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REVITALIZING POLITICAL AGENCY: CONTEXTUAL POLITICS AGAINST DISCRIMINATION*

abstract

This article centres on the predicament of political discrimination insofar as inclusive policies fail to address it and end up impoverishing political agency. On the one hand, inclusion plays out as a powerful political tool, as people are believed to gain access to forms of recognition granting legal protection and social visibility. On the other hand, however, my claim is that most models of political inclusion require people's adhering to fixed policy matrixes that do not allow the articulation of forms of life falling short of the standards that these matrixes incorporate. The following analysis will be devoted to foregrounding the limits of inclusion and to advancing an alternative model that revitalizes political agency by valuing practices carried out in smaller social networks of solidarity – ones that entail some sort of normativity but are characterised by fluidity and proximity. On this alternative account, inclusion comes to be reframed as a web of relations and relocated within the subject's reach. Whether in a vertical or a horizontal exchange, the subject becomes part of a collective that is not configured as the mainstream or the majority, nor does it saturate the subject's life. Rather, inclusive processes appear as sectional moments of renegotiation and rearticulation of one's subjectivity exposed to the constant flux of daily interactions.

keywords

discrimination, inclusion, rights, social context, utopias

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This article centres on the predicament of political discrimination insofar as inclusive policies fail to address it and end up impoverishing political agency.[1] On the one hand, inclusion plays out as a powerful political tool, as people are believed to gain access to forms of recognition granting legal protection and social visibility. On the other hand, however, my claim is that most models of political inclusion require people's adhering to fixed policy matrixes that do not allow the articulation of forms of life falling short of the standards that these matrixes incorporate. The following analysis will be devoted to foregrounding the limits of inclusion and to advancing an alternative model that revitalizes political agency by valuing practices carried out in smaller social networks of solidarity – ones that entail some sort of normativity but are characterized by fluidity and proximity. On this alternative account, inclusion comes to be reframed as a web of relations and relocated within the subject's reach. Whether in a vertical or in a horizontal exchange, the subject becomes part of a collective that is not configured as a mainstream group or a majority, nor does it saturate the subject's life. In this perspective, inclusive processes appear as sectional moments of renegotiation and re-articulation of one's subjectivity exposed to the constant flux of daily interactions.

1. Inclusive politics: three models

To understand why inclusive politics often fails to address discrimination, it will be of help to delineate three ways in which inclusion can be politically configured. Generally speaking, policies can aim at including people through granting a formal equality among citizens, through a redistribution of opportunities to achieve personal goals or, finally, through the legitimation of non-traditional identities or ways of living.[2]

The first strategy is oriented at promoting political participation. It comprises a set of inclusive policies working on the assumption that political enfranchisement is the best way

1 Political discrimination is a wide phenomenon that can be generally described as the discrepancy between political opportunities offered in democratic contexts and their effective social impact. Discrimination, then, takes the form of social injustice (Bufacchi 2012) or of a discrete marginalization (Venditti 2019, in print), one that targets single segments of a subject's life. This complex phenomenon is described by Iris Marion Young ((1990: 48-63) as a multi-layered condition which often emerges in the co-presence of factors such as oppression, powerlessness, violence and cultural imperialism.

2 In what follow, I will present three general normative frameworks that typically inform inclusive intervention and policy measures aimed at fighting discrimination. In this sense, the models I refer to are specific political conducts that follow from the application of theoretical lines. I delve into the analysis of these models in Venditti 2019, in print.

