

For a philosophy of doubt Norberto Bobbio and the Enlightenment of dialogue

Por uma filosofia da dúvida Norberto Bobbio e o Iluminismo do diálogo

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Abstract

This paper intends to reconstruct Norberto Bobbio's philosophical-cultural itinerary by focusing attention on "doubt" as a category of thought. The Enlightenment legacy and its revival in Bobbio's path represent a key to understanding our contemporary world; dialogue is the correlate of doubt, a philosophical practice that constantly problematizes and critically examines all instances. Bobbio has explored various fields of knowledge, both practical and theoretical, always keeping in the foreground the need to understand through a critical opening; the same political militancy in the process of resistance and liberation makes him a non-negligible voice of high educational value for generations to come.

Keywords: enlightenment; dialogue; criticism; militancy; ethics.

Resumo

Este artigo pretende reconstruir o itinerário filosófico-cultural de Norberto Bobbio, concentrando a atenção na "dúvida" como categoria de pensamento. O legado do Iluminismo e o seu renascimento no caminho de Bobbio representam uma chave para a compreensão do nosso mundo contemporâneo; o diálogo é o correlato da dúvida, uma prática filosófica que constantemente problematiza e examina criticamente todas as instâncias. Bobbio tem explorado diversos campos do conhecimento, tanto práticos como teóricos, mantendo sempre em primeiro plano a necessidade de compreender através de uma abertura crítica; a mesma militância política no processo de resistência e libertação faz dele uma voz não negligenciável e de alto valor educativo para as gerações vindouras.

Palavras-chave: esclarecimento; diálogo; crítica; militância; ética.

Informações do artigo

Submetido em 29/07/2024
Aprovado em 25/08/2024
Publicado em 15/09/2024

 <https://doi.org/10.25247/P1982-999X.2024.v24n3.p205-213>



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Como ser citado (modelo ABNT)

SIMONETTI, Alberto. For a philosophy of doubt Norberto Bobbio and the Enlightenment of dialogue. *Ágora Filosófica*, Recife, v. 24, n. 3, p. 205-213, set./dez. 2024

1 INTRODUCTION

In Norberto Bobbio's philosophical, ethical and political itinerary a character emerges that founds the entire architecture of his thought: the category of *dialogue*. Through a careful and rigorous reading of the various phases, from Idealism to phenomenology to analytical philosophy, Bobbio's intent is to always find a concept of relationship. While in idealist systematics he finds insurmountable limits concretely represented by synthesis as a closing term, the experience of Husserl and phenomenology provides him with a first nucleus for a philosophy of dialogue and for a philosophy in dialogue: the category of *Erlebnis* ("lived experience"). Study and research have always found in the Turin thinker a close analogy with the search for processes of freedom, equality and democracy; the intellectual invents forms of interpretation to open reality to understanding and this objective is not isolated, but is directly a political and cultural teleologism. Bobbio's philosophy finds its roots in the crisis of every demagogic and absolutist position, which is particularly important today to counteract the cultural void of nationalism and demagogic movements.

2 LANGUAGE AND DIALOGUE

In the text *Science of law and analysis of language* from 1950, Bobbio seeks a significant relationship between the sometimes excessively formal elaboration of the legal norm and language; however, Anglo-Saxon analytical practice does not fully satisfy the intent of the Turin philosopher who changes and reworks its characteristics, opening up to an Italian analytical school. Language, according to Bobbio, cannot be a mere communicative explanation but must necessarily enter and initiate a relationship that I would define as "living" between the self and the world. The development of the neo-rationalist and neo-empiricist current of the Turin school clearly shows that Bobbio's thought does not elaborate a simple applicative model of rationality on reality but makes it dialogue with the concrete events of existence (Abbagnano's existentialism finds its constitution in starting from this relationship, it is no coincidence that he has collaborated with Bobbio on the *Rivista di politica* since 1952).

The transition from the foundation of law to the theory of democracy is decisive. During his work Bobbio tried to renew the legal aspects of the debate on the law by linking

them to the practice of building democracy¹; these two strong points are also reflected in *Teoria della norma giuridica* (1958) and in *Il Positivismo giuridico* (1961) where Bobbio rejects the blind faith of natural law scholars who make natural law absolutist for everyone, maintaining, inversely, that the norm is a binding map for the community whose objective is a history of continuous and increasingly coherent approximation and approach to justice. We can say that it is about the infinite work of the relationship between freedom and law. The reason that unites the three areas of reflection of the philosopher and jurist (ethical-political, legal and historical-philosophical) emerges precisely in what we could outline as the enlightenment of relationality. He himself will define himself as a “man of doubt and dialogue”. In prefiguring the prospects of democracy in a secular and plural sense, Bobbio warned against the danger of technology appearing as an apolitical force ready to serve any master; in the text *Tra due repubbliche* (1996) he also places the dimension of dialogue and the politics of the relationship as the key point of a truly democratic structure where technology is also a political force, that is, discussed, transformed and used by the *community*. It is necessary to underline a certain recovery in a contemporary key of the participatory decision-making of Greek classicism (πόλις and ἀγορά appear to be centers of collective relationships and communication)². Bobbio states that democracy today means giving the State to the citizens, removing the separation between individual and State, returning to connecting man and State³. Bringing politics back to a horizontal level means creating a new rational and communicating alliance between the institution and the new challenges of sociality. From this renewed capacity for cohesion in difference, according to Bobbio, the citizen becomes a participatory force in the name of the pedagogy of freedom and responsibility.

