POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY: SOME DOUBTS ABOUT ITS UTILITY IN ANTHROPOLOGY

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Abstract

The concept of "political subjectivity" would appear to be characterized by a *contradictio in adjecto* since it evokes an individual viewpoint or perhaps an individualistic one in contrast with the idea of *polis* as well as its derivatives, such as politics for example, which instead presuppose the existence of a collectivity, i.e. a group. More in general, subjectivity is a concept of philosophical origin that is too indefinite thus difficult to operate with, i.e. make it serviceable in purely anthropological researches of an empirical nature.

This contribution aims to show that specific societies, often incorrectly regarded as particularly individualistic and which may be held to be characterized by a specific "political subjectivity", display informal coalitions consisting of highly personalized networks that infiltrate formal public structures and undermine the efficiency of the state's institutions.

Contrary to what social sciences often naively and ethnocentrically uphold, we shall bring to the fore, instead, how in many societies, especially those divided along class and ethnicity lines but considered modern, thus characterized by formal organizational institutions and based on organic solidarity, these formal institutions are infiltrated or replaced by vast informal networks, which the actors themselves consider meaningful thus legitimate, albeit often illegal, and rationally suitable for specific situations.

We shall also highlight what type of historical experiences played a substantial role in the emergence of these societies, which may be defined as public mistrust societies, where the State has the monopoly on legality but lacks legitimacy in the eyes of its individual citizens.

Keywords: *political subjectivity, voluntarism, individualism, mistrust, informality, personalized networks, coalitions, patronage, clientelism, legality, legitimacy*

Introduction

The concept of "political subjectivity" would appear to be characterized by a *contradictio in adjecto* since it evokes an individual viewpoint or perhaps an individualistic one in contrast with the idea of *polis* as well as its derivatives, such as politics for example, which instead presuppose the existence of a collectivity, i.e. a group.

More in general, subjectivity is a concept of philosophical origin that is too indefinite thus difficult to operate with, i.e. make it serviceable in purely anthropological researches of an empirical nature. Delving further into the philosophical definition of political subjectivity, we will notice a fundamental characteristic. Ultimately, this concept contains the more or less manifest idea that an individual can break free from the constraints imposed by societies and especially by the various forms of domination inherent in power relations. This approach, therefore, displays a considerable amount of unrealistic voluntarism, especially in terms of the hegemonic trends imposed by society.

Political subjectivity is a concept of philosophical origin that is too indefinite thus difficult to operate with, i.e. make it serviceable in purely anthropological researches of an empirical nature. Ultimately, it is an abstract concept steeped in ethics that fails to take account of the different socio-historical and cultural contexts in which single individuals must interact.

Moreover, the concept of "political subjectivity" has a strong psychological connotation (Jameson 1981) of a bleeding-heart nature along with an aura of irrationality and idealistic voluntarism rooted in the ideal of free will, thus in each individual's freedom of choice. Furthermore, if we examine other specificities of this concept we will notice that it also has a strong psychological connotation, once again principally centred on the individual who is free to act without social constraints. In this case, too, we can talk about a utopian view that does not attach enough importance to the role of society and its influence on individuals. Once again, it is an approach removed from any empirical evidence of an anthropological nature. Rather naively and arbitrarily, the psychological conception of political subjectivity overlooks the fundamental role of primary and secondary groups that crucially determine the life of single individuals who ultimately cannot elude the constraints imposed by life in society. In fact, should they contravene social norms they would have to deal with usually harsh and unpleasant sanctions. This contribution aims to show that specific societies, often incorrectly regarded as particularly individualistic and which may be held to be characterized by a specific "political subjectivity", display informal coalitions consisting of highly personalized networks that infiltrate formal public structures and undermine the efficiency of the state's institutions.

For social sciences, informality along with its specific coalitions, networks, and personalized relationships has a questionable, if not notorious reputation. These features are often regarded as premodern, dysfunctional or indeed anomic because they foster or are at the root of social phenomena such as friend's favouritism, nepotism, cronyism, patronage, corruption, etc.

