

Book Review - Debates



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Carmen Leccardi, Paolo Jedlowski, Alessandro Cavalli
Exploring New Temporal Horizons. A conversation between Memories and Futures

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In an essay on the genesis and evolution of his intellectual path, Zygmunt Bauman notes: «if sociological vocation has any use for humans it is in the service it renders or may render to the struggle waged by the humans to comprehend, ‘to make sense of’, their life experience» (2008: 237-8). This vocation is «born from responsibility and driven by responsibility; it signals the assumption of responsibility for human choices and their consequences for the shape of humanity» (236). By «re-presenting human condition as the product of human actions», sociology performs, in fact, a critical function, which allows «to open the possibility of alternative social arrangements and ways of life, to militate against the TINA (There Is No Alternative) ideologies and life philosophies [...] to keep other options alive» (238). In this way, Bauman actualizes the thought of Charles Wright Mills about the mission of sociology. The American sociologist played an important role in his early formation, particularly with regard to the clarification of «the task and the promise» (Mills 1959: 6) of the «sociological imagination»: a lesson that should never be forgotten.

The call to these issues is particularly urgent today, in a world bewildered by the speed and drama of the changes taking place. Just think of the degradation of the ecosystem and the return of the fear of nuclear holocaust. Human experience is confronted with the difficulty of facing new scenarios and new risks with old conceptual categories and political-institutional tools inadequate to drive change in an ecologically and socially sustainable way. The daily news about intolerance, racism, war, violence feeds the doubt that even the capacity of thinking is weakening. Hanna Arendt highlighted the «political and moral significance» of this capacity (Arendt 1971: 445), in situations that risk triggering processes of «evil-doing» (p. 418). The disorientation of the ordinary citizen is recently amplