



## In Which Imaginary Places Do Our Flags Fly?

Claudio Luzzati 25 May 2020

### A few messy notes

My friend Silvio Ferrari asked me to comment, with other scholars, a 2019 article by A.B. Seligman and D.W. Montgomery, which bears an upsetting title that would imply that human rights became in no uncertain terms “a tragedy”[1]. For me, this is a punch in the gut.

On the other hand, the main thesis of the essay, according to which liberals have neglected the motivating force of belonging is by no means foreign to me. I too have argued of the importance of taking belonging into account for persuasiveness in rhetoric.[2] As Gramsci[3] had already highlighted, it is an entirely different story if it is “one of ours” or “one of theirs” who speaks. Moreover, we all know the extraordinary success of frankly incorrect arguments, *ad hominem*, or blatantly stupid.[4] Often, people give credit to messages that are “irrational” from the very point of view of a mere selfish calculation of their own interests. George Lakoff[5] argues this, putting his skills as theorist of metaphors to good use, but this same truth had also been grasped time ago by Epictetus, who had

proclaimed a golden rule to which today's social sciences should not be deaf: "What troubles people is not facts themselves but their judgement about the facts".[6]

In reality, the intuition that sense of belonging plays an important, and perhaps underestimated role, and the obvious thesis that in a multicultural society the encounter-clash between different ways of living often provokes acute suffering and unbearable tensions, are only the start of an analysis and not its conclusion. I particularly fear that the key term 'belonging' is vulnerable to being revealed as more slippery than predicted, particularly if it is opposed, as it is in the work in question, to such an ambiguous word as 'identity'. In this moment of writing, I have not yet worked out a precise position. I will therefore proceed with notes, in no predetermined order. I cannot even rule out arguing against myself.

A final preliminary note: I must confess that, as a "left-wing intellectual", I am the least appropriate person to explain collective behavior. Intellectuals have gotten all predictions of recent political developments wrong. They were taken by surprise because of their snobbish annoyance at the banality of clichés, at what is "the same for all", at the so-called homogenizing factors, searching for what distinguishes them from others. Actually, they are more akin to Walter Benjamin, who deplored the reproducibility and mass enjoyment of art, than to Andy Warhol. After all, the myth of the "good savage" dies with difficulty: we hardly tolerate that the "people" can make errors in their evaluations or that the "crowd" let itself be seduced by gross and unacceptable messages from the point of view of minimal ethics, which does guide isolated individuals, although it is known that *senators boni viri, senatus mala bestia*. To have an understanding of these problems, it would probably be more useful to follow reality television shows or social networks than to read weighty tomes of political philosophy. But those in my profession have difficulty realizing this.[7]

## **The stakes**

The paper submitted to our attention by Seligman and Montgomery should be contextualized within the framework of the initiatives of CEDAR (Communities Engaging with Difference and Religion)[8], an international organization, which carries out fundamentally pedagogical activities, teaching activists and leaders of different communities around the globe different techniques for coexistence, based on the ability to accept, rather than negate or overcome differences of perspectives primarily in matters related to religion. To know more, one should read *Living with Difference*, a book that illustrates the programs, aims and methods of the organization.[9]

We are therefore faced with a text that, far from being a dispassionate theoretical analysis, is connected to fieldwork, halfway between an experiment of anthropological assumptions and a proactive, if not openly persuasive and “educational” approach (for the transmission of certain values). Here, however, I will restrict myself to examining the article as if it were the product of purely academic research.

As mentioned above, the authors’ central idea is that the rhetoric around human rights has neglected the need for a “shared belonging”, that is, the need for every person “to be a member of a *particular* community, with a particular past, particular stories, smells, tastes, jokes, obligations, recipes, moral judgments, boundaries of what is permissible and prohibited, basic frames of meanings, fears and desires”. In this regard, Seligman and Montgomery, make sure to emphasize strongly that “membership in community”, which plays a considerable role in our conception of a “good life”, is removed from choice. To put it in their words: “It is not for an individual to merely pick and choose belonging”. [10]

Belonging is non-fungible. On the other hand, Seligman and Montgomery argue that one cannot have universal belonging, extended to all human beings, such as, in their opinion, is postulated by rights. The latter, if compared to the protective warmth of a community of trust, would only be a freezing utopia. The “abstract” character of rights, abstract and impersonal as it is incapable of arousing real emotions, is repeatedly lamented by the authors. If we can speak of help, here we are faced with “legalized assistance programs doled out by cold bureaucratic organizations and welfare

agencies”. Moreover, those who enjoy the same rights often have nothing in common except falling in the same abstract situation, being catalogued under the same label. Often, they do not share any type of experience, or form of life whatsoever.