Contrary to what social sciences often naively and ethnocentrically uphold, we shall bring to the fore, instead, how in many societies, especially those divided along class and ethnicity lines but considered modern, thus characterized by formal organizational institutions and based on organic solidarity, these formal institutions are infiltrated or replaced by vast informal networks, which the actors themselves consider meaningful thus legitimate, albeit often illegal, and rationally suitable for specific situations.

We shall also highlight what type of historical experiences played a substantial role in the emergence of these societies, which may be defined as public mistrust societies, where the State, echoing Max Weber's words, has the monopoly on legality but lacks legitimacy in the eyes of its individual citizens. Clearly, we are not dealing with official history characterized by objective facts and processes (namely, the history of historians) but with a *hostile history* learned, interiorized, handed down and reconfirmed by single individuals through the dialectic between *spaces of experience* and *horizons of expectation* (Koselleck 1979).

Finally, we shall also analyse a number of different types of informal organisations and personalised networks typical of such societies. This comparative analysis of the widespread public mistrust among citizens and the lack of State legitimacy is based on long term fieldwork in the Mediterranean (Southern Italy. Spain) and in Southeast Europe (Bulgaria).

Introduction: Public Mistrust Societies: Informality and Personalized Networks in Mediterranean and South East European Public Mistrust Societies

In many societies of the Mediterranean area and in South East Europe anthropologists must deal with specific notions of *public* and *private* that clash somewhat with ideals and ideologies specific to the Occident. In these societies, which we will call *public mistrust societies*, the relation between public and private is clearly conceived as a binary opposition. In terms of collective representations, in fact, there is an undeniable confrontation between the public and the private sphere. Accordingly, in *public mistrust societies* the clear-cut separation between public and private sphere and the supremacy of the former on the latter has never been questioned. The consequent evaluation of these societies' members is categorical: the private sector is regarded as the social space of security, trustworthiness, and solidarity, while the public sector is perceived as a dangerous foreign body. In accordance with this type of social ideology, which is a more or less a standard feature of *public mistrust societies*, any endeavour a person undertakes to guarantee, achieve, and even maximize the particularistic-like welfare and benefits of his own group is legitimate, given the private sphere's essentially positive features.

In parallel with the positive evaluation of private social spaces, this social ideology is averse to the public ones. This is precisely one of the reasons why public

institutions rekindle the feeling that their ultimate aim is to rob and harass people. Anyone who thinks that this is an undisputed truth can have only one reaction; namely, develop action strategies based on the logic that *robbing your robber* is legitimate. Thus, the opposition between private and public turns out to be one of the fundamental collective representations on which corruption practices, political scandals, Mafia activities, and mutual assistance between patrons and clients are established. However, this does not imply, and we stress this point, that such behavioural models pertain solely to *public mistrust societies* based on various local versions of the above-mentioned morality.

Constructing Informality: Relationships. Coalitions and Personalized Practices

Despite significant structural differences, almost all experts on informality agree on stressing the *primordial importance* of family and kinship as a *solidarity group*, since according to members of a *public mistrust society* they represent the only types of community that can guarantee *cooperation without a hidden agenda.*

At first sight, therefore, *public mistrust societies* apparently fall into the category which can be labelled as *atomistic society* whose characteristic is to be solely and without exception an *assemblage of families*. However. a closer look at these societies reveals that their members believe in the need to extend their relationships of solidarity beyond family and kinship ties.

In *public mistrust societies*, when we look beyond family and kinship structures, we ought to consider above all the importance of informal interaction networks, which could be defined as a system of strongly personalized dyadic relationships.

• *Ritual Kinship. Instrumental Friendship and Acquaintances*

Among the several types of personalized relationships used in *public mistrust societies* one of the most important ones is ritual or symbolic kinship. i.e. godparenthood (It.: *comparaggio.* Sp.: *compadrazgo.* s. Sl.: *kumstvo*) which to this day is still widespread especially in Euro-Mediterranean countries and South East-European Slavic countries.