to tackle social and political discrimination. These policies are meant to prompt people to play an active part within political institutions, by strengthening connections between citizens and institutions and promoting public engagement. The development of a political awareness and the invitation to the broadest participation to public procedures are believed to gather different voices from disparate positions within society and to give them political visibility. In this sense, public engagement is claimed to prevent the formation of enclaves of marginalization, as it grants every citizen (without any distinction based on "personal features" such as sex, class, colour, religion) access to the public forum, as well as the possibility of expressing their interests and affecting the outcomes of political procedures. One of the main problems of this model of inclusive policies lies in the structure that originates from the ambiguous bifurcation of the concept of political equality they support (see e.g. MacKinnon 1987). For they incorporate a basic distinction between *private* and *public* domains and address politically only the latter. The perpetration of such a division produces a fracture in the social realm, one that imposes a naturalized division of roles, based on the recognition of a normal, neutral, non-specific position in relation to which other positions come to be identified. In doing so, this type of policies promotes a model of the political citizen *par excellence* (the adult, able, respectable citizen) serving as the basic standard for a variegated group of "others", who might variously be identified as different because of their sex, gender, skin colour, ethnicity, religion and so on. Interestingly, the creation of a difference-blind political sphere neither flattens nor harmonizes divergences, but instead relegates the tensions they bring about in the private realm, where primary effects of discrimination often originate and reproduce.

In sum, the main problem besetting this way of conceiving inclusion is that the very perpetration of a disentanglement between the private and the public (which is alleged to empower the subject *as a citizen*) ratifies roles and hierarchies in the private sphere. For policies of this sort pay exclusive heed to the political-public side of one's life and remain mostly blind to those (private) differences that are the primary source of discrimination and marginalization. The private/public divide and the consequent elision of the private as a fundamental space marks those strategies that are only concerned with granting access to public procedures as unable to tackle the roots of discrimination (see e.g. Young 1990; 2000). Even worse, the divide they create reinforces existing social hierarchies and disadvantages insofar as the public display of good intentions on the part of state institutions belittles the need to cut deeper into the subtlest causes of inequalities that are based on "private" deficiencies (see Fricker 2006; Langton 1993).

The second strategy is based on the idea of defeating inclusion by means of an improvement of private lives . In this sense, this approach is somehow opposite to the one I considered above. Emphasis here is placed on private life, something which inheres in people's basic and potential skills to attain an actual and effective political participation. Apparently, then, these policies work as a felicitous correction of the first strategy. The advocates of these models, in particular Martha Nussbaum (2011) and Amartya Sen (2010), offer a theoretical structure that aims at indicating where and when state institutions should intervene to redress circumstances of marginalization and discrimination. For these authors, the key to fighting discrimination is associate with individuals' actual needs and inclinations. My argument against this perspective is that the supporters of this policy model, to identify spheres of intervention, need to postulate, whether explicitly or implicitly, the existence of a *basic human nature*. As illustrated by Disability Studies and Crip Theory scholars (see Shakespeare 2006; McRuer 2006), relying on an allegedly homogeneous humanity not only neglects physical aspects of marginalization, but actually *constitutes* some realities as permanently and inescapably inhuman. Examples of policies that seek to promote the integration of people

with disabilities reveals the tendency to implement activities that could help those people cope with the allegedly neutral environment within which everyday life unfolds. This model places the burden of inclusion (that is, of being included, of proving capable of being included) entirely on the impaired subject, denying the role of an organization (material, socio-spatial and temporal) structured around (and for) healthy and able-bodied individuals (see Kafer 2013). Political paradigms pivoted on capabilities tend to take for granted widespread features of a majority of the population as *hallmarks of a shared humanity*, which therefore work as a threshold and as a system of measurement.

Finally, the third general model of inclusion is concerned with the visibility of non-traditional forms of living and the legitimation of marginalized categories. Contrary to the two types of policies described so far, this kind of strategies aims at securing inclusion indirectly, that is, either through the discouragement of behaviours that are deemed to be detrimental to individuals and groups that are discriminated against, or through the recognition of rights based on individuals' being members of marginalized groups. Therefore, an approach oriented at protecting certain categories shifts focus from the improvement of the life conditions of single individuals to the definition of the *strands of the population* that deserve to be protected and recognized by the law. Accordingly, the main target of laws and policy measures becomes the conducts that foster discrimination and the practices of minority group in need of legal recognition. This does not only eventuate in the production of laws that prohibit discriminatory behaviours or extend rights, but also in the implementation of symbolically compensative measures for the "victims" of discriminatory behaviours. In this latter case, protection and recognition play out as an enablement, a sort of liberation through legitimation.

