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On Enthusiasm in Politics: 12 Hypotheses

Sull'entusiasmo in politica:
12 ipotesi

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ABSTRACT

The author suggests twelve hypothesis to revive enthusiasm as a political category and, finally, to restate the possibility of political action. The enthusiasm of the masses was in this perspective the essential political element of "The Glorious Thirties" following the Second War World, characterized by this tension to realize a greater social justice. It would have been also at the base of the "Long Sixty-eight" and of the processes of decolonization. Enthusiasm is thus thought in opposition both to the monopolistic pretension of political innovation forwarded by communist parties in the past and to the exclusive competence on political-economical decisions claimed today by democratic élite. Rethinking the enthusiasm that animated these historic sequences of the Twentieth century should offer the possibility to respond to «the sad passions» that dominate the era of neoliberal administration of global democracy.

KEYWORDS: Enthusiasm; Democracy; Masses; Historic Sequence; Neoliberalism.

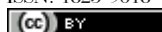
L'autore presenta dodici tesi per riabilitare l'entusiasmo come categoria politica e, in definitiva, per riaffermare la possibilità stessa dell'azione politica. L'entusiasmo delle masse sarebbe stato l'elemento politico fondamentale dei "gloriosi trent'anni" successivi alla seconda guerra mondiale con la loro tensione a realizzare una maggiore giustizia sociale. Esso sarebbe stato soprattutto alla base del "lungo '68" e dei processi di decolonizzazione. L'entusiasmo viene così opposto tanto al monopolio dell'innovazione politica preteso un tempo dai partiti comunisti, quanto alla competenza esclusiva sulle decisioni politico-economiche rivendicata oggi dalle élite democratiche. Ripensare l'entusiasmo presente in quelle sequenze storiche del Novecento dovrebbe servire a reagire alle «passioni tristi» che dominano nell'epoca dell'amministrazione neoliberale della democrazia globale.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Entusiasmo; Democrazia; Masse; Sequenza storica; Neoliberalismo.

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Introduction

The hypotheses suggested in this essay originate from the studies that I have undertaken on thought, passion and political bodies. My research work concerns the possibilities of a political materialism, in a post-Marxist perspective, but far from any anti-Marxist conception fashionable today. One of my principal targets is to go beyond the conceptions which reduce politics to a superstructure without its own power of determination.

The hypotheses here presented collide with many polemical fronts: first of all against the conception which sees the turning point from Fordism to Post-Fordism as the key to explaining the entire history of the last hundred years. In other words, I reject the idea that everything that happens in politics is due to the capitalistic objectivation of the subjective creativity of the working class. I also take a distance from any idea that considers history as a history of a struggle between opposite economic interests. I think it's necessary to recognize that there is an infinity of phenomena, events and sequences that can't be analyzed as an effect of the capitalistic transformations more or less determined by the class struggles. For instance, it must be recognized that in the name of socialism, communism, fascism and even of the New Deal it was possible to change destiny, in every instance in a singular way, and to understand this we require adequate categories of analysis.

Using Lacan's terms, we can approach this kind of phenomena as subjective phenomena: "subjectifications" or "subjective processes". However, it is important not to abuse this language by removing it from its field of relevance. A mistake made, for example, by Ernesto Laclau in his book *The Populist Reason*, where he attempts to interpret Lacan's thought with the idea of "inter-subjective relationships". This is an interpretation which fails. Where Lacan speaks about the subject he speaks about the interior division of every subject in front of his own singular object of desire, and thus, Lacan's thought does not allow any meta-psychological generalization and it is not in this way that his teaching could help the search for new post-Marxist views. In this perspective it is far more interesting to think about how lacanian psychoanalysis finds objectivity, not outside but inside subjectivity.

This is one of the main teachings useful for a renewal of materialism in politics. It is exactly thanks to this teaching that I argue that also political thought and passions are able to create their own objects. Not always, but sometimes: when they take shape in organizations that are able to transform the ideas of social justice into experimental issues. The first hypothesis presented here starts from 'the glorious thirty years (1945- 1975)'. It was during this age that president Mao spoke about the "masses' enthusiasm for socialism".



1. 'The glorious thirty years' as a singular age of social justice

The principal features of this period can be described as followed: it was a high point in terms of wages, social security and public education, resulting in the reduction of social differences, thus creating the middle class; the epicentre was in Europe, but in the same time there was also the spread of policies of 'decolonization', immediately criticized as 'neo-colonialism'; at the geopolitical level, it was also an era marked by the Cold War, then by 'peaceful coexistence' and 'détente' between the two 'superpowers', and in the meantime by the emergence of the 'movement of non-aligned countries'.