In Mediterranean and southern Slavic societies, an important strategy to extend protection and solidarity structures is to establish personal dyadic relationships of symbolic kinship with people with a higher status and social prestige and/or with better political and economic opportunities than one's own. In these cases, the poor, the underling, and the powerless tend to choose their godfathers among rich and powerful people who can provide the necessary assistance to secure personal interests within the public sphere (Pitt-Rivers, 1977: 54).

Within the framework of this analysis we need to underscore that ties of symbolic kinship always imply reciprocal rights and duties that guarantee the informal exchange of favours and counter-favours between socially superior and socially inferior actors.

The second type of interpersonal relationship comprises the ties of friendship. In general, the social institution of friendship is based upon symmetrical extra-kinship and extra-family relationships. Friendship ties usually develop among people belonging to the same class or equivalent/analogous social strata (Mühlmann and Llaryora 1968: 8).

However, the notion of symmetry leads to another feature of friendship relations that is quite prevalent in *public mistrust societies* in the Mediterranean and South East European area; namely, the transactional aspect of these dyadic relationships, which, as a rule, involve informal instrumental interactions (Boissevain 1966: 23; Wolf, 1966: 10 ff.). In *public mistrust societies*, the instrumental aspect is intrinsic to friendship and the exchange of material favours is openly performed. These transactions among friends are not stigmatized at all, though the affection aspect is not missing and coexists smoothly with other types of favours and counter-favours in these societies as well.

In practical terms, we can add that in *public mistrust societies* an individual, who needs to speedily solve a problem with the civil law or wants to obtain a permit, a pension, or a license that depend upon the decision of a remote and unfamiliar office in the capital, will not apply to the relevant authorities in person but will mobilize a *close friend.* The latter in turn will get in touch with acquaintances occupying important positions in the magistracy or civil service who will help deal with the case. These instrumental relationships based on transactionality, thus on reciprocity, entail equivalent counter-favours – in our case, the mediation of acquaintances with high-ranking people.

The term *friend*, according to the word's instrumental and transactional meaning, and the term *acquaintance* are often nearly synonymous. This was true in the long period of realized socialism for example and can still be found in post-socialist transition societies. Consequently, *acquaintances* imply the existence of a network of dyadic and polyadic social relationships based on transactional reciprocity, which is put to use to obtain what are regarded as vitally important personal favours at the expense of the common good and public resources (Ledeneva, 1998: 37). Being an *economy of favours*, *acquaintances*, especially during the socialist era, was a practically universal system of informal network that enabled these coalitions of friends and acquaintances (at times just temporary) to appropriate material-like common goods as well as symbolic-like State privileges via highly-personalized channels.

Finally, we ought to highlight that money plays a secondary role in the mentioned three types of relations and coalitions. Therefore, this phenomenon must be fully distinguished from corruption.

• *Patronage Relationships and Corruption*

The relationship between patron and client can be defined as an interpersonal and dyadic tie regulated by rights and duties usually informally defined. However, the tie between patron and client gives rise to an asymmetrical type of reciprocal

dependence, since the client depends more on the patron than vice versa (Mühlmann and Llaryora, 1968: 3). The relationship between patron and client implies a marked social, political and economic inequality between the people involved.

The institution of patronage permeates all organizations and associations linked to wielding and controlling power. Consequently, with its implicit strategy of personalizing social relationships, the clientele system becomes the so-to-say backbone of the management of the common good, which is privatized via extensive and multifold vertical links.

