

The Democratic Ethos: An interview with Alessandro Ferrara

By Jakob Kowalski

In his recent book 'The Democratic Horizon' (2014), political philosopher Alessandro Ferrara analyses democracy from a critical philosophical perspective in relation to globalisation and economic crisis. Ferrara's earlier work has mostly focused on grounding notions of ethics and identity in contemporary pluralist society. In this interview, a connection between the areas is sought while the subjects of education and the clash of cultures are also touched on.

JK: Is it possible to briefly outline the main focal points of your philosophy?

AF: I started my philosophical work in response to the Linguistic Turn. It created problems that today, given the infatuation for the neurosciences and the mind (the new reincarnation of positivism) are more often sidelined than solved. If, as authors as diverse as Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Dewey, Gadamer and others taught us, we always relate to the world through the mediation of some frame of meaning (a culture, a language-game, a paradigm, a tradition, a life-world, and so on) and there exists a plurality of such frames, with no overarching 'frame of frames' or meta-language, then what is truth, what is justice over and beyond what is believed true or morally right in one, but not necessarily in another, frame of meaning? Studying with Habermas, I was confronted with the urgency of the question and yet not entirely convinced by the idea that the gaps between frames or contexts could be bridged through a universal discursive procedure, grounded in certain unavoidable presuppositions of the communicative use of language. I started looking at aesthetic sources of normativity — authenticity, identity, exemplarity — because they seemed to me to exert a paradoxical cogency lodged in their unique singularity, which defused the problem of translating across frames of meaning.

My first two books were on authenticity (*Modernity and Authenticity*, and *Reflective Authenticity*), then I grew interested in the kind of judgment that underlies our sense that some aspects of an identity are more crucial than others, in the sense of contributing to its definition, and in the way reflective judgment (the faculty through which we identify those aspects) works in the case of political judgment and collective self-definition. I then grew interested in political philosophy: in *Justice and Judgment*, and later in *The Force of the Example*, 'exemplary responsiveness to identity' is a key notion for understanding the reasonable in Rawls, integrity as the leading value in adjudication for Dworkin, or what a 'constitutional moment' is in Ackerman, but also for understanding the universality of human rights (if we apply identity and authentic self-constitution to humanity as such), for understanding republicanism, for making sense of what radical evil is. Now, in a recent book on democracy (*The Democratic Horizon*) I try to take this idea in yet another direction. In a world where looking like a democracy has become a must for almost every regime, we feel sometimes the urgent need to sort out real democracies from elective oligarchies of various sorts. And when wondering what makes of a democratic regime a real democracy, we often find that procedures and rules can always be imitated and at the same time enervated. More helpful is instead to refer to a democratic ethos, a deep-seated layer of ethical intuitions concerning certain democratic values with which we identify if we are truly democratic, a set of values that define who we are, politically, and could not be forfeited or significantly altered without that resulting in the feeling that we are no longer ourselves.

JK: Your first book revolves around a particular reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's authorship and you return to his philosophy in your latest book, *Rousseau and Critical Theory*. What is so special about him and his work, and how do you use it?

AF: Many things are special about Rousseau. As the first critic of modern civil society, he points to the weakening of individual subjectivity and the inauthenticity induced by its competitive mechanisms of social reproduction; he is the initiator of a radical democratic kind of political pact where the political impact of social inequality is defused; he is the discoverer of an altogether modern form of the tragic (not the classical conflict between two norms, but between a principle and the authenticity of one's identity); the proponent of a philosophy of 'negative education' based on fostering creative autonomy rather than internalizing models. I use him as an inspiring figure, whose views on the self, on the practical, as opposed to cognitive, process of self-constitution, on the non-sovereign relation of the self to its

own authenticity, and on the irreducibility of authenticity to mere integrity, offer us still unsurpassed insights even if compared with contemporary theories of self-constitution such as Korsgaard's or Frankfurt's. Furthermore, in the realm of political philosophy his understanding of the special authority of the 'legislator' offers us seminal insights onto the normativity rooted in identity that came to fruition in the 20th century in the work of the later Rawls and especially in his standard of 'reasonability' as opposed to the 'morally true'.

