migrants as a threat to be defended against as opposed to individuals with the right to seek protection. The adoption of the hotspot approach, proposed by the EU as a filter to distinguish economic migrants from forced migrants, ended up further restricting access to asylum applications, using as a discriminator the conditions (security or otherwise) of the country of origin and hasty and superficial procedures to establish the reasons for entry (Dal Zotto, 2020). To give one example, only migrants of Syrian and Eritrean nationality were admitted to relocation procedures in European countries other than those of entry. In short, discourses and practices shifted from considering everyone a refugee on the high seas during the Mare Nostrum operations to considering everyone a criminal, including the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that multiplied their efforts in search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean after the end of the operation.

Although closure without alternatives is the workhorse of the political right – it was from the Interior Minister, Salvini, from to the Lega party, who issued the 2019 directive on closed ports – it was a centre-left government that first adopted a code of conduct for NGOs in 2017 (Decree-Law No 13 of 17 February 2017, known as Orlando-Minniti) and reorganized the asylum application process downwards in terms of guarantees.

The overlapping of applicants and beneficiaries of protection with unwanted migrants has severely affected the Italian reception system in

recent years. Also Minister Salvini's measures – issued in 2018 – have also downsized the Italian system, both in terms of resources (material and human) and protection, eliminating humanitarian protection (the one most granted to applicants in Italy). The blows dealt to reception have ended up severely limiting the integration prospects of forced migrants. Measures such as the exclusion of asylum seekers from the SPRAR system, and the reduction of activities such as language courses in the Extraordinary Reception Centres (the so-called CAS, in Italian), have contributed to the erosion of the already precarious rights of people waiting for, but also already entitled to, protection.

With the installation of the Meloni government on 22 October 2022, the colors of the reception and asylum landscape in Italy have become even darker. Emblematic in this sense is the most recent decree issued on immigration, Decree-Law No. 20 of 2023: leaving aside here the details of the further restrictions imposed both on rescue at sea and on reception and the right to protection, we will focus here on the circumstances in which it was presented. The DL is also known as the 'Cutro Decree' after the name of the place where it was proposed to the press during a meeting of the Council of Ministers. A few days earlier, on 26 February 2023, the beach of Steccato di Cutro was the scene of the shipwreck of a boat from Turkey in which 94 people from countries such as Afghanistan and Syria, recognized as departure points for forced migrants, lost their lives. At the site of the shipwreck, Interior Minister Piantedosi emphasized that under certain circumstances one should not leave. After a few days, he placed the responsibility for these deaths on the migrants themselves, adding to the criminalization of their journeys the blame for their decision to leave by denying their right to mobility (Giudici, de Wenden, 2017).

3. In the operational and discursive interstices: the experiences of the Community Matching programme and Inclusive Universities

The context just outlined, characterized by the denial of the Right to reception and protection and the widespread aversion to asylum seekers and refugees, does not seem to consider the possibility, already hinted at by some authors in the 2000s (Ambrosini, Marchetti, 2008), of citizenship for the latter. In this section, however, the conceptual tool of multilevel governance understood as a «battlefield» (Campomori, Ambrosini, 2020), allows us to look beyond the vertical alignment between the different levels in terms of rhetoric and closure policies. Considering also the actions of different actors moving in the horizontal dimension and their intersection with policies, allows us to grasp «the emergence of (fragile)

socially innovative practices»⁶ (Campomori, Feraco, 2018). In particular, the following lines will describe and analyze the experience of Community Matching and that of Inclusive Universities. Both initiatives concern the post-recognition phase, which has received less attention from both policies and research.

The aim is to reflect on the elements that made them possible and on their scope in terms of innovation, especially with regard to the concept of citizenship. Indeed, the European refugee crisis of 2015 has seen the proliferation of solidarity actions by different social actors, alongside the sharpening of attitudes and policies of closure towards migrants (Agustín, Jørgensen, 2018; Della Porta, 2018). Some of them – just like those analyzed here – do not belong to the classic institutional or third sector actors involved in asylum governance: not only international and/or humanitarian organizations, NGOs, no-border activists, cooperatives and associations traditionally involved in the professional management of services for asylum seekers and refugees, but also ordinary citizens (who do not necessarily identify themselves in the role of ‘volunteers’ or ‘activists’). The same applies to Universities, which are not absolutely new to the issue, but which have played a new and stronger role precisely in contrast to the general spread of policies of closure and exclusion legitimised by the emergency framework.

From a methodological point of view, data collection took place during the authors’ direct participation in the Community Matching activities, as project manager and researcher, and in the activities of the University of Pavia’ dedicated to refugee students, as support to the project designer and to the student beneficiaries. As far as Community Matching is concerned, the author has not only had the opportunity to observe and live frequent situations of direct implementation of the program, but has also been appointed to carry out a research in 2023, with interviews, focus groups and questionnaires⁷ collected in the 10 cities involved (Marchetti, 2024). As for the initiatives of the University of Pavia, the author, in a dual role, research-oriented and organizational at the same time (Dal Zotto, Fusari, 2022) carried out a participant observation that began with the conception of the project ‘Diamo Rifugio ai Talenti’ in September 2015 and is not yet fully completed.

⁶ Translation of the authors.

⁷ More precisely: 24 interviews with buddy pairs (tot. 48 participants, in Turin, Naples, Milan, Rome, Parma, Palermo, Bergamo, Padua), 6 focus groups (tot. 36 participants, in Turin, Naples, Milan, Rome, Parma, Palermo) and 226 questionnaires (115 from refugees and from 111 volunteers, in Turin, Naples, Milan, Rome, Parma, Palermo, Bergamo, Padua, Bari and Bologna).

3.1. Community Matching

Coinciding with the so-called European refugee crisis and in line with other subsequent crises (e.g. the Ukrainian crisis in 2022), we have seen an increase in grassroots initiatives and willingness of ordinary citizens, not necessarily previously mobilized, in support of asylum seekers and refugees. Some have remained at the level of spontaneous and uncoordinated actions that have fizzled out once the bubble of emergency on duty deflated (e.g. the direct aid provided by thousands of volunteers in major European cities). Others have become institutionalized (see, for example, the experience of domestic hospitality that began in Germany and then spread under the umbrella of Refugees Welcome International, now active in Australia, Austria, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden). Many others have been picked up and sometimes absorbed by organisations already active in the field of asylum, which have been able to make the most of the spontaneous and grassroots commitment of citizens, alongside the skills and services provided in a more stable and structured way by experienced and trained operators. In the latter case, Community Matching can be involved.

The importance of considering the development of meaningful intercultural relations as central to refugee integration pathways has become increasingly evident, when observing how – even at the end of potentially virtuous paths of integrated and comprehensive reception – people arrive at the end of their project with apparently satisfactory integration indicators (in terms of training work, knowledge of local services), but they are still very fragile in terms of real social roots, in-depth knowledge of the language, as well as in terms of building solid and diversified networks that could act as a support and a possible “parachute” in case of negative events and partial regression in the integration process. The need for greater interpenetration between institutional responses and informal resources is therefore considered by many to be the key to rethinking the welfare system of services alone into a system of community welfare, in which the theme of social solidarity and reciprocal relations is central to overcoming the gap – visible in the reception paths of asylum seekers and refugees – between passive adaptation and the development of subjective life projects. However, in order to experience levels of social and community participation, it is necessary to gradually reduce the impact of «architectural barriers» that are often invisible but also active: language, bureaucracy, procedural constraints, categorization of needs and responses, implicit expectations of behaviours and communication, and a lack of sensitivity to cultural differences.

Therefore, in order to overcome these barriers and at the same time, to valorize the willingness of many Italian citizens to be at the side of a refugee, the first experiments with *buddy schemes* have also been launched in Italy, proposing and developing particularly intimate and long-term rela-

tionships between volunteers and refugees in within a very informal context (Cantat, Feischmidt, 2019). These projects represent a “move away from a humanitarian imperative of helping in times of conceived crisis towards a more personalized form of long-term informal social support between individuals who choose to care for each other’s needs outside of organized public structures within the private realm. In this sense, voluntary buddy schemes are similar to the informal caring relationships often found between family members or friends” (Stock, 2019, 129). Since 2016, the figure of the territorial tutor for integration has been tested within the AMIF Ancora project, promoted in the areas of the province of Parma (where the CIAC⁸ lead partner is active), Brescia, Trieste, Ivrea and Chivasso (Turin), and later extended by the subsequent Ancora 2.0 to 9 regions from Northern to Southern Italy. But the possibility of reaching another level of dissemination and institutionalization was realized in 2021, when the project was recognized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which promoted it within the Community Matching programme, which is now active – through the direct implementation of CIAC and Refugees Welcome Italia and the support of the Italian Buddhist Institute Soka Gakkai – in 10 cities: Rome, Milan, Turin, Bari, Palermo, Naples, Parma, Bologna, Bergamo, Padua⁹ (for an analysis of the different experiences of buddying and befriending in the framework of social cohesion, see Marchetti, 2022).

By the end of 2023, a total of 825 individual matches had been initiated, with important results for both refugees and Italians and local communities. With regard to the former, in the last year, 33% of the participating refugees showed an improvement in their general condition, 63% improved their level of Italian, 84% improved their ability to find their way around the territory and to access services, the number of refugees with a work contract at the end of the project increased by 20%. And 30% of beneficiaries of protection who did not have any kind of institutional reception or autonomous housing at the beginning of the match found accommodation¹⁰. As far as Italian volunteers and communities are concerned, Community Matching has allowed them to get to

⁸ CIAC, Centro Immigrazione Asilo Cooperazione internazionale di Parma e provincia Impresa sociale ETS, is a non-profit organization founded in 2001 in Italy (Parma), working in the field of protection, reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees, as well as in the field of social orientation and first level legal assistance for Third Country Nationals. CIAC implements SAI programs in the Municipality and Province of Parma; AMIF nationally funded projects targeting specific groups as well as refugees in the process of exiting of their institutional reception; other projects focusing on innovation in social housing, community mentorship, gender-based violence (GBV).

⁹ <https://buddy.unhcr.it/>.

¹⁰ Community Matching Report (2023), https://buddy.unhcr.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CM_factsheet_IT_WEB_2024-05-10-.pdf.

know directly a large number of refugees, in addition to those with whom they were directly matched with (+150% more refugees than before the match), contributing to the reduction of prejudice between majority and minority groups, as already highlighted in Gordon Allport et al.'s seminal «contact theory» (1954). Research on the impact on communities (Marchetti, 2024) has confirmed that Community Matching plays a direct and indirect role in the participants' experience of living and being rooted in the cities. But it also makes the places they pass through more familiar with the presence of refugees and Italians together, and it counteracts racism and discrimination through greater awareness and activation on the part of the Italian buddies in the various instances of everyday racism with which they come into contact.

3.2. Inclusive Universities

In September 2015, while news and images of shipwrecks in the Aegean Sea were multiplying, driven by the desire to 'send a strong signal of welcome and brotherhood'¹¹, the University of Pavia activated a network that included bodies from its Board of Directors, the Agency for the Right to Education¹², and some of the student residences that make up the city's campus. They offered fifteen students with international protection the opportunity to enroll free of charge in their degree courses (both three-year and master's degrees) and to benefit from free of charge accommodation and meals for the duration of their studies. The students, selected from over fifty applicants, came from the Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees, with which the University of Pavia had developed and signed a memorandum of understanding. The following year, a private foundation from outside the University also became part of the protocol, committing itself to providing financial support for the students. In nine years, a total of twenty students have enrolled in courses under this initiative (not all of whom have managed to graduate). While other works have been dedicated to the description of the project and to the contribution that the social sciences can make to projects of this kind (Dal Zotto, Fusari, 2021, 2022), we would like to focus here on how the Pavia experience, together with many others that were born during this period, transformed, albeit partially, the Italian asylum scene.

Like the University of Pavia, others have moved this year, or in the years immediately following, to offer their support to students with – but also seeking – international protection. This support took different forms: among the 300 or so good practices surveyed in 2017 in 32 countries by

¹¹ <https://viedifuga.org/rifugiati-diritto-allo-studio1-luniversita-pavia/>.

¹² In Italian: "Ente per il Diritto allo Studio".

the Erasmus + «inHERE» project¹³, in addition to access to higher education, there were language courses, employability measures, economic support, but also forms of humanitarian assistance such as the provision of housing for asylum seekers. A sense of welcome, as opposed to the prevailing sense of closure, spread through European and Italian universities, forming a diverse framework of interventions of great symbolic significance, but of an extemporaneous and limited scope.

In 2018 in Italy, the UNHCR, taking advantage of the willingness of the University to interact and work on issues of reception and inclusion, launched the proposal of a Manifesto of an Inclusive University for Refugees¹⁴, opening a space for exchange and confrontation between universities. The Manifesto¹⁵, drafted the following year, focuses on the principles of equality and non-discrimination, welcome, integration, awareness, appreciation of differences and participation. By 2023, the number of universities that had signed it has reached 59.

By closely following this process, from the privileged observatory of participation in the Pavia project (then called «We give asylum to talents»¹⁶), it has been possible to identify a number of changes that have taken place in the university in the meantime in relation to asylum. First of all, the various interventions that began as expressions of solidarity have given way to the «normalization» of the enrolment of refugees in degree courses offered by Italian universities, and thus to an increase in the number of university students seeking or benefiting from protection, even outside initiatives dedicated to them. This has been made possible by political decisions to make universities more inclusive (not only with regard to refugees) and by the spread of a culture of asylum within universities. Indeed, the presence of these students has created within the academic community a need for knowledge of their geographical and bureaucratic trajectories, for the acquisition of intercultural skills and technical expertise, especially in the recognition of refugee titles and qualifications, as well as for openness to the territories and cooperation with the actors of reception. In order to meet these needs, numerous training activities are organized by the UNHCR within the framework of the Manifesto and by the universities themselves, also with funding from the ERASMUS+ programme. Although there are still obstacles and resistance to the full realization of the project of an Inclusive University for Refugees (Dal Zotto, Fusari, 2021, 2022), it is undeniable that starting with the recognition of the right to study of applicants and beneficiaries of international protection, a transformation has been triggered that af-

¹³ <https://www.inhereproject.eu/it/progetto/publications>.

¹⁴ Manifesto dell'Università Inclusiva per i Rifugiati.

¹⁵ <https://www.unhcr.org/it/manifesto-delluniversita-inclusiva/>.

¹⁶ In Italian: «Diamo rifugio ai talenti».

fects both the university (internally and in its relations with the outside world) and the asylum system.

4. *From good to innovative practices: signs of a new citizenship*

Even if studies on the impact of experiences such as Community Matching and Inclusive Universities on the integration of refugees and their representation in the long term still seem limited, we have enough elements here to affirm that they are both cases of socially innovative practices with regard to Italian policies on reception and integration (albeit, as has already been pointed out, limited).

Both the Community Matching initiative and the Inclusive Universities initiative were born in response to a relevant social problem and to promote inclusion: two factors common to all definitions of social innovation formulated in the 2000s (do Adro, Fernandes, 2020). Other aspects that characterize social innovation for several authors and that we find in the two case studies are: the prominent role of organisations whose primary purpose is social (Mulgan, 2006) – such as civil society actors (Ludvig *et al.*, 2018) – the transformation of social practices and long-term outcomes (Voorberg *et al.*, 2015) that invest in the lives of individuals and their interaction with social systems (Mumford, 2002). The European Commission in its definition insists on the contribution of new ideas and new collaborations for greater effectiveness in meeting social needs (Bureau of European Policy Advisors, 2011). Again, Moulaert and other scholars (2009) focus on the territorial dimension of social innovation, on the changes that affect the structures and governance of local communities.

Third sector organisations and universities have entered the ‘interstices’ (Fontanari, Ambrosini, 2018) of the dominant political and discursive frameworks, marked by the emergency to propose novel solutions in the field of reception and asylum, practices that have become innovative not only because they are new, but also because they are institutionalized. In both situations, the UNHCR, a supranational organization, played a crucial role, facilitating the harmonization of the different realities involved and encouraging exchange and mutual learning. In particular, it is thanks to the facilitation of the Italian Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees that Community Matching and Inclusive Universities have been transformed from a good practice to a component of refugee integration policies.

If this step was taken by the universities with the signing of the Inclusive University Manifesto, it was taken by the municipalities for Community Matching by its inclusion in the Charter for the Integration of

Refugees¹⁷. Drawn up together with UNHCR, the Charter for the Integration of Refugees was drafted and signed in 2022 by six major Italian cities (Bari, Milan, Naples, Palermo, Rome and Turin), followed in 2024 by Genoa, Ravenna, Bologna and Brescia. The Charter, which aims to strengthen cooperation between cities for the integration of persons benefiting from international protection by promoting the exchange of practices, experiences and tools, and the development of services already available in the territories, recognizes that municipalities are at the forefront of the reception and integration of refugees. By ensuring access to local services, education and employment opportunities, they promote full social inclusion, and lay the foundations for building a better future for refugees. By signing the Charter for Integration, the municipalities emphasize that the inclusion of refugees in their territory is a factor of enrichment and harmonious development, a fundamental value in which to invest collective energy and effort, and commit themselves – among other things – to promoting exchanges and encounters between refugees and the local community, through volunteering, mentoring and inclusion programs. Community Matching has also been included in some of the lines of the new programming of the Ministry of the Interior's Fund for Asylum, Migration and Integration¹⁸ which finances actions for the integration of third-country nationals through European funds. The approval of the rankings and the corresponding allocation of funds were completed at the end of 2024. However, a clear picture of the extent of Community Matching's distribution and potential impact across different regions is not yet available, as project implementation has not yet begun¹⁹.