By now, each *public mistrust society* is embedded in a modern bureaucratic order. Thus, there is a more or less centralized territorial State based on a standardized administration, (in principle) impartial and hierarchically structured. Transactions between patrons and clients, in the shape of asymmetrical favours and counter-favours, are usually carried out in contexts where the administration of the common good is well known to be crucial. Exemplifying, relationships between representatives of the State's power (i.e. politicians and state officials) as well as managers of civil society organizations (NGO, co-operative association, or trade union directors, for example) on the one hand, and common citizens on the other, do not comply with the principles of objectivity of common interest decreed by the abstract models of bureaucratic organization. These relationships, not personalized in theory, are invariably turned into ties of patronage, which, through the exchange of reciprocal favours, pursue essentially particularistic interests. Whoever holds a public post of any kind will at length instrumentalize the structures and resources of the legislative, executive and judiciary power solely in favour of specific people connected to his network.

For the actors themselves, the relationships between patron and client represent the most efficient means to make the State's bureaucratic apparatus more transparent and less rigid. Paradoxically, the clientele system turns out to be a bridging mechanism between State and society that helps to make the citizen's relationship with the public administration less troublesome. Consequently, in post-socialist societies in South East Europe or in the Mediterranean area one would rather seek the help of a capable patron than apply directly to the appropriate public office that follows the unpredictable and intrinsically sluggish procedure of the public service.

The clientele system is often interpreted as a legacy of archaic rural-like societies. Consequently, there is a mistaken assumption that such practices, looked upon as obsolete and socially harmful, will disappear thanks to modernization and democratization processes. The far-reaching social changes that have taken place in specific *public mistrust societies* in Europe have certainly transformed their social fabric. Paradoxically, however, they also triggered the clientele system's adaptation to the new situation. Ironically, we can observe that the classic institution of patronage updated itself, taking on more complex and certainly less archaic forms of organization. In the Italian Mezzogiorno, experts have witnessed the rise and development of a party-political clientele system and/or of a mass clientele system (Graziano, 1974), which ultimately replaced the old clientele system of the notables.

As opposed to the clientele system of the notables, the new forms of patronage are based on obtaining large quantities of votes in exchange for favours through the shrewd control and instrumentalization of civil society's institutions. The case of Italy, therefore, proves that the institution of patronage is far more flexible and durable than what institutionalist approaches, which settle for formal analysis and disregard actual social practices, still reaffirm (Putnam 1993).

Corruption, like patronage, can be defined as a system of social practices based on reciprocal, voluntary and illegal transactions between two or more individual or collective actors.

Several experts express the opinion that corruption involves only a serious and intentional lack of concern of one's duties as an actor in the public sector. The definition by which corruption is merely *the abuse of public office for private gain* is a simplification since it restricts evidence of these illicit behaviours to the public dimension, specifically the political and bureaucratic ones. Instead, we cannot deny that corruption practices emerge also in the private sector, for example within or between companies operating in a market economy.

Corruption is a reciprocal exchange of favours (Ledeneva, 1998) by which two or more persons linked in an informal and temporary net-like coalition obtain illicit benefits at the expense of other individuals, private groups, public collectivities and communities of citizens. In fact, corruption can be defined as such only within a legal system guaranteed by a single State or a transnational community of States that openly declare its illegality. This fact is relevant not only juridically, but also socio-anthropologically.

From these general observations, we can establish the first significant difference between corruption and patron-client relations. In fact, though corruption practices, due to the intrinsic nature of the exchange, are criminally indictable transactions, in most cases the relationship between patron and client implies behaviours that might be morally and politically reproachable but not downright illicit.

Secondly, corruption practices nearly always involve monetary issues. This monetary aspect, instead, is an exception in clientelist transactions where the exchange of favours covers a wider and less specific range and the favours' socio-political aspect definitely outweighs the economic one.

Thirdly, we ought to stress that cases of corruption usually involve a single transaction, which in general, unlike clientelist favours, is not repeated periodically.