There are three sets of characteristics which, when combined, can lead to a conclusion of major importance: that the exceptional peak of social justice of this era was initially made possible by the rivalry between the sphere of influence of American capitalism and that of Soviet socialism, in a time when the latter was still credible as a regime devoted to the creation of greatest social justice. Love and fear aroused from the expansion of that kind of regime can therefore be identified as a driving force behind this golden era of universal reduction of the differences between the rich and the poor.

2. The "enthusiasm of the masses for socialism" as a key category for understanding 'the glorious thirty years'

Speaking about the "enthusiasm of the masses for socialism" Mao alluded to the passion aroused by the political bodies (the party-state of the USSR, China and that half of the world in which their models were imitated) guided by the same idea (the communist one) though differently interpreted. Even then there were good reasons to doubt that the socialist countries were really creating social justice, but the words of Mao and the actual universal trends reducing social differences show that in this age such doubts were less important than the "enthusiasm" and the fear of the spreading of communism. Happiness at that time was a condition of politics, not only because prosperity was the obligatory promise of every regime, but also because the future was a source of hope in the socialist countries as well as in the capitalist ones. Saying that the "East wind" was blowing, the Chinese at that time were alluding to the fact that socialist States and communist parties were on the offensive on the world scene.

3. 'Long Sixty-eight' as an explosion of 'non-aligned particles'

The 'Long Sixty-eight' is a widely accepted term in historical literature. I use it to mean the political season that was possible between the Sixties and the

Seventies world-wide thanks to the multiplicity of organizations, mostly inspired by Communist ideals, but not by Communist parties. At that time, in fact, these parties began to decline because of their subordination to the geopolitical relationships between the Soviet superpower and the American one.

Using the term “particle” to characterize the political groups of ‘Long Sixty-eight’ I aim to stress the ambiguous relationships between these groups and every kind of party: on the one hand, the fact that they tried to be organized like a party, but not to participate in elections or to lead governments; on the other hand, the fact that their principal target was to change radically the political systems to promote greater social justice.

Finally, applying also to these groups the attribute of ‘non-aligned’, I aim to stress their convergence with what is known as the ‘non-aligned movement’ and which involved Third World governments demanding greater justice, but at the geopolitical level. Symbols of these phenomena were, for instance, the committees organized by the youth of every capitalistic metropolis in solidarity with the resistance of Vietnam. It’s not a simple coincidence that both the political groups of ‘Long Sixty-eight’ and the movement of Third World governments were practically contemporaneous in terms of beginnings, developments and final dispersion.

4. The Cultural Revolution as crucial sequence of ‘Long Sixty-eight’

In China the enemy of this revolution was the culture of a communist party leading a socialist State, but the repercussions of this event were universal during the ‘Long Sixty-eight’: a reference to this strange kind of revolution was cited everywhere by every political group born during this time. It is always relevant to ask ourselves why. The culture of the communist parties born in 1921 had always maintained in its own way an assumption shared by other political cultures: the irreducible pre-eminence of experts. It is the famous assumption of Kautsky renewed by Lenin that the theory doesn’t arise from the social movements that are so considered historically crucial, but politically blind. In the Leninist doctrine fixed by Stalin and thereafter shared by all the communists faithful to the USSR the perspective was more restricted, so much so that the party’s central committee remains the only source of legitimate knowledge. In the capitalist countries cultural plurality was always defended, but at the same time there was an essentially unchallenged assumption that in politics, as well as in other fields of culture, only the experts are authorized to teach the non-experts. It is this certitude that was destroyed by the Cultural Revolution. During this sequence it was not only Mao’s thought which was to be exalted, but also that of the masses. That the experts conducted investiga-



tions among the masses seems today only one of many totalitarian injunctions which justified deportations and other ill-treatments of dissenters. However, this understanding fails to explain why the Cultural Revolution became a universal reference of 'Long Sixty-eight'. It is not a coincidence that hereafter also in the capitalistic countries the investigations among the masses, even if otherwise called and with completely other aims, began to become an absolutely necessary condition of any political or economic strategy.

5. The end of 'Long Sixty-eight' as an end of the most relevant political experimentation in the last forty years

Today the word 'revolution' is mainly used in an equivocal way, too often to support the destabilization of local regimes with the aim to promote the foreign interferences of the most powerful countries. Therefore the question is to give back political dignity to this word and all that it meant from the end of the Seventeenth to the end of Twentieth centuries. My proposition is to rethink this long cycle as a cycle of political experimentations. This choice is justified if we think that the category of revolution comes from the category used in those astrophysical experiments which made possible the passage "from the closed world to infinite universe", according to the title of the famous book by Alexandre Koyré. Robespierre, for example, was absolutely clear about the fact that the French revolution had to be a continuation in the political field of what the Copernicus discovery had begun in the of physics field.