On the other hand, what can already be reported as an achievement in terms of broadening and scaling up of the activation experiences of civil society and universities is the approval of the National Plan for the Inte-

¹⁷ In Italian: "Carta per l'Integrazione per i rifugiati". Cf. <https://www.unhcr.org/it/wp-content/uploads/sites/97/2022/02/Carta-Integrazione-con-Nota-di-accompagnamento-2.1.2022-1-3.pdf>.

¹⁸ In Italian: "Fondo Migrazioni Asilo e Integrazione – FAMI".

¹⁹ Cf. FAMI Notice «Qualification and strengthening of public services in support of third-country nationals», <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/amministrazione-trasparente/bandi-gara-e-contratti/avviso-pubblico-qualificazione-e-rafforzamento-dei-servizi-pubblici-supporto-dei-cittadini-paesi-terzi-capacity-building>; FAMI Notice «Promotion of the social and economic autonomy of refugees», <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/amministrazione-trasparente/bandi-gara-e-contratti/avviso-pubblico-promozione-dell'autonomia-sociale-ed-economica-dei-rifugiati>; Co-design Notice of the Municipality of Turin in response to the FAMI MULTI-ACTION 2021-2027 call «Regional intervention plans for the integration of third-country nationals» – Piedmont Region «InterActions in Piedmont 3», http://www.comune.torino.it/bandi/pdf/files/servsoc/stranieri/DEF_Testo_avviso_pubblico_coprogettazione_FAMI_21-27.pdf.

gration of Persons with International Protection²⁰ for the biennium 2022-2024. This document, drawn up in accordance with the specific directive set out in art. 5 of Law 173/2020 (converting Decree-Law 130/2020), has, on the whole, been little disseminated and implemented, due to the inauguration – the day after its final approval – of the Meloni government, which would soon introduce further restrictive regulations on asylum and reception. Its success is due to the inclusion of ‘Community Matching’ (understood as ‘building networks of trust’), together with ‘Whole-of-society’ (i.e. the involvement of all actors involved in the integration process, including universities) and ‘One-stop-shop’ (the creation of multifunctional centres and one-stop-shops for integration) among the transversal approaches on which the entire National Plan is based. It is therefore somewhat downgraded by the positions of the new government and it should be noted, for instance, that although it was distributed in hard copy at conferences and cited in several relevant official documents subsequently published²¹, it is not to be found in any ministerial online source. Nevertheless, it represents a significant policy document in terms of multi-level innovation, thanks to its emphasis on the strengthening co-operation – within the existing territorial welfare framework – between the reception system, territorial services, and institutional and private actors involved in integration processes. It also recognizes the centrality of social relations in integration processes, as realized through the encounter of refugees with institutions, third sector bodies, associations, but also with volunteer citizens: through the direct interaction between refugees and volunteer citizens, according to the Plan, even the local community’s perception of refugees can be changed.

With regard to the level at which these policies operate, it should be noted that both the Inclusive University Manifesto and the Charter for the Integration of Refugees bring together local experiences, but are spread throughout the country; the same is true for the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund and the Integration Plan for Persons Entitled to International Protection, which have a national dimension. From the interstices in which they took shape, the practices described in this contribution have made their way up the different levels of governance to the national level, where their presence, though not ostentatious, can be read as the seeds of a transformation in the notion of asylum.

In carrying out this reflection, we refer to Ager and Strang (2008)

²⁰ In Italian: Piano Nazionale per l’Integrazione di Persone con Protezione Internazionale.

²¹ Cf. inter alia the Ministry of the Interior’s «Handbook for the identification, referral and care of persons living with Vulnerabilities entering Italy and within the protection and reception system», which mentions it on p. 4 among the procedures and operational guidelines taken into account, https://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/2023-11/vademecum_vulnerabilities_31-web-eng.pdf.

who proposed a conceptual framework to identify integration processes by formulating an inverted pyramid model with «rights and citizenship» as its foundation stone. With this guarantee, moving up the pyramid, we have a level of ‘facilitators’ identified in ‘cultural knowledge’ and ‘language’, which in turn are the premise of ‘social connections’, divided into bonds (within a group), bridges (between groups) and links (with state structures), which in turn preside over four basic indicators: ‘housing, work, education and health’. The model is innovative because it identifies the key social relationships (bonds, bridges, and links), the development of the foundation – rights and citizenship – and the basis on which access to employment, housing, education and health rests. Without such development, and without such development creating a social network, there can be no integration. Not only that: Ager and Strang’s framework shifts the focus from isolated pathways of ‘adjustment’ to collective pathways of building social relationships. These are key to guiding the process of reception and integration. Interpreted broadly, the framework provides a mandate to host societies and – within them – to host policies. Building bridges, contacts and social links, not for, but with the migrants themselves: institutional social relations, contacts to be addressed, but also meaningful relations from an identity and personal point of view. Only in this way, at the end of the process (note: not as a premise, but as a consequence of an effective recognition and a successful path to ‘citizenship’), will the objectives more classically understood as indicators of successful integration, i.e. housing, work, education and health, be achieved.

Also innovative in this theoretical framework is the presence of rights and citizenship as a founding element. Not a citizenship defined by national borders, that produces the exclusion of those who do not share it, but a citizenship that transcends those borders, because it finds its constitution in the recognition of rights such as «dignity, equality, justice, security and independence» (Ager, Strang, 2008, 175). These are rights that are not only the responsibility of the state but are shared under its guidance, by all sectors of society including, relevant to our study, the education and training system (Ager, Strang, 2008). A reversal of perspective, placing rights at the base of the inverted pyramid, which together with that of the «political posture» towards foreigners, makes it possible to rethink hospitality away from the notion of a favor that is done to the recipient (Agier, 2020).

The innovation introduced by Community Matching and Inclusive Universities points a step in this direction, a step that also takes the issue of refugee integration out of the sole perspective of asylum and into the broader one of citizenship (Ambrosini, 2022). In this perspective, it is not so much a matter of formal citizenship, granted and defined “from above”, but a process activated “from below”, that is from the point of view of actual practices of accessing and using, re-interpreting and negotiating the contents of citizenship (see, for example, Turner, 1993; Bel-

lamy, 2008; Isin, Nielsen, 2008; Sassen, 2008b). Overcoming emergency policies, the criminalization of refugees and the erosion of asylum cannot, in our view, be achieved through a mere defense of rights, which risks trapping the debate, practice and policy on the subject in an increasingly stifling and defensive blind spot. Rather, it can be done by recomposing and reintegrating a more complex plot that brings together broader and transversal categories of subjects and different spheres of rights promotion and defense in a precise context, acting forms of «lived citizenship» (Lister, 2007), through which people understand and negotiate rights and responsibilities, belonging and participation. In this sense, informal relations with members of local communities and the involvement of universities through their diverse composition (from institutional to administrative bodies, from professors to students) can promote forms of community-based protection, as defined and promoted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), among others. In its broadest sense, community-based protection does not refer exclusively to refugee communities, but involves host communities – in all their components – in defining priorities and programming of interventions. This includes communities that would therefore be both recipients and active subjects of inclusion and citizenship policies and practices. In this sense, inclusive Universities put the right to study for all back at the centre; Community Matching promotes forms of intercultural social cohesion that weave bonds and counteract the isolation not only of refugees but also of long-term residents.

5. *Conclusions*

The current tendency to criminalize migrants, which manifests itself in the violence of borders (national borders against others) and in exclusion within the states that those borders protect, affects, among others, those who are supposed to be welcomed and protected. This is undoubtedly one of the new faces of Obscurantism in Western Societies, in spite of the commitment they made by signing the 1951 Geneva Convention not to reject and to protect those who fear for their safety. In the darkness of this scenario, however, there are glimmers of light. The realities of Community Matching and Inclusive Universities, presented here as innovative practices, are an example of how, despite the closure imposed by national policies, there is still space at the different levels of governance for different actors, not necessarily those who usually populate the asylum scene, to carry out interventions dedicated to integration. Their innovative character lies not only in the novelty of the proposed activities or their authors, nor only in the process that has led them to have an impact, albeit under the radar, on integration policies. The innovation lies also and above all in the transformation – faint, limited, but

underway – in the approach to the refugee issue in Italy. It is a transformation that replaces the emergency framework, in which the figure of the refugee is depoliticized and reception is reduced to a humanitarian duty, with citizenship and rights as the cornerstones of paths to integration. The transformation involves the protagonists of these pathways in the realization of these principles. This includes not only the beneficiaries of protection, but also the whole community, which is called upon to establish and strengthen relations, links, and connections between all its parts, by placing the welfare of services alongside that of the community.

The limitation of this paper, like that of the case studies presented, is that it applies, at least for the time being, almost exclusively to those who are already beneficiaries of international protection. While it is true that there is a paucity of research that examines what happens to refugees and host societies after the process of granting protection has been completed, it is also true – as noted at the beginning of this paper – that refugees constitute a residual population compared to those who have received more precarious forms of protection, and even more so compared to those seeking protection. Studies that take into account the socially innovative reception and integration experiences of these groups of forced migrants could help to advance the reflection on protection, taking it further beyond the confines of asylum to broader terms of citizenship and rights.

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Rethinking the sea as a public space Claims for justice in the central Mediterranean

1. *Introduction*

Throughout the centuries, the Mediterranean has always been a place of crossing, with commercial exchanges and human mobilities merely constituting normal phenomena that were shaped by the rules and laws of the time (Braudel, 1978; Bono, 2000). As a legitimate event, seaborne migration had very different features than it does today. Journeys were not undertaken aboard unseaworthy and overcrowded boats; sea crossings were not dangerous and lethal as they are today; nor were the institutionalised search and rescue systems often violent border surveillance infrastructures. Finally, rescue was perceived as a culturally recognised and universal obligation, according to an unwritten law of the sea (Papanicolopulu, 2016).

Today, the central Mediterranean is, among other things, a space of (im-)mobility (İşleyen, El Qadim, 2023). In 2023, while on the one hand, 152.415 people managed to cross it¹, almost 121.000 people on the move were intercepted at sea and returned to Libya and Tunisia². Against the well-documented systematization of human rights violations and racist violence against migrants' both in Tunisia and Libya, sea arrivals in Italy faced a radical decrease in 2024 – as consequence of the strengthening of EU cooperation with Tunisia: as of during 2024, only 66.317 people had managed to reach Italy by sea, with a 80% drop in arrivals from Tunisia.³ Furthermore, while the Mediterranean keeps being the deadliest border in the world⁴, where since 2014, more than 32.000 people have

¹ Statistics on sea arrivals in Italy are regularly published in *Cruscotto statistico* by the Italian Ministry of the Interior: <http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica/cruscotto-statistico-giornaliero>.

² See also, https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cronaca/2024/01/11/piantedosilibia-e-tunisia-hanno-evitato-arrivo-121mila-migranti_6d5c5849-9c89-4447-a53f-d20d82993996.html.

³ See <https://www.agenzianova.com/a/670e24713e1f40.08771208/5588770/> 2024-10-14/tunisia-ue-in-primi-9-mesi-2024-partenze-irregolari-diminuite-dell-80-per-cento-2 and http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_31_dicembre_2024.pdf.

⁴ See IOM, Missing Migrant Project, <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>.

lost their lives, the central Mediterranean corridor is still the most lethal one (+25.100 deaths).

Over the years, people have moved along several migration routes starting in Libya and Tunisia, but also in Algeria, Turkey, Lebanon and Egypt – and heading towards Italy. The data on arrivals by sea in Italy show that the people who successfully crossed the sea largely come from Central and West Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, but also the Horn of Africa and beyond⁵.

Since the 1990s, the spaces of legal mobility for those whom Gramsci (1975) defined as subaltern populations⁶ have been continuously shrunk, and the so-called unauthorised border crossings have remained the only way to exercise the *right to flee*, «reuniting the right to leave with the right to non-refoulement» (Squire, 2010; Zaiotti, 2011; Carrera, 2012, Giuffré, Moreno-Lax, 2019; Moreno-Lax, 2020)⁷. The European Union's cooperation with neighbouring countries and migrants' countries of origin was strengthened to prevent departures, facilitate interceptions at sea or land borders and repatriations, in the frame of "non entrée" policies (Carrera *et al.*, 2019). Over the years, EU externalisation policies – consisting in the progressive delegation of an increased portion of border management responsibility to so-called third countries, which were politically redefined as "safe" – raised a multiplicity of human rights concerns (Podkul, Kysel, 2015; Casas-Cortes *et al.*, 2016). Over time, border management priorities began to influence search and rescue policies, leading to the definition of a «rescue gap»⁸. As a multidimensional concept, this gap resulted from a multiplicity of interconnected factors, including: the limited presence of institutional search and rescue assets, especially after the end of the Mare Nostrum humanitarian-military mission in 2014; so-called left-to-die policies, consisting of authorities delaying the launch of SAR operations and abandoning people at sea; and the increased delegation of SAR responsibility to unsafe countries – where rescue operations cannot be considered concluded in compliance with international law. While the Italian practice of directly intercepting people in distress at

⁵ See note 2.

⁶ By introducing Gramsci's concept of subalternity here, I wish to stress differential access to freedom of movement, according to existing inequalities related to gender, race, socioeconomic conditions and so on.

⁷ The right to leave a country is mentioned by several human rights conventions. Amongst them the European Convention on Human Rights (art. 2 of Protocol No. 4) and the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (art. 12); see also <https://rm.coe.int/the-right-to-leave-a-country-issue-paper-published-by-the-council-of-e/16806da510>. The right to non-refoulement is enshrined in the Geneva Convention on Refugee Status (1951), and traceable in the combined reading of the art. 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, recalling the prohibition of inhuman and degrading treatments, and of the art. 4, § 4, on the prohibition of collective expulsions.

⁸ See <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur03/1434/2015/en/>.

sea and returning them to Libya was strongly condemned in 2012 by the European Court of Human Rights⁹, the *modus operandi* entailed by the above-mentioned delegation of responsibility was different: interceptions and returns would have been conducted by Libyan and Tunisian assets, by limiting accountability of EU states.

While in the governmental narratives, boat interceptions and subsequent returns to countries such as Libya and Tunisia are defined as “rescue” operations, yet this attribution of meaning looks highly problematic¹⁰. On the one hand, the documentation produced by migrants at sea, SAR NGOs and international organizations shows how the operational approach of Libyan and Tunisian authorities at sea is very distant from what a rescue operation should be. Shots fired at boats in distress, beatings, and threats against people intercepted at sea, as well as other kinds of dangerous manoeuvres are clearly not aimed at protecting the lives of people at sea. On the contrary, these “*modus operandi*” reflect what Fassina defined as «endangering politics»¹¹, whose purpose is rather to put people in danger. On the other hand, these ways to operate at sea contradict a key maritime law principle, according to which a rescue operation can be considered concluded only after the disembarkation of survivors in a place of safety (POS)¹². Since neither Libya, as pointed out by UNHCR (2020), nor Tunisia¹³ meet the requirements to be considered PsOS, it seems more appropriate to label boat interceptions and returns as “captures” rather than rescues. In the case of Libya, the application of the notion of rescue to operation of sea interception and return to the country was strongly challenged at a judicial level (Denaro, 2024a).

⁹ See ECHR Grand Chambre decision on the application no. 27765/09, case “Hirsi, Jamaa and others vs Italy”, [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#%7B%22item-id%22:\[%22001-109231%22\]%7D](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#%7B%22item-id%22:[%22001-109231%22]%7D).

¹⁰ The impossibility to consider activities at sea carried on by the Libyan Coast Guard as rescue operations is extensively addressed in the judgement issued by Crotone civil court on 19.04.2024, in response to the appeal submitted by the NGO SOS-Humanity against the administrative detention measures issued by the Italian government. See also <https://sos-humanity.org/en/press/final-court-decision/>. See also Denaro (2024a).

¹¹ Keynote speech at International Conference “Bodies on the edge”, Maison Française de Oxford, 28.04.22.

¹² According to the International Maritime Organization’s MSC.167(78) Guidelines on the Treatment of Persons Rescued at Sea, a POS is a location where rescue operations are considered to terminate, where the survivors’ safety of life is no longer threatened and where their basic human needs (such as food, shelter and medical requirements) can be met, taking into account the particular circumstances of each individual (paras. 6.12 and 6.15). See also <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2022/May/the-concept-of-place-of-safety-under-international-law-and-the-respect-of-the-rights-of-migrants-and-refugees-rescued-at-sea-by-all-states.html>.

¹³ See also the statement on the topic, signed by more than 20 civil society organizations, <https://www.asgi.it/notizie/la-tunisia-non-e-ne-un-paese-di-origine-sicuro-ne-un-luogo-sicuro-di-sbarco-per-le-persone-soccorse-in-mare/>.

A further contribution to this “rescue gap” was made from 2017 onwards by the harsh criminalisation of civil society organisations (CSOs) at sea, which was mainly but not exclusively, driven by the Italian governments (Cusumano, Villa, 2021). Their direct involvement in the SAR operation dated back to the end of 2014, after the end of Mare Nostrum Operation and was aimed at reducing the loss of lives at sea (Cuttitta, 2018). The criminalisation had started a few months after the acknowledgment of the Libyan SAR zone with the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Italy and Libya: in that new scenario, NGOs became inconvenient actors that needed to be kept far from the sea, with the aim to silence their critical voices and erase their problematic gaze on border violence and human rights violations (Dadusc, Denaro, 2021). Criminalisation strategies have evolved throughout the years, straddling from the NGOs Code of Conduct¹⁴ to the “security decrees” issued by the Italian authorities, and leading to the so-called closed-harbour, unsafe-harbour, selective disembarkation and distant-port strategies (Cusumano, Gombeer, 2020; Denaro, 2021; Denaro, Esposito, 2023). Responses by CSOs to these criminalisation policies straddled from building counternarratives to acts of civil disobedience, until building strategic litigation actions: legal battlegrounds became a very important scenario to decriminalise NGOs’ behaviours, and re-legitimising “transgressive solidarity” (DeBono, Mainwaring, 2020; Denaro, 2024b).