Strangely, in this exposé, *belonging* never comes into conflict with *believing*, such as in the not-infrequent case of atheists calling for large crucifixes to be put up in public spaces just to spite Muslim immigrants. The authors look upon multiculturalism with suspicion and transform “identity” that is demarcated by rights with each of us possibly containing many identities at the same time, into something that is possessed. They do not fail to observe that “having an identity is not the same as belonging to a community”. Obviously, the objection to liberals that intersperses the piece is a usual effort of communitarianism: making the individual an island, “a morally autonomous agent devoid of inherited ties and obligations”. On the contrary, the individual does not exist outside of a social context characterized by a shared narrative: the only thing to guarantee “human flourishing”, since the tastes and values of individual people do not develop inside a vacuum.

This analysis, however, does not hold. It is not simply a matter of building coexistence between “tolerated” religious groups, which govern themselves as with the *millet* of the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, liberals do not intend to construct a “universal citizenship”, nor do they try to imagine the individual as an abstract entity. The stakes are another. Liberals claim the space to discuss dominant values, possibly those of the minority group to which they belong, and if they so wish, to make the personal choices that detach themselves, in whole or in part, from them.

This means being “undemocratic” in a certain sense, that is being able to say explicitly that collective decisions are in many cases, irrational, stupid and wicked, or that the tradition in which one is born and raised in does not have the last word. In this sense, the human rights movement is the bearer of an emancipatory message with a disruptive emotional force. Think of Kant’s “sapere aude!”.

At the level of individual existential situations, the enlightenment of rights defends anyone who makes different, if not opposing, identitarian choices to those of their group. The paradigmatic story could be the one imagined by the writer Chaim Potok, of Asher Lev who becomes a painter despite belonging to an ultra-Orthodox Jewish family who is therefore hostile to forms of figurative representation. Or the story of the Somali model, Waris Dirie who denounced female genital mutilation as one who was subjected to it. Or that of anyone who rebels against the emotional blackmail of one's clan as regards their profession, sexuality, choice of partner and friends, etc. Here the ambiguous term "identity" is not declined as an identification with respect to a specific group, but as the feeling of being a bearer of personal characteristics that are as a whole unique and inimitable. More than participation, this experience is one of being able to *say no* to the voice of warm ties, those of our family or of the "community". Rights do not in themselves ensure a good life. That depends on us. But certainly, rights are presented as a condition *sine qua non* of a good life. This occurs in a kaleidoscopic and open world like the present one, in which a growing number of existential models – and temptations? – are within our reach.

On a positive legal level, however, it is always said that rights are a "counter-majority". This claim is not ritualistic. We need that the guarantees that protect rights to be enforced independently of the personal morals of the heads of institutions and, necessarily, also against the opinions of the majority. The crux today, when it comes to "populism" is just that. In fact, a clash is taking place between those who intend to weaken those guarantees and those who wish to keep them by strengthening them. The sovereignty of states has very little to do with this conflict.

In the following pages, I would like to make some additional considerations about equal belonging (§3) and about individual autonomy (§4). Finally, (§5) I will put forth some conclusive reflections on the – limited, but not inexistent – possibility of falling prey to collective symbolic processes.

**Agoraphobia vs. Agoraphilia**

In the article under discussion, a romantic and welcoming idea of belonging is cultivated. Even if one does not want to maintain the all-pervading, or even theological, nature of Carl Schmitt's friend-enemy opposition, it is necessary to bear in mind that love for one's "own" often corresponds to hatred for an enemy, real or invented. Negativities are projected outwards. Therefore, not only can we not speak of universal belonging, but also speaking of universal love, for instance in the Christian sense, is highly problematic. One needs to know how to see the sinister shadow of belonging that hangs over the rest of humanity. We move from conspiracy theory to the demonization of the enemy. It is still ok to look at "barbarians" with a complacent smile. Seligman and Montgomery understand that "belongings" are at the root of symbolic processes. It is well known that symbols can both include and exclude. But I fear that the authors underestimate the violence of exclusion. They do not tell us how strong the desire is to kill the enemy, how intensely the axiom "*mors tua vita mea*" has a hold over people.[11] They limit themselves to the bland statement that, all things considered, belonging has boundaries. "But exclude they must" they say, thinking of a reframing of their respective prejudices, of an honest and peaceful negotiation of real or symbolic contrasts, rather than something that could take on terrifying and unbearable features.

