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# ON THE NOTION OF POLITICAL AGENCY

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Political agency may be the easiest notion to define and the most complicated at the same time. Such ambivalence is not just a play on words: in fact, it depends on what being a political agent means, if that being is any citizen or any individual *in se*. Further questions arise: is political agency something like a status to be acknowledged to any human being or to any member of a democratic polity? Are there requirements to be fulfilled, in order to be labelled as political agents?

Basically, an agent is the one who is 'capable to act'; meanwhile, 'agency' means that capacity or, even, the expression of that capacity. In some detail, political agent is the one who is 'capable to act' politically: that is, someone who is capable of participating in a 'common' exercise of political power. The accent on the idea of a collective exercise of power is paramount: in such an account of political agency the more a person is 'isolated' from other people, the more her political agency diminishes.

Beyond this very general meaning of political agent, there is further room for a deeper examination (Marchetti 2013). For example, some authors see political agency as the capacity to take part in the struggle to define the models of a common life, stressing the conflictual dimension of politics (Mouffe 2005). Other scholars understand political agency in a liberal view, as being the strategic capacity to coordinate with others in order to settle a fair society. These are only two ways to understand political agency. Generally, all traditions share a preoccupation with the issue of power. The point is about legitimacy: we should ask when power may be coercive, when coercion is legitimate, who is legitimate to coerce others and why. If 'the state' has been the traditional actor, its role and functions are being transformed by the process of globalization: a state's capacity to influence the political course is now controversial. Given this context, further articulation of the notion of political agency is needed: questions such as what political actorness means today, what doing politics means in the present time wait for better answers. Differently, by eluding these philosophical questions of what political agency is and what being a political agent means, the debate would be anchored to an out-of-date understanding of political agency as rooted in conventional images of political actorness, while ignoring what currently challenges the traditional political thinking. By doing so, we would fail to capture politics in the real world, while giving up taking reality seriously.

The present issue of *Phenomenology and Mind* entitled "*Unpacking Political Agency: Equality, Vulnerability, Discrimination*" contains a selection of papers presented at San Raffaele Spring

School of Philosophy (SRSSP) 2018 written by contributors selected through a double-blind peer review process. Moreover, it includes invited papers (subjected to peer review process as well) written by scholars working on the topic of political agency, who were not able to attend the SRSSP, but whose contributions may have added some value to this debate. SRSSP was held at Vita-Salute San Raffaele University in Milan, in June (5th – 7th) 2018. It was organized by the research centers CeSEP, CRESA, gender, IRCECP, and PERSONA of the Faculty of Philosophy, and it also received support from the Faculty and the Ph.D. program.

The aim of this SRSSP was to try and fill the gap between traditional theoretical accounts of political agency and the new practical challenges addressed by this notion in different domains, thus investigating political agency in relation to vulnerability, discrimination, migration, equality, and the community. Contributors were asked to reflect upon the notion of political agency within their respective fields of expertise, exploring issues such as the followings: what does it mean to be a political agent, which is her identity, why a form of political agency emerged and in what context, what practices the agents concerned do undertake.

Drawing from the collected contributions, this special issue is organized through four thematic sections: Political Agency, Vulnerability and Discrimination; Political Agency and Migration; Political Agency and Equality; and Political Collective Agency.

The first section – **Political Agency, Vulnerability and Discrimination** – hosts the two papers written by Luca Iacovone and Valeria Venditti.

Drawing from the well-known distinction between inherent vulnerability and situational vulnerability (Mackenzie *et al.* 2014), **Luca Iacovone** focuses on the notion of vulnerable population or vulnerable group, analyzing the effects of the vulnerable group-based approach in the case law of European Court of Human Rights. Taking the *Chapman v. the United Kingdom* (2001) European Court of Human Rights' judgment as case study, he criticizes the very concept of vulnerable population as it has been traditionally interpreted and used within this framework, on the basis of two main reasons. First, it turns out “constructing and reiterating the idea of stable identities”. Moreover, and consequently, “it reduces the political agency of the social actors through the boundaries defined by the list of the available vulnerable groups”. Against this background and starting from the belief that vulnerability still represents a promising concept, he sketches out “a multifaced conception of vulnerability meant to take into account at the same time its universality and its specificity”. As such, vulnerability does no longer conflict with the notion of agency, but becomes the condition of possibility for agency itself.

Not less problematic than the notion of vulnerability is the one of inclusion, on which the contribution of **Valeria Venditti** revolves around. Despite being a powerful political tool in virtue of its promise of allowing people to gain access to forms of recognition, according to Venditti “the vast majority of models of political inclusion requires 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”. Moving far from traditional accounts, the author suggests to embrace an alternative form of political inclusion, which appears able to “revitalize 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”.

The second section – **Political Agency and Migration** – hosts the four papers written by Silvia Mocchi, Gaetano Marco Latronico, Francesca Pongiglione and Roberta Sala, and Elettra Repetto.

Insofar as it deals with the notion of vulnerability, the contribution of **Francesca Pongiglione** and **Roberta Sala** builds a bridge between the first and the second section of this special

issue. The two authors embrace an ontological as well as political concept of vulnerability, considered as “a distinctive feature of human beings on which our duties towards each other are grounded”. Drawing from this definition, they claim that, although migrants are, by definition, vulnerable agents (as they flee from wars, dictatorships, poverty, climate change, and/or other calamities), they nonetheless should not be considered as entitled of duties of beneficence, but of justice. By doing this, they explicitly take a distance from David Miller, who refers to duties of beneficence while speaking of migrants, and argue that pursuing justice, in this context, also requires the fulfillment of the duty to host migrants, as their vulnerability is not due to some kind of misfortune, but to some form of injustice.