Against this background, this article aims to address a discernible gap. Within the context of an ever-changing landscape where sea rescue stands as an increasingly debated topic, the proposal here is to reconsider the Mediterranean Sea as a public space. Specifically, the focus is directed towards viewing its accessibility through the lens of justice-related considerations. Therefore, by focusing on seaborne migration, and with the aim of shedding light on how various actors access the central Mediterranean area as a space of (in-)justice the contribution develops throughout four sections.

Theoretical and empirical considerations at the core of this contribution are grounded in nearly a decade of qualitative research and ethnography concerning the evolution of seaborne migration routes in the Mediterranean, and related policies of SAR policies, as well as human rights implication of EU border externalization to Libya and Tunisia. In the frame of my PhD and four research projects¹⁵, I conducted extensive

¹⁴ Available at <https://www.statewatch.org/media/documents/news/2017/jul/italy-eu-sar-code-of-conduct.pdf>.

¹⁵ In particular, qualitative research has been carried out in the frame of EXTERN Project (Edge Hill University, UK), PRIN 2017 Project “Debordering activities and citizenship from below of asylum seekers in Italy” (Trento University), SAR Med Project (Osnabrück University), ERC HEMIG Project (University of Bologna). In addition, beginning in October 2014, engaged research and daily ethnography were conducted as

fieldwork in Italy, Malta and Tunisia – where also several International Organizations operating on Libya are based – and I comprehensively conducted more than 50 in-depth interviews – online and in presence – with institutional and non-governmental actors involved in SAR activities in the Central Mediterranean, as well as key experts in this domain.

Section one situates the sea within the scholar's debate(s) on public space, by focusing on its accessibility from both a physical and political perspective, and as a “matter of justice”. Those who access the sea, from different positionalities and with different goals – deal with it as both a space of appearance and surveillance, which becomes an opportunity to challenge infrastructures of injustice (Arendt, 1958; Foucault, 1977; Marquez, 2012). Then, section two clarifies my intersectional approach to justice and provides a deeper analysis of the “justice gap” in central Mediterranean, as a multidimensional concept.

Afterwards, moving the reflection to an empirical level, section three examines how four different categories of actors – seaborne migrants, SAR institutions, civil society organisations at sea, and private or commercial vessels – deal with existing restrictions in accessing the sea as a public space. Moreover, it focuses on how each one of them deal with the intersectional justice gap at sea, by promoting, seeking, or hindering mobility justice, epistemic justice and accountability for rights violations. Finally, in the fourth section, my conclusion is that accessing the sea, both as a political “space of appearance” and “surveillance”, emerges as a ground for reshaping justice from below.

2. Can the Sea be considered a public space?

The sea is almost absent from the scholars' debate(s) on public space: from geography to urban studies, contributions focus on cities, squares, parks, or other gathering places. Nevertheless, like many other natural environments – mountains, deserts, forests, ice-covered regions, the sea is crossed every day by a multiplicity of actors; moreover, it is not a private space, and such privatization is hardly imaginable.

Public space typologies usually consider functional aspects, space ownership, relationships, social engagement and the people who use the space. Furthermore, exclusion and inclusion processes from or within a space, as well as the now somewhat old dichotomy between underman-

part of the Watch Themed Alarm Phone network, that voluntary manages a 24/7 hotline dedicated to people who are in distress at sea, in order to amplify their SOS claims by formally referring each case to institutional actors and international organizations, as well as by publishing them on social media, documenting border violence and human rights violations.

agement – in the form of abandonment – and over management – in the form of the hyper-control of space – are also significant topics in the public space debate (Carmona, 2010a, 2010b).

Drawing on Carmona's proposal for a «new typology» of urban public space (2010b, 166), several of the 11 categories apply to the sea – as a migration space and corridor, border, and political space. The sea is (1) a natural space “under state ownership”, especially when it comes to so-called territorial waters, contiguous zones and spaces where coastal states exercise their sovereignty at an economic level – in the form of exclusive economic zones (EEZ) – and political level, in the shape of border management or military operations that take place in territorial and international waters¹⁶; (2) a civic space, with [...] multifunctional spaces that are crossed by people for different purposes on a daily basis; (3) a public open space available and (potentially) open to all; (4) a movement space dominated by movement needs; and (8) an interchange space at the same time. In a similar vein, according to Langstraat and Van Melik (2013) and Li *et al.* (2022, 483), different research focuses and perspectives on the publicness of space can be synthesised around four key dimensions: ownership, accessibility, management and inclusiveness. Although it is hardly privatisable, the sea is only partially ‘owned’ by states: while territorial waters belong to coastal states, international waters do not belong to any state, according to the notion of *mare liberum*. The latter denotes a kind of ‘hyper-publicness’ of some portions of the sea, which belongs – eventually – to the (international) community that is collectively responsible for its management. In fact – as Li *et al.* highlights, ownership is considered as connected to agency, where other sea categories, such as Contiguous zones and Exclusive economic zones (EEZ), but also Search and rescue (SAR) regions come into play. These may be transversal to territorial and international waters, with coastal states exercising economic sovereignty over them, as well as agency and responsibility.

Search and rescue (SAR) regions – whose attribution takes place through a self-proclamation mechanism by each state – on the other hand, were designed to ensure adequate coordination between coastal states in compliance with the internationally established duty of rescue and cooperation, which indicates a theoretical state's primary, but not exclusive, responsibility regarding possible distress cases in the area. The establishment of SAR regions should not prevent non-responsible states from acting in cases of distress (by taking over the coordination of the SAR event or by directly deploying assets nearby), especially if the responsible state is unresponsive or is manifestly lacking capacity, naval as-

¹⁶ Definitions of different maritime zones and boundaries can be found at <https://www.noaa.gov/maritime-zones-and-boundaries#:~:text=In%20its%20contiguous%20zone%2C%20a,its%20territory%20or%20territorial%20sea.>

sets or the very intention to intervene by launching a SAR operation and preventing the loss of life¹⁷. In other words, agency at sea is not so much related to ownership, but largely depends on management agreements between states. With specific regard to seaborne migration, the “management” of the sea should primarily depend on international maritime law conventions and national regulations on SAR (i.e., the Italian SAR Plan¹⁸); nevertheless, priorities identified in the frame of border management policies and related agreements between coastal states are increasingly affecting SAR policies. These dynamics are well-exemplified by the Italian investigative journalist Nello Scavo (2023) in his book «Le mani sulla Guardia Costiera» (*The hands on the Coast Guard*) that sheds light on the governmental attempts to undermine the autonomy of the Italian Coast Guard, by subjugating the priority of saving lives to that of preventing sea departures, and arrivals in Italy.

State management of the sea “public space” – from a transnational (different states and authorities), multilevel (international, European and national level), and multidisciplinary (border management, migration management, search and rescue activities, fisheries monitoring and military activities) point of view, affects accessibility and inclusiveness. Accessibility hinges on a variety of factors and conditions, including intersections between the agency of potential sea crossers and border management policies. Moreover, accessibility is determined by individual status – migrants, fishermen, commercial actors, SAR authorities, navy vessels, police vessels, private transport companies, civil society organisations and so on – as well as by the type of means of transportation used – unseaworthy vessels (canoes, dinghies, metal, or wooden boats), patrol boats, navy ships, merchant vessels, fishing vessels and so forth. Access limitations can affect both individuals, from swimming bans to a set of rules restricting the possibility of leaving a country and vessels, for example, when they are under seizure or administrative detention. Unquestionably, inclusiveness, as the public space’s ability to accommodate diverse users and behaviours, depends significantly on accessibility.

But what does accessibility mean? For sure, it’s a condition made of both physical and political instances. Starting a sea crossing means accessing the sea, but under which circumstances does it take place? How is visibility negotiated? And what about being forcefully returned to the country from where one was attempting to flee? These returns, also defined as direct and indirect pushbacks, are sort of “denied access” to the public space. Nevertheless, accessibility is not an immutable condition. More likely it evolves through pathways that create and disrupt possible

¹⁷ Interview with former Italian Coast Guard official, 11.10.24.

¹⁸ See Piano Marittimo Nazionale (2020), <https://www.guardiacostiera.gov.it/normativa-e-documentazione/Documents/Piano%20SAR%20Nazionale%20Parte%20I.pdf>.

restrictions, including borders, which are often related to ownership and privatisation processes. For this reason, the reconquest of public space is often amongst the goals of broader struggles for social justice, whose achievement is closely related to the right to the city (Mitchell, 2003).

And, what about accessing the public space from a political perspective? According to Caves (2004), public ones are contentious spaces where people exercise their rights, speak, build democratic spaces of exchange and political participation. But, putting into Spivak's words (1988), can those who are fleeing by sea speak? And are they heard? By whom? Since the first uses of the concept of public space—such as in Madge's (1950) paper «Private and Public Spaces» and Hannah Arendt's book *The Human Condition* (1958), its political nature was fully acknowledged. Arendt's concepts of «public realms» and «spaces of appearance» referred to environments within which citizens could «move, confront one another, look from their different angles at a matter of public concern, and hear what the others have to say» [...]: spaces within which political action was possible (Arendt, 1958; Canovan, 1985, 619, 635). While Arendt highlighted the transformative power of public spaces, Foucault focused on «surveillance» (1977), as a tool of control and normalisation, which was able to reproduce inequalities and unbalanced power relationships. Nevertheless, as Marquez (2012) underlined, the relationship between visibility and power was at the core of both Arendtian and Foucauldian works, and putting them into dialogue is a great opportunity to reflect on resistance, and on how «human beings generate counter-power by means of their joint action, disrupt the instrumentalization imposed on them by disciplinary organisation, and create, at least momentarily, spaces of appearance where people's individual stories can be articulated» (2012, 30). Focusing on how different actors access the sea as a public space – by negotiating visibility and voice, dealing with surveillance, and accessing spaces of appearance through strategies of resistance, provides us an interesting perspective from which understanding sea crossings, institutional search and rescue and border management policies, as well as the involvement of civil society organisations at sea.

By being inspired by the public space debates, which have widely shown how the reconquest of public space is itself a medium to achieve social, or other forms of justice, in the following paragraph I will deal with the access to the sea as a public space as (also) a matter of justice.

3. An intersectional approach to justice at sea: immobility, epistemology and (lack of) accountability in the Central Mediterranean

As the relevant scholar's debate underlines, the claim to access public space is – amongst other things – a matter of justice (Mitchell, 2003; Low, 2020). This section is dedicated to clarifying my approach to justice, as an

intersectional concept, that consists of at least three components: mobility justice, epistemic justice and state accountability for rights violations. Mimi Sheller's concept of «mobility justice», and the question she poses to assess it, looks helpful to understand the sea as a public space: «Who is able to exercise rights to mobility and who is not capable of mobility within particular situations? Who is mobile or immobile and why? Who governs or controls mobility systems? How have sovereign control and disciplinary systems historically produced differently marked bodies as unequal mobile subjects?» But also, turning the gaze to how different subjects react to mobility injustice, she questions: «What modes of counter power and subversive mobilities might inform the kinds of moves that can be made to resist, overturn, challenge, or escape these mobility regimes? How can we support building greater mobility justice?» (2018, 22-23).

Those who start potentially lethal journeys by sea, because of complex entanglements between forcing and voluntariness that shape each migration pathway, are affected by a structural lack of access to the freedom of movement which – as it is well known – is unequally distributed. Beyond being determined by existing inequalities, mobility injustice generates differential access to visibility, voice, grievability and – first and foremost – life and survival themselves, by exposing people to structural violence and, possibly, premature death (Mbembe, Mitsch, 2003; Denaro, Boccagni, 2023). In a similar vein, civil society actors performing SAR activities, face a multiplicity of obstacles in accessing the sea public space, which can also be read as forms of mobility injustice.

Against this consideration, performing a sea crossing or engaging in a rescue mission – can be read as «acts of immediate justice» (Papadopoulos, 2012; Papadopoulos, Tsianos, 2013). The concept of immediate justice looks extremely useful to understand unauthorized sea crossings. These acts, stemming from the inadequacy of legal mechanisms to guarantee the right to flee, and to seek asylum, strive to reclaim those rights by disrupting the conventional timelines of justice: as Munro (2004) observes, «justice is now, it's without deferrals». For sure, in case of shipwrecks and pushbacks, justice is far from being immediate, but rather it remains unachieved. Nevertheless, qualifying border crossings as «acts of immediate justice» looks still useful: it allows the focus to remain on the desire for justice, as a driving force in migration paths, to be achieved at all costs.

Similarly, against a (more and more structural) criminalisation of civil society rescue actors at sea, being present at sea and performing a rescue can be perceived as an act of immediate justice, which fills the same insufficiency highlighted above.

Choosing the criminalisation of mobility as a perspective – and acknowledging how it diversely but simultaneously affects those who exercise their right to flee by sea and those who support their mobility – fa-

cilitates us in grasping existing forms of «epistemic injustice». As greatly conceptualised by Kidd *et al.* (2017, 1) epistemic injustice refers exactly to «those forms of unfair treatment that relate to issues of knowledge, understanding and participation in communicative practices» and concerns «wrongful treatment and unjust structures in meaning-making and knowledge producing practices such as» – amongst the others – «exclusion and silencing; invisibility and inaudibility (or distorted presence or representation); having one’s meaning or contribution systematically distorted, misheard, or misrepresented [...]». Mainstream representations and narratives around seaborne migration and civil search and rescue can be unfair, misleading, and defamatory; they are often instrumental to the building of political consent for the implementation of more restrictive border management policies. Examining (in-)justice through an epistemological lens not only allows for the exploration of agency and the politics of voice but also delves into the concept of «acoustic justice», as suggested by Bassel (2017) and Labelle (2020). Inspired by Couldry’s plea to reconsider the politics of voice resulting from interactive dialogues between speakers and listeners who collaboratively shape messages (2009), Bassel’s emphasis on listening over voice (2017), and Labelle’s exploration of acoustic justice involving misrecognition, displacement, and resistance, offer valuable insights for analysing the ongoing struggles for the right to speak and be heard in the Mediterranean Sea.

Finally, in reasoning about forms of injustice at sea, engaging with the systematic violations of the law of the sea, human rights, and the right to asylum that take shape there, is essential. Several jurists explored the “rightlessness” of seaborne migrants, generated by «maritime legal black holes», resulting in a lack of state accountability for violations (Mann, 2018). In their view, this is related to the imperfect nature of some rights – such as the right to leave one own’s country – which do not correspond to a state obligation to grant access to their territory, but also to the lack of EU jurisdiction for sea crimes occurred in some portions of international waters. Beyond conceptualising for the first time the right to flee – as a necessary combination of the right to leave one’s country and the right to non-refoulement – Giuffré and Moreno-Lax’s work on «contactless control» and «functional jurisdiction» went in the direction of enhancing EU accountability for those crimes: the key role of EU states in funding, equipping, and training Libyan authorities for border management purposes was argued to be a sufficient ground to attribute them a “management” role in the operations of boat interceptions and return (*contactless control*) and then to envisage the subsistence of an EU (*functional*) jurisdiction, exceeding geographical or infrastructural criteria (2019).

In the following section, after clarifying how different private and public actors negotiate their access to the sea as a public space, I will explain how they deal with injustice at sea, as a multidimensional concept.

4. Accessing the sea as a public space, dealing with multidimensional (in-) justice

As briefly argued above, accessibility to a public space is far from being an immutable condition and can concern both the physical and the political spheres. With the aim to shed light on “differential” accessibility of the sea as a justice-related matter, I will focus on four different categories of actors – seaborne migrants, SAR institutions, CSOs and commercial vessels.

4.1. People on the move, navigating invisibility, claiming mobility justice

The main protagonists of sea crossings are unquestionably migrants, who attempt to exercise their right to life, to leave, to seek asylum and more broadly the right to flee and for the freedom of movement. When beginning a journey, they access the sea as a public space, and start voluntary and involuntary interlocutions with a variety of stakeholders. Through this exchange, they choose to become visible, or to remain invisible – by critically dealing with spaces of appearance and surveillance (Marquez, 2012). While before departure they may inform someone of their imminent presence at sea, such as relatives, friends, or community members, during the sea crossing itself, their ability to communicate becomes compromised. Regular mobile phones no longer work, and communication is only possible via a satellite phone; people reaching Europe via the Tunisian and Algerian routes almost never have satellite phones, while those crossing from Libya usually do. While these latter can “launch an SOS”, by reaching out to EU coast guards, or the Alarm Phone network and sharing with them a GPS position, those travelling without a satellite phone cannot. In this case, the SOS can be launched by relatives or loved ones after a contact has been lost for a while.

The decision to launch or not an SOS – as one of the possible channels through which seaborne migrants become (more) visible depends on different factors, which are deeply related to their perception of distress and danger. Perceived danger may be related to the situation onboard – a drifting boat with a broken engine, water coming in, lack of fuel, limited water and food, illnesses, worsening weather conditions – but also to the risk of being captured by Libyan or Tunisian authorities and returned to the country they were fleeing from. If launching an SOS means accessing to a “space of appearance” – as a platform for speaking-up and being heard – boats in distress’ visibility in a “space of surveillance” is not necessarily related to it. Institutional aerial surveillance planes¹⁹ and civil

¹⁹ Since 2017, Frontex Agency launched its Multipurpose Aerial Surveillance System, with the official aim of supporting member states in the surveillance of their borders. In

society counter-monitoring aircrafts²⁰ can spot boats at sea from above and report their presence to institutional actors; merchant vessels or oil tankers, as well as search and rescue ships can “have a visual” on the boat in distress and decide to initiate a rescue, standing by and providing assistance, or simply sheltering, waiting for other assets to come.

