

COUNTERING HATE SPEECH IN THE DIGITAL ERA THROUGH A PEDAGOGICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH IN TEACHING PRACTICE

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Hate speaks through what are defined as Hate Speech, which aim to foment or encourage denigration and defamation towards individuals or groups, subjecting them to verbal and non-verbal violence based on ethnic, physical, cultural, sexual, or religious diversity. Specifically, the introduction of Social Media in our digital era has contributed to the spread of this phenomenon, through their online version, called Online Hate Speech. Supporting the pedagogical position according to everyone, by nature, is educable, and that one of the promoting factors of HS is a miseducation in critical thinking, to counter this fact are necessary a re-education towards assuming a critical and deep stance facing reality, to the discernment of one's own truth, and to the relationship with others. Therefore, schools and universities should be a fertile ground for educating future citizens to think critically about the world we live in, maybe supported by educational and learning activities which can promote this need through the acquisition of soft skills useful for the purpose, experimenting active and participative teaching strategies for fostering active learning. Relating to this, an important aspect to further reflect on corresponds to *Faculty Development* programs.

HS; critical thinking; education, Social Media, teaching practice

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS HATE?

Respectively, Treccani and the Devoto-Oli Dictionary define 'hate' as a feeling of strong and persistent aversion, by which one desires harm and ruin of others for others. So, a feeling of deep hostility and antipathy. Namely, a resolute hostility that usually implies a negative judgment associated with rejection, repugnance towards someone, or the intense desire to harm someone. Someway, we can say that hate is a feeling that has accompanied human life since ancient times, leading to a lack of authentic thinking, and hindering the promotion and development of ones own and others humanity. This feeling leads individuals to perceive diversity as something to distance, denigrate, and in extreme cases, desire to annihilate. Even if is not always simple to actually know the specific reason why one human being hates another one – because of the different nature of this condition, that it could be due to cultural, social, value-based, personal issues, and also because of the

fact that each one is different from every other who has got a life and an educational story at the same time different from everyone else – it is important to be aware of the psychological mechanisms that lie beneath (Amnesty International, 2019). The first is the social cognition, by which we mean a cognitive process that, by classifying reality incentives into categories, aims to simplify human daily life, influencing the way humans think and act in it: when we talk about social category, the related process of categorization leads to identifying individual subjects as members of a specific social group because they share certain characteristics of that one, enabling them to predict the behavior of others and act accordingly (Crisp & Turner, 2017). However, social categorization is the process behind stereotyping and prejudice, which can lead to discriminatory actions, attitudes, and behaviors (Amnesty International 2019, 11; Crisp & Turner, 2017). The second mechanism corresponds to ones own worldview, which stems from the totality of ones emotional structure, the perception of our personal and social identity, the influence of the experiences and events of our existence, and our beliefs and convictions: the moment one encounters a worldview that differs from ones own, one may feel a feeling of discomfort – cognitive dissonance – and the need to eliminate it, changing its meaning, re-aligning it consistently with ones own (Amnesty International, 2019, 7-10).

1. HOW DOES HATE SPEAK?

It is possible to say that hate speaks through its language, composed by hate words that together form Hate Speech (Ferrini & Paris, 2019). HS are commonly defined as expressions of intolerance – predominantly verbal (written or oral), accompanied by or related to visual (pictures, photographs and similar) dimensions, but with non-verbal consequences and possibilities – primarily directed against minorities, that are aimed at expressing and spreading hatred or inciting prejudice and fear toward an individual or a group of people who share a different ethnicity, sexual or religious orientation, disability, or social and cultural affiliation (Ferrini & Paris, 2019; Amnesty International, 2019; Anjum & Katarya, 2024; Arcila-Calderòn, et al., 2022; Shilpashree & Ashoka, 2024; Wachs et al., 2022). In this case, it is important to refer to the General Policy Recommendations n° 15 by the European Commission (2015) that officially says that

HS is defined as fomenting, promoting, or encouraging, in any form whatsoever, the denigration, hatred, or defamation of a person or group, as well as subjecting a person or group to abuse, insults, negative stereotyping, stigmatization, or threats, and the justification of all such forms or expressions of hatred as mentioned above on the basis of race, color, ancestry, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, language, religion or belief, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other characteristics or personal status¹.