JK: How does your ethical version of authenticity differ from other discourses of authenticity or individuality thus avoiding the pitfall of being a philosophy of mere egocentrism?

AF: It differs in that it is built on an intersubjective view of the individual and of subjectivity in general, which, much in the same way as Honneth, I derive partly from Hegel but especially from Mead and from the object-relation tradition of psychoanalytic theory (from Winnicott to Kohut and Kernberg, via Edith Jacobson and Margaret Mahler). So my view of authenticity as a standard of validity developmentally rooted in the perception of the coming into its own of an identity has no essentialist overtones, no need to presuppose an originary 'true self': authenticity is not something we discover but rather something that we create, without being able to fabricate it. This leads me to answer the second part of your question. Because we are what we are, individually or collectively, among other things by way of reverberating and internalizing the recognizing gaze of others, then we realize ourselves more fully, completely or authentically, the more our life also does justice or brings to expression the part of ourselves where the subjectivity of others is reflected and incorporated. Dis-attending, ignoring, denying that part — as in 'merely egocentric' life-projects — can then only lead to a less complete realization of our complex identity.

JK: Can your concept of exemplarity or reflective authenticity be related to the concept of formation (Bildung) or teaching and learning in general? Why / why not & how?

AF: Yes, indeed it can. It relates to education in two basic ways. On the one hand, fostering reflective authenticity can be understood as one of the goals of a proper education which is not just a mere training, or the mechanical learning of some information. To educate means to help or facilitate a personality to self-shape or, as usually said in ordinary language, to find one's own way. The input contributed by the educator consists of offering

options, stimulating the envisaging of alternatives, disclosing new possibilities, encouraging, raising questions where answers are too readily accepted, keeping an initial openness open as far as possible, teaching how to listen to and interpret one's own inner urges. On the other hand, exemplarity is also one of the fundamental tools of a proper education, in the sense that all proper educational relation requires a modicum of exemplarity on the part of the educator. We do not learn much from those teachers who fail to inspire us, regardless the amount of data, facts, concepts or precepts that they pour on us. Instead those whom we call our mentors are always figures who engage our sense of who we are: we identify with them, wish to become 'like them' not in the sense of imitating them but in the sense of emulating them. That is, we want not so much to reproduce what belongs to their unique life-context, but to act in our own context in a way that brings to life some fundamental aspect of their way of being in the world, their courage, their honesty, their dedication, their integrity. Such process of identification requires face-to-face interaction among human beings, the flow of ongoing responses to each other's emotions and cannot be replaced by long-distance, virtual or otherwise indirect forms of communication.

JK: Does your philosophy provide any answers to – for example – our current economic and environmental predicament?

AF: It certainly does have implications for rethinking our economic predicament under a different light. One of these implications is an understanding of the 2008-initiated economic crisis (and the transformations connected with it) as the unprecedented creation — via the total disembedding of a largely virtualized global financial market — of a new kind of absolute power that makes of the democratic will of the peoples a merely nominally sovereign one. What was invented by democratic constituencies for curbing the absolute, unaccountable power of the kings (constitutions and bill of rights) and the nearly absolute power of the aggressive industrial capitalism of the early 20th century (welfare state legislation and social rights) gives today's democratic will no protection against the absolute power of the global financial markets, of the speculative hedge funds and of rating agencies. We as the nominally sovereign democratic people are being expropriated of our sovereignty. I'm confident, however, that democratic publics will react with creative jurisgenerative processes to this new challenge: government-spurred class-actions in defence of citizens impoverished by adverse and incompetent ratings, temporary public buy-out (as opposed to bail-out) of banking institutions in distress, mandatory

insurance policies for financial investors, in lieu of taxpayers' money, in order to feed the European Stability Mechanism, 'trickle-up' schemes for the recapitalization of banks, extensive implementation of Tobin-tax-like schemes for creating enough reserve capital to stabilise market fluctuations. Some of this language may sound technical, and thus may fall under the suspicion of not being democratic: so did some of the New Deal legislation, which however ushered in a revolution in the traditional way of conceiving the relation of democracy to capitalism. But let's not let ourselves be misled: at stake is the democratic demoi's ability to force technostructures like ESM, as well as pseudo-economic actors like sovereign funds and rating agencies, into the circle of democratic accountability and to regulate their operation.