The limit of this strategy is that the practice of addressing someone as a member of a protected category (say, "gay" or "lesbian", or a "gipsy", a "refugee", a "sex worker", and so on) postulates the existence of a *basic link* between one's belonging to a social group and her sexual preferences, or ethnic and/or religious affiliations, or, generally speaking, particular ways of living. Indeed, there are specific kinds of traits on whose grounds a given identity can be attributed to a given subject. On this account, individuals are first and foremost members of a category and, because of that, are constantly assimilated to a pre-defined role. This entails that subjects can acquire a place in the social world only through the endorsement and the re-enactment of standardized identity features. Categories that emerge out of this legal regulation of the social world draw the perimeter of intelligibility within which a given way of living is made visible and can be recognised. Such a mechanism is so powerful that behavioural standards, habits, and a whole range of personal features tend to disguise their social constructedness and to be perceived as inborn in the very nature of the categories to which they are ascribed.

Although these models appear to be different in some central regards, the third approach helps discover an important *trait of commonality* among the three strategies I analyzed. In effect, policies aimed at protecting categories seem far away from the former two because of an explicit categorial filter, which is set in motion for them to address specific policy targets. And yet, this way of functioning is archetypal and can be observed as being at work in the other two models when we look at them not only as policies, but as alternative systems that contribute to the production of a substantive and formative symbolic core. In this sense, the third political strategy illustrates as how, by claiming to be redeeming the situation of discriminated subjects, policies at the same time *constitute* these subjects, or better contribute to the semantic construction of the social situation that people recognize as affecting their life. In short, this last model of policies casts light on how inclusive policy measures in general construct and introduce categories to address someone as a member of a group (e.g., as gay

or lesbian, gipsy, potential terrorist or prostitute), and by doing so, postulate the existence of a basic link between one's belonging to a social group and some traits that are believed to qualify their identity as social beings. Subjects are taken to be members of categories that the law not only legitimates, but constructs to make these people legally speakable.

2. For a contextual re-politicization of agency

So far, I have discussed various political effects of three general political approaches to inclusion. The outcomes of narrow inclusive scheme affect the actual life of discriminated groups by determining the conditions of their social experience as well as the conditions for verbalizing them. At a symbolic level, processes of marginalization and inclusion are subjected to the same linguistic making-up: the very account of what marginalization is and who discriminated people are is deeply connected with available accounts and practices codified by policy measures (Hacking, 1999; Haslanger, 2012). Policies constantly refer to a semantic repertoire that allows to frame unfamiliar situations by relying on already accepted meanings. This mechanism of "translation" hampers the perception of alternative forms of living, which are displayed as always consistent with hegemonic standards. From women equality to disability-friendly accommodations, up to LGBT families and new kinship formations, the logic of the "in and out" cannot but following assimilating procedures of normalization. To put it differently, inclusive discourses draw on a language that reconfirms and reproduces a definite (contingent and partial) matrix that erases differences in the name of the indefinite extension of legal patterns of recognition.[3]

But how to reframe inclusion, then? How to tackle marginalization without resorting to the standardized set of patterns that allows to understand the social realm as an ordinate, non-problematic, homogeneous field? And, above all, can we imagine a way to *empower* marginalized subjects instead of just endowing them with political recognition?