Against this complexity, is it possible to argue that those who perform sea crossings do access the sea as a public space? For sure they attempt to do it, when they start a journey by sea, but if they are intercepted and returned, their access is partially denied or somehow interrupted. Vice versa, a successful crossing – both happening as autonomous landing in Italy or following to rescue operation – can be read as an access to the sea as public space. Certainly, starting a sea crossing represents a claim for mobility justice but being intercepted and (directly or indirectly) pushed back means facing mobility injustice. Nevertheless, both successful or failed sea crossings, become an opportunity to speak and being heard (Creta, Denaro, 2022), to counter narrate human mobilities and violent border management infrastructures, by challenging epistemic injustice. Migrants’ voices – as interlocutions between them as speakers and (often) civil society as listeners (Couldry, 2009) are the grounds for building up legal struggles, because they can challenge mainstream narratives, institutional reconstructions of the events, as well as the regime on limited visibility and transparency about search and rescue. Over the years, a variety of – both human rights and criminal law – legal actions have been started, thanks to the testimonies of those who experienced violence and violations at sea: the left-to-die case (2012)²¹, the “11 of October shipwreck” (2013)²², the Vos Triton pushback (2019)²³, as well as the Cutro shipwreck (2023)²⁴ are some examples of claims for state accountability and justice. Furthermore, a variety of legal actions before Rome civil

practice, through the daily deployment of air assets and drones, the Frontex agency has since then played an active role in identifying vessels in distress and sharing information with the authorities ‘competent’ to intervene, which in their view include the Libyan and Tunisian authorities. In 2022, Human Rights Watch and Border Forensics highlighted the agency’s complicity in ‘departure prevention’ policies, and thus in the violation of human rights. See in particular <https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2022/12/08/airborne-complicity-frontex-aerial-surveillance-enables-abuse>.

²⁰ The civil society currently has two monitoring aircraft, Seabird (NGO Sea-Watch) and Colibri (Pilotes Volontaires). See also <https://sea-watch.org/en/mission/airborne/> and <https://www.pilotes-volontaires.org/fr/accueil/>.

²¹ See also <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/fo-report.pdf>.

²² <https://www.proasyl.de/en/pressrelease/landmark-court-ruling-on-2013-shipwreck-italian-coast-guard-and-navy-responsible-for-deaths-of-268-refugees/>.

²³ <https://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/libia-nuovi-esposti-contro-i-respingimenti-denuncia-delle-ong>.

²⁴ <https://www.meltingpot.org/2023/03/naufragio-di-cutro-lesposto-di-43-organizzazioni-era-prevedibile-ed-evitabile/>.

court have been started by people who suffered interceptions at sea and illegitimate returns to Libya, asking for the compensation of damages and the issuance of an entry visa in Italy: most of them have been won, showing again the potential of strategic litigation in challenging mobility and epistemic justice²⁵.

4.2. Institutional actors: the shift from rescue to (invisible) surveillance

Institutional actors at sea, such as state coastguards, police authorities, military authorities and navies and EU agencies carrying out border surveillance (like Frontex – the European Border and Coast Guard Agency²⁶) are also present at sea. These agents are responsible for implementing border management and search and rescue policies, which should be defined in compliance with international principles and standards related to maritime, human rights and asylum law. Nevertheless, they are often implemented through so-called soft law instruments such as cooperation agreements between EU states and the North African countries or domestic “tools”, including “security decrees” issued by Italy, which are justified by supposed emergency/extraordinary circumstances. Specific examples include the Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and Libya, the secret agreements between Italy and Malta, the EU-Tunisia agreement and the measures adopted by the Italian government concerning NGOs: from the codes of conduct to the entry ban in territorial waters, from the illegitimate decrees issued by the Italian Ministry of the Interior against two NGO rescue ships, SOS-Humanity and Geo Barents (Denaro, Esposito, 2023) until the 2023 so-called Piantadosi decree²⁷ establishing the ground to implement the “distant port strategy”.

Access to the sea by institutional actors – especially for SAR related issue – can also face a variety of (both legitimate and illegitimate) limitations. Before to explore them, it’s interesting to observe that, diversely from the past, most of the SAR assets by the Italian Coast Guard operate in condition of invisibility – namely with the AIS signal switched off, so they do not appear on accessible programmes of real-time mapping. Aerial assets are generally more “visible”, but they are not in the position to directly perform rescue operations, and their original function of facilitating them is increasingly challenged by law enforcement priorities. This invisibility does not allow to get a comprehensive overview of institutional SAR actors’ presence and mobility in the Central Mediterranean, but some of the limits imposed to their access to it are however

²⁵ <https://www.asgi.it/asilo-e-protezione-internazionale/vittoria-diritto-asilo-respinti-illegalmente-eritrei-in-italia-con-visto/>.

²⁶ <https://www.frontex.europa.eu>.

²⁷ The decree was converted into Law 15/2023. Full text available here <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2023/03/02/23G00023/sg>.

observable considering the political scenario, and the critical sea-watching performed by civil society actors at sea. Over the years, institutional actors' physical access to the sea has been limited through agreements between states, which can limit the access of naval and air assets of one state to the territorial waters or search and rescue zones of another state. Starting in 2017, they publicly stated their "lack of competence" to rescue in the so-called Libyan SAR, while over the previous years this was a normal behaviour, considered legitimate, and in compliance with SAR obligations and the duty to rescue²⁸. While in the past, institutional rescue operations – being completed with the disembarkation of the survivors in a place of safety in Europe – enhanced mobility justice, today the situation looks partially different. The practice to refer boats in distress to the authorities of unsafe countries – such as Libya and Tunisia – contributes to create mobility injustice, by facilitating interceptions and pushbacks. At the same time, institutional actors are themselves affected by mobility injustice, when they accept to limit their access to the Libyan SAR zone, as a choice which submit SAR priorities to border management ones.

In addition, SAR institutions can contribute to produce epistemic injustice through their public communication about seaborne migration and search and rescue policies: the denial of the "distress" situation in which migrant boats are, the criminalisation of boat drivers for shipwrecks occurred after hours of non-assistance and abandonment, the seizure of NGO vessels for the supposed "lack of compliance" with navigation law requirements, are some example of misrepresentation or misleading narrative concerning those phenomena.

Finally, institutional SAR actors have a role in the processes of accountability and access to justice in cases of shipwrecks and pushbacks. The outcome of these processes strongly depends on the possibility to unveil chains of command and the decisional processes that led to these events, as the main ground for prosecutors to assess possible state responsibilities. Nevertheless, the lack of transparency – coupled with the juridical limits outlined by Mann (2018) as "maritime legal black holes", significantly hinder these processes. Nevertheless, in some rare cases, the responsibility of SAR institutional actors in those tragedies has been assessed by national courts and international bodies, showing how also accountability and justice can be successfully claimed and obtained, by challenging injustice and rightlessness in the central Mediterranean.

²⁸ See the presentation by Vessel Commander Sergio Liardo on 6.11.16 at Italian Ministry of Health, https://www.salute.gov.it/portale/temi/documenti/usmaf/formazione2016/08_LIARDO.pdf.

4.3. Civil society actors: claiming the right to observe and intervene, challenging a “denied access”

Beginning in 2011, several civil society actors started to perform critical “sea-watching” and monitoring activities, primarily aimed at documenting and denouncing forms of border violence and human rights (Pezzani, Heller, 2013; Denaro, 2015; Stierl, 2018). Then in 2014, civil society responses to the “rescue gap” produced by the end of Mare Nostrum mission first, and by Italy-Libya MoU after, started including the direct engagement in SAR operation, to prevent the loss of lives at sea by rescuing people in distress and disembarking them in a place of safety.

A very first experiment of “critical sea watching” was the launch of the Watch The Med by a group of researchers from the University of London. The so-called “left-to-die boat” – referring to the 27th March 2012 shipwreck during which at least 59 people lost their lives – was exposed by combining survivors’ testimonies and official documents with maps and producing a drifting model and satellite imagery to reconstruct with precision the events and locate the military vessels which were nearby²⁹. Then on 11th October 2014 – on the anniversary of the so called “children shipwreck”, a transnational network of human rights activists launched the Alarm Phone project, which consisted of a 24/7 active hotline for people in distress at sea, implemented by a multilingual team of volunteers³⁰. In addition to its primary aim of amplifying migrants’ SOS by promptly and simultaneously referring them to relevant EU Coastguards, international organisations and SAR NGOs, Alarm Phone’s work includes daily documentation and reporting of any possible delay or complete lack of intervention and accountability by SAR-related institutions, as well as border violence and human rights violations occurring in the Mediterranean. Since 2015, civil SAR missions have multiplied: over the past 7 years, at least 25 rescue ships and 3 airplanes have been operating in the Mediterranean, coordinated by around 15 NGOs. Notwithstanding their common mission to rescue people in distress at sea, they have very different backgrounds as well as distinct operational and political approaches.

In addition to the critical documentation, denounce and rescue work, civil society has acted with the aim of “challenging ungrievability for death at sea” by supporting relatives, friends and community members in their claims for information, accountability and justice (Stierl, 2016; Denaro, Boccagni, 2023).

After 2017, parallel to the enforcement of EU cooperation with Libya and the recognition of its SAR zone, a well-structured, multi-faceted criminalisation campaign took shape. From exclusively targeting people on the

²⁹ See <https://watchthemed.net/reports/view/16>.

³⁰ See the official website: <https://alarmphone.org/it/>.

move – in particular boat drivers – the campaigns began to focus on civil society organisations involved in search and rescue activities. After a Code of Conduct designed to limit their operational autonomy was issued, and before the systematic implementation of administrative and criminal proceedings against them, a core aspect of the criminalisation campaign was the delegitimisation of CSOs before the public. A first, the consequence of criminalisation campaigns was to restrict – and in some cases to permanently foreclose NGOs access to the sea as a public space, such as in the *Iuventa* case³¹. These policies, aimed at keeping them “far from the sea”, both through criminal and administrative prosecution and through the issuance of “soft law instruments” justifying what were defined as “closed ports”, “unsafe ports” and then “distant ports” strategies – resulted in “mobility injustice”. In addition, both the institutional efforts direct to avoid undesired gazes on border violence and to silence possibly critical voices, as well as the mainstream narrative built around civil rescue at sea were understandable in terms of “epistemic injustice”. NGOs’ operational approach to search and rescue was delegitimised and deemed illegal in a narrative in which rescues performed by NGOs were unnecessary, because the rescued boats were supposedly not in distress. In this scenario, the behaviour of NGOs was denounced for falling under the scope of Art. 12 of the Italian consolidated law on migration (D.lgs 286/98), due to their abetting and facilitating illegal immigration. As some of the search and rescue NGOs publicly stated, criminalisation campaigns had a profound effect on public opinion by delegitimising their presence at sea.

Over the years, civil society involved in critical monitoring activities and performing search rescue at sea kept claiming for mobility justice, epistemic justice, and EU states’ accountability for rights violations at sea. Supportive interlocations on the phone with people in distress, media, and political pressure for rescue, as well as direct rescue could be read as claims for mobility justice. Similarly, overcoming geographical limits imposed to their operationality by authorities, patrolling south, rescuing in the Libyan SAR zone, entering ports without an authorisation were acts of civil disobedience and “immediate justice”.

Then, being not physically present at sea, civil society actors were somehow promoting epistemic justice, by positioning themselves as “listeners”, by amplifying seaborne migrants’ voices, by counter-narrating human mobilities and border regimes, by challenging often misleading and unjust dominant narratives, as well as structures of power and vis-

³¹ After seven years of criminalization, including the seizure of *Iuventa* ship, on 19 April 2024, the Trapani court dismissed the charges of aiding and abetting illegal immigration to Italy in the *Iuventa* case. Contextually, the court acquitted 21 human rights defenders, along with three civil society organizations, including Jugend Rettet, Save the Children, and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). See also <https://iuventa-crew.org/case/>.

ibility that tended to prevent subaltern groups from speaking out. Yet, despite the lesser impact on public opinion, the legal battles that arose within the criminalisation and subsequent decisions succeeded in overturning the defamatory narrative, decriminalising the behaviours under investigation (Sampugnaro, 2020; Denaro, 2024b). Such battles became opportunities to claim for justice as a multidimensional instance, from promoting mobility justice to epistemic justice to accountability. The latter was demanded through legal actions such as complaints and appeals, based on joint documentation of violence and violations co-constructed by people on the move and civil society.

4.4. Private “commercial” actors and the (denied) duty to rescue: fishermen, merchant vessels, oil tankers and other actors

The wide variety of private actors that cross the Mediterranean many times a day include fishermen, merchant vessels, oil tankers, ferry ships and pleasure boats. Considering the primary duty to render assistance to people in distress as a universal obligation, their role and presence is extremely important. Ordering private ships to shift direction towards a boat in distress – for the purpose of sheltering, providing basic supplies or performing a rescue – is one of the tools available to SAR authorities to prevent shipwrecks and further loss of life. Nevertheless, the possibility for SAR authorities to coordinate private actors to perform a rescue, does not undermine their freedom – and duty – to directly intervene if they are informed of a distress situation, or have “a visual” on it.

Over the years, despite rescue activities being in line with maritime law provisions, fishermen and merchant vessels have been increasingly targeted by criminalisation policies: a growing number of ship captains have been accused of facilitating illegal immigration and had their ships seized. A fear of being sanctioned has spread amongst these actors. As observed by CSOs at sea, the refusal to rescue without an authorisation by state actors has become more and more common between merchant vessels which – in parallel – are increasingly required by state actors to contribute to the implementation of the border regime: orders to “just stand by the boat in distress” without rescuing, but waiting for Libyan authorities to arrive, indications to transfer shipwreck survivors onboard and then hand them over to the Libyan coastguard, orders to “rescue” and then bring people back to Libya have become more and more common.

In 2022, the Court of Naples in Italy sentenced the captain of the vessel Asso 28 for bringing people back to Libya after a rescue, thus violating international law³². This decision demonstrates the almost systematic

³² The decision was appealed, and then confirmed by Naples Court of Appeal, <https://www.asgi.it/notizie/libia-condanna-respingimento/> and <https://www.sistemap->

lack of accountability of search and rescue authorities for these crimes, even if Asso 28 was basically following institutional orders. Beyond these criminalisation policies, which affect large shipping companies less than small-scale fishermen, the latter continue to engage in SAR operations. Especially off the coast of Tunisia, the agency of fishermen is not limited to life-saving interventions with boats in distress, which often remain engineless and adrift after being intercepted by the local Coast Guard, but also involves the recovery of bodies from the sea and the active search for those missing after reported shipwrecks.

Private actors engaged in activities of a commercial nature – from fishing to transporting goods – generally enjoy full access to the sea as a public space, except in cases of very particular prohibitions and limits imposed by the activities they engage in. By law, they are required to keep AIS access on their assets, thus being fully “visible” and locatable by anyone with an interest – nevertheless, CSOs have documented their “invisibility” during problematic search and rescue operations.

Depending on the orders they receive from the authorities of coastal states they generally abide by, they may promote or hinder mobility justice. Increasingly, they are rarely authorised to rescue and disembark people in Europe; they often receive orders not to intervene, or to remain on standby waiting for Libyan patrol boats to arrive. In several cases, merchant vessels have helped to push people back directly – such as in the Vos Triton’s case, or the Shimanami Queen’s one³³, and some of this unjust conduct has even been deemed illegal and has been legally sanctioned – such as in the Asso 28 and Asso 29 cases³⁴. Yet, the fact that they are charged and not the states, does not increase state accountability in any way.

From an epistemic justice point of view, they are rather neutral actors: except in very rare cases, their narrative does not concern cases of search and rescue and their role in the reconstruction of critical events is always rather limited. Nevertheless, they are in a privileged position for “accessing information” – both for their presence at sea and because of their direct – and easy – communication with SAR institutional actors. In some cases, after being reached out by civil society organisations, they contributed to increase transparency about specific events, shipwrecks, or pushbacks but they only rarely allowed those who collected their testimony to mention them as official sources.

enale.it/it/scheda/pagella-caso-asso-28-la-corte-dappello-di-napoli-conferma-la-condanna-per-di-sbarco-arbitrario-e-abbandono-di-minori-o-incapaci.

³³ See also <https://alarmphone.org/en/2021/06/29/shipping-company-vroon-complicit-in-forced-return/> and <https://sea-watch.org/en/nonrefoulement/>. For the Vos Triton case, CSOs filled criminal report to Rome Prosecutor.

³⁴ In this case, Rome Court has ordered the Italian Ministry of Interior to issue an entry visa for one of the people who were illegally returned to Libya, <https://ilmanifesto.it/respinto-illegalmente-in-libia-ora-litalia-deve-accoglierlo>.

5. Rethinking the sea as a public space: conclusive reflections on rescue, accessibility, and justice

After examining the Central Mediterranean Sea as a space of (im-)mobility and framing it within the inspiring public space debate(s), in this article I tried to analyse the differential accessibility to the sea as a matter of justice. In particular, I proposed to conceptualize the “justice gap” as a multidimensional notion, as made of mobility injustice, epistemic injustice, and lack of states’ accountability for human rights violations and deaths at sea. Furthermore, with the aim of highlighting how accessibility to the sea as public space – far from being an immutable condition – results from negotiations and interlocutions, I explored how various actors – as seaborne migrants, SAR institutions, civil society organizations and private actors – navigate with it.

In the effort to draw some provisional conclusions, it is useful to come back to the initial research question: is it legitimate and possible to re-think the sea in terms of public space? The theoretical and analytical pathways that I followed seem to lead to a positive answer.

When applying them to the central Mediterranean Sea, categories developed by geographers and sociologists in their contributions to the public space debate(s) – such as those of ownership, accessibility, management and inclusiveness – have been of great inspiration. Certainly, some notions look more significant than others in facilitating the public – and in some cases “hyper public” – nature of the sea and to investigate the complex negotiations and interactions behind its accessibility.

