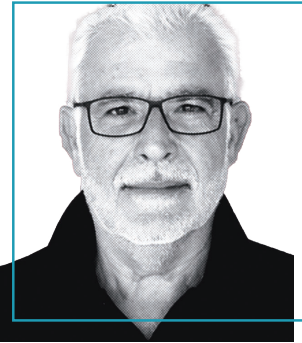


From the Polis to the Group and back

De La Polis Al Grupo



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Abstract

This contribution explores the relational quality of humans, underlining the political nature of their psyche, with its intrinsic connections to culture, ethics and society.

To deal with the political transpersonal, when it comes to the work with the unconscious, means to acknowledge we are part of a system where individuals are not seen as "subjects" but as "participants", in a network of shared laws and ethics. Specifically, ethics concerns the quality of the intersubjective relationships, as it does not only concern *knowing how to do* or *knowing how to be*, but the *making of being*. In other words, ethics deals with the relational nature of the subject.

The nature of such relational subjectivity is political and its most evident quality is ethical: politics is intertwined with culture, not as the obvious background where human evolution and civilization takes place, but as a co-protagonist in the constitution of the mental schemes that support the man-world relationship.

The transit from the idea of an individual subject to a collective subjectivity belongs to the process of socialization of the mental experience. Both from an inter-subjective and groupanalytical perspective, human beings prematurely internalize relationships and form "internal groupalities". The concept of a collective structure of the psyche implies that mental phenomena are metaphorical representations and cannot only be reductively explained in terms of combination-interaction between physiochemical elements.

The proposal that stems from this contribution, therefore, is to transform our relationship with the ways of knowing, of doing scientific research, of practicing in our clinical practices, by challenging our mental organizations and the institutions that we inhabit.

Keywords

Transpersonal, political unconscious, thinking as a group, responsibility.

Resumen

La presente propuesta explora la cualidad relacional de los seres humanos, subrayando la naturaleza política de su psique, y sus conexiones intrínsecas con la cultura, la ética y la sociedad.

Abordar el ámbito político de lo transpersonal, cuando se trata de trabajar con el inconsciente, significa reconocer que somos parte de un sistema donde los individuos no son vistos como "sujetos" sino como "participantes", dentro de una trama de leyes y éticas compartidas. Más concretamente, la ética atañe a la calidad de las relaciones intersubjetivas, ya que no atañe sólo al saber hacer o al saber ser, sino al *hacer del ser*, es decir, la ética se ocupa de la naturaleza relacional del sujeto.

De este modo, la naturaleza de tal subjetividad relacional es política siendo la ética su cualidad más sobresaliente: la política se entrelaza así con la cultura, pero no solo como un decorado visible ante el cual se representan la evolución humana y la civilización, sino como un coprotagonista activo en la constitución de los esquemas mentales que sustentan la relación entre el hombre y el mundo.

El paso que va desde la idea de sujeto individual hasta la noción de subjetividad colectiva concierne al proceso de socialización de la experiencia mental. Tanto desde una perspectiva intersubjetiva como grupoanalítica, los seres humanos internalizan tempranamente las relaciones formando así "grupaldades internas". El concepto de estructura colectiva de la psique implica considerar que los fenómenos mentales son representaciones de naturaleza metafórica que no pueden explicarse de forma reduccionista solamente en términos de una combinación-interacción de elementos físico-químicos.

La propuesta que surge de este aporte insta, por tanto, a transformar nuestra relación con las formas de saber, de hacer investigación científica y de ejercer en nuestra práctica clínica, cuestionando las organizaciones mentales que nos son propias y las instituciones que habitamos.

