

A Short Introduction to the Proceedings of the Conference “The Reason of Passions: Emotion and Rationality in the Landscape of (Contemporary) Politics”

We are well aware that political life has always dealt with passions. But today it seems, in fact, that the liberal, rationalistic approach to politics has been almost completely replaced by its emotional dimension. Therefore, it seems necessary to explore the changing ways in which thought and feeling, rationality and passion, reason and sentiments, have been understood both in practice and in theoretical discussions, focusing on their public standing.

This issue contains the refined version of the papers presented at the conference on this topic, held in a period of two days at the University of Bergen in November 2019. The conference was organised as a joint effort by the Department of Philosophy of the University of Bergen (UiB), Norway, and the Department of Antiquity, Philosophy and History (DAFIST) of the University of Genoa, Italy.

The purpose of this conference was to approach the topic of the relations between rationality and emotions, wondering which part do they actually play in politics. In many ways, politics is the art of persuasion and often people are indeed persuaded to position themselves on a given subject by emotional appeals rather than reasonable arguments. Within the political sphere, both past and present, one can actually find a complex mixture of rational arguments and emotional discourses.

In the dominant Western philosophical tradition, the relationship between reason and emotions has been marked by a conflict between various contrasting models of rationality and emotions. The sphere of rationality and that of passions have been often categorized according to a fundamental dichotomy: either the triumph of reason against the weakness of sentiments or, in the popular interpretation of Hume, the triumph of passions over reason. This dichotomy has also served as a starting base for conceptualizing politics, where already early-modern political theorists defined political autonomy as reason dominating the emotions and passions.

In *The Passions and the Interests* (1977), Albert Hirschman described how, in the process of modernization, the “passions”, motivating social and political behavior were transformed into modern “interests” and they were thereby assigned the role of containing the social and political destructive passions.

Until recent times, theorists have described both political movements and political affiliation as based on beliefs, ethics, and sentiments. In the last years, though, an “Affective Turn” has taken place both in analytic and continental philosophy, and in contemporary political studies. Emotions and affects are now becoming the object of extensive, multidisciplinary studies that challenge political liberalism’s idea that the emotions must be relegated to the private sphere. This “turn” highlights that the political cannot be understood without

A Short Introduction to the Proceedings of the Conference “The Reason of Passions: Emotion and Rationality in the Landscape of (Contemporary) Politics”

reference to human feelings.

However, the fundamental dichotomy between emotions and reason has not at all been overcome in the forms of current politics. While it is true that, today, emotions and passions are returning to the centre of the political scene, they often do so in a passive form. Contemporary politics consists more and more in an abuse and manipulation of the passions. Social media, for instance, has redefined the public sphere in ways that allow charismatic, intimidating and even hateful rhetoric to stand unchecked by editorial control. The space of public discussion has also increased to the point where quick “instinctive reactions” replace careful reasoning. One could ask if the “affective” political change consists in an increasingly oppressive use of the passions as forms of domination. The active function of passions and the way they can contribute to the processes of political democratisation and the conscious involvement of citizens need to be duly analysed; albeit always keeping in mind that passions are ambiguous, for any feeling within a given political context, even the noblest – compassion and love, *inter alia* –, holds its limits and presupposes dangers.

This motivates the following questions: Do emotions, of any kind, pose a dangerous threat to rationality and political life? What, for instance, becomes of democracy when a rigorous and rational language in political debates is replaced by one that focuses on emotions, like hope or fear? Is it possible to build up a democratic society with no recourse to passions, mutual trust and a belief in the right of every individual to participate in the social and political debates? If so, what kind of emotions are positive and what kind of emotions do hinder this development?

A key aim of the conference was seeking to define the possible paths of reflection on this topic and study the relationships between reason and emotions, concepts of rationality and “structures of feelings” as a marker of the political arena.

The European research team that has long been engaged in social and ethical reflection about cultural changes in the modern and contemporary epoch chose to address these questions by a variety of approaches.

At the opening of the conference Anat Biletzki questions populism in the light of the relationship between reasons and passions, and wonders if it is an ideology or a tool. Retracing different definitions given by political scholars, Biletzki notes how some such as Kazin and Urbinati define populism as an instrument while others, such as Mudde, Kaltwasser and Pappas, consider it as an ideology. Through an in-depth analysis of the different forms of populism, the article highlights how, understood as a rhetorical tool, it

A Short Introduction to the Proceedings of the Conference “The Reason of Passions: Emotion and Rationality in the Landscape of (Contemporary) Politics”

can be used for the most different and contrasting ideologies of the right or left. If populism is an ideology, that is to say, a vision of the world that has people as the highest value, it implies a form of politics that combines reason and passion. And although on the right it can deteriorate into fascism, it can work on the left to extend democracy, as it requires to overcome a purely rationalist idea of politics.

Some of articles have a common starting point in our time politics, that sees the advance of populism even in democratic countries; a populism characterized and also empowered by an emotional rhetoric, focused on what we could call negative passions such as hatred and anger.