In a similar way, the more political contributions to the public space debate were extremely insightful: the Mediterranean unauthorised crossings, can simultaneously entail access to the Arendtian «public realm» and space of appearance» as opportunity of visibility and voice, and confront with the Foucauldian «space of surveillance». Furthermore, being inspired by Caves’s conceptualisation of public spaces as contentious ones, where people exercise their rights and express their voice, it was possible to draw a theoretical pathway leading to understand accessibility to the public space as a matter of justice. Against a multiplicity of scholars applying this reasoning to urban contexts, marginalised areas and green spaces within the cities, applying this theory to sea space looks somehow innovative.

Yet, even if the notions of the migration corridor, transit space, border, and battleground already say a lot about the nature of the central Mediterranean Sea and the most relevant issues at stake over there, looking into it through the lens of the public space can be useful, both from a theoretical perspective and an ethical one. From a theoretical point of view, allowing the debate on public space to inspire reflections on the Mediterranean Sea allows us to re-think accessibility – resulting by the multi-layered interlocutions and negotiations between a variety of actors – as a matter of justice, related to mobility, epistemology, and ef-

fective enjoyment of human rights. Moreover, adopting such a perspective permits to re-emphasise the key role of states in its management, its inescapable duties to ensure dignified access to the sea as a public space for all, and thus – once again – the undisputable and necessary state accountability for possible conditions of structural inaccessibility, racialised hostility and lethality of the sea. Being accessibility made of both physical and political instances – sea crossing and rescue are potential space to counteract forms of epistemic injustice: for individuals or groups whose voices are controlled and silenced, who are misrepresented, defamed, or described in a manner which is not fitting their own vision, accessing the sea is an opportunity to get in a “space of appearance” where they can speak up and being heard, by challenging mainstream narratives.

Beyond media – courtrooms are also scenarios in which – in addition to the limited state accountability for violations – epistemic injustice can be challenged: shipwreck survivors can provide testimonies and evidence in front of state authorities; criminalised rescuers can also provide their own interpretation of the events. Legal battlegrounds are a contentious terrain, where truth, accountability and justice for border deaths can be demanded, in addition to the very right to mobility.

Rethinking the Mediterranean Sea as a public and political space shaped by interactions between the different actors inhabiting it is in line with the efforts by urban studies of public space which focus on struggles for “the right to the city”, bordering processes mirroring privatisation processes. While the motivations may vary – encompassing security and militarisation on one hand, and more frequently, economic, or financial considerations on the other, both the acts of bordering and privatisation employ a variety of tools to restrict access to a public space.

Accessing the Mediterranean Sea – both from a physical and political perspective, has many justice-related meanings. It is not only an opportunity to exercise human rights – from the right to life to the right to leave one own’s country, until the right to be protected from inhuman and degrading treatments – but also a space where civil and political rights can be claimed: from the right to observe and intervene in matters considered of public concern, until the right to speak and of being heard. While bordering processes increasingly seem to undermine these rights, both sea crossings and rescues become opportunities to claim access to the sea, as a form of justice.

Finally, re-thinking the sea as a public space may have some relevant ethical implications: by contributing to perceive it as a space belonging to everyone, and what occurs there as everyone’s concern, as a precondition for a stronger justice-oriented civic sense and widespread engagement to prevent it from being still the deadliest border in the world.

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Alberto Baldissera

Un'Italia senza merito

L'economia italiana è un caso eccentrico nel mondo occidentale. Negli ultimi trent'anni la sua crescita è stata sostanzialmente stagnante. Ciò risulta da una comparazione con altri paesi occidentali. Dal 1995 al 2019, "il Pil *pro capite* statunitense è cresciuto del 45%, quello del Regno Unito del 42%, della Spagna del 41%, della Francia del 30%, del Giappone del 22%, del 19% in Grecia" (*sic*) (Codogno e Galli, 2022, 40). In Italia solo dell'8%: una media annua di circa 0,32%. Insomma, negli ultimi decenni, in un periodo di tumultuosi cambiamenti tecnologici e organizzativi, l'Italia "ha quasi smesso di crescere" (ivi, 147). Una tendenza proseguita negli anni successivi.

Anche le regioni italiane, in modo diseguale, hanno perso terreno. Nella classifica del Pil *pro capite* delle 280 regioni europee, nel 1995 Piemonte, Lombardia e Veneto erano vicine ai primi posti. Nel 2019 avevano perso rispettivamente 49, 22 e 37 posizioni classificandosi all'84esimo, 36esimo e 68esimo posto. La perdita è stata simile per le regioni del Sud: Campania (– 35 posizioni al 191esimo posto), Sicilia (– 38 al 197esimo), Sardegna (– 21 al 169esimo), Calabria (– 31 a 202esimo) (ivi, 437).

Una situazione analoga, ampiamente pubblicizzata dalla stampa, è stata confermata, per quel che riguarda i salari, dall'Organizzazione internazionale del lavoro (2025): "a differenza della maggior parte dei paesi del G20, l'Italia si distingue per una dinamica salariale negativa sul lungo periodo, con salari reali inferiori a quelli del 2008".

La tesi del libro di Lorenzo Codogno e Giampaolo Galli, *Crescita economica e meritocrazia. Perché l'Italia spreca i suoi talenti e non cresce* (Bologna, il Mulino, 2022), è semplice: buona parte della crescita economica nelle società contemporanee dipende dalla presenza di un sistema meritocratico nell'allocazione delle risorse sociali più rilevanti. Questa istituzione favorisce la competizione, aiuta a produrre e mantenere "standard etici elevati", stimola l'emergere e la selezione di talenti, facilita la creazione di nuove imprese e l'adozione di innovazioni – scientifiche, tecnologiche, organizzative. Al contrario, la presenza o la prevalenza di *lobbies*, relazioni e nepotismo ostacolano o impediscono nel medio e nel lungo termine la crescita del prodotto interno lordo di una nazione. *Bonus* e incentivi pubblici; privilegi garantiti da leggi; soddisfazione delle

richieste di *lobbies* e gruppi sociali e/o professionali; azioni affermative e quote riservate, pur se animate dalle migliori intenzioni; limitazioni della concorrenza, sono efficaci antidoti alla meritocrazia.

Secondo gli Aa., alla base della stagnazione del Pil italiano vi è soprattutto la ridotta presenza di criteri meritocratici nella selezione dei ceti dirigenti e professionali: nella scuola, nell'università, nelle burocrazie pubbliche. Anche in imprese private, specie se di modeste dimensioni. Tra i tanti, un buon indicatore di questa situazione riguarda le fonti di variazione della retribuzione dei lavoratori dipendenti. La sua determinante principale non è il merito, ma l'anzianità di servizio (Baldissera, 2011; Bianchi e Paradisi, 2022). Esemplare da questo punto di vista è la carriera retributiva degli insegnanti nelle scuole pubbliche. Anche quella dei magistrati (p. 209 segg.).

Il metodo adottato dagli Aa è anzitutto la comparazione. Essi confrontano indici e indicatori riguardanti 167 paesi, sviluppati e no. Non comparano solo proprietà e variabili economiche, ma anche quelle abitualmente adottate da sociologi e scienziati politici, come capitale sociale, *governance*, istruzione, diritto, criminalità organizzata e corruzione. Interessante è l'uso di dati tratti dall'Indice di Prosperità realizzato nel 2007 e annualmente aggiornato dal Legatum Institute di Londra. Esso utilizza un numero elevato di indicatori e indici (circa 300), tratti da 70 fonti diverse.

Quali sono le ragioni specifiche di questi risultati così mediocri – complessivamente e comparativamente – ottenuti in un quarto di secolo dall'Italia? Una prima risposta è la stagnazione e il declino della produttività generale dei fattori (Tfp: l'acronimo internazionale). Si tratta di una misura dell'efficienza in cui un sistema economico utilizza le risorse produttive (lavoro, capitale, risorse naturali, tecnologia) per produrre beni e servizi. Essa riflette il progresso tecnologico e l'innovazione, nonché l'organizzazione dei fattori di produzione. È anche legata all'efficienza delle istituzioni pubbliche.

In cinquant'anni (1970-2019, numero indice 1970=100), il valore della Tfp negli Usa è aumentato a circa 166 punti, in Olanda e in Francia intorno a 140; in Germania e Regno Unito 133, in Spagna 123. Il valore del numero indice in Italia (ripeto: 1970 = 100) nel 2019 era inferiore a quello della fine degli anni Sessanta. Nel nostro paese la Tfp ha cessato di crescere dall'inizio degli anni '70 dello scorso secolo. Intorno al 2000 ha cominciato a decrescere (ivi, 103, figura 2.1).

La produttività è ristagnata nonostante l'insieme delle innovazioni rese disponibili dalle nuove tecnologie dell'informazione e della comunicazione, che hanno consentito altrove una crescita spettacolare di molte aziende ed economie nazionali. Poiché queste innovazioni continuano a essere introdotte anche in Italia, in ogni settore della vita economica e sociale, si deve presumere che esistano e operino forze in grado di limitarne l'uso e/o di annullarne i vantaggi. Insomma: mentre gli altri paesi

avanzavano, e l'economia mondiale si trasformava, l'Italia è rimasta praticamente ferma.

Una seconda ragione, a mio parere più importante della prima, è legata alla scarsa qualità dell'istruzione pubblica, quindi al livello di istruzione reale (*literacy, numeracy, problem solving*) comparativamente ridotto di studenti e adulti. Il quinto capitolo del libro di Codogno e Galli – “l'istruzione al servizio degli insegnanti” – è dedicato alla scuola e all'università. Gli Aa. criticano la mancanza di valutazione di scuole e insegnanti, nonché le modalità della selezione all'ingresso di insegnanti e professori universitari, oltre all'assenza di università di eccellenza.

Tentativi di riforma in questi campi sono stati affossati o evirati negli ultimi decenni. Così è stato per il miglioramento dei criteri di reclutamento e per l'avanzamento della carriera e dello stipendio per merito degli insegnanti, nonché per la creazione di atenei eccellenti.¹

Questa situazione si riflette sui livelli di istruzione reale di studenti e di adulti, come risulta dalle indagini periodiche e comparate Pisa (Ocse), Piac (idem) e Invalsi. La prima riguarda gli studenti quindicenni, la seconda gli adulti. In ogni rilevazione, a partire dal 1994, i risultati ottenuti dagli italiani, studenti o adulti, sono comparativamente mediocri, anzitutto nel Mezzogiorno (Baldissera, 1996; Cornali, 2006; Bianco, 2011; Baldissera e Cornali, 2020).

Le indagini dell'Invalsi riguardano anche gli studenti che stanno per sostenere l'esame di maturità. Secondo le recenti rilevazioni (2024), solo il 51% dei diplomandi raggiunge il livello base delle competenze in italiano; il 50% in matematica. Gli scarti tra Nord e Sud sono rilevanti: 23 punti percentuali in italiano e 31 in matematica. Quasi tutti superano però l'esame di maturità.

¹ La legge attuale (n. 232 dell'11 dicembre 2016) ha previsto per il quinquennio 2023-2027 la distribuzione di 271 milioni annui per cinque anni a 180 'dipartimenti di eccellenza', situati in oltre 50 atenei italiani. Un finanziamento premiale distribuito a molti enti. A pioggia, per usare un'espressione comune. Sullo sfondo rimane il sottofinanziamento cronico, e ormai consolidato, del sistema universitario italiano.

Aumentare i finanziamenti solo in alcuni poli di eccellenza significherebbe invece favorire “le economie di agglomerazione” (Boeri e Perotti 2021) e la formazione di talenti scientifici (Menger 2024). Quindi, come conseguenza a medio e lungo termine, un maggiore sviluppo economico e sociale di un paese. La reiterazione di questo processo produrrebbe una stratificazione degli atenei e una loro aumentata competizione per le risorse, pubbliche e private.

Il dibattito su una proposta avanzata in questa direzione da Boeri e Perotti (2021) è stato intenso. Si vedano ad esempio Regini (2021), Baccini (2021) e il manifesto di alcuni giuristi (Anonimo 2021). Questi ultimi giudicano incostituzionale (*sic*) la proposta di Boeri e Perotti. Scarsamente apprezzato nel dibattito è stato il ruolo scientifico ed economico delle università eccellenti nei paesi in cui esse sono presenti, a partire da Usa e Cina. Sul fenomeno delle università eccellenti – in Europa, ma anche negli Usa e in Cina – utili indicazioni si trovano in R. Bloch *et al.* (2018). Considerazioni critiche in Münch (2011/2020).

Per quanto riguarda gli adulti da 16 a 65 anni i recenti risultati dell'Adult Skill Survey dell'Ocse (Oecd 2024) confermano questa situazione. Il 35% degli adulti italiani (media dei paesi Ocse: 26%) ha ottenuto risultati mediocri o molto mediocri nelle prove di competenza linguistica (*literacy*). Sono cioè capaci di comprendere solo testi brevi ed elenchi organizzati. Risultati analoghi nei gruppi di prove riguardanti la capacità di risolvere problemi. Il 46% degli adulti (media Ocse: 29%) è in grado di risolvere solo problemi semplici o molto semplici, con poche variabili.

Questi insiemi di adulti italiani potrebbero essere classificati come 'analfabeti funzionali'.

La situazione di *undereducation* cronica è aggravata dalla cosiddetta "fuga dei cervelli". Un fenomeno importante, sovente sottovalutato. Dal 2013 al 2022 le persone espatriate sono state oltre un milione, di cui un terzo con un'età compresa tra 25 e 34 anni. Oltre 132.000 erano laureati. Tenendo conto dei rimpatri, la perdita complessiva è stata di 87.000 laureati. Una città delle dimensioni di Pisa, ma composta solo da laureati, è stata così cancellata in dieci anni dalla carta geografica dell'Italia. L'espatrio è aumentato negli ultimi anni. Fattore causale principale? "Il rendimento comparativamente inferiore dell'istruzione" (p. 260 segg.).

Un ulteriore fattore causale della ridotta crescita economica, connesso a quelli ricordati, è la predominanza nella nostra struttura economica di micro e di piccole imprese, il cui valore aggiunto complessivo è proporzionalmente inferiore a quello delle medie e grandi aziende. "Empiricamente, esiste una forte correlazione tra dimensione e produttività" (p. 130). Nelle piccole imprese la gestione è spesso affidata a qualche membro della famiglia; non viene invece delegata a manager professionali. Anche l'aggregazione di imprese simili in distretti non è servita ad "aggirare il problema del nanismo delle aziende italiane" (p. 179). Malgrado questi limiti strutturali, la base industriale italiana è solida e capace di mantenere una quota rilevante nel commercio mondiale.

In conclusione, gli Aa ricordano l'incapacità tipicamente italiana di far fronte all'avvento della società della conoscenza, in atto dagli anni Ottanta del secolo scorso. La rivoluzione delle nuove tecnologie dell'informazione e della comunicazione richiede l'introduzione di innovazioni, anche organizzative, in ogni ambito della vita economica e sociale (Freeman & Soete, 1985/1986). Essa ha sostituito il fordismo, o meglio lo sviluppo economico basato sull'imitazione tecnologica, alla base del miracolo italiano del dopoguerra. L'introduzione dell'euro e l'ingresso della Cina nella WTO hanno inoltre aumentato negli ultimi decenni la competizione internazionale. Sono così nate, anzitutto negli Usa e in Cina, nuove imprese che trent'anni fa non esistevano o erano realtà di dimensioni ridotte: da Amazon a Google, Nvidia, Meta, Microsoft, Tencent, Alibaba. Senza scordare le nuove imprese automobilistiche cinesi.

Alla base dello sviluppo impetuoso di queste imprese vi sono università di eccellenza. La californiana Stanford University ha alimentato

per decenni lo sviluppo della Silicon Valley. La recente irruzione sulla scena internazionale di Deepseek, la nuova stella cinese dell'intelligenza artificiale, non si spiega senza tener conto delle quindici università, di cui otto politecnici, di Hangzhou – la città di circa 11 milioni di abitanti in cui questo *software* è stato progettato. Non si spiegano inoltre i successi economici cinesi se non si tiene presente la selezione meritocratica dei diplomati della scuola secondaria superiore nell'accesso alle università (*Gaokao*). L'idea di università eccellenti non ha invece attecchito in Italia. Né lo è l'idea di una scuola di qualità o quella di coltivare lo sviluppo degli studenti più meritevoli e dotati.

Il libro di Codogno e Galli non è esente da critiche. La prima, è una certa sciatteria nella revisione del testo finale. Il linguaggio metodologico è sovente inappropriato: non si introduce la distinzione tra l'idea di proprietà di un oggetto e quella di variabile; vi è confusione tra i termini 'indice' e 'indicatore', considerati talvolta come equivalenti; si usa il termine 'misurazione' a proposito di variabili ordinali o quasi cardinali. Va notato anche uno scarso senso critico nel trattare i dati tratti da sondaggi. Gli Aa indicano il testo della domanda (quello della versione italiana del sondaggio? O una traduzione della domanda in inglese di un questionario di Gallup, Inc.?), ma non specificano le scale usate nelle risposte (a 7, 5 o 4 *item*? Scale autoancoranti?). Il testo avrebbe inoltre potuto essere reso più asciutto ed efficace.

Dal punto di vista sostanziale, le spiegazioni storiche fornite a proposito della sottovalutazione e negazione del merito non sono del tutto convincenti. Spiegare l'assenza del merito con la presenza di forti adesioni alle ideologie dell'egualitarismo è suggerire in pratica lo stesso argomento. La spiegazione non può ovviamente che essere in gran parte storica: l'assenza in Italia di rivoluzioni politiche e culturali simili a quelle inglese o americana, la predominanza della religione cattolica, la debolezza della borghesia italiana e dei suoi valori. La diffusione di ideologie egualitariste è poi favorita dalla presenza, come abbiamo visto, di una quota rilevante nella popolazione di persone con un livello di istruzione ridotto o molto ridotto. Non è certo singolare che esse preferiscano al merito altri criteri distributivi.