3 THE FOUNDATION OF DEMOCRACY

Expanding the democratic model means activating, for Bobbio, new community spaces for debate and conflict between ideas (the Enlightenment expresses its importance here)⁴; in this way philosophy becomes criticism, militancy and foundation of values of brotherhood, respect and rejection of violence. Secularism takes on a foundational value

¹ Cf. Ragazzoni-Craiutu, 2024.

² Cf. Bobbio, 1990.

³ Cf. Bobbio, 1987.

⁴ Cf. Bobbio, 1995.

here as it prevents the counterfeiting of political theologism: “The principle of the secular is coherence; its norm is sincerity”. In the integral vision of democracy there is not even room for the ideological monolith which, alongside the theological one, obscures the philosophical, ethical, political and juridical research aimed at building a new age of rights within which man can coincide with a authentic activity of *political competitiveness*. Bobbio also identifies the weak side of democracy, the unstable balance that constantly threatens *the work of equality*. Liberalism and socialism, according to him, must walk side by side in order to enrich and control each other to avoid rigidity that could close the democratic process⁵. Chantal Mouffe defines the link between freedom and equality “the democratic paradox” because both embody ideals coming from plural, different but also similar political traditions. Reconciling this paradoxical structure is, also for Bobbio, the infinite task of the critical intellectual⁶.

As a man active not only on a theoretical level but also immersed in praxis (remember his activity during the Resistance in the *Giustizia e Libertà* movement and in the Partito d’Azione up until the appeal for Pinelli in 1971 which was then partially retracted as well as his membership of the Democratici di sinistra in recent years), Bobbio has always had among its heuristic key points the construction of individual freedom within shared freedom, in the name of dialogue and relationship. The liberal vision that Bobbio was addressing was very distant from the connotation assumed today (the one linked to the centre-right) since liberalism, in reality substantially close to the area of the left, opened up that philosophical and moral itinerary that led citizens to get used to the exercise of democracy and its rules; any forcing that attempts to conceive a top-down and hierarchy is criticized by the Turin thinker precisely because, if dialogue is a *fundamentum inconcussum* of democracy, the rational space for its exercise can only be plurality. Bobbio states in *Destra-Sinistra* (1995) that a freedom equal to that of everyone else means being able to enjoy the rights of individuals who become a community⁷. Democratic ambivalence, recalling Voltaire, is well highlighted by Mouffe: “the aim of democratic politics, is to construct the ‘them’ in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an ‘adversary,’ that is, somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question”⁸.

⁵ Filippi, Lafer, 2004.

⁶ Cf. Mouffe, 2000.

⁷ Cf. Bobbio, 1996.

⁸ Mouffe, 2000, p. 101-102.

The category of *culture* emerges as an architecture of thought that supports politics so that it does not become a simple game of compromises; attitudes, lifestyles and ideas represent a *universe of meaning* that can be defended in egalitarian terms only if political practice is linked to the constant exercise of critical reason. Being an intellectual implies being a serious and rigorous scholar. This attitude does not represent a private fact but is, in reality, a political, public fact. Bobbio believes it is necessary for the philosopher to measure his heuristic path within the political controversies of democratic life. The Turin thinker, twenty years after his death, returns to speak to us to give us the political-cultural tools against historical revisionism, anti-politics, the nationalist and chauvinist upsurges of the European and world right. In an interview in December 1992 he declared that “the function of the intellectual is to draw attention to what must be continually revised”⁹. A thinker, in a rereading that starts from Gramsci and Gobetti, is the *avant-garde* that always remains vigilant, a sentinel of criticism that works for freedom and the exercise of a common and plural cultural ethics. Bobbio’s adherence to the left reflects the values of emancipation but tries to avoid too rigid ideological segmentations; the truth of politics lies in the openness to making reason a public *modus operandi*, following the Enlightenment Kant.

The liberal version that comes from the Resistance movement (very different, almost opposite to the liberal drift of the conservative right of recent years) is for Bobbio united with the demands of socialism: “liberalism and democracy have never existed radically antithetical”¹⁰. Bobbio’s anthropological gaze is based on the debate that arises from the relationship between legal norms, law and freedom. This coexistence presupposes both a path of *peace* (only conflict remains, understood as a plural and democratic debate), and the recognition of the need for an international balance in relations between States¹¹. The cosmopolitan citizen (remember Kant) must be able to mediate the demands of democratic construction with the will to reject those who isolate themselves, preventing the full development of the community (the ultra-identitarian regression that we see in the world today demonstrates this). Bobbio says:

These two processes are represented by the two aspects of citizenship, that of the citizen qua participant and that of the citizen qua state protected subject, which often conflict with each other within the same person. For through participation the active citizen

⁹ *LA STAMPA*, December 1992.