Many papers try to understand this phenomenon and propose politically positive emotions, not without critical remarks. As Anne Granberg does: faced with Martha Nussbaum’s proposal to encourage socially positive emotions including compassion, she detects the limits of this suggestion and takes up Hanna Arendt’s observation that compassion is essentially an apolitical emotion.

After recalling several scholars, from Walter Lippmann to Edward Bernays and, closer to us, William Davies, according to whom politics was increasingly connected and based on both individual and collective emotions, Alberto Giordano highlights how post-truth and polarization threaten liberal democracy, since they persuade people to rely more on feelings rather than facts, in such a way as to manipulate collective decision-making. Recent suggestions to limit the influence of political emotions, such as epistocracy and e-democracy, seem not sufficiently sound both theoretically and practically. Giordano thus proposes an intergenerational republican compact as a possible and provisional solution to post-truth dilemmas.

More oriented towards overcoming the rigid dualism of reason and passions, Juliette Grange tries to define the “reasoned feeling”. After highlighting the convergence of the “affective sciences”, and the philosophical attention to emotions delivered by populism, Grange argues that the “reasoned feeling” is embodied by the republican passion for certain political ideals. Enthusiasm for an idea or an ideal, altruism and a culture based on knowledge and science, are basic traits of this feeling. The reasoned feeling is the founder of a civilization and a social morality proper to scientific and technical modernity. In order to be realized, this feeling must be combined with political rationality understood as a form of rationalism that allows “a plurality of axiological and social choices and the public space of their confrontation”.

The solution to the emotional dangers inherent in political options, regimes, opinions given

A Short Introduction to the Proceedings of the Conference “The Reason of Passions: Emotion and Rationality in the Landscape of (Contemporary) Politics”

by classical utopias is analysed by Jean Christophe Merle and compared with the imaginary dystopias of the 20th century. The utopias of the early modern times were proposed as a solution to the absolute political evil, namely discord, rivalry, desire to possess, domination and glory; and as an alternative to the classical theories of social contract. Dystopias, in so far as they constitute the opposite of the democratic and liberal rule of law, are based on the eradication of its members' ability to think and act rationally. The failure of both shows the human inability to live without confronting the evil and the extreme difficulty in which attempts to resist the dystopian order often occur.

New signs of kindness and politeness to follow in social relations can help counteract the increase in passions and violent reaction in our democratic societies: here is Mirella Pasini's proposal. After going over the old Galateo of Monsignor Della Casa and the new one by Melchiorre Gioia, she wonders if Gioia's prescriptive goal of spreading civil education as part of the process of training citizens of a democratic nation could be a suggestion for our time. Almost the same proposal is virtually opposed by the agonistic and competitive rhetoric of the Norwegian public intellectual and author Georg Johannesen (1931-2005), illustrated by Hans Marius Hansteen, and proposed as a way to promote peace.

The speeches by Giorgio Baruchello and Pascal Nouvel, respectively, open to the epistemological dimension and the positive and negative role of emotions in the construction of knowledge, with its obvious ethical and political consequences.

Baruchello addresses the prejudice issue, whose area ranges from the cognitive sphere to the social dimension, according to a plurality and multiplicity of meanings that cannot be reduced to a single negative level. Faced with the inevitability of prejudice or the not-so-argued need to overcome it as a “poorly formed opinion, an unreasonable belief, an unjustified false assumption, a negative feeling”, Baruchello affirms the need to investigate its polysemy, also in the history of philosophical thought. By following this path, we could overcome prejudice as a source of error and bad behaviour.

Pascal Nouvel, on his side, questions the nature of political errors; because, if emotions and affects play a key role in politics, they can also play a role in political errors. A better knowledge of what is specific in political errors could therefore help to understand the relationships between reason and emotions, between rationality and “structures of feelings”. His starting point is the modern distinction - laid down by Machiavelli - between political errors and other fashions, with which they have long been mixed. In a brief “history of error”, Nouvel distinguishes four types, that is: perceptual error, conceptual error, moral error and, finally, political error, still not well defined. A key point is the distinction between moral error and political error, which appears to be speculative rather than factual.

A Short Introduction to the Proceedings of the Conference “The Reason of Passions: Emotion and Rationality in the Landscape of (Contemporary) Politics”

Understanding the nature of the political error can be useful in order to modify the affects: this is the basic thesis. As for the method, the narrative approach is in Nouvel’s intention a powerful way to manage political issues and, in some cases, avoid political errors.

The importance of political affections in contemporary European society is underlined by Paola de Cuzzani, who remembers at the beginning of her paper the rapid spread of growing xenophobic and racist sentiments, anti-Semitism, discrimination and violence against migrants, blacks and Muslims. For de Cuzzani the implications of these sentiments for the stability of our liberal democratic societies are evident. Spinoza’s theory of imitation of affects can help us in our attempt to understand the ease with which negative feelings come to be diffused even in the most civilized and democratic societies. It also clarifies the dangers that these negative feelings pose for the stability of the body politic.

It remains to be asked whether Spinoza’s lesson can also be useful in a positive way, in order to provide us with tools to fight negative affects, while not running the risk to erase affectivity but rather promoting a positive one.

Such is the legacy that this rich selection of papers offers for future studies and meetings of the research group.

Share this:

- [Share](#)