Ancora: gli Aa. considerano, ma non sembrano attribuire il giusto rilievo, sia al disordine sociale sia a quello introdotto da decisioni politiche. Sono fenomeni indipendenti dalla meritocrazia, eppure rilevanti nella spiegazione della stagnazione della crescita economica,

Il primo tipo di disordine è indicato dai frequenti fenomeni di illegalità diffusa e, più di recente, da fenomeni di aperta decivilizzazione (Baldissera *et al.*, 2024). Tra di essi, la cronica, rilevante, evasione fiscale e contributiva è uno tra i fenomeni peculiari. La situazione del fisco italiano è nota. Solo 32 milioni di cittadini su 59 milioni di abitanti hanno presentato per il 2022 una dichiarazione dei redditi positiva. Ciò significa che il 45% degli italiani non ha redditi e di conseguenza vive a carico di

qualcuno. Nel Sud l'importo medio dell'Irpef versata è inferiore alla spesa media *pro capite* per la sanità: circa 1.900 € *vs* circa 2.200 € (Itinerari previdenziali, 2024). In compenso, nel 2022 gli italiani hanno speso in giochi d'azzardo una somma pari a 136 miliardi di €. La cifra superava il costo dell'intera sanità pubblica.

La risposta istituzionale a questa situazione è stata negli ultimi decenni un lungo elenco di condoni: fiscali, contributivi, edilizi, mirati in genere a favore di specifici gruppi di elettori. Analoghe sono state le decisioni degli organi istituzionali in risposta alle richieste di pensionamenti anticipati o agevolati e, negli ultimi lustri, di interventi intesi ad ampliare il campo dell'assistenza pubblica. Qualcuno ha stimato in 1.491,18 miliardi di euro l'importo, in moneta del 2015, dei disavanzi cumulati dal sistema pensionistico nel periodo 1981-2016. Una somma "pari al 67% dell'intero debito pubblico" di allora (Centro Studi, 2017, 129)². La stima è probabilmente benevola e non copre tutto il periodo che va dal 1969 (legge Brodolini) a oggi.

Gli Aa. apprezzano l'importanza delle *lobbies* (ad esempio quella dei magistrati) nella formazione delle decisioni pubbliche italiane negli ultimi decenni. È però singolare che essi non usino l'espressione "coalizioni distributive" introdotta da Mancur Olson (1965), il cui libro è ricordato in bibliografia ma non nel testo del libro.

In conclusione. Il libro di Codogno e Galli merita di esser letto anche da un sociologo. Chi si occupa di meritocrazia e/o di sviluppo economico e sociale dell'Italia troverà in esso molti argomenti e informazioni su cui riflettere e da approfondire.

Università di Torino

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² I disavanzi contabili del sistema previdenziale italiano sono periodicamente scaricati sulla fiscalità generale. Un quasi pareggio fu realizzato solo nel 2008. Fu prontamente eliminato a seguito della crisi economica e degli anticipi pensionistici promossi dall'allora Ministro del lavoro Cesare Damiano.

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Paolo Parra Saiani

Torniamo alle fondamenta

Oggetti di ricerca, concetti, parole e distinzioni

Durkheim scriveva che il primo compito del sociologo deve essere definire le cose di cui tratta, in modo che si sappia e che egli sappia bene di cosa si sta parlando (1895, 44, mia traduzione). Due libri recenti di Monika Krause (2021) e Gabriel Abend (2023) hanno il merito di riportare l'attenzione della comunità scientifica internazionale¹ sull'importanza della specificazione dei concetti, della categorizzazione e sugli oggetti di ricerca la cui scelta spesso (retro)agisce sul modo in cui intendiamo il concetto stesso. Più in generale, i libri di Krause e di Abend analizzano il modo in cui le pratiche e i presupposti epistemologici influenzano la produzione della conoscenza e la costruzione dei significati, con un focus particolare sul ruolo delle convenzioni e dei contesti disciplinari.

Entrambi affrontano, seppure da angolazioni diverse, il tema della standardizzazione e della cumulatività della scienza. Krause si concentra sui *model cases*, oggetti di ricerca che diventano centrali nella produzione accademica e fungono da rappresentazioni canoniche per intere categorie o fenomeni perché plasmano la conoscenza, sebbene riflettano decisioni accademiche spesso non esplicitate. Abend esplora come i linguaggi siano strutturati e come questi, a loro volta, strutturino le azioni e i giudizi umani. Gli strumenti usati per rappresentare la realtà – siano essi oggetti materiali di ricerca, concetti, termini, definizioni – non sono neutrali, ma plasmano in modo significativo il sapere e la pratica della ricerca. Se per Krause l'uso implicito e ripetuto di alcuni oggetti di ricerca privilegiati può portare a una conoscenza parziale o distorta, Abend invita a considerare la pluralità dei significati e a interrogarsi su come le distinzioni linguistiche influenzino il dibattito sui valori e sulle norme, specialmente in un contesto globale e multiculturale.

Secondo Krause una maggiore riflessività nella selezione dei casi modello e la relativa diversificazione degli oggetti di ricerca potrebbe migliorare la produzione della conoscenza, mentre Abend suggerisce che la pluralità e la complessità dei significati debbano essere riconosciute per affrontare sfide globali come il cambiamento climatico e la disuguaglianza.

¹ In italiano, invece, si vedano i due volumi di Marradi (2022, 2023).

za sociale. Il ruolo del contesto, cruciale per entrambi, mette in crisi la possibilità di una conoscenza universale: il contesto accademico e istituzionale determina quali oggetti diventano privilegiati e modellano interesse discipline (Krause), i contesti culturali e sociali influiscono sui linguaggi, producendo una varietà di modi di pensare e giudicare il bene comune (Abend).

Parole e distinzioni

Abend, in particolare, analizza come termini, concetti e distinzioni vengano usati in vari contesti culturali e sociali, e come il linguaggio plasmi le nostre decisioni e azioni. Proponendo esempi provenienti dalla politica, dalla medicina e dall'economia, Abend sostiene che le dispute sulle parole tendono a confondere due attività: "prima la parola" o *Word First* (WF), che riguarda l'uso delle parole da parte degli scienziati sociali; e "prima la distinzione" o *Distinction First* (DF), relativa alle distinzioni e alle classificazioni. L'esempio che più spesso viene richiamato per tutto il volume² riguarda le *Sandwichness Wars*, cioè la difficoltà e le controversie legate alla definizione di "sandwich". Partendo da un episodio di un podcast (*The Sporkful*) nel quale si discute dello status di un hot dog – «è o non è un sandwich?»³ –, il dibattito serve come punto di partenza per analizzare come si istituiscono definizioni e significati. Discussione bizzarra, futile, se non inutile? Tutt'altro: basti pensare che negli Stati Uniti i prodotti alimentari qualificati come "pane" sono soggetti a dazi d'importazione inferiori e che i tribunali sono chiamati a risolvere questioni semantiche e definitorie con implicazioni economiche e contrattuali.

Nel capitolo 5 si riprendono le due attività a dire di Abend spesso confuse tra loro. L'Activity WF inizia con una parola – "populismo", "etnia", "ingiustizia", "democrazia" –, e si concentra sul decidere come usare correttamente quella parola. È quindi un'attività *normativa* che poggia su ragioni sociali e epistemiche, tenendo conto delle implicazioni morali e pratiche delle scelte linguistiche. La loro funzione va al di là di

² Il termine "sandwich" ricorre 252 volte, indice analitico escluso. Sconsigliato a chi è a dieta.

³ Da una parte si sosteneva che un hot dog non sarebbe un sandwich perché quest'ultimo è di solito tagliato a metà prima di essere consumato, al contrario dell'hot dog; dall'altra, un hot dog sarebbe un sandwich perché si tratta di una proteina servita dentro del pane, indipendentemente dal tipo di pane o dalla modalità di consumo. L'esempio ricorda gli scritti di Wittgenstein e le ricerche condotte da Castelfranchi (1975) e da Marradi e Fobert Veutro (2001): agli intervistati veniva chiesto di dare una definizione di termini di uso quotidiano ("sedia" per il primo, "sedia" e "lampada" per i secondi) e dalle risposte emergeva una notevole differenza interindividuale nel significato attribuito a questi due termini di uso comune. Sul ruolo della conoscenza tacita, si vedano almeno Fleck (1946), Ryle (1949), Polanyi (1958; 1966), Marradi (2022).

un semplice nome: è performativa, servono a orientare la ricerca e a guidare l'analisi. Quando i ricercatori discutono, per esempio, su cosa significa "giustizia" o "povertà", stanno facendo molto di più che definire un termine: stanno negoziando un significato che ha impatti concreti sulle politiche, sulle teorie e sulle prassi sociali. L'Activity DF si concentra non sulle parole, ma su come distinguere i concetti. La definizione dei confini tra categorie e il modo in cui si classificano gli oggetti di studio è il cuore di questa attività. Separando e analizzando ciascuna di queste attività in modo rigoroso, le comunità scientifiche potrebbero migliorare le loro pratiche e risolvere dispute concettuali in modo più efficace. Per ciascuna attività, le comunità scientifiche dovrebbero chiarire cosa fare, cosa non fare e qual è la posta in gioco. Entrambe le attività sono definite da Abend «attività di ragione pratica»: i loro risultati non possono essere veri o falsi, ma saranno buoni o cattivi, migliori o peggiori, alla luce delle caratteristiche, delle pratiche e degli obiettivi di una comunità (2023, 333).

Abend sottolinea che, a differenza delle questioni empiriche, le domande su come definire o usare le parole o tracciare distinzioni non hanno risposte definitive perché la categorizzazione e la comprensione del mondo sono intrinsecamente influenzate da prospettive e scelte umane. Non esiste un modo unico o oggettivo di suddividere il mondo: ogni categorizzazione riflette valori, obiettivi e prospettive particolari (2023, 237-239). Che i concetti siano sempre riferiti a comunità spazio-temporali delimitate e soggetti a negoziazioni intersoggettive è noto da tempo e la proposta di coinvolgere in modo più attivo le comunità scientifiche non è certamente nuova: come ricorda lo stesso Abend, nel 1937 l'American Sociological Society⁴ istituì il Committee on Conceptual Integration; nel 1970 è stato fondato il Committee on Conceptual and Terminological Analysis (COCTA) per promuovere la discussione e la ricerca su questioni concettuali e terminologiche nell'ambito delle scienze sociali promosso da Riggs e Sartori, del quale farà parte anche Marradi⁵. Altre proposte verranno successivamente avanzate all'ASA e ad alcune sue sezioni, senza successo (Wallace, 1990, 1996). Anche in Italia la Sezione di Metodologia dell'AIS ha proposto un Glossario per la propria Collana di Metodologia delle scienze umane pubblicata da Franco Angeli. Iniziative che, dopo un relativo slancio iniziale, sono state via via dimenticate e cadute nel vuoto⁶,

⁴ Nel 1959 diventata American Sociological Association (ASA), forse – insinuano i maligni – per evitare di usare l'imbarazzante acronimo.

⁵ Il COCTA è nato da un incontro nell'ambito del Congresso mondiale dell'International Political Science Association (IPSA) avviato da Fred Riggs e Giovanni Sartori. Il COCTA è stato riconosciuto nel 1976 come IPSA RC01 (ora attivo come "Concepts and Methods") e nel 1978 come RC35 "Conceptual and Terminological Analysis" dell'International Sociological Association (ISA) (Riggs, 1983).

⁶ Il glossario appare per la prima volta in Zajczyk (1996), redatto in collaborazione con

tanto che ancora oggi molto spesso si comincia uno scritto chiarendo che in letteratura non c'è un accordo unanime su cosa si intenda per quel determinato concetto. Senza incappare nella “sindrome cartesiana” – la convinzione che solo le idee chiare siano portatrici di conoscenza e l'ossessione per l'esplicitazione, e se possibile la formalizzazione, di tutti i pensieri umani (Marradi, 2003) – ridurre l'ambiguità terminologica può aiutare a ridurre il peso della conoscenza tacita, favorendo così la condivisione della conoscenza.

Il testo di Abend è molto ambizioso, ma talvolta è un po' approssimativo, paradossalmente proprio nell'uso di alcuni termini: a p. 245 scrive che le ragioni sulle quali basare le distinzioni non possono essere individuali, private e stipulative, associando quindi i significati di libertà, privatezza e stipulatività⁷. Alle pp. 72-73 leggiamo: «If each scientist (or research group or lab) is *free to define and use words in whichever ways they please*, definitions and uses of 'w' are likely to mushroom. *Since stipulation is cheap and it's not disincentivized*, overpopulation is the probable upshot» (mio corsivo). Ancora, a p. 166, scrive: «Proponents of stipulative freedom maintain that you, a social scientist, can decide on your own how to use words and what signs refer to in your work. Just like in mathematics, logic, and constructed languages, it's your free stipulation. The only requirement is that you announce how you decided to define and use word 'w.'». Ci troviamo di fronte a un uso distorto del concetto di stipulatività, che in sé racchiude la necessità di trovare un consenso: la stipulatività è una proprietà intrinsecamente relazionale e non può essere considerata una mera scelta individuale e privata. L'etimo stesso del termine “stipulativo” rimanda a una decisione non arbitraria, ma consensuale, visto che stipula era «l'arboscello che i latini rompevano ritualmente per sancire un accordo o un contratto» (Marradi, 2007, 66; Pianigiani, 1907, 1361). Le controversie dovrebbero essere superate attraverso processi deliberativi basati su criteri trasparenti e condivisi in termini non solo di accuratezza epistemica ma anche di buon senso morale e pratico, che comprendano l'equità, la giustizia, e l'utilità sociale. Come infatti ripete nel capitolo 9, «We have to make collective decisions. I believe some of our reasons and considerations should have to do with morality. With what's right and good, fair and just. The moral good of our scientific community, our stakeholders, society at large. Distinction *d* is accountable to scientific and epistemic objectives. It'll have to perform well scientifically and epistemically (whatever that's taken to be and however it's measured). But it's also accountable to moral objec-

Marradi; edizioni ampliate, talvolta riviste, compaiono in rete, su siti che nel tempo sono stati disattivati.

⁷ Più precisamente, si legge: «your reasons can't be individual, like “*d* works for my article and that's that”. They can't be private and stipulative» (Abend, 2023, 245).

tives. It'll have to perform well morally (whatever that's taken to be and however it's measured)» (Abend, 2023, 259).

Abend, comunque, riconosce in più punti che, sebbene i ricercatori abbiano la libertà individuale di creare distinzioni, la comunità scientifica è il giudice finale che valuterà ogni proposta sulla base del suo contributo alla comprensione dei fenomeni sociali, in quello specifico contesto e della sua conformità rispetto al bene della comunità. È forse questo l'elemento di novità rispetto ai tanti lavori analoghi: porre l'accento sul bene comune (d'altronde ripreso anche nel titolo) a fianco della correttezza/adequatezza epistemica, e parallelamente ampliare la platea degli interessati da coinvolgere: come afferma Dayé (2024, 245), l'idea che gli *stakeholders* debbano essere coinvolti già nella decisione su come usare parole e distinzioni va oltre le pratiche consolidate di ricerca partecipata che prospera ormai da almeno un secolo.

Nell'offrire delle risposte a delle ipotetiche critiche e obiezioni, Abend incorre nella fallacia del fantoccio, come quando illustra una possibile argomentazione contraria alla sua proposta: «“It's pointless. It's just about English words, not social reality. Mere terminological matters. Matters of definition. Science is about real things; scientists' objects of inquiry are real things. What causes terrorism and civil war, the properties of neoliberalism and creativity, ongoing changes in family structures. But you're merely talking about talk, speaking about speech. Stop talking about that”» (ivi, 217-218). Ancora, all'inizio del capitolo 11 presenta una serie di critiche immaginarie alle sue proposte: gli scienziati sociali sarebbero troppo concentrati sulle loro carriere per impegnarsi in discussioni collettive su parole e distinzioni e le proposte sarebbero perciò irrealistiche, proprio come le teorie utopiche di un mondo perfetto dove tutti agiscono per il bene collettivo (ivi, 308-311). Anziché chiedersi retoricamente «Do these critics sound familiar?» (ivi, 310), sarebbe stato più trasparente citare qualche lavoro che si attesta su quelle posizioni: certo, è innegabile che da anni l'attenzione principale si sia riversata sulle tecniche di analisi a scapito delle riflessioni su concetti e dintorni – ancora di più al tempo dei big data e dell'intelligenza artificiale – ma ciò non significa che tale dibattito sia scomparso dalla letteratura. In un testo così denso e ricco di citazioni e di esempi – forse, questi ultimi, troppi – sarebbe stato opportuno riportare alcune critiche testuali con le relative fonti e non riassumere, estremizzandole, delle posizioni articolate, così estreme da rasentare la caricatura.

Quali oggetti e perché

Se Abend si concentra su concetti, parole e definizioni, Krause affronta come si scelgono (o non si scelgono) gli oggetti di ricerca, partendo dalla distinzione tra oggetti di ricerca materiali (*material research objects*)

e oggetti di ricerca epistemici (*epistemic research objects*)⁸. L'oggetto materiale è il concreto e specifico oggetto studiato dal gruppo di ricerca, mentre l'oggetto epistemico è l'obiettivo cognitivo di una ricerca. Muovendo – criticandole – dalle ricostruzioni razionalistiche della produzione scientifica, Krause sostiene che gli oggetti materiali non sono sempre scelti per ragioni metodologiche o teoriche trasparenti perché spesso i gruppi di ricerca si limitano a studiare “casi modello” (*model cases*, appunto). La selezione degli oggetti materiali di ricerca è influenzata da una serie di questioni e considerazioni, alcune strategiche, altre meno⁹, altre ancora strategiche in modi diversi (Krause, 2021, 33), ivi compresa l'influenza delle decisioni passate, che avvia un ciclo in cui gli stessi oggetti vengono ripetutamente selezionati, consolidandosi come sostituti privilegiati. Un'inerzia che si potrebbe definire *pianificata e desiderata*, incorporata nelle infrastrutture scientifiche materiali, contrapposta all'inerzia *non pianificata e in qualche modo indesiderata*, come ricordavano anche Clarke e Fujimura (1992), ripresi dalla stessa Krause.

