

## OVERVIEWS AND ITINERARIES IN THE TEXTS

### I - Looking for People, Tracking Power: The Long Journey Home

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Continuity or difference and «facing out»? The question came up immediately at the beginning of the symposium and the informal, wide-ranging, discussion of the theme of the relationship / behavior characterizing ordinary people, on the one hand, and power, on the other, as they deal with each other and, as well, the «dealing» itself. It continued to be at the center of discussion throughout. Papers and comments touched moments of a time-arc going from mid-seventeenth century phenomena like Masaniello to the situation of ethnic minorities today. We might synthesize this itinerary as running from the folklore of political violence to the folklores of subcultures: a very long ground-swell indeed, furnishing us with a «before» and an «after» reflecting profoundly different contexts, on which to test the analyses of the two apparently antinomic words «People» and «Power» which most of the papers examined in a brief, dense, period where the events seem to accumulate and political positions are more fluid than «before» or «after», that is within the chronological space of little more than a century we can define as peri-revolutionary.

In the end, my impression is that the concept of continuity prevailed, not only from the sociological viewpoint, but from the specifically historic one, and it prevailed in the sense that certain behavioral constants emerged across and through the very diversity and specificity of the situations. These traits have usually been considered within specific temporal, spatial contexts so that their epoch-bounded facets have dominated their image and the continuity underlying the «local» manifestations has remained hidden in the fragmentation of the empiric: the single historic «moments», like so many snapshots, only allow us to see that we are photographing movement when they are placed side by side in a series that does nothing to their individuality, though it shows their continuity in a phenomenon. Thus, it is more usual to find difference, «break» and confrontation in presentations of «people» and «power».

That does not mean that I have now formed a satisfying, unified, image: what I have is, rather, an image in movement, such as you might see in a kaleidoscope where, as you turn the cylinder, the bits and pieces move into unexpected symmetric patterns you would not imagine to be there at all if you looked into the cylinder when it was still, but that however, needs stillness if it is to be

placed harmoniously into a larger picture where it can be «set off» properly.

The symposium has sketched in the outlines of such a larger picture, though I do not mean here to attempt to do more than look at a few of its elements. A great deal of work has been done here to define a plurality of political subjects operating consciously in «the people» which, though formally recognized as the only legitimate source of sovereignty – of government – is then described by the winning élites as an amorphous and violent mass, to which «power» will avoid recognizing the status of citizen as long as possible, treating it as subordinate whose dissent may be ignored at least until it does not take on the attributes of open revolt (to be, in any case, repressed without any compliments or in subtly violent ways, with force first and negative legend afterwards, so that a blanket of silence covers motives which prompted popular positions to move to manifestations deemed illegitimate by those who see the legitimacy of their government in discussion).

So the theme of violence soon became important in our discussions, and it seemed essential to try and understand what it really is, attempting various redefinitions. But I feel that a further effort in this direction needs to be made, as Pierluigi D'Oro so warmly urged in a paper that invites us to a greater honesty in the use of interpretative categories and an ethic stance freed of the weight which afflicted whites in the past and some intellectuals today; to avoid using the study of minorities as a mirror to reflect our own image and show us how «right» our prejudices are.

The papers analysing the relations between power and minorities have helped us to come closer to the heart of the general theme of the symposium by making us come face to face with all of the numerous and complex groups that make up the reality loosely filed under the general heading «common people». Usually in the background, usually taken as «given» and «known», they are both numeric majority and political minority over against the élites who are also minority, but dominate as qualitatively made compact by the exercise of power, however organized (if there is conflict inside power this is almost solely between factions).

Once we get hold of this composite reality we can see at once that it is structurally weak as it attempts to engage power, for it is difficult to find the «glue» to keep subalternate groups so different one from the other together over the long haul. Not only are urban and rural groups different, they are cut up internally in ways so complex that not even the most general and composite categories, applied to carefully limited situations, really manage to cover them. If we take «work» and use the concept of «manual laborer» we see that, however we use it, «horizontally» or «vertically», we have no more than an imprecise catch-all for the observer's professional convenience. The great variety of interests are not usefully defined: where, for example, are the implications arising from the difference between manual laborers who are independent and those who work for salaries, between daily hands and seasonal help, between free and unfree workers? And we have not yet added the «natural» difference, shunted off into other groupings: race, national origin, religious persuasion

(including *what* sect or what national «branch» of a given church), age, sex, material culture, culture (where we need to consider the question without the adjective «popular» pulling us towards occult anthropology). Clearly, it is only with the propulsion of enormous tensions that this multiplicity can come together and express itself politically making its own autonomous and radical formulations of theory and its own institutional proposals.

In other words, it seems natural that multitudes («the people») speak in revolutionary terms and not in the language of reform when they do come together. Marco Minerbi\* has shown how «the people» go the «philosophes» one better, anticipating theorists and «ideologues» with their acts, and furnishing the ethic content to break the ties constituted by old régime power relationships, rebelling in the name of liberty against a power which exercised its authority without justice. Yet these common people, who have been able to make of themselves an avantgarde and act together are destined to become merely instrumental to ends pursued by élites, falling back into their constituting elements, once the constitutional revolution on which the élites have always been focused is completed.