¹⁰ Bobbio, 1990, p. 73.

¹¹ Cf. Bellamy, 2013.

calls for greater protection from the state and thereby reinforces the very state which he or she wishes to control¹².

The relational moment between State and society must be illuminated by plurality, therefore by an open democracy that is at the same time vigilant of itself.

4 A CRITICAL CITIZENSHIP

The intellectual is also a citizen. It is important and necessary to update Norberto Bobbio's thoughts in light of the contemporary global political trend, the one we are all experiencing. In an era of prevailing technocracy, of a new arms race, of authoritarianism and of racist and xenophobic regressions, returning to reflect in the universities (and not only) of democracy means returning to talking about culture and training activities for a *critical citizenship* attentive to reject any participatory closure, any sharing that erases real communication, any false freedom. The possibility of dissent, criticism, doubt becomes a political transcendental for real democracy, an essential condition that comes into conflict with the concealment desired by power (remember also the analogy with Elias Canetti's *Mass and Power*¹³). This oblivion of reality brought about by power is today even more masked by the fake participation in social networks where the illusion of expressing one's opinion relegates politics and culture (with all their multiple relationships) to *quantité négligeable*. For Bobbio, active participation is the core of *visibility* which must be understood as a concept of freedom and truth against the power accustomed to hiding and acting underground. In fact, *clarity* is a peculiarity of philosophy, therefore a politics that builds democracy and dialogue on the fertile ground of doubt, on the pluralism of free and responsible choices, on the Enlightenment as a set of tangible instruments of community law (today we would call them multitudes), is necessarily a philosophical politics and a political philosophy.

The philosophical exercise of doubt requires democracy as a concrete, mobile and real political space; only within this neo-enlightenment opening can the age of rights be embodied by the multitudes, interrupting the depersonalizing vortex of globalization with reflection. A general theory of politics, as Bobbio reminds us, finds its completeness if supported by culture as a critical militancy of the *res publica*; opposing the forces that

¹² Bobbio, 1985, p. 41-42.

¹³ Cf. Canetti, 1984.

intend to overthrow democracy means maintaining constant reciprocity between the individual and the community. In fact, Bobbio writes:

[...] the only way a meaningful discussion of democracy, as distinct from all forms of autocratic government, [...] is to consider it as characterized by a set of rules (primary or basic) which establish who is authorised to take collective decisions and which procedures are to be applied. Every social group needs to take decisions binding on all members of the group so as to ensure its own survival¹⁴.

The point of view of the intellectual who is active is always public, he lives in a perpetual dialectic with citizenship as a critical form of *Mitsein*. Bobbio's scientific rigor establishes a new epistemology but in a different way compared to Kelsen or Hart as it keeps the horizon open on the *Erlebnis*, the main category of the living to think of rationally founding a global democracy. The experience of classical texts and their study, from Hobbes and Rousseau to Marxism and English utilitarianism, represents for Bobbio the common thread that supports thought and allows him to grasp the present¹⁵. Law and politics can become democratic resources if they are subjected to cultural scrutiny, if they are constantly subjected to rigorous criticism that can distinguish between paths of freedom and autocratic closures. Democracy, for Bobbio, is kept alive only through this "fatigue of the concept".

5 CONCLUSION

To conclude, twenty years after the death of Norberto Bobbio, in my opinion, it is useful to rethink and re-propose in a critical sense the philosophical-political legacy of the Turin intellectual, in particular for some conceptual categories which, if re-proposed in the contemporary world, would once again make a decisive contribution in a historical-social phase, ours, which appears regressive in many respects. A *pedagogy of freedom* formed and founded on dialogue as rational praxis (the neo-enlightenment) leads us to think truly in a global sense (and against the logic of a purely commodity-based globalization), or to publicly exercise the force of doubt, of questioning, of criticism and to conceive society as a multiple universe of relationships.

¹⁴ Bobbio, 1987, p. 24.

¹⁵ Anderson, 1988; Maissin, 2004; Tosel, 1994.

The honesty of the intellectual and the scholar (concepts always united for Bobbio) seems truly urgent to us in the current context because, faced with the violent effrontery of historical revisionism, the community of educators, from primary schools to academies and universities, has the duty to counteract radical resistance at a cultural and political level, returning to speak with balance, passion and authentic creativity about the past and the future. Equality and democracy can experience their transformations towards a new age of rights while maintaining indissoluble the cornerstone of participatory and cultural recognition centered on *communitas rationalis*. Against the dogmatism of silence and invisibility, Norberto Bobbio gives us a possibility of clarity which, in the end, is nothing other than the possibility of a *philosophical life*.

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