La biologia all'inizio del XX secolo è stata investita da una spiccata “industrializzazione” che ha portato con sé una sorta di “taylorismo culturale” (Krause, 2021, 55) favorendo così la standardizzazione degli oggetti della ricerca: costi, tempi, parcellizzazione entrano con forza e in modo esplicito nel discorso scientifico. D'altronde, se laboratori differenti in differenti luoghi usano gli stessi animali – siano essi il moscerino della frutta *Drosophila melanogaster* o il topo Wistar – sarà più facile comparare i risultati, favorendo la cumulatività della scienza (ivi, 12). Riprendendo i lavori di Fujimura e i “pacchetti standardizzati” (Fujimura, 1987, 1996a, 1996b), Krause sottolinea come questi organismi sono sempre più usati, ricevendo attenzione e risorse – indipendentemente da motivazioni epistemiche – e diventano quindi degli “oggetti privilegiati”. Il National Institutes of Health degli Stati Uniti, ad es., mantiene un elenco di organismi riconosciuti come organismi modello: se i gruppi di ricerca scegliessero autonomamente, non è detto che punterebbero sullo stesso organismo (Krause, 2021, 39). Ovviamente, come riconosce Krause stessa, l'oggetto privilegiato non è da considerare sempre in modo negativo (ivi, 31).

Krause individua schemi analoghi nelle scienze sociali: alcuni oggetti materiali di ricerca diventano privilegiati perché ripetutamente usati come rappresentazioni di altro. Un quartiere specifico di Boston può essere studiato per esplorare più in generale il concetto di “rigenerazione urba-

⁸ Krause fa risalire la distinzione ad Aristotele, ripresa – talvolta con accezioni e termini parzialmente differenti – da altri autori: “technical research object”, “object of experience”, “proxy”, “research materials”.

⁹ «Considering archival research, scholars do travel to archives, but, as historians will discuss informally, some archives are in nicer places than others» (Krause, 2021, 45).

na”; Chicago è usata negli studi urbani come “modello” per comprendere le dinamiche urbane globali; le fabbriche automobilistiche diventano casi rappresentativi per studiare il mondo del lavoro industriale; la Rivoluzione Francese diventa il paragone di riferimento per ogni rivoluzione; gli studi sui medici hanno definito l’agenda della ricerca sulle professioni. Ci troviamo di fronte a oggetti di ricerca studiati ripetutamente e l’uso inconsapevole o implicito di oggetti privilegiati può distorcere la nostra comprensione di fenomeni complessi. Krause richiama quanto scriveva Small a proposito degli studi sulla povertà: scegliere Chicago, come hanno fatto molti studiosi (Venkatesh, 2006; Wacquant, 2008; Wilson, 1987) ha fatto sì che i quartieri che via via venivano abbandonati dalla *middle class* fossero identificati poveri di istituzioni locali e i loro residenti isolati socialmente; se una generazione di ricercatori avesse sviluppato le teorie più importanti sulla concentrazione della povertà non a Chicago ma a New York, forse ora si riterrebbe il sovraffollamento e non l’isolamento la quintessenza dell’esperienza del ghetto urbano nero (Small, 2014). Da qui la necessità di un quadro concettuale per l’analisi comparata del ruolo degli oggetti materiali di ricerca (Krause, 2021, 10).

La differenza tra scienze biologiche e sociali, da questo punto di vista, sta nel diverso tipo di strumenti usati per perseguire la standardizzazione: quando i biologi studiano una serie di topi standardizzati non studiano un campione rappresentativo di topi, roditori o altri animali; etichettano, moltiplicano e standardizzano un topo specifico in modo che possa servire come base stabile per la comprensione. Il sistema modello è “esemplare”, non “rappresentativo” (Creager *et al.*, 2007; Krause, 2021, 66). Nelle scienze sociali si preferisce non standardizzare gli oggetti di ricerca e si ricorre a tecniche di campionamento per superare (quando ci si riesce) l’ostacolo della non-fungibilità. La standardizzazione avviene ugualmente, in modo implicito e non regolato da convenzioni condivise: scegliendo/selezionando oggetti privilegiati. La conseguenza è l’impossibilità – o estrema difficoltà – di sfruttare appieno i vantaggi derivanti dalla concentrazione di attenzione su determinati oggetti: la variazione tra gli esemplari degli stessi oggetti privilegiati (diversi tipi di ospedali o di medici) è spesso casuale e non intenzionale e rende difficile la cumulatività dei risultati.

Per questo motivo Krause dedica alcune pagine alla critica della scelta di Merton (1987) di parlare di “strategic research materials”: secondo lei l’aggettivo è fuorviante (Krause, 2021, 34) perché trascura l’influenza di fattori non strategici – convenzioni accademiche, accessibilità dei materiali o finanziamenti privati – e non terrebbe conto dell’inerzia provocata dagli investimenti precedenti nell’infrastruttura della ricerca. Merton, tuttavia, usa l’aggettivo “strategico” non per riferirsi alle caratteristiche di un’azione razionale, al suo essere strumentale per raggiungere un obiettivo, ma all’importanza che “il fatto” riveste per la teoria: «the unexpected fact must be “strategic”, i.e. that it must permit implications which bear

upon generalized theory» (Merton, 1948, 507). Strategico, per Merton, è l'oggetto di ricerca una volta inserito in un quadro teorico¹⁰, non il comportamento o le motivazioni di chi lo sceglie. Ovviamente l'importanza è decisa da chi lo sceglie, ma la scelta può avvenire anche a posteriori, come lo stesso Merton afferma a proposito della serendipità, riconoscendo quindi esplicitamente la rilevanza dei fattori non strategici ricordati da Krause.

Krause avrebbe potuto approfondire il discorso sulle infrastrutture della ricerca anche per quanto riguarda le scienze sociali: da molti anni, ormai, le banche dati si stanno diffondendo anche in queste discipline – si pensi alla disponibilità di dati da statistiche ufficiali o da fonti secondarie come EVS, WVS, o ai materiali disponibili tramite Gesis – che in tempi di ristrettezze economiche (almeno per quanto riguarda i fondi da destinare alla ricerca) è possibile che vadano a sovvertire il processo di ricerca “guidando la domanda”, inducendo a usare solo le informazioni già disponibili.

I fattori che «sponsorizzano»¹¹ – avvantaggiandoli – alcuni potenziali sostituti (*stand-ins*) rispetto ad altri possono essere risorse finanziarie, ma anche pratici o simbolici, interni al campo scientifico o esterni. Krause non si riferisce solo agli interessi commerciali o di politica pubblica generalmente riconosciuti, ma include attori e legami spesso trascurati, come quelli con attivisti, giornalisti o gruppi di interesse speciale (Krause, 2021, 41-42), toccando, seppure molto lateralmente, il tema sempre più centrale della circolazione della scienza (Rodriguez Medina, 2014; Parra Saiani, 2024). Alcuni oggetti materiali beneficiano di una particolare attenzione grazie a fattori extra-scientifici: media che rendono alcuni temi più popolari di altri, subculture accademiche che privilegiano determinati oggetti o fattori storici, come anniversari di eventi o opportunità politiche contingenti, l'accessibilità dei dati e disponibilità di finanziamenti specifici, la pressione delle riviste accademiche. Allo stesso tempo, l'accesso può essere limitato o negato non solo nella fase di *produzione della conoscenza*, ma anche in quella della sua *circolazione*, come conseguenza di disparità nelle infrastrutture accademiche globali: il ruolo dominante delle riviste scientifiche anglo-americane fa sì che oggetti di ricerca provenienti dai loro contesti siano sponsorizzati (nell'accezione datane da Krause), mentre studi su altre regioni sono derubricati a pubblicazioni “locali”, rafforzando il dominio delle istituzioni accademiche centrali e marginalizzando le voci periferiche, perpetuando l'asimmetria globale della conoscenza

¹⁰ Merton (1948, 1987) cita un oggetto di ricerca triviale (un lapsus, un refuso) che diventa strategico grazie a Freud.

¹¹ Nell'accezione di Krause, «il concetto di sponsorizzazione – associato in modo preponderante alle squadre sportive e ai singoli atleti – evidenzia come particolari unità siano legate alle risorse, senza suggerire una completa acquisizione di queste unità» (2021, 41).

(Krause, 2021, 104). Non basta però essere più inclusivi e accogliere visioni “altre”: anche le teorie postcoloniali – che pur combattono da sempre una visione euro-US-centrica – non sono esenti da tali tendenze: riprendendo le critiche avanzate da Mignolo (1994), le teorie sviluppate in specifici contesti, come il postcolonialismo indiano, vengono spesso applicate ad altri casi senza un confronto critico, replicando il meccanismo dell’“industria dell’applicazione” e limitando la diversità nella produzione teorica: la tensione non si risolve passando semplicemente da un caso modello all’altro (Krause, 2021, 111), riproducendo nuove forme di colonialismo accademico (Mignolo, 1994, 58).

Conclusioni

Krause e Abend si occupano entrambi di standardizzazione: mentre Abend si occupa della standardizzazione di concetti, termini, distinzioni, etc. all’interno delle comunità scientifiche, Krause si focalizza sulla standardizzazione (o sulla sua assenza) degli oggetti di ricerca materiali. Gli oggetti privilegiati non sono studiati sempre per merito intrinseco, ma sono spesso il prodotto di pratiche accademiche, tradizioni disciplinari e convenzioni consolidate, e invita ad adottare strategie di ricerca basate su oggetti di ricerca trascurati. Le due opere si intrecciano nell’invito a una maggiore consapevolezza critica delle pratiche disciplinari, sia che si tratti della selezione di oggetti di ricerca (Krause) sia che si tratti dell’uso dei termini e delle distinzioni linguistiche (Abend). Entrambi i testi offrono spunti per analizzare e migliorare il modo in cui costruiamo conoscenze e norme, aumentando la trasparenza – fondamentale per ogni attività scientifica – contribuendo a un dialogo tra discipline e culture.

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Antonio Martella, *Scrolling politics. La comunicazione politica alla prova di TikTok*, Milano, Meltemi, 2024, pp. 146.

In molte occasioni, gli studiosi e le studiose del campo dei media ritengono di aver compreso molto delle dinamiche soggiacenti e derivanti dal pervasivo uso dei social media. Non di rado questa consapevolezza è motivata. D'altronde è almeno dal 2010 che li studiano con assiduità, profondità teorica e varietà metodologica; hanno cominciato con Facebook, proseguito e indugiato molto su Twitter (per le maggiori possibilità di scaricare dati) e proseguito lambendo in diversi modi tutte le sfaccettature che rientrano nella categoria social media.

Nonostante ciò, rispetto a *TikTok* c'è ancora molto lavoro da compiere. Gli utilizzi di *TikTok* non sono ancora stati compresi fino in fondo, come non è stato compreso il ruolo che assume nei repertori mediali delle generazioni più giovani, i modi in cui intreccia le scelte politiche. *TikTok* è una piattaforma caotica e personalizzata, ma allo stesso tempo capace di rafforzare l'agenda. Che dire di una piattaforma così atipica rispetto alla comunicazione politica? Cosa si può dire della sua capacità di indirizzare lo *scrolling* – lo scorrimento del contenuto – che è sicuramente guidato dall'algoritmo, ma che può apparire caotico e contingente? Come si fa ad attribuire un senso compiuto a questo susseguirsi di contenuti eterogenei?

Se queste domande si impongono appare necessario trovare qualche risposta nel libro *Scrolling politics* di Antonio Martella.

Nel libro infatti si ritrova una accurata spiegazione del funzionamento di TikTok, declinato nella sua evoluzione *storica* rispetto agli altri social media più popolari. Questa ricognizione traccia le origini di *TikTok* partendo appunto da *Musical.ly* per arrivare alle sue dinamiche contemporanee. Ricostruzione necessaria e molto informativa. Unica obiezione rispetto a questa ricostruzione è la quasi totale mancanza di riflessione relativa alle dinamiche di potere. Il tema probabilmente avrebbe portato lontano dagli specifici intenti e interessi del libro, però è un punto che non può essere trascurato nelle sue dinamiche macro economiche, politiche e legate alle percezioni e attitudini delle persone che usano la piattaforma. In generale uno approccio critico, come sovente usato nei *platform studies*, avrebbe accresciuto il livello di competenza del lettore rispetto alle dinamiche relative a *TikTok*.

Questa prima parte del libro restituisce, descrive e commenta anche le funzionalità di *TikTok*; si parla della semplicità della sua interfaccia, con un approfondimento legato alla sezione "Per Te", addentrandosi poi nella descrizione delle funzionalità e pratiche che il social attiva. Fra le altre peculiarità, come ben

spiega Martella, il fatto che *TikTok* sia un ambiente che si distribuisce principalmente attorno al contenuto e non alle relazioni. I social media più vecchi enfatizzano la popolarità pregressa, rafforzano le relazioni, sovente creano un ponte verso la vita offline. *TikTok* ha le potenzialità per far sì che i contenuti abbiano una vita propria, indipendente da chi li crea e distribuisce. In questa prima parte del libro si usa sovente la parola *messaggio*, in particolare prima che si tracci questa utile distinzione tra contenuti e relazioni. L'utilizzo è comprensibile e in molte occasioni permette al libro di prendere delle scorciatoie linguistiche verso una lettura più pratica. Però, l'utilizzo di quel termine rimane una scorciatoia linguistica, che riporta gli studi sui media a un passato ormai superato e che si scontra ancor di più con la polisemia e la multimedialità dei contenuti che circolano su una piattaforma come *TikTok* (polisemia e multimedialità che emerge con evidenza poi nella parte di ricerca del terzo capitolo). Parlare di messaggio, ancor di più quando si declina la discussione sull'ambiente della comunicazione politica, riporta a contesti tipo le prime tribune elettorali della RAI. Sarebbe bastata una piccola accortezza iniziale, anche solo in nota, sottolineando che per indicare la molteplicità dei testi audiovisivi che scorrono in *TikTok* si sarebbe usata la parola *messaggio*, pur sapendo che è una semplificazione.

Il primo capitolo, inoltre, introduce e discute i capisaldi della letteratura scientifica di riferimento. Questa parte delinea e definisce con accuratezza, completezza ma anche accessibilità, la letteratura di riferimento, quella su cui bisogna fare affidamento per comprendere le dinamiche (algoritmiche) dei social media contemporanei. La rassegna è davvero di facile uso e comprensione, prendendo in considerazione molti lavori, tra i quali spiccano come imprescindibili quelli di José Van Dijck e Thomas Poell (2013, *Understanding Social Media Logic*) e di Ulrike Klinger e Jacob Svensson (2015, *The emergence of network media logic in political communication: A theoretical approach*, «New Media & Society», 17, 8, 1241-1257). I primi due autori hanno introdotto il concetto di *social media logic*, con le sue caratteristiche di *programmabilità*, *popolarità*, *connettività* e “datafication” che rimangono imprescindibili nella lettura del funzionamento dei social media. Impianto, come noto, poi ampliato nel successivo e fortunatissimo libro *Platform society*. Klinger e Svensson (2015) propongono il loro aggiornamento del concetto di media logic e la sua trasformazione in network media logic. In questa parte l'autore avrebbe potuto maggiormente approfondire il concetto di media ibrido, accennato facendo giusto riferimento a Andrew Chadwick (2013, *The hybrid media system: Politics and power*, Oxford University Press). È proprio il costrutto analitico di media ibrido ad aiutare nella transizione tra il concetto di media logic a quello di *network media logic*.

Il secondo capitolo è una cesura che prova a cesellare in questo quadro tutta una letteratura più marcatamente legata alla comunicazione politica. Tra i tre capitoli, questo è forse il più debole. I motivi sono diversi. Il primo: molta di quella letteratura è presentata come una produzione legata a un contesto mediale totalmente diverso (si parla di personalizzazione, politica pop, celebrity politics da ben prima dell'esistenza dei social media). Questa letteratura appare talvolta forzata se inserita nel contesto della politica piattformizzata. È sovente necessario riutilizzare schemi analitici e concettuali che si sono già mostrati abili nel comprendere contesti passati, ma nello specifico contesto qui analizzato appaiono talvolta forzati. In questo libro si usano i concetti di personalizzazione e intrattenimento derivanti prevalentemente da Van Zoonen (2005, *Entertaining the citizen: When politics and*

popular culture converge, Rowman & Littlefield) e Van Aelst *et al.* (Van Aelst P., Sheafer T., Stanyer J., 2012, *The personalization of mediated political communication: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings*, «Journalism», 13 2, 203-220). In controluce si possono cogliere dei bagliori capaci di intercettare i modi in cui Matteo Salvini mangia spaghetti online o Matteo Renzi corre per Firenze, ma appunto quegli strumenti concettuali non colgono le citate caratteristiche di *programmabilità*, *popolarità*, *connettività* e “datafication”. Questi concetti, inoltre, sono introdotti dalla più ampia cornice della mediatizzazione, che come si accennava poco sopra, cambia radicalmente i suoi elementi per via della social media e della network logic. Utilizzare il concetto di *mediatizzazione* è sicuramente opportuno, ma laddove utilizzato dovrebbe introdurre e non seguire l’impianto del libro. Le molte ottime riflessioni e intuizioni successive che presenta il libro sarebbero dovute partire da una nuova discussione di mediatizzazione e media logic, da lì parlare del resto. Forse anche la precipua rassegna legata alle componenti di personalizzazione e celebrazione avrebbe dovuto precedere il tutto per poi calarlo nella trattazione relativa ai social e a *TikTok*.