Bertrand Russell, whose pacifist ideas are well known, describes in his autobiography the wild cry of jubilation at the shooting down of a Zeppelin airship with which the Germans were bombing London: "[...] we heard suddenly a shout of bestial triumph in the street. I leapt out of bed and saw a Zeppelin falling in flames. The thought of brave men dying in agony was what caused the triumph in the street." [12] Now I wonder if another recent event could be compared to Russell's wild scene: in 2017 a group of minors from Verona burned a Moroccan man alive while he was sleeping in his car.[13] I know, in one case they are "righteous citizens" and in another "youngsters", in the first case they are strong subjects and in the second, weak ones. But the analogies between the two situations remain striking. On the other hand, if moral judgment is suspended, one can see that in both stories the same primordial mechanism is triggered, however you evaluate it.

In the same way, a group of youngsters can torment a disadvantaged companion *without feeling guilty or ashamed*. Is it strange? But if one pays attention, one realizes that senses of guilt or shame resurface in those who appear to break from the group solidarity. Social morality, normally, is only valid in internal relationships among members of a community. In this sense, the idea of equality and the identification that follows is at its origin a rare good, that excludes many. Freud explains these dynamics with a penetrating remark: “The individual citizen can with horror convince himself in this war of what would occasionally cross his mind in peace-time – that the state has forbidden to the individual the practice of wrongdoing (*Unrecht*) not because it desires to abolish it, but because it desires to monopolize it, like salt and tobacco”.[14]

Here, the discussion becomes extremely complex. Behind the warmth of belonging often hide forms of collective violence. One can even fall in love with revolution. A town square packed with people waving flags reminds us, channeling it, the belligerent enthusiasm criticized by Russell.

In reality, the unifying objects gradually proposed are increasingly unstable, and therefore less dangerous if their *imaginary* character is revealed. We are referring to nation, race, class, religion. Behind these particular “citizenships” are hidden conflicts, divergences of views, different stories. Rarely, and only for the smallest communities can we speak of mutual familiarity. But in open society one can hybridize and mix in many ways.[15] One need only get on a bus to hear many, incomprehensible languages. Somehow, people’s mobility represents a guarantee. In an age of maximum interconnectivity, it is difficult to hit an enemy without damaging also “one’s own”. The nexus between population and territory, in the name of which many bloody wars have been fought, has loosened.

On the other hand, there are never-before seen risks that come with these new forms of communication. The new town squares, where people can congregate at little cost, are virtual ones created by online platforms. Even if the physical squares remained empty like De Chirico’s metaphysical ones, which we could ideally contrast with the flag-filled, overflowing square of Guttuso’s painting *Funerals of*

*Togliatti*, there would still be fictitious (internal?) squares that would fill in their stead. This creates an impression of direct participation in public affairs, *without mediation*, albeit with very volatile forms of aggregation. And this is what brings us to the discussion in the next two sections.

## **Why do so many young people get tattoos?**

I am not sure that I am able to reliably answer the question that is this section's title. When I hear the word "tattoos", the first thing that comes to mind is Cesare Lombroso's *L'uomo delinquente* [Criminal Man] (1876, V. ed. Fratelli Bocca, Turin, 1897), and the images that accompany it. The famous anthropologist believed that tattoos – presented by him in a crescendo from obscene to gruesome – in the West were a phenomenon limited to some marginalized subcultures, such as prisoners, sailors, and prostitutes. They were deviancy and picturesque anomalies exhibited before bourgeois respectability. Those that are explored, are underworlds worthy of Eugène Sue and his *Mysteries of Paris*. By now, as many know, the situation has been turned on its head. Tattoos are now widespread among young people of good family (as well as the less young).

Even the subjects depicted have changed. Fewer explicit images. Abstract figures and writing prevail, preferably small. Sometimes, they appear to be vaguely tribal, regressive, with primitive elements (such as African masks in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*). Except that in general, though with some exceptions, the symbols of our culture are not imprinted. Exotic and decorative factors seem to be dominant here. Almost as if the tattoo is a sort of fashionable item of clothing, which however cannot be removed.

My hypothesis is that the basic idea of Westerners who get tattooed is expressed in the narcissistic idea of making use of their body as they wish; in some cases also to mark its own "uniqueness" (I do not exclude, however, that instead it sometimes indicates a common belonging to a particular subgroup).