If we look back to the policy models I analyzed so far, it is possible to unpack the outcomes of the flaws of these inclusive strategies: if, on the one hand, they always rely on a system that *depends on* exclusion, on the other, they produce a subject that is politically "passive". A subject that embraces a position in order to be legitimated, but that, at the same time, cannot interact or negotiate in order to *embody* a political alternative to already-recognized forms of living. Political interventions are deemed to safeguard people and their good lives, instead of creating the conditions for subjects to emerge out of a situation of disadvantage. In this sense, political strategies withdraw from a task of constituting a lively political context, to offer a range of political ready-made solutions. These solutions will always displace the problem of marginalization from one category to another. Take the example of same sex marriage: legal ratification of same sex couples allows a new strand of the population to enjoy marital and familial rights. However, this form of recognition only interests those who embrace a specific type of relation, one that should be stable, monogamous but – above all – based on coupledom. To extend marriage to non-heterosexual couples still not accounts for the variety of other forms of affective relationships that might ask for legal protection: from the ones that entail more than two people, to the ones that are not based on sexual bonds (see Croce 2018). Apart from this constant displacement, however, the most problematic result of this kind of inclusion concerns the political value of this legitimation: subjects are always recognized "from above", placed in a political matrix that reinforces accepted meanings and conventional ways of living.[4]

3 I cannot delve here on a thorough analysis of normalization and its relation to institutional language, the jargon of rights and the symbolic power of common sense. On this issue see Bourdieu 1991 and the by now classic Warner 2000

4 Indeed, I am not making the case *against* same-sex marriage or any form of traditional institution. Legal legitimation

A more promising strategy for revitalizing political agency is the enactment of alternative practices in micro-political contexts. To this end, it is possible to think re-politicization as a set of different *contextual* processes that take political action as a "range of tasks, from denaturalizing the status quo to stimulating and educating the imagination, promoting a desire for change, demonstrating the limits of what can be thought of, and performing textually and experimentally the political struggles that change invokes" (Cooper 2013: 44). On this view, such practical activities give life to concrete alternative political scenarios, though small and segmental. This model of inclusiveness is totally embedded in the contexts where practices are performed. Scholars who study those contexts focus on imaginative sites where ordinary social practices are actualized in unconventional ways. Their focus is especially directed to restricted communities where people operate a re-articulation of the categories and concepts at play in mainstream political arrangements. The radical embeddedness of such enacted practices and, at the same time, their disjunction from mainstream routines is what lead scholars to identify them as "everyday utopias" (Cooper 2013; on "contemporary" utopias see also Levitas 2007; Lewis and Neal 2005; Wegner 2002).

A word on "utopia" is needed. Far from retaining its traditional, value-laden, ideal and perfectionist meaning (observable in the double characterization of utopia both as "ou-topia" and as "eu-topia" – respectively no-place and good place – see Willemsen 1997 in Schönpflug 2008, p. 7), everyday utopias are (spatially and temporarily) accessible sites in which "counterintuitive ways" (Cooper 2013, p. 27) of coping with ordinary situations are imagined, designed and practiced. Examples of everyday utopias are small communities in which common practices are performed in different and innovative ways, for instance – as Cooper (2013) indicates –trading groups that work with local currency or more generally without money (as in the case of time banking); schools adopting methods and ideals of democratic nature (such as Summerhill School in the UK or schools that adopt the Reggio Emilia Approach).

The concreteness of the examples provided above shows that everyday utopias do not shape up imaginary places of perfect politics, nor do they indicate a modality for leaving behind mainstream social interactions in order to enter a temporary space of ideality (Wegner 2002, pp. 17-39). Rather, they lay the foundations for a re-attunement to the political based on *concrete daily interactions*. The utopia of a better world is not the production of an all-encompassing, totalizing political project, but the shared performance of more viable and satisfying social dynamics. On this view, re-politicization is both fragmented (in the sense that it cannot be brought about by institutional measures "from above") and pragmatic (in the sense it centres concerns and anxieties that are part and parcels of people's quotidian experience). At the same time, it is never totalizing, as it emerges out as a series of collective practices that target very *specific segments of people's lives* (e.g. sexual intercourses, money, education, sociability) with the aim of producing a viable alternative to mainstream inflections of everyday situations. It is important to remark that none of these practical realities pursues change for its own sake, as at the core of such communities lies an interest in responding to prosaic, concrete, quotidian needs and difficulties by exploring other ways of coping with particular moment of their members' everyday life. In summary, the utopian element does not reside in the idyllic imagining of a better world in a fictional, fictitious dimension, but in the daily and micro-contextual actualization and re-elaboration of meanings, concepts and