JK: Is your philosophy strictly Western or, on the contrary, would you say that it's globally oriented to an extent that its principles could be used to mediate in our clashes with other cultures?

AF: The gist of my philosophy is the recourse to aesthetic sources of normativity, such as exemplarity, judgment and authenticity precisely in order to bridge the gap between self-referential cultural, traditional, epistemic frames of meaning and to make sense, without invoking principles of dubious universality, of how something originating here and now can project a cogency there and then. Thus it is aimed at breaking free of the boundaries of one's own frame of reference, regardless whether such boundaries are entirely within 'Western' philosophical space (if such thing exists) or are boundaries separating Western sub-traditions and sub-cultures from non-Western ones. I'll mention only one example. In 'The Democratic Horizon', I advocate reconsidering and expanding our understanding of the democratic ethos. Over and beyond the canonical dispositions to give priority to the common good, to prize equality and individuality, I consider Taylor's view of agape, Derrida's focus on hospitality, and Stephen White's suggestion of presumptive generosity as possible additions designed to strengthen the public virtues of a democratic culture confronted with the challenges of the 21st century. These suggestions are all in various ways flawed and in the end, I propose to enrich our understanding of the democratic ethos with a disposition toward openness, as the quality of a public culture that orients opinion in the public sphere in the direction of favouring unconventional solutions, trying partially explored paths, endorsing temporary closure only for the sake of maintaining reversibility, contestability, responsiveness to change.

Having said this, one obvious limitation of all theorisation about the democratic ethos in the tradition of political philosophy is that it has always

been reconstructed in terms of Western categories. Democratisation as a result has often become unnecessarily synonymous with Westernisation: philosophically, an unsound move, and politically a stupid one, which instantly transforms those who resist the Westernisation of their society into enemies also of democracy. Instead, a viable notion of the democratic ethos must allow for a multiplicity of variants. The distinction, drawn by Rawls in 'The Law of Peoples', between liberal and decent peoples ought to be completed with the effort to distinguish a plurality of transitional paths for the democratisation of decent societies. I try to do this by way of raising the question whether the democratic cultures, anchored in different religious and civilisational contexts, share enough common ground to be understood as variants of one democratic ethos and can be seen as different enough as to generate multiple versions of the 'just and stable society of free and equal citizens' at the centre of political liberalism. The answer is positive. Adequate consonances can be found in all historical religions for most of the major components of the 'ethos of democracy': namely, for an orientation to the common good, for a positive notion of pluralism, for a notion of legitimate rule as resting on the consent of the governed, for the equality of the citizens, and for a positive appraisal of individuality. Instead, the priority of rights over duties and the valuing of contestation or agonism within democratic life are two components for which it is most problematic to find equivalents in non-Western or in Western but non-Protestant cultures. Provisionally then an analytic pluralisation of the democratic ethos must start from here, and I conclude with a first sketch of four ideal types of democratic ethos, whose differences by no means correlate with the East-West binary but cut across that divide. A clash exists only in the fantasy of those who still dream of extending their hegemony over others.

Alessandro Ferrara (1953-) is a professor of political philosophy at the University of Rome Tor Vergata and the author of six books: 'Modernity and Authenticity' (1993), 'Reflective Authenticity' (1998), 'Justice and Judgment' (1999), 'The Force of the Example' (2008), 'The Democratic Horizon' (2014) and 'Rousseau and Critical Theory' (2017). He co-directs the 'Prague Seminars', an annual political-philosophical conference in the tradition of critical theory, founded by Habermas in the 1970's in Dubrovnik.

Jakob Kowalski (1977-) has a Masters in English, Danish and philosophy. He teaches sixth form and has also studied drama and media studies. Lately, he has been affiliated with the department of English at the University of Southern Denmark where he taught a course on the English playwright Christopher Marlowe in comparison to current American TV-drama series.

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