• *Mafia Networks: Managing Protection in public mistrust societies*

The Mafia has been viewed as a very efficient organization that can defy the State. This view's flaw lies in having created a representation of Mafia in the likeness of bureaucratic institutions, deemed as holders of the administrative rationality. Therefore, the Mafia has been cast as a counter-state, i.e. as a mirror-like reproduction of the State itself. According to this perspective, the Mafia is a pyramid organization ruled by a strong centralism and a firm hierarchic order. Yet, this rep-

resentation of the Mafia is based upon an ethnocentric assumption, i.e. on the belief that an efficient organization must be based on formal institutions that are identical or at least similar to the State's ones.

At present, there is a growing awareness that the Mafia is an amazingly flexible phenomenon. At this point, the rightful assumption is that the Mafia is neither a Freemason-like secret society nor a formal centralized organization, but rather a complex system of networks consisting essentially of interpersonal relationships (Hess 1988:119–133). On the other hand, claiming that within the Mafia sphere there are no bureaucratic-like organizational structures would be unreasonable nowadays, yet conversely one could claim they are not as pervasive as was believed in the past, although these structures are present in the shape of small, formally-established nuclei (Paoli 2000). Thus, we can concur with the well-grounded hypothesis that these formally structured Mafia cores (for example, a *famiglia* or *cosca* with well-defined roles, hierarchies, rituals and contract relationships among its members) are integrated in an extensive network of informal and hardly permanent relations with unskilled criminals, with occasional or regular clients, and above all with powerful politicians and distinguished entrepreneurs. In turn, the various nuclei join forces temporarily, forming more or less lasting, yet rarely enduring alliances. The power of Mafia networks, which by virtue of their inherent flexibility and imperceptibility can easily avoid being snared by the law, lies in the markedly informal aspect of social relationships with the world beyond the nucleus.

In order to explain the persistence and diffusion of the Mafia phenomenon we need to start from the statement of fact that in a given society there is no reciprocal relationship of trust between citizen and State. In this case, obviously enough, most of the community of citizens would rather join informal and highly personalized protection networks. However, this is also the fertile ground in which Mafia networks flourish. As regards to local society, Mafia above all stands for the *management of public distrust* through the *industry of private protection* (Gambetta, 1993).

This formula indicates that in an environment of widespread distrust in the public sphere Mafia can guarantee the proper running of public transactions among groups or single individuals. Consequently, large sections of the economy as well have no intention of associating directly with the market and would rather rely on Mafia control. Finally, we need to stress that the private industry of private protection is not based solely on wholesale violence. Although violence is an essential characteristic of Mafia behaviour, it should actually be regarded as an *ultima ratio*, used only in case of serious and repeated violation of agreed terms.

The lack or inadequacy of trustworthy State structures within the public sphere in the end drives citizens to turn to informal protection networks (mainly Mafia-like ones), which in turn tend to appropriate the State or even take its place.

The clientelist, corruptive and Mafia practices in the frame of informality should not be considered exclusive to societies perceived as archaic collectivities or ones plagued by social, cultural and moral backwardness. This would be yet another ethnocentric theory of the sociocultural deficit of some societies compared to others,

namely Western ones. Societies deemed to be more advanced have cronyism, clientelism, corruption and Mafia too, although probably to a lesser extent or maybe just better concealed because the State is more efficient.

The question of the diffusion as well as the continuity of informality and its associated social relationships in *public mistrust societies* cannot be adequately dealt with via a culturalist approach, which usually employs an overly static notion of culture. An interpretation based on the pure and simple use of the rational choice paradigm appears to be highly reductive as well.

An historical-anthropological approach, instead, reveals quite clearly that the extent of clientelist, corruptive and Mafia-like phenomena in *public mistrust societies* is strictly correlated to a permanent discord between State and society. In Weberian terms, we could say that there is a split between legality and legitimacy as shown in the following diagram:

Formal Stateinstitutions	Informal relationships and social networks
Legal	*Partially illegal or semi-legal*
Non-legitimate	*Legitimate*

The roots of this discord between State and society reach deep into a distant history. Yet, history cannot be reduced to a mechanical or automatic sequence of objective facts. Instead, it must be understood as an interpreted past activated by the actors themselves in their present to be interpreted (Ricoeur, 1985: Vol. 3, 314). Thus, we reach the question of history as a past that is experienced either in a direct or mediated way and then actualized. This concerns what has been defined as the presence or efficacy of history (Ricoeur, 1985: Vol.3, 495). The historical-anthropological view does not deal as much with the sociologically relevant roots of informality, as with the social construction of continuity by which informal activities in the minds of members of some societies take on and maintain a specific meaning.