Palabras clave

transpersonal, inconsciente político, pensamiento grupal, responsabilidad

PREMISE

The study of political thinking and acting concerns the ways in which the forms of sociality and common coexistence are developed and given, the mental space that political feeling occupies for each individual and for the community of reference and of belonging. A “broad” vision of politics, then: one not limited to the behaviors and interactions that are traditionally included in the “technical”, as it were, analysis of this matter (parties, institutions, local authorities and national games, exchange games, and so on), but open to what is manifested and concretized of social life (of feeling and social action) in the context of the *polis*. The concept of *polis* acquires a specific field relevance in the way of understanding “politics”, thanks to the values it has assumed in the context of ancient Greek thought and which were then recalled by modern thought when, in the struggle for civil and political rights, the idea of the city and citizenship was opposed to that of subservience to an absolute state. The political community (the *polis*, in fact) as a place of shared coexistence and as a practical project of social life: an organism of which one is not a “subject”, but a “participant” under the protection of shared laws. This way of understanding the category of the “political” has an intrinsic psychological-social dimension. Indeed, the *polis* (recalling *Nicomachean Ethics* and Aristotle’s *Politics*) is not only the place of social life structured in the political community, but also (and fundamentally) the practical environment (praxis = action) in which human beings concretely realizes that active sociality which, along with reason, constitutes the founding, species-specific characteristic of our species. Sociality, the ability to live together, is not an accessory characteristic of man, but rather an original and necessary part of the basic outfit that has allowed the survival and development of human species on our planet.

Although “capable of science and technology” (we recall the imaginary reconstruction carried out in Plato’s *Protagora*), men would soon become extinct because, unable to live together, they wander isolated in the woods, prey to wild beasts: the gift of sociality, sent by Zeus through his two messengers Justice and Respect, saves them (the *politeia*, the ability to live together in an organized way). For this reason, Aristotle can affirm that the *polis* exists before the individual and that “he who cannot become part of a community or who does not need anything because he is sufficient for himself ... is either a beast or a God”.

And this is the central crux of the question whose solution is the task of Psychology.

THE DIMENSION OF THE POLIS

Dealing with *polis* and political forms also means dealing with ethics. A complex issue, in particular, considering a psychological dimension which is flexible and complex when compared to the “strong” and “authoritative” dimension of ethics. However, to propose a first reflection, we could affirm that ethics concerns the quality of the interhuman and of intersubjective relationships, as it does not only concern “knowing how to do” or “knowing how to be”, but the “making of being”. We cannot speak of ethics if we do not recognize others as subjects who can exist in their otherness. Therefore, in the ethical dimension, subjectivity has the possibility of accepting and recognizing that a subject is born and evolves on the inside and through a subjective relationship, in other words by sharing subjectivity.

So we tried to establish a “beginning” of the speech. But at the onset of the reflection the problematic issue shifts to a second definition, that of politics. Politics is above all a way of conceiving and regulating the bonds and relationships within the interhuman, the community. For this reason politics is strongly present and constitutive of the social image; the internal world of subjectivity does not pertain to the social imaginary, and the dialectic between subjectivity and the collective presences that were previously external to it and which, for example, preceded and conceived it in the (transgenerational) family does.

What becomes “internal” is not the relationships but the modalities of relationships and mental spaces - more precisely the mental fields - in which they are inserted. So, the internal becomes external and vice versa, and it is so that politics, like everything transpersonal, is internal and external to the subject: it crosses the individual, groups and organizations.

Politics is intertwined with culture, it produces it and is produced from it, without, however, being a background within which human social evolution and civilization takes place, but a co-protagonist, since politics must be recognized as having a function of active participation in the constitution of the mental schemes that support the man-world relationship. The transit from an individual subject to a collective subjectivity belongs, in fact, to this process of socialization of mental experience.

Today’s society, more than ever, needs a culture of the *polis*, of the community, it needs mental spaces in which relationships and groups can interact. Society needs politics, understood as a correlation between words, actions and a state of affairs to be read as a constraint and

as a resource. The way of being there, of staying within the political community is determined by the mental field that said community constitutes. For this reason, politics is not only structures and provisions, it is also a sensemaker. In a context in which politics is experiencing catastrophes of constant and parallel signification and re-foundations, it needs ethics: politics without ethics is just a technology of governance, an art of conflict mediation, a mediation for its own sake. Although, let us remember, ethics without politics can lead to, and get lost in, contemplative moralism.

Psychology has set the breaking point of the contemplative dimension, for example when in research-intervention it has been able to combine aspects of innovation, aspects of change and aspects of acting. Ethics, therefore, is to politicize the psychological philosophy of acting: the *change* that is proposed as *changing*, a path of identification of the action in the acting subjects. Any contemplation of knowledge loses the ontological dimension of action; in doing this it opposes the mechanism which sees the centrality of a new ability to intervene on the external world starting from its relationship with the internal world.