Obviously, this experimental way to approach politics has to be distinguished from other kinds of approaches. I propose to simplify this by dividing them into two types: one that is normally called conservative politics and the other reactionary politics. Reducing the political problematic to these three major categories (experimental, conservative and reactionary) has multiple theoretical consequences. But the basic assumptions remain that the aim of conservative politics is to conserve the continuity of institutions, whereas the aim of reactionary politics is to react in front of an explosion of disorder, to restore an imaginary order. Both these types of politics are, however, different from the experimental type in a crucial point: the latter is possible only if it is thought and experienced as a singular sequence, in discontinuity with all that precedes as well as with all that follows. It implies that we can draw a political lesson from each of these experiences only if we recognize that each one is deeply different from the others of the same type. But we also have to consider another point in this regard: just as in scientific or artistic experimentations, also in political ones, only the course of time decides the success or the failure.

It is very significant that only a few years ago even the president of France Sarkozy declared it was necessary to break with the consequences of 'Sixty-eight'. The more recent decline in the image of this figure suggests that these consequences were stronger than he thought. In effect, every time conservative and reactionary politics become powerless and the problem of new political experimentations emerges again, thinking of the 'Long Sixty-eight' is unavoidable.

6. There is a relationship between the end of 'the glorious thirty years of the welfare state' and the end of the credibility of Socialist states and Communist parties

In the second part of the Seventies China took definitively the capitalist road that was always opposed by the Cultural Revolution during the ten years of its different waves. In the same years the USSR seemed to obtain some success in the diplomatic plan of the so called 'Détente' (for instance, in the Conference of Helsinki in 1976 which first recognized the division of Germany) with its traditional Cold War enemy, then deeply wounded by the end of the Vietnam war and of Nixon's impeachment. But in both cases, the Chinese one and the Soviet one, Communist universalism is explicitly abandoned for the benefit of nationalist interests. Neither enthusiasm nor fear could be generated within these countries anymore. All the socialist and communist parties and class organizations started to decline or to break definitively with their traditions. It was precisely in those years that 'the glorious thirty years' came to the end.

7. Starting from the Eighties the global leadership has belonged to the neoliberal democratic regimes which follow the pattern of the so called 'biggest democracy in the world'

Towards the end of the Seventies an unprecedented opportunity presented itself for the US. From the second post-war period to the Sixties, its influence was limited by the advance of communism in half of the world and by the enthusiasm thus aroused. After the 'Long Sixty-eight', the Vietnam defeat and Nixon's impeachment presented problems for the credibility of the 'biggest democracy in the world', which reached a low ebb. However, these problems were overcome, when a Hollywood actor entered the White House. While China was folding in on itself in order to reestablish a capitalist system, the USSR was trying to recover from 'stagnation' by launching into the war in Afghanistan, which in fact contributed to its definitive collapse. Following this, communism, class parties and class organizations, and therefore also of all the ideals of social justice, lost all credibility. More than one century of experiences in



the name of these ideals was reduced to nothing. This bleak void is one of the first conditions of the epochal turning point which became possible during the Eighties: on the one hand, the particular pattern of American democracy can work as a universal pattern for democracy; on the other hand, this pattern can also impose a new version of economic liberalism. Nothing will be able to hinder the global hegemony of neoliberal democracy anymore. Thanks to its different interpretations, now more democratic, now more neoliberal, this kind of regime will be adopted by all the governments of the richest countries, which each suffer from every kind of criticism and opposition, but remain more unified around the same strategic mainstream than ever before.

8. The present democratic regimes are all constituted by neoliberal political ideals.

In other words, it is vain both to fear the existence of a capitalism without democracy (as Žižek and Sloterdijk maintain) and to hope in a democracy beyond capitalism (as Hardt and Negri maintain). Neo-liberalism is today often criticized, but always as a limitation of or a threat to democracy. On the contrary, it is important to admit that capitalism needs both democracy and neo-liberalism (as Badiou maintains). The point is that in our time, despite all the increasing riots and general disorders, there is 'no alternative'. In this absence of political and intellectual alternatives the leading world democracies can reduce the traditional distinctions between the rulers and the ruled, the capitalists and the workers, the rich and the poor, to a biological distinction between the worthier and the less worthy, that is between the fit and the less fit to survive. To help disadvantaged populations is always less of a problem for governments. Its solution is to increase philanthropic operations, the aim of which is to extend financial power to the utmost limits. Worldwide, people such as the 'ninja' (no income, no job, no asset), the homeless or the poor have been seduced by capitalism and integrated into the system of debts and credits. This is the result of carefully calculated capitalist interests, but also of the unchallenged belief that the so called rules of the market are the most democratic way to select and reward persons and communities.