According to the historical-anthropological view, this endurance springs from the tight and permanent interaction between the collective spaces of experience, in the sense of interpreted past, and the horizons of expectation to be considered, instead, as imagined future in the present (Koselleck, 1979: 349 ff.).

Present informality is strictly linked to the dreadful experiences that members of a given society have continuously had with the State, both in a recent and distant past. Obviously, these negatives spaces of experience, which have a marked influence on the actors and on the formation of their horizons of expectation, do not reproduce themselves automatically by tradition. These spaces of experience must be constantly confirmed in the present. In accordance with the members' perception of these experiences, the corresponding systems of representations and behavioural models will be strengthened, modified, or discarded.

As already mentioned, the reproduction of negative spaces of experience in *public mistrust societies* goes hand in hand with the constant failing of the State and of civil society's institutions. Yet, such a public inability to carry out one's duties is not only an objective fact that can be observed from the outside, but, far more important, is also shared within and consequently built as such by the citizens themselves. Thus, for the actors affected by the permanent disaster of public powers and civil society's institutions, the persistence, resurgence and expansion of informal behavioural models are simply the outcome of a contextual rational choice. In fact, members of *public mistrust societies* in the Mediterranean and South East-European areas resort to informality with good reason since nobody is foolish to the point of doing things that serve no purpose or that could be damaging.

In closing this section, I would underscore that the various types of informality analysed above can be interpreted as socially and culturally shared behaviours of political and cultural resistance. Therefore, they are forms of intentional but not necessarily subjective resistance, typical of societies with an endemic mistrust towards the public sector, epitomised by politics and bureaucracy especially, to which the individual actors grant no legitimacy (Ledeneva 2018).

Conclusions

Instead of political subjectivity, I prefer using the term political intentionality, thereby referring directly to Edmund Husserl and indirectly to the concept of *soziales Handeln* (social action) proposed by Max Weber (Weber, 1956). Therefore, we need to draw a distinction between subjectivity and intentionality. Intentionality means voluntariness in acting, which is not synonymous with subjectivity since voluntariness in linked to, though not determined by, the fact of living in human society.

In fact, the social actors I refer to in my analysis do not act in accordance with the logic of political subjectivity, albeit acting intentionally. They do not act as robots, therefore, driven by overpowering external forces such as culture, society, social control etc. Hence, they act intentionally in accordance with what may be defined, in the words of Alfred Schütz and Norbert Elias, as their *social knowledge* (Elias 1977; Schütz 1960), which is acquired in their *Lebenswelt,* i.e. learned through everyday social experiences and further influenced by their specific *Vorwelt,* i.e. by their conceived and imagined collective past. This is a specific historical knowledge that the actors learned during their socialization process and was later confirmed by their personal experiences within a specific society. Not based on objective facts, this history is rather an interiorized history, yet at the same time a collective or social one, like the *innere Geschichte* evoked by Edmund Husserl (Husserl 1952).

Using the concept of subjectivity as if it meant that the actors can choose ad libitum, i.e. freely pursuing their purely subjective ideas, ideals and strategies as if these were not the product of the society they live in, is misleading. A revolutionary,

a visionary, an idealist or simply a person who strives for a better world may devise or plan a new society, but historical reality shows that this venture is always bound to fail at some point. What remains is a noble but unrealistic pipe dream that may appeal to some idealistic anthropologists: a category I happily neither belong to nor wish to belong to.

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