We want to insist on the connections between creativity, imagination, power and the possibility of subjectively playing with the “not yet”, as a way of coping with the catastrophes of meaning of contemporary community. This leads us to responsibility. In this undoubtedly unapocalyptic, though certainly disturbing scenario, what role, what mental space, what perspective of “crossing” does the *polis*, as a place-time of the “competent” and “responsible” coexistence, have? To cohabit is not to survive, it does not belong to the dimension of living beyond, but of living with others. Connivance is, therefore, a thought about the relationship with self and other, and with the groups that the other represents. The more recent debate on the structure and definition of groups could not help but tackle some epistemological questions concerning the group in its configuration as a “significator of the intelligible”. In an epistemological sense the group meets the we as a being *in itself* and not as the being *for itself* typical of inter-individual relationships. We have defined this as the ability of the group to place the *we* as the *fourth person singular*, a thinking other than the individual, dislocation and overcoming of individuality. A methodological approach which is very far from those who see in the group only a work or training tool, and which instead strives to overcome sociometric uncertainties and semantic confusions starting from the founding value that group thinking has in the epistemology and methodology that we propose.

The distinction between *thinking-as-a-group* and *group thinking* should not be considered either an artifice or a strange and original linguistic device, but rather a real cognitive episteme. In fact, *thinking-as-a-group* differs from the more well-known *group thinking*, because it refers to the original act of birth of a new and different type of thinking, what is called *dual thinking*. *Thinking-as-a-group*, on the other hand, refers to the concrete result, to actualization, to the possibility of consciously recognizing oneself in a product, the thought itself, the result of the complex pooling and subsequent sharing of individual thoughts.

Many researchers, facing the problems of leadership in groups, had had the merit of expanding group epistemology to the social and community dynamics, proposing the most innovative aspect concerning *group thinking as a form of group politics*. The *breakthrough of the political in the group* has allowed us to deepen some nodes of the psycho-dynamics of interpsychic and intrapsychic relationships, in particular as regards a theory of the grouping apex mind and the psychodynamic definition of emotional resonances itself.

The group, as an anthropologically founded space in which the conditions of the intersubjective relationship are actualized, is the mental space in which the dynamic of deconstruction of a saturated thought towards a thought of change can be acted out.

As is well known, the passage from the study of the one-to-one relationship (the couple) to the study of the complex relationships between three or more people (the group) represents one of the most revolutionary facts in the history of psychology; in fact, it implies a crisis both of the individualistic conception of human relations, and of the concept of personality traditionally based on an individualistic paradigm. Personality theories, in fact, have tried to place a coherent order between the different factors that contribute to the formation of personality structures. At the beginning of the experimental investigation, the researchers choice was to isolate independent traits in order to build the concept of “type”. All studies virtually oscillated between two models: an individualistic and a social one, long opposed to each other, and represented by the traditional psychoanalytic and behaviorial models, both based on the paradigm, or rather, on the individualistic prejudice.

In this sense, psychology has probably ended up becoming a victim of this prejudice, giving up, even in recent times, to apply to the reality of the community, to the *polis*, the new perspectives opened up by theory and by the theory of technique matured in the group context.

We refer to concepts such as those of the *transpersonal*, in its various articulations, which allow a more aware and targeted clinical-social operation, but also to working techniques with groups both in the organizational context (organizational diagnosis, institutional analysis, etc.), and in the clinical-therapeutic field (the use of the group from cognitive to dynamic areas).

Psychology cannot renounce being a political science as it should and could be. Politics in the sense in which Plato could have understood it and in which we will try to understand it in this writing. A significant “sense” within a complex and comprehensive observation point. At a group and social level, psychology is the science of conscious and planned coexistence, of the competence to live together. This also means acknowledging that psychology can acquire tools and concepts capable of contributing to the political changes of a community and not only useful for interpreting it. From this point of view psychology has never ceased to play this role, but it has done so mainly in a minimalist sense. In other words, it has accepted to be the science of problems related to coexistence and the conflicts it determines, failing to propose itself, still properly, as the science of change, of planned transformations and, therefore, of the *Polis*.

The group epistemology, as a whole, has been able to cross the transition from interpretation to transformation: just think how ever so often the group (enlarged, in formation, training, focus) has been able to assume fruitful and stimulating roles for changes.

Authors such as De Marè, Brown, Hopper, propose us to think that the ability to detach oneself from events and to read their psychodynamics does not exclude the involvement produced by identifying with them. Wanting to influence events and be influenced by them: this is the breakthrough of political thinking in the group, the giving of a ground-space of encounter and ambivalence (the dynamic resistance-change). *Groups are not static realities*: they are born, they develop, persist, disperse. A group expresses a project, an enterprise, an adventure, a way of being together, which ask the researcher a complex series of questions, among which the one about *what is Us* is probably the most meaningful.