Before the new *Res publicae* thought up by the élites are fully institutionalized and stabilized, there are other polarizations, other moments of violent conflict in which subordinate classes voice radical programs in the attempt to keep alive the political and social fluidity which had characterized the revolutionary period and now seemed prerogative of the élites. What we have here are manifestations aimed at reformulating the rights of citizenship on the basis of the natural rights for whose recognition a war had been fought and won and which, though continually and solemnly proclaimed «inalienable», are displaced and infringed at their very root, in «the people» to whom they belong and from whom all governing powers derive, but which is slipping back into a state of subjection where the legal means for making its voice heard are ineffective. So, finding collective, institutional channels – those ways in which it had been legitimate to protest and usual to obtain attention – dried up, it seemed to many there was no way but «violence» to make protest heard (Marco Sioli shows this about the Whiskey rebellion).

So appeals – in defense, in criticism – and political projects in general assume a language which is often not oral since minorities' tongues are «cut», but is none the less eloquent and efficacious, able to put across its messages in a form clearly legible by everyone and at all political and social levels. The militancy developed throughout the revolutionary period had in fact favored, in America, the acquisition of a more specifically political view of liberty, a consciousness which is expressed in attitudes and behavior which had become common and stable, constituting a generalized common patrimony, a solid base that showed flexibility and imagination in moments of tension and crisis, a spirit of cooperation founded on the acceptance of interdependency.

\* Minerbi spoke about the relations of riot and insurrection to Condorcet's constitutional project. [Editor's note]

What we see here is a political language which is not confined by locality and time and can be «exported» because it rises from a reality that is present wherever there are masses of people without citizenship ready to do something about it for their own dignity (not certainly for the «nation»). Later, of course, this situation will be theorized as «social consciousness», and considered the hope of working people. This language develops and consolidates, well before it shows itself in militancy, in clubs or societies, in the only «academies» people frequent everywhere in the Atlantic world: the streets, squares, and ports, the places people gather in and work in. Here different lower class situations meet, each with its own history, its own ways; and positions form which are unified in the directions they take, though not always in their formal aspects (Rediker).

It is certainly difficult to «read» popular dissent in its political articulation when it occurs, because it presents itself as collective and we see only its outward image – gestures, acts – while we cannot properly know the thought and the conceptual abstractions it contains and provokes. Yet recourse to action, in the period, almost always comes about only when petitions have proven vain and, as several papers innovately indicate, it is the final step of a series of phases (something which in itself constitutes a proof of theoretic activity). Though the «better sort» describe the episodes as blindly violent, they follow a ritual pattern and it is undeniable that ritual with its precise symbology, its «order» indicates: a) a precise political synthesis; b) a violence which is prescribed, rather than spontaneous, and intends to defend rights and liberty before it aims at harming the enemy (Sioli and Viola).

The corollary might be carried to the point of supposing that «the people» (at any rate the American people) had already appropriated the counter-culture of civic virtue which élite republican thought had contrasted to the court of the *ancien régime* and now, when republican governments show a tendency to behave like new courts, the ethic proposal of political reform rises not from the élites but from the subalternate classes seeking legitimation of their citizenship through a gestural language based on behavior neither contingent nor casual. In their acts as a whole they avoid being boxed in by temporal and spatial uncertainty, setting themselves into a ritual contestation of power which is specular to the way power is exercised and tend to occupy materially the symbols and the places where power shows itself (courts, for ex., as Gross shows; but see Taylor and Sioli, too), with a physical presence that substitutes a juridic formulation of the right to political existence.

The institution of a «system» of national festivals (beyond forming a national consciousness, see LeCour Grandmaison), tends I feel, to deviate and absorb dissent in the expressive forms just described, associating it metaphorically with power and power's government, in the celebration of the revolutionary experience in which every one had felt himself or herself a protagonist and which here is symbolically repeated. This is the first normative epiphany of power, a thermidorian demonstration before the real «Thermidor» which follows every revolutionary event imposes its scheme of collective and indivi-

dual values. It is the same mechanism which removes the «natural» leaders the people express *from*, or coopt *into*, power, according to whether they are indeed a part of that world of origin or only functional to it and so can in some way be integrated into the new governmental system.

And perhaps it is the more or less conscious beginning of a system of compensations centered on the recognition of citizenship: formal citizenship though, not full citizenship which requires legitimation of the right to express, on a footing of equality, differences and personal «otherness». But it is a characteristic of every «Thermidor», formal or informal, to block the process which the history of institutionalized societies tends to consider natural, so that our society finds itself with the problem of economic-social-political-cultural pluralism which can only be vaguely accomodated – and even that with great difficulty – by the institutions which the postrevolutionary period made formal and which constitute the legal space for discussion.

Parties, expanding vertically, take in the highest possible number of social groups, consenting an active participation to those groups which have a precise sense of themselves, are already mobilized; but they do not activate any one, nor promote a broader acquisition of the concept of citizenship. Indeed, it often seems that they intend to put subordinate groups to sleep, and show themselves to be above all excellent vehicles for containing the dissent of such groups. Inside parties, as you rise towards the top of the pyramid, ideological capacity becomes refined, but ethical perception fades away in a procedure which has no tendency to affirm the people who are its base, but rather to negotiate shared management of power with other political leaders.