Through this symbolic shortcut it could seem that the proverbial “mass-man” coined by Ortega y Gasset acquires a face. However, this is not the case.

To be clear, an illusion is being cultivated. The same that the “profiled” consumer falls victim to; or those who believe they are participating in a political movement by approving all its decisions, programs and policies, online. It goes without saying that this a fake, or in the best case wishful thinking.

What emerges from this brief analysis on the practice of tattoos is a fictitious autonomy of the individual, who in many cases believes is choosing wisely, weighing the pros and cons, but instead falls victim to mechanisms out of his control. This is what happens for freedom and equality.[16] In other words, it can be said that the genealogy of the idea of autonomy is much less straightforward and noble than it appears. Nor can we pretend that an uneducated person be a complete individual. On the contrary, one becomes an individual through education, learning to think critically with his own head.

I am convinced that autonomy, in order to become an effective value, and not irresponsible egotism with no capacity to choose, needs detachment and mediation. At an institutional-political level, the *intermediate bodies* – and with them the prohibition of the imperative mandate pursuant to article 67 of the Italian Constitution – should be staunchly defended. “You are all of us” is always mendacious[17]; likewise, any direct representation is a dangerous illusion, especially in a period such as this one, in which the rule of law and the protection of human rights, which necessarily presuppose elites to implement them, are under attack.

### **Symbols and mediations. An attempt at a conclusion.**

Returning now to Seligman and Montgomery, I feel I should conclude that the culture of human rights, that now characterizes the best of the left, is not a “tragedy” at all. With all the respect I have for belonging, that the authors conceive in a well-reasoned and balanced way[18], I would say that rights are on the side of the remedy, more than that of the problem.

The problem is represented in the divergence that is created between symbolic processes of belonging and the inability of the political class to solve concrete questions. It is something that is happening everywhere, also because it is a process that is heavily influenced by the media and notoriously, to quote Marshall McLuhan, the medium is the message.[19]

Knowing how to win an election does not mean knowing how to govern.

Laws, in fact, become more and more “symbolic”, more suited to sending the “right message” to the public rather than to provide a country with substantial solutions.

Politics has been confused with entertainment since it was understood that there is little difference between techniques for selling toothpaste or soap and those needed to sway an electorate.

On the other hand, this effect is enhanced by years of miseducation, or an inadvertent education in eristics, through shows that are based on futile discussions, all fake, where the theme, often centered around gossip, is pretentious. All that matters is “to have won”.[20]

The culture and politics of rights represent the solution because they make differences stand out in an increasingly pluralistic and interconnected world. The basic idea is not that we are all the same, but that despite being different, we are forced to live together. The authors think only of coexistence between communities. Instead in my opinion, it is essential that the ability of individuals to make choices, midway between different value systems, is also developed, loosening the symbolic grip in which belonging is based. Rights, if we remove the maternal and emotional blackmail of one’s group, relativize cultural values, taboos and religious symbols, and allow us to understand that social myths, even those on which a constitution is founded, are imaginary constructions that manipulate the past. To put it bluntly, why should we prefer the story of the Founding Fathers to that of the African Americans, if they are both, for the most part, invented? We are in need of a deconstructive “metaphorology”.

Ultimately, recognizing that no one is truly a prisoner of their group's mythologies, rights open essential spaces of freedom and realistic mediation of interests. The screaming crowd should not be indulged. And realizing that The People is an ambivalent dream, one of many, a dream that quickly fades, helps. Let us not talk about the disasters generated by long-lasting dreams, from which we struggled to wake up, which marked the last century, if not to say that the contemporary culture of rights is also built on the collective memory of those disasters.

[1] A.B. Seligman– D.W. Montgomery, *The Tragedy of Human Rights: Liberalism and the Loss of Belonging*, «Society», 56, 3 (2019), pp. 203-209.

[2] C. Luzzati, *La non sempre garbata violenza del proselitismo e della propaganda* [The not always polite violence of proselytism and propaganda], «Quaderni di diritto e politica ecclesiastica», 2 (2019), pp. 229-240.

[3] A. Gramsci, *Quaderni dal carcere* [Prison Notebooks], edited by V. Garrettana, Einaudi, Turin, 1975, II, 1390-91. Perhaps not wholly out place U. Eco, *Il superuomo di massa. Retorica e ideologia nel romanzo popolare*, Bompiani, Milan 1976.