of same-sex couples under the form of marriage is desirable and must be pursued as an aim and a goal. However, the *prominence* of traditional forms of living conceals and hampers the articulation of different ways of living. On this see Swennen and Croce 2015.

arrangements that are commonly taken for granted. Here, the taken-for-grantedness that silences discriminated subjects is interrogated and questioned, eventually overturned in the pursuit of alternative ways of doing things.

At the same time, these imaginative practices are inherently transformative but never oppositional. The re-formulation of political agency that utopias allow and encourage is not contingent on the mainstream imaginings and conceptual schemes, since it opposes (most often indirectly) what exists through a *critical engagement* that however does not neglect (nor try to annihilate) it. The operation of *displacement* undertaken in these minor-stream contexts eventuates neither in the creation of insulated counter-communities in which ordinary practices are distorted and reshaped in service of partial, particular projects or programs, nor in the reproduction of mainstream modes, that is, in the arrangement of monolithic counter-communities that aim at substituting the "normal" one. Rather, everyday utopias are oriented towards destabilizing the apparently fixed status quo of mainstream social reality by imagining and enacting an immanent rethinking of existing social connections (such as sexual pleasure, trading, hierarchical structures, the relation with the environment, and others). The fact that the actualization of "better" ways of living starts on a small-scale basis and is configured as a non-totalizing way of living (that is, the reduced space and the limited temporality of everyday utopias) constitutes the kernel of a polymorph, dynamic re-articulation of the political. In effect, the fragmented nature of minor-stream groups and/or organizations, as well as their proximity (both physical, as they are not *else*where, and practical, as they touch upon commonplace concerns) to mainstream institutions lead to the articulation of innovative practices which intersect and interact with traditional ones. Moreover, this articulation takes the concrete path of material interactions where new meanings are produced precisely in virtue of their potential clash with dominant signifiers and grids of meanings that however does not intend to replace them. Given this orthogonal relation to mainstream society, Cooper (2013) describes everyday sites as displaying high pervasiveness and permeability, in which "a focus on the everyday extends into utopia" and where "prosaic dimensions of regular life – sex, trading, teaching, politics, public appearance, and speech – are performed in innovative and socially ambitious ways that, by challenging, simultaneously *unveil* prevailing norms, ideologies, and practices" (p. 6).

Portraying the re-politicization of agency as the collective actualization of alternative imaginaries spotlights the strong link among political concepts, symbolical structures and material arrangements. Everyday utopias become sites of political reformulation at the very moment in which they cease to be self-excluding manifestations of discomfort and begin to set in motion a series of "epistemologies of the margin" (Cooper 2013; hook 1991). These are not only the expression of a critique of dominant ways of living, but are above all the structuration of (physical, symbolic and political) sites where it is possible to experience "what other kinds of forms [of living] could be like" (Cooper 2013, p. 32). The experience of these alternatives might be both active (as enacted and achievable) and passive (as witnessed and observable), since the openness of these sites allows participant to go to and fro, but also to become the mediators between such non-conforming practices and the mainstream context. In this sense, *flexibility* and *proximity* are two of the most important features of this re-politicization of political agency.