9. "Superclass" and "the bottom billiard": beyond the ruled world

As democratization implies a single political strategy, its main result is the global increase in social differences. During the Nineties some already poor countries began to become richer, but within every one of these countries the poor and the rich became more and more distant. In 2008 Rothkopf (author of

the book *Superclass*) counted six thousand “Very Important Persons” far from public eye, but able to condition the destinies of the six billion or more people who live on the earth. Whereas, Collier counted in his book *A Bottom Billion* of people condemned to fight hunger, thirst, illness and local wars only to survive.

The class struggle theory was the most important interpretation in terms of the conflict of the classical theory of the division of every national power between rulers and ruled. But today the most important political problem is the global injustice suffered by all the growing populations explicitly abandoned by every government. It is not enough to analyze and to emphasize the contingent conflicts that those populations fight against exterior effects of the domination of the “superclass”: the most important political question is how to unify the “bottom billion” around new strategic ideas.

10. Do we live in the «era of sad passions» (as described by Benasayag and Schmitt)? Certainly, one of political apathy

Everywhere that which is necessary for survival depends today not directly on nature, but on the decisions of the powers able to make natural resources available. But these powers are limiting their range of action more and more. Increasing populations thus see their hopes reduced. Not only in the world peripheries, but also at the heart of capitalistic countries where unemployment is already considered a normality just as is the case with wages which are not enough for the survival of workers. The time when the future was a source of hope is only an old memory. Nobody knows how or where the faith in progress can come back. In the psychoanalytical field a growth of sad passions is noted. In the political one we notice simply an absence of passions.

In this regard the principal problem is, in my view, that the conditions for experimenting with the ideals of social justice are completely new: beyond every conflict between rulers and the ruled, without any certainty of global progress. If that is the case, first of all intellectual work is necessary to renew a debate about the way to conceive these kinds of experiments.

11. Beyond the opposition between democracy and dictatorship

I don't know if it is the case elsewhere, but in Europe we are often told that the rulers have to do their ‘homework’ as dictated by the necessities of markets. If we think that the word “dictatorship” comes exactly from the verb “to dictate” it follows that the “dictatorship of markets” is not only a story created by incurable extremists. Instead the assumption that the many countries allied with the US are ruled in a democratic way is not at all realistic. In effects, this assump-



tion works only to hide the power of the “super-class” able to condition markets and politicians.

The self-evident fact is that no political action (meeting or demonstration, negotiation or choice of candidates, election or management of election results, and so on) is possible, if its conditions are not preliminarily dictated by some subject able to decide them. Recognizing that doesn't imply the nihilistic conclusion that all politics are dictatorial, but implies only an admission today ever more important: that in any politics there is always a dictatorial “feature” (according to the terminology of Mao's text *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People* (1957), which can be treated into two opposite ways; on the one hand, this feature could be declared, democratically discussed and therefore its consequences limited; on the other hand, if this feature is hidden, its consequences are unlimited and democracy is reduced to simulacrum.

But there is also another important implication coming from the admission that no democracy can exist without “dictating”. This implication is that no people can have force (according to the etymological root of the word “democracy”), if there aren't intellectual authors able to dictate how and when this force could be conceived and organized. It is not a coincidence if among all the biggest political thinkers it is impossible to find one who believes in democracy as such. And that today this belief is practically obligatory only shows how low the passions for politics are.

12. Rethinking the “enthusiasm” of the ‘Long Sixty-eight’

That the engine of capitalism is greed is not news. The novelty is the absence in the last thirty years of the ideas and the organized bodies searching for greater social justice. It is for this reason that today the desire to become richer and richer has no limits, even if fewer and fewer people can be satisfied in this search. Technical propositions to exit from the crisis are not lacking. The lack is instead of a politics able to experiment with these propositions. Numerous economists invoke their arrival, but the years pass and there is no sign of it.

Therefore, it is not an academic or nostalgic exercise to rethink ‘the glorious thirty years’, the ‘long sixties’ and the ‘enthusiasm’ for more social justice aroused by the ‘east wind’. At the beginning all that was possible thanks to the opposition between the two parties present everywhere in the period after the Second World War: the communist and the anti-communist ones. But afterwards experiments seeking to establish greater social justice were pushed to the

more extreme consequences above all by small groups with big ideas and passions.

Isn't this the best example of what there still is to think and do in politics? How to learn from the masses, through adequate inquiries? How to experiment with models for establishing greater social justice, starting from where governments are absent? How to organize a new politics, where the aim is not simply to gain power? These three and many other fundamental questions of the 'Long Sixty-eight' are certainly not anachronistic.