The feelings of hate that every human being can feel are partly subjective and partly generated and/or fueled by the reference society or community: the foreigner

¹ Translated from Italian by the author.

(Ferrini & Paris, 2019). Every historical period has got a specific collective actor (They), protagonist and target of their own HS. In daily HS, this role may appear to be played by a single actor: e.g. the immigrant or criminal (Arcila-Calderòn et al., 2022). Actually, in this way, he represents a collective narrative role, producing one of the most typical and dangerous dynamics of HS: generalization (Ferrini & Paris, 2019). To try to investigate HS formal structure, it is interesting to mention the linguistic and semiotic study approach by Ferrini & Paris (2019). From this perspective, HS are investigated by analyzing and meticulously dissecting it syntactically, lexically, grammatically in the broadest sense, semantically, and symbolically. From the linguistic perspective, it is methodologically important to first separate the parts of speech (nouns, adjectives, and verbs), followed by an analytical process of observing each grammatical category taken individually and placed in relation to their target subjects. From a semiotic perspective, it is necessary to do an interpretation, recognizing where – in a speech – the terms We and They are used for derogatory purposes: they place themselves in linguistic reference – in relation – but in complete contrast, rejection, and conflict from a semantic and symbolic point of view. HS, therefore, builds the identity of the other as the object of hate:

The object of hate is thus “someone” (noun), who is in some way (adjective) and who performs certain actions (verb). This person (the other) is hated by someone else (noun) in a certain place and in a certain way. HS does not always manifest itself through overtly aggressive language: the various ways in which HS is realized depend, first and foremost, on the channel through which the message is conveyed² (Ferrini & Paris, 2019).

HS can be recognized in a variety of physical places – schools and universities, stadiums and entertainment places, at home, in public places or social spaces, in newspapers and books, on public transportations, at work, on the street, everywhere around us.

2. ONLINE HATE SPEECH

The increase of technologies, the progressive and persistent digitization of communications and relationships have contributed to the creation of new places and ways of conveying HS, which, in this way, are called Online Hate Speech (Ferrini & Paris, 2019; Anjum & Katarya, 2024). Especially with the emergence and rise of Social Media – such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, X, etc. – it is possible to identify them and see their almost uncontrolled proliferation in the form of posts, comments, reactions, videos, images (Amnesty International, 2019). Therefore, virtual world, has increasingly allowed hate to spread in an ever more unstoppable and difficult-to-contain manner over time. Despite hate, through its speech – as seen – being a discriminatory, denigrating, and marginalizing act and tool, it is interesting to note how in the digital reality one might say it does not discriminate: everyone hates everyone, no one excluded. OHS have several peculiarities, such as the

² Translated from Italian by the author.

permanence over time – when a disparaging or offensive comment is posted on SM, it is difficult to be sure that it can actually be removed, because it can be shared several times and it is difficult to know by whom; they are itinerant and recurring; one is hidden behind a monitor and this entails having fewer inhibitions, to feel all ‘equal’ – for example, hate comments can be aimed at political figures or celebrities without worrying about different social positions (Amnesty International, 2019; Ferrini & Paris, 2019; Anjum & Katarya, 2024; Arcila-Calderòn, et al., 2022). It is worth mentioning that the Covid-19 Pandemic has contributed to the increase of Online HS (Anjum & Katarya, 2024), as shown by Amnesty International Hate Barometer³: the Organization, in that time that Adriano Prospero (2021) calls plague time, has constructed this digital tool and platform through which is possible to realize the increase of this kind of HS, destined towards increasingly specific diversities, featured in comments or posts on various SM.

3. PEDAGOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

The use of SM today predominantly affects the younger generation and it is interesting to consider that increasingly precocious young people are making use of it, bringing with them a state of hyperconnectedness to everything that conveys the digital world and a disconnection from the real world, with recurring episodes in which they themselves first contribute to the proliferation of HS towards peers, but not only. Some of the adolescents possible motivations about it, have been studied by Wachs et al. (2022). The uncontrolled use of SM can cause alienation and isolation in a parallel world; self-enclosure; lack of reflexivity, promoting a superficial view of reality and crisis of intelligence (Morin, 2020); favoring performance and appearance, in order to please others even if this means denigrating and hurting someone; the inability to discern reality, due to the proliferation, for example, of fake news and the progressive inability to discern the truth, giving up the will to find it (Modugno, 2023); the denial of relationship, the denial of face-to-face dialogue and confrontation with the other as a richness; the risk of promoting conflict and competition, even to the point of producing behaviors of dehumanization and de-formative consequences (Sola, 2024). Finally, all this leads to a progressive habit of hatred and a diseducation in critical thinking, underscoring the urgency of educational interventions that know how to aim at re-education in relationship with oneself, with reality and with other human beings. Drawing inspiration from Hate Studies, which consist in the collaboration among different sciences and disciplines working together to find solutions to counter HS (Ferrini & Paris, 2019), I think that a pedagogical-philosophical approach to counter this fact could be one key: supporting the pedagogical position according to every man and every woman, by nature, is educable (Kaiser, 2013), if one of the promoting factors of HS could be a mis-education in critical thinking, a re-education towards assuming a critical and deep stance towards reality and the discernment of ones own truth (Modugno,

³ It is possible to explore it on this link: <https://www.amnesty.it/barometro-dellodio-intolleranza-pandemica/>.

2023) and relationship with others is not only possible but necessary. In a pedagogical perspective, a lack of education implies the necessity to either assume for the first time or re-educate oneself to recognize some essential pedagogical principles related to the recognition of human values (Kaiser, 2013; Gennari, 2006; Sola, 2024) in everybody, so to identify diversity as richness and as something that is within each of us; on the other hand, identifying Philosophy as critically thinking means assuming a critical stance towards oneself and the world we live in, acquiring the ability to question, inquire the why of things and go deeply into there: thinking critically is philosophizing, experiencing Philosophy in first person (Modugno, 2023), which allow for opening oneself to ourselves and to others; questioning and engaging with reality; promoting the reflexivity and the authenticity; fostering the research of truth; learning to take a personal position about an issue, problem or question (Modugno, 2023).

4. CONCLUSIONS: TEACHING AND LEARNING FIELDS

Although the possibility of educating in critical thinking is ageless, fertile places to do it can be schools and universities (Chomsky, 2004). A possible strategy for educating the younger generations to become aware citizens, critical thinkers, and promoters of pedagogical principles capable of countering all forms of hate could be the use and experimentation of active and participatory teaching innovation methodologies also integrated with techniques of a more properly philosophical nature (Modugno, 2023), capable of promoting the acquisition and development of soft and life skills (Sancassani et al., 2019) such as: relational competence, team building and teamwork, critical thinking, decision making, problem solving, etc. For example, Cooperative Learning and Mutual Teaching allow students to develop interpersonal and teamwork skills (Bonaiuti, 2014) that enable them to value the importance of everyone's contribution in achieving a common goal. Since it is very important to educate on the conscious and correct use of SM, they can be integrated into these kinds of strategies: e.g. proposing the development of a small-group project aimed at countering OHS, creating an Instagram social page to make reels and multimedia content that promotes values of peace, equality, etc. Another useful strategy could be the Case Study: one could build a case focused on HS, have students recognize them, and have them propose possible solutions and interventions to counter them. Another optimal technique to stimulate critical thinking and educate students to take a position, identify valid arguments to support and confront others, is Debate. Finally, it might be useful to formulate reflective questions that can challenge students on social and value issues related to HS: either individually or in pairs or small groups. Still to enhance critical thinking skills is the philosophical analysis of texts, videos, movies, songs, containing hate words or HS (Modugno, 2023). In conclusion, an important aspect to further reflect on corresponds to Faculty Development, that can be an extremely relevant resource for ensuring that teachers are consciously trained in methodologies that can make their teaching a path of critical development for the life of each of their students. For example, through workshops, seminars, individual consultations centered on how to use

these methodologies and promote soft skills in students to address more transversal themes (Silva, 2022) – such as Hate Speech – starting from their own discipline of reference.

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