Il terzo capitolo aggiusta tutte le possibili aporie qui evidenziate. La ricerca qui presentata è rivelatrice per diversi motivi. È innovativa proprio per la capacità di analizzare *TikTok* alla sua prima vera prova durante una campagna elettorale italiana (il riferimento qui è quella al 2022), calandolo nella complessità di un sistema mediale ibrido e di una campagna elettorale scontata negli esiti ma non priva di avvenimenti. Sono diversi gli spunti che questa ricerca offre. Per esempio, il fatto che in questi ambienti c’è un ribaltamento della visibilità. Non sono i soliti noti ad avere capacità di agenda, a comporre e distribuire i contenuti capaci poi di diffondersi. Il numero degli attori è alto e la politica ne esce ridimensionata nella sua visibilità (per quanto, come si scrive a pagina 90: “Solo l’account di Giorgia Meloni è classificabile come *Mega influencer*”). Martella riesce a definire quali siano le caratteristiche di quella che definisce come *Tiktokizzazione* della politica; l’analisi multivariata che effettua sui video analizzati rileva otto cluster, a) video provenienti da altri media, b) video registrati in presa diretta, c) video ambientati in spazi pubblici, d) video presentati con la grammatica della commedia, e) video registrati in spazi privati, f) video più lunghi presentati principalmente da media tradizionali che offrono i propri contenuti anche in *TikTok*, g) video brevi, ironici e diretti al pubblico e infine h) video brevi in cui non ci sono persone né setting. Anche solo questa tipologia è un risultato chiarificatore dei contenuti che circolano sulla piattaforma. Ci sono infine altri due aspetti rilevanti e controintuitivi, ben discussi dall’autore nelle conclusioni. Il primo, per quanto una diffusa vulgata intraveda in questo social il luogo del divertimento e della leggerezza, la comunicazione politica lì veicolata non è in prevalenza legata all’intrattenimento. L’altro aspetto altrettanto interessante, forse meno controintuitivo, è la diffusa partecipazione dal basso. Sin dal primo sviluppo del web 2.0, con l’introduzione di concetti quali *prosumer*, molti studiosi e studiose di comunicazione politica hanno previsto che le ricerche avrebbero mostrato una più alta partecipazione dal basso e una differenziazione delle fonti. Il libro di Martella e la *scrolling politics* attestano che il momento è arrivato e lo si trova tra i contenuti personalizzati di *TikTok*.

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Lorenzo Todesco, *Interazioni fatali. Uomini e donne che uccidono in Italia*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2024, pp. 360.

Perché svolgere una ricerca sugli omicidi in Italia? La risposta è nel libro di Lorenzo Todesco: *Interazioni fatali. Uomini e donne che uccidono in Italia* pubblicato nel 2024 per il Mulino nell'interessante collana "Culture, politica e società" diretta da Anna Caffarena e Rocco Sciarrone.

Non potendo restituire l'ampiezza della trattazione, che circumnaviga l'omicidio a tutto tondo, vale la pena volgere lo sguardo alle tre dimensioni innovative di questo lavoro.

La prima è quella storica. Da questo punto di vista, Todesco ricostruisce il fenomeno nell'arco di ben 135 anni: da poco dopo l'Unità d'Italia a oggi. In questa parte vengono messi in luce non solo i cambiamenti quantitativi dei flussi in aumento, in crollo e in diminuzione dell'omicidio, ma anche le cause di tali variazioni in rapporto alle caratteristiche specifiche del caso italiano rispetto agli altri paesi europei. All'interno dell'Italia, si offre poi un'ulteriore analisi comparativa, affrontando le differenze territoriali, il periodo post-unitario, gli anni di piombo, gli omicidi delle mafie, i casi risolti e irrisolti. L'obiettivo sembra voler essere quello di studiare gli omicidi per conoscere la storia della società italiana. Il punto di vista analitico che ne emerge è decisamente peculiare anche se perfezionabile.

La seconda dimensione è quella quantitativa. Un conto sono i dati raccolti dalle statistiche delle istituzioni o prodotti dalle ricerche di alcuni centri o enti di analisi, e un conto sono le informazioni derivanti dall'interpretazione di questi dati o numeri. E se raccogliere i dati è importante, saperli trasformare in informazioni e conoscenze lo è ancora di più. Questo secondo compito spetta innanzitutto allo scienziato sociale. Il contributo di Todesco va in questa seconda direzione. La fonte principale dei dati è rappresentata dalle indagini EURES sugli omicidi in Italia (ma non solo, si vedano le pp. 19-20), a partire dalle quali Todesco elabora incroci specifici nel tempo e li interseca con le tre classiche teorie sociologiche di spiegazione delle cause dell'omicidio (strutturalista, culturalista, interazionista). La prospettiva sociologica e i dati consentono la costruzione di una conoscenza del fenomeno molto diversa da quella della maggior parte del giornalismo nei vari mezzi di informazione. Qui spesso, per questioni di tempo e spazio, alcuni dati e informazioni rilevanti vengono trascurate. Una ricerca sociologica come quella di Todesco, che quindi non è soltanto statistica in senso stretto, ben inteso, riesce anche a essere più completa, e utile alla costruzione di un sapere il più possibile attendibile. A questo proposito, chi leggerà questo lavoro potrà comprendere la forte correlazione esistente tra le teorie socio-criminologiche, i moventi dell'omicidio e le caratteristiche degli autori, delle vittime nonché delle loro interazioni-relazioni.

Questo elemento si evince anche nella terza dimensione, la più originale, che contraddistingue il libro: l'analisi di genere dell'omicidio. Un unicum per la ricerca sociologica italiana sul crimine, ma in linea con una certa consapevolezza acquisita da tempo anche nella sociologia – che sempre più si interfaccia con gli studi femministi e le prospettive di genere. Todesco dedica a questo discorso tutta la terza parte del volume (pp. 183-296), articolandola in ben quattro capitoli: uomini che uccidono uomini, uomini che uccidono donne, donne che uccidono uomini, donne che uccidono donne.

Anche in questo caso, va rilevata la capacità dell'autore di far dialogare in

modo costante e comparativo i quattro capitoli. Quello però più sviluppato e a cui porre attenzione utilmente nel dibattito scientifico attuale è il sesto, intitolato “Uomini che uccidono le donne”. In primo luogo, la trattazione presenta notevoli spunti analitici sul femminicidio rispetto ai problemi posti dalla traduzione della “definizione operativa” del fenomeno. In secondo luogo, oltre ai dati della situazione italiana, in questo capitolo Todesco fa spesso riferimento al concetto di femminicidio della sociologa Diana E.H. Russel e a due studi che ritiene centrali e collegati tra loro sul “femminicidio intimo”: si tratta dei testi di Fiona Brookman del 2005 (*Understanding Homicide*, SAGE Publications Ltd) e di R. Emerson Dodash e Russel P. Dobash del 2015 (*When Men Murder Women*, Oxford University Press).

Il femminicidio intimo è infatti il principale tipo di violenza omicida maschile contro le donne: «il 92% di tutti i femminicidi, di cui il 63% tra coniugi o conviventi, il 23% tra ex, il 6% tra fidanzati o amanti» (p. 237). Questi dati, per l'Italia, sono confermati dalla Commissione parlamentare di inchiesta sul femminicidio nel 2022. Todesco li collega alle teorie sulle motivazioni dell'azione omicida, alle relazioni tra uomini e donne, all'età, alla cittadinanza, all'istruzione, ai luoghi e alle tipologie delle armi del delitto, alle teorie criminologiche – dimostrando la strettissima correlazione di tutto questo con le disuguaglianze tra generi e nelle relazioni tra questi.

Studiando la relazione tra autore e vittima dell'omicidio, è possibile registrare delle differenze di genere notevoli per quanto sociologicamente prevedibili, poiché in linea con le posizioni che la struttura sociale patriarcale attribuisce a donne e uomini: le donne sono maggiormente uccise in ambito familiare, gli uomini in ambienti criminali nei quali hanno svolto la propria carriera deviante. Tuttavia, è sbagliato affermare o credere che se la percentuale delle uccisioni delle donne da parte di conoscenti è aumentata, l'omicidio sia anche al contempo più diffuso. Infatti, non è così: «questo crimine non risulta in aumento nell'ultimo trentennio; lo è, invece, – e in misura consistente –, la sua prevalenza sul totale degli omicidi» (p. 15).

Se da una parte la storia dell'omicidio in Italia è infatti la storia di un declino, dall'altra, come nella maggior parte dei fenomeni sociali, una ricerca sociologica sull'omicidio continua oggi più che mai a essere utile proprio perché «ogni omicidio è un crimine unico e irripetibile, in quanto ci racconta una storia: la storia dell'autore e della vittima, del loro *incontro fatale* e delle macro e micro-dinamiche che hanno fatto sì che il primo uccidesse e la seconda morisse» (corsivo mio, p. 299). E il libro di Todesco, pur non entrando nelle specificità interne delle singole storie delle interazioni conflittuali tra autore e vittima, ci restituisce con grande respiro temporale la forte eterogeneità sociale di questo tipo di crimine, mettendoci a disposizione degli strumenti analitici per orientarci tra dati e teorie, oltre che per spiegarne e comprenderne scientificamente proprio le dinamiche (macro, meso e micro) che lo sottendono.

Per quanto in Italia il numero degli omicidi diminuisca o rimanga costante ormai da tempo, la ricerca di Todesco riesce a compiere un'analisi sociale della complessità e dell'eterogeneità del fenomeno, intrecciando insieme tre principali dimensioni: quella storica, quella quantitativa e quella di genere. In questo senso, siamo davanti a un lavoro innovativo, oltre che sociologico in senso forte. Ciò è ancora più vero, se si pensa che, pur trattandosi di un reato considerato “grave”,

in Italia tutto sommato non se ne sa molto – non come fenomeno sociale e al di fuori della cronaca nera.

Questo libro ha il merito di aver riempito un vuoto scientifico, per quanto alcuni aspetti – primo fra tutti l’analisi del movente dell’omicidio – non siano sempre chiari e facili da indagare. Diversamente da come saremmo portati a pensare, a detta dell’autore, l’analisi dei fascicoli processuali “merita sicuramente di essere battuta, ma sapendo che non è quella giusta per ottenere una fotografia aggiornata del fenomeno dell’omicidio sul territorio nazionale. A questo scopo, meglio utilizzare i dati riportati dai media, con tutti i limiti del caso, in combinazione con quelli prodotti dal Ministero dell’Interno” (pp. 311-312). A più riprese, e soprattutto nella parte finale del volume, è l’autore stesso a svelare i limiti della sua ricerca e in generale della ricerca su uno dei fatti-reati tra i più difficili da studiare per almeno tre ordini di motivi: disponibilità di dati, politiche di controllo e prevenzione, criticità della classificazione per sesso sia dell’autore sia della vittima. Tuttavia, la scrittura di Todesco fa attraversare al lettore, anche a quello che non si occupa per ricerca e/o per professione del tema, diversi livelli di approfondimento al momento possibili e ne apre nuovi da prospettare in futuro. Probabilmente, questa sua attenta e consolidata postura conoscitiva deriva dall’aver riflettuto e ragionato sul tema da più di venti anni, ovvero a partire dal lavoro di tesi di laurea incentrato proprio sui fascicoli processuali e sulle sentenze degli omicidi.

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Alon Helled, *Between Enlightenment and Obscurantism. The Jewish and democratic schizophrenia of Israeli sovereignty*

The State of Israel could not have been founded without the legacy of the European Enlightenment. Its founding ideology, i.e., European-born Zionism, acquired its political and social savoir-faire through the pursuit of modernization. Catalysed by the rise of “scientific” anti-Semitism, a societal transformation was engendered oscillating between societal rejection (the reaction of ultra-Orthodoxy) and the desire for civil equality through assimilation. This changed the hitherto stratified “habitus” of European Jewry. The independence of the Jewish and democratic state in 1948 was the fruit of these contradictory processes. Nevertheless, the equilibrium between the two fundamental components of Israeli sovereignty is in constant conflict. The particularistic Jewish character conditions democratic universalism, while the state’s legal infrastructure struggles to find convergence and institutional balance. The essay explores the obscure aspects of the Israeli paradox and weighs them against Israel’s progressive auto-cratization and democratic regression.

Maria Cristina Marchetti, *Identity and values in the European Union: towards a new form of obscurantism in European societies?*

The process of rationalisation that has characterised the modern West for centuries culminated in the Enlightenment. The universalist values it proposed were the reference point for the development of Western civilisation and a series of achievements in civil, political and social rights that still form the basis of modern democracies today.

At the same time, the universalist nature of these values has come into conflict with other models of society, leading to the emergence of a widening gap between the West and the rest of the world. Recently, this gap has widened even within the cradle of the Enlightenment: Europe.

Indeed, if from a global perspective, «Western values are steadily diverging from the rest of the world’s» («The Economist», 2023), as highlighted by the latest *World Values Survey*, the Western world and Europe in particular are witnessing a “cultural backlash” (Norris, Inglehart, 2018) that underlies the rise of various forms of populism, sovereignism, and nationalism. In the European context, the gap with Western values has become an internal opposition between the European Union and Europe as a whole.

Matteo Finco, *Claims inflation, modern individualism and immunity. Paradoxes of inclusion in the West*

In today's world society, the proliferation of claims could be seen as a problematic consequence of functional differentiation and modern individualism: everyone could potentially be included in every subsystem of society (economy, law, politics, etc.), but has to build his or her own personal identity through decisions. Claims are then the result of the attempts to be individual (self-determined, specific, different), i.e. to respond to contingency and complexity. While the Western tradition socially legitimates the claim to be different from others, this legacy seems to be challenged today. The paper analyses four emerging tendencies relating to claims to protection and inclusion based not on the individual per se, but on specific memberships, on the one hand, and on the insistence on affectivity, on the other. The hypothesis is that these claims reflect the difficulty of responding to structural change in a society dominated by contingency and uncertainty.

Emanuela Dal Zotto, Chiara Marchetti, *Lights in the night from asylum: innovative integration practices and signs of a new citizenship in Italy*

In a European context, and in particular in Italy, where nationalist and emergency rhetoric supports policies of strict closure towards migrants, the reception and integration processes of asylum seekers and holders of international protection, as well as the right to asylum itself, appear to be strongly constrained by decisions taken at the national level. However, this contribution, based on an empirical analysis of the Community Matching and Inclusive Universities for Refugees experiences, highlights the existence of discursive and operational 'interstices' within the 'battlefield' of Multi-level Governance. In these spaces, practices that are initially only original but later socially innovative emerge, capable of transforming (albeit to a limited extent) the societies in which they occur, particularly with regard to the issue of protection. This transformation primarily involves the community, which, is called upon to participate in the integration processes alongside refugees through the creation of relationships, ties and links. Secondly, it reshapes the concept of citizenship. In this view, the recognition of the rights that constitute citizenship is not a hard-fought achievement, but rather the foundation of a path that, supported by intercultural relations, leads to the highest degree of integration (indicated by elements such as access to housing, education, employment, and health care).

Chiara Denaro, *Rethinking the sea as a public space. Claims for justice in the central Mediterranean*

In recent decades, the mobility of people by sea and the efforts of the coastal states to control their own borders have led to a constant reconfiguration of the Mediterranean Sea. If we look at the central Mediterranean using real-time mapping programmes, we can visualise a multitude of actors crossing it every day: however, the picture we see is partially incomplete. Military vessels or other assets carrying out border controls or monitoring fisheries are invisible, as are the

unseaworthy boats used by those who have no option but to take irregular and risky routes to exercise their right to flee.

This article proposes to rethink the sea as a “public space” and focuses on its accessibility as a matter of justice. Depending on their status and role, those who try to have access to the sea – from a physical and political perspective – face various restrictions. Furthermore, when claiming access to this space, they are confronted with various forms of (in-)justice on different levels. Justice may concern issues of mobility, epistemology and accountability among others, but it is also directly at stake when it comes to reclaiming access to a space that is supposed to be public.

After situating the sea in the scientific debate on public space, this article examines the constraints faced by seaborne migrants, search and rescue institutions, civil society organisations and commercial actors in accessing the central Mediterranean and how each of them deals with the “justice gap” that exists at sea, as a multidimensional concept made of mobility injustice, epistemic injustice and a lack of state accountability for violence and rights violations. Finally, it argues that access to the sea and related struggles for justice can not only contribute to reshaping the sea as a public space but can foster processes of remaking justice from below.

Alberto Baldissera, *An Italy devoid of merit*

Recent decades have seen Italy's economy grow in a modest fashion when compared to that of other Western countries. From 2000 to 2019, Italian GDP has exhibited an average annual growth rate of 0.32%. From 1970 to 2019, there was a halt in the growth of general factor productivity. A reduction, from 2000 on. Consequently, both wages and per capita GDP have decreased. In a recent book (2022), L. Codogno and G. Galli posit the argument that these phenomena are contingent on the limited diffusion of meritocratic criteria within Italian society, as evident in institutions such as schools, universities, the judiciary, bureaucracy, and small businesses. Instead, privileges in favour of lobbies and social and/or professional groups; affirmative actions and reserved quotas; limitations of competition are widespread. The explanation offered is substantiated by extensive empirical and comparative evidence. The authors appear however to underestimate sources of variation that are independent of the diffusion of meritocracy. In particular, the existence of large areas of social disorder (e.g. widespread tax evasion) and institutional disorder (e.g. prodigal pension policies, from 1968 to the present).

Paolo Parra Saiani, *Back to basics. Research objects, concepts, words, and distinctions*

The essay deals – through the analysis of two recently published volumes – with some of the most important phases of social research: the specification of concepts, the clarification of definitions and the rationale behind the choice of research objects themselves. Phases that are often neglected, to the detriment of transparency, itself the foundation of all scientific activity.

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