On the one hand, the flexible variety of participants brings about an ever-changing oscillation between the moment of actualization and the moment of imagination of alternative good spaces. Participants' differences in needs and desires, ideals and longings subject minor-stream communities to the continuous and incessant reformulation of the utopic imaginary (which, for this reason, are unlikely to turn into an ideology, in which a fixed status quo has to be sustained – see Levitas 2007) and, consequently, to a reassessment and reevaluation of

practices themselves. However, conflicts and failures to which these sites, because of their inherent uncertainty, are exposed should not be seen as pitfalls or flaws. The articulation of a desire of more livable contexts is actually contingent on the provisionality of these practices. For it is exactly by virtue of a dynamic articulation of premises and fundamental assumptions of the practice that the risk of dehistoricization and naturalization of the political and symbolic concepts produced can be avoided (see Levitas 2007).
On the other hand, the proximity (or even promiscuity) of these sites and mainstream social reality is an invitation to the reflexive game of comparison. The ostensive, though tentative, exhibition of alternatives paves the way for a renewed articulation of one's own situation.
In this sense, as I pointed out above, the core of everyday utopias is not about dismantling or destabilizing the existing order, as they rather aspire to unsettle this order through the arrangement of non-competitive alternative forms of living. The non-totalizing tendency of these practices permits them to interact *concretely* with the hegemonic structure, without being forced to prove an ideal, inherent consistence. It is in their transience that everyday utopias fulfill the task of reinvigorating political agency.
It is my claim that the contextual re-politicization enacted by these site does not lapse back into the assimilatory dynamic that besets the other inclusive policies. Everyday utopias might be taken as instances of political modes of re-collocating symbolic resources at the margins. Thanks to their limitedness in space and time, they are able to challenge the hegemonic order without engaging in a dangerous tug-of-war against it. At the same time, their inherent variety and their ineffability contribute to make them sites of creation of a transformative politics: utopias emphasize the importance of transformed social existence to thinking differently. [...] It is not simply about the creation of worlds or ways of living that will better meet people's interests *as they currently are*. Utopia is also centrally concerned with those changing interests, desires, identifications, and forms of embodiment that happen as people (and other forms of life) experience other ways of living (Cooper 2013, p. 34).

In conclusion, contextual re-politicization is not a recipe to the re-establishment of a thick state, nor is it the remedy to the mismatch between political procedures and legal techniques.[5] The current state of affairs is such that social actors will predictably continue to seize on the rapid upsurge of inclusive measures as an effective, albeit normalizing, political tool. However, the opening up of micro-dynamics where people can experience the day-to-day organization of practices in subversive but ordinary ways (where subversion does not target "the system" as a whole, but the widespread understanding of how certain ordinary things have to be carried out) is likely to mine interstices where people can really regard themselves as 'affected agents' – which is to say, people called upon to think up the alternative. In these interstices, the political gets back its original sense of re-*imagining the social and performatively affecting it*, where imaginings and actualization can and often do diverge, but this divergence serves as a symbolic prism through which we can grasp reality's inevitable character of constructedness and artificiality, and thus, its amenability to revision. Contextual re-politicization, of which everyday utopias are an important instance, is thus a small-scale but ambitious project (or dozens of micro-projects) where subjects, at least transitorily (not all their life, not all their

5 I delve into the issue of re-politicization in Venditti 2018a and 2018b. Micro-practices have the power of re-configuring individual relationships and constituting webs of interactions that held a political virtue. Micro-practices constitute (or even re-constitute) what is lost in a political dimension saturated by rights intended as privileges ascribed to certain identities. In this sense, everyday utopias place subjects in the condition of developing a new political stance, a presence in the world which transcends mere socialization to delineate spaces and sites informed by a *political rationality*. See in particular Cooper 2013.

time) become political subjects who get dirty hands to make decisions on how to do things in the here and the now, who dare to take responsibility for these decisions, who take the risk of making mistakes. In these contexts, the rights and benefits typical of other inclusive models are already and always political, because they display at once their face of choice, duty and responsibility; in these contexts, the marginal has always something to say to the mainstream, and the unspeakable is systematically brought to bear on the speakable as the ever-present incongruity between what we hoped and what we failed to achieve.

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