On the question wondering whether migrants – ‘undocumented’ migrants, in particular – may be political agents and, in case of positive answer, what does it mean for migrants to be political agents, is built the contribution of **Elettra Repetto**. The author rejects a so-to-say ontological account of political agency, denying that such a notion may be reduced to a status represented, in this context, by the right to vote. Differently, and following Arendt amongst others, Repetto argues that “whenever a *person* expresses herself in the public forum, in a legal or in an illegal way, addressing the incumbents or the other residents, participating in setting the agenda of what should matter for the community and discussing how institutions should implement the obligations individuals have towards each other, she expresses herself in a political way”. By saying this, Repetto endorses a more inclusive and broad definition of political agency, which requires capacity and action, and which has, as its main implication, that migrants may become political agents who deserve to be heard ‘simply’ by acting and voicing their claims as autonomous individuals.

Precisely on the concept of participation on a national and local level as the core content of political agency focuses, instead, the contribution of **Silvia Mocchi**. The author argues in favor of a two-fold strategy aimed at addressing social and political marginalization experienced by minorities, in particular migrants. On the one hand, at a national level, political agency for immigrants should be enhanced “through a system of enfranchisement designed to improve the participation rights of outsiders”. On the other hand, and insofar as enfranchisement alone is not enough to allow a proper participation, this should be accompanied by a residency-based policy. Through the expressions used by the same author, whether at a national level political agency requires “modifying restrictive citizenship laws that are based on the *ius soli* principle [...], the *demos* at local level should be enlarged in line with the principle of *ius domicili*”.

Finally, a broader theoretical perspective underpins the contribution of **Gaetano Marco Latronico**. Starting from the consideration that the phenomenon of immigration considered in its general meaning of “human mobility” is far from being a recent one, the author relates present occurrences of such phenomenon to fundamental dynamics shaping contemporary societies. Namely, the author argues that the so-called “neo-liberal” turn in “advanced capitalistic societies” generates impersonal dynamics that “appears to put into question the same political capacity of classically conceived National States” as primary political actors. Within this context, the phenomenon of immigration seems to require the elaboration of new coping strategies from the part of established political actors, which could also foreground the lived experiences and political agency of immigrant groups.

The third section, entitled “**Political Agency and Equality**”, contains the two papers written by Federica Liveriero and Dragan Kuljanin.

In *The Social Bases of Self-respect. Political Equality and Epistemic Injustice* **Federica Liveriero** defends a non-ideal account of political equality that relies on both moral and epistemic features. This specification, according to the author, is extremely important insofar as “it helps developing a framework that defines epistemic forms of injustice as instances of social suffering that endanger the very possibility for agents to be granted the social bases of self-

respect”. Recovering the epistemic dimension of political equality, pretty underestimated by the contemporary debates, may have a positive impact on members belonging to disadvantaged groups, who may feel themselves as devoid of political agency, if subjected to “structural injustices related to epistemic wrongs”. The conclusion of Liveriero’s reasoning is that, if the epistemic dimension of political equality matters, “political institutions have a duty to contrast forms of epistemic injustice, because these injustices do not simply concern the horizontal interpersonal relationships among citizens but, rather, are detrimental to the enactment of the ideal of political equality in institutional contexts as well”.

In his contribution, **Dragan Kuljanin** investigates the intriguing topic of epistocracy. After having introduced what the authors summarize as the two assumptions of epistocratic systems – equal political rights are not fundamental rights, and democracy cannot be considered as endowed with a privileged epistemic status – he focuses on one of the epistemic accounts developed by Brennan, namely “restricted suffrage”. By showing all the (fatal, according to the author) problems that restricted suffrage epistocracy poses, such as the level of knowledge dilemma, and the epistemic problems related to the identification of the epistocrats, Kuljanin ends up supporting – albeit indirectly – democracy over epistocracy. The conclusion is, in the author’s view, that “the most promising way to solve, or at least minimize, the problem of an uninformed electorate lies in more equality (economic, social, gender and racial), better and more accessible education, public and publicly-spirited media, and not in abandoning democracy”.

The last section, entitled “**Political Collective Agency**”, contains the two contributions of Adélaïde de lastic and Marco di Feo.

Both authors defend a collective account of political agency, the first contributor wondering whether enterprises may be considered as political collective agents, the second contributor focusing on a core issue of political agency in its collective stance, i.e. social integration. More in details, **Adélaïde de lastic** argues in favour of an ontological account of political collective agency applied to the reality of enterprises. In her view, enterprises may be defined as specific kinds of social objects, presenting intrinsic properties which, if considered as a whole, enable them to act as a group with a definite political significance. On the other hand, and drawing from a phenomenological perspective, **Marco di Feo** investigates the importance of social integration in relation to collective political agency, where the former is broadly defined as “a processes of personal change, in which the subjects involved have to find a way of living together”, i.e. intersubjectivity. After having identified four possible ways in which intersubjectivity occur – namely community, society, territory, and state – the author claims that “Since the failed integration of new subjects may have a deep negative impact on the life of communities, on the flow of social interactions and on the order of legality, causing critical situations of social exclusion, then social integration, in all its forms, must be always a priority of the political agenda”.

Throughout the contributions of this special issue, the notion of political agency appears in its entirety and complexity, as a multifaced concept, that may be investigated from different perspectives and within different disciplinary domains, and which may be referenced to the individual as well as to the community. Despite the intrinsic and unavoidable complexity characterizing the notion of political agency, we hope that this special issue may help clarifying the different layers of a debate, which, in our view, will deserve, in the near future, ever more consideration.

We are grateful to all those who made this experience possible. First, we would like to thank the contributors to this volume, as well as our reviewers for their availability and their competent job.

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