[4] G. Zanetti, *Filosofia della vulnerabilità. Percezione, discriminazione, diritto*, [Philosophy of Vulnerability. Perception, Discrimination, Law], Carocci, Rome 2019, pp. 12 ss. He is one of many who seek to exorcise this scandal by distinguishing what he calls respectively the “horizon of motivation” and the “horizon of argumentation”.

[5] G. Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant. Know your Values and Frame the Debate*, II edition, Chelsea Green, White River Junction (Vermont), 2014. The notoriety and the oversized influence of this little book, based on a few elementary ideas, show how we are illiterate in this matter.

[6] *Enchiridion*, §5.

[7] Cfr. R. Musil, *Über die Dummheit* (1937), appeared in English as *Discourse on stupidity*, Shakespeare & Company, 1979, p. 31, immediately sets the case clear: “those who nowadays have the audacity to speak about stupidity, run serious risks [...]”. From reading L. Canfora, *Il sovversivo. Concetto Marchesi e il comunismo italiano* [The Subversive. Concetto Marchesi and Italian Communism], Laterza, Roma-Bari 2019, I obtain confirmation of the thesis that even the Communist leadership, instead of appealing to the people’s Jacobin ideal, aimed to form an élite.

[8] <https://www.cedarnetwork.org>

[9] A. B. Seligman, R. R. Wasserfall, D. W. Montgomery, *Living with Difference. How to Build Community in a Divided World*, University of California Press, Oakland, California 2015. The text contains passages that correspond almost verbatim to the article discussed here (cf. ch. VI, pp. 137-149).

[10] See J. Mitchell, *Religion is Not a Preference*, “Journal of Politics”, 69, 2 (2007), 351-62. The authors give decisive importance to a late essay by Simon Weil with the significant title *L’enracinement. Prélude à une déclaration des devoirs envers l’être humain* [The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind ], Gallimard, Paris 1949. The thesis of the decisive importance of belonging and the prevalence of duties over rights is also advanced by R. Cover, *Obligation. A Jewish Jurisprudence of the Social Order*, “Journal of Law and Religion”, 5 (1987), pp. 65-74, a theorist well known to Seligman.

[11] F. Fornari, *Psicoanalisi della guerra* [The Psychoanalysis of War] (1966), II ed. Feltrinelli, Milan 1979, remains a classic on the theme.

[12] B. Russell, *Autobiography*, Routledge, London-New York 1998, II, p.249.

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[https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2019/02/01/news/bruciarono\\_il\\_clochard\\_per\\_noia\\_il\\_giudice\\_non\\_li\\_condanna-217991349](https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2019/02/01/news/bruciarono_il_clochard_per_noia_il_giudice_non_li_condanna-217991349). It is interesting how the newspaper, referring to the judicial proceedings of the young people (which, by the way, ended in acquittals, because at the time of

the event the accused were minors and therefore were non-attributable), uses a non-Italian term to designate the victim – *clochard* – making it therefore even more alienating.

[14] S. Freud, *Zeitgemäßes über Krieg und Tod* (1915), *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, SE 14, 273-300, p. 279.

[15] See J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) – London 1988.

[16] On the “metamorphoses of liberty” see H. Kelsen, *Vom Wesen und Wert der Demokratie* [The Essence and Value of Democracy], Mohr, Tübingen 1929, ch. 1. Do not forget that Kelsen, in his socio-religious investigations, was close to Freud’s thinking. For an updated psychological approach, see G. Pietropolli Charmet, *La paura di essere brutti. Gli adolescenti e il corpo* [The Fear of being Ugly. Teenagers and their Body], Cortina, Milano 2013. Equality as the original *conventio ad excludendum* I mention in §3.

[17] One of the more insidious ways of expressing this idea is the common practice of taking a selfie with one’s preferred political leader. We are not far from the cults of celebrity in sport and entertainment.

[18] In the words of Seligman and Montgomery, “while a need, community in and of itself is not an unbridled Good”.

[19] See M. Barberis, *Come internet sta uccidendo la democrazia* [How the Internet is killing Democracy], Chiarelettere, Milano 2020 and G. Ziccardi, *Tecnologie per il potere. Come usare i social network in politica* [Power Technologies. How to use Social Networks in Politics], Cortina, Milano 2019.

[20] On the other hand, programs like “Big Brother” make one used to fake participations, due to the regular participation of viewers that can vote remotely and “decide” which, among the fighting contestants, to save.

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