This question implicitly contains the need to arrive at a satisfactory *theory of bonding and coexistence* that psychology is still looking for. We do not have the ambition to propose a definitive one, but to expose the basic conditions that are able to indicate, in different application fields, some characteristics of the bond itself, trying to offer a contribution for the construction of an ever more complex and complete paradigm of the bond.

Thinking of the group, in conclusion, as *action, interpretation, transformation* of the processes of communication and exchange, which make the bond and coexistence possible at the same time determining them. Therefore, the idea of considering the group as a *polis* where the phenomenology of politics has the opportunity to reveal itself is not restrictive; it is appropriate to question the transition of the group subject from existence (family matrix) to coexistence (dynamic matrix).

The group not only lends itself to the knowledge of the contribution made by the social to the formation of the individual mind, but also to the opposite movement, in which subjectivity can confront itself with the social, with a thought of the *polis* that is thought of coexistence and dialogue with the other, with the value of diversity. *Group thinking is political thinking that engages with change through the resistance-transformation dichotomy*.

THESIS FOR A PSYCHOLOGY OF THE POLIS

At this point, we would like to propose a synthesis of the reflection process advanced up to now.

Overcoming methodological individualism

Both ontogenetically and phylogenetically, the origin of psyche is groupal. The belief that the human being is constitutively individual is a prejudicial thought (individualistic prejudice). By “individualistic prejudice” we mean the risk inherent in the practice of the uncritical adoption of individualistically grounded interpretative vertices of reality and, in overcoming them, the possibility of recognizing the heterodeterminacy of identity and its consubstantial multiplicity, its “dividuality” (to paraphrase Nietzsche). However, with this “dividualist” concept, we do not want to propose a vision of man as internally split and dimidiated, the other is not radically Other (in the Lacanian sense) but substantiates their Self as an internalized We. From this point of view, identification is the process underlying the construction of psychic identity. Specifically, from an inter-subjective (Stolorow, Atwood, 1992) and group analytic (Lo Verso, 1994) vertex, the human being prematurely internalizes relationships which, taken as a whole, establish what Napolitani (1987) calls “internal groupality”: “The internal groupality is the result of the internalization, through identifying processes, of the set of relationships by which the individual, from birth, becomes part as a personal element in a circularity of meanings and intentions” (Napolitani , Maggiolini, 1989). Elaborating the idea of the collective structure of the psyche means conceiving the processes of identity formation as the assumption, through identification with the inter-subjective and relational field of the social collective to

which one belongs, of the mental and affective traits of one's anthropological and cultural environment. We also want to underline the unconscious / conscious quality of the relational field which is precociously internalized: with relational, we do not refer to a communicative-interactive level but, rather, to a plot of implicit symbolic meaning which, while being part of the psychic field of the person, transcends and crosses it (transpersonal).

The idea of the collective structure of the psyche also implies the firm opposition to its biological or physiological concepts. The psyche is not bio-physio-logical, but has a historical-relational origin. Mental phenomena are representations of a metaphorical nature and cannot be reductively explained in terms of combination-interaction between physico-chemical elements; the same neurobiological substrate from which it originates (the brain) is peculiarly influenced by interpersonal and relational experience (Siegel, 1999).

The man-context relationship

Mental events are therefore characterized by their essence as social events; the individual is already a social institution in itself; it transcends him in every sense. "Just as Athens is unthinkable without the Athenians, so social meanings are unthinkable without the individuals who embody them and whose psyche still escapes any attempt at integral domestication" (Barcellona, 1995, p.103). The *polis* has a sociohistorical characterization: intersubjectivity itself is a social institution and not "the simple agreement of the I with the you" (ibid.). Furthermore, there is no human / natural "before" and a social "after"; the human being is not opposed to the social collective, the two terms do not constitute an irreducible polarity nor are they in a dialectical relationship: the psyche is substantially social and groupal. The psyche cannot exist if it is not socialized: mental organization and social organization, internal world and external world reflect each other. Between the individual and society, nature and culture, there is no contrast or dualism, one permeates the other (Brown, Zinkin, 1994).

Merits and limits of political cognition

Social psychology applied to politics, especially that of US matrix, has had the undoubted advantage of overcoming the contradictions of economic paradigms and rational choice theories, focusing instead on the cognitive processes involved in political and political attitudes in political participation (Catellani, 1997). *Political cognition*, however, in its excursion into the world of "scientific" guarantees, has not been and is unable to go beyond the methodological and epistemological constraints imposed by the models it has generated. In particular, the operationalization of phenomena

into variables, their manipulation and measurement, from a simply descriptive operation, tends to become an explanationist investigation, implying as postulate the existence of objective phenomena as such or, in any case, as an abrupt epistemological shift towards the pre-eminence of consciousness. Consequently, the experiments presuppose that things happen in a deliberate and voluntary way, and that the experimenter is able to read the mind of those who participate in them (Moscovici, 1993). Proceeding through "clear and distinct ideas" is also achieved through the clearance of the Freudian unconscious towards a merely functional dimension (the "automatic cognitive processes") and not already constructive (unconscious as a mental organizer providing meaning to the experience, *facultas signatrix* - Fornari, 1978). Downstream of all this, thinking about the action of the individual in society in terms of a cognitive representation of the world beginning with an isolated thinking leads to reducing the relationship between individual and context to an inarticulate relationship between two immeasurable entities.

Psychology and politics: from the socio-cognitive choice towards a psycho-socio-dynamic option

The main limitation of the models of social knowledge applied to politics probably lies in placing aspects such as symbolic communication, social representations and collective actions outside their own field of investigation. What we want to suggest is an observational context in which, rather than "explaining" phenomena, we aim at a search for the relationship and meaning of the social to be reached through the (Diltheyan and Jaspersian) principle of *Verstehen*. In this process of understanding, society is not a mere study object but a living subject systematically immersed in a highly reciprocal relational field. There is no contrast between social and individual (as already guessed by Freud in 1921), but rather between relational and narcissistic, where however, unlike in Freud, such antithesis does not refer to the object of supposed drive energies; rather, it should be emphasized that a psyche is given to the extent that there is relationship and intersubjectivity: psychological existence is intrinsically linked to an access to the relational world, to a process of socialization. From this point of view, the only possible opposite term of "relational" is "non-being".

In our opinion, in fact, reading social facts from a psycho-socio-dynamic vertex means focusing one's own attention on unconscious affective structures that connote social sense and meaning, with respect to which the cognitive semantic field is "commensal" (Fornari, 1978). Again, it means reading social and political phenomena as the realization of a transpersonal process and conceiving a multipyschic and transformative subjectivity, the

potential bearer of a mental space that looks to planning, to thinkability and to the realization of transformations of the state of present things (the so-called “political-environmental” level of the transpersonal, Di Maria, Lavanco, 1991).

From a subjugated psychology to a psychology that serves

The adoption of a psycho-socio-dynamic group-analytical vertex also implies freeing oneself from the constraints and static nature of a contemplative type of knowledge in order to engage in the construction of a transformative knowledge; in this sense, a psychology “for” politics can only be clinical, where “clinical” has nothing to do with the attribution of diagnostic labels to the ills of society but aims to promote the use of one’s own cognitive “probes” to the emotions of daily life and which lead to a “responsible awareness of groupality” (Pagliarani, 1985). From this point of view, psychology itself takes on a specific political responsibility (Di Maria, 2002; Di Maria, Lavanco, 2004; Di Maria, Lo Piccolo, 2005b). What is at stake is not a content to be changed, such as the substance and function of social institutions, but rather the profound relationship with the ways of knowing, our mental organizations, and the institutions

themselves; a change in the present state of things also implies, and in the first place, a radical change in scientific work. Psychology, in this sense, can make a contribution to politics insofar as it is able to promote, within *polis* citizens, a reflective and participatory (and not reflective and static) action, a transition from the relations of dominion / antagonism between people and groups to relational exchanges based on exchange and symmetrical reciprocity (Maggiolini, 1998).

Unavoidably this project has an ethical tension. An ethic not founded on a relativistic disengagement, nor on an ideological definition of just and unjust, but “an ethic of social well-being”, which is to say, the ability to go beyond prejudice and to build spaces of citizenship and relational value “(Di Maria, 2002).

In line with these considerations, the thought of Castoriadis (1978, p.75) still seems alive and current forty years later: “There is no politics of science and no science of politics, except, in both cases, as a mystification or manipulative pseudotechnics. There is only, there must be, thought politics and political thought, and this is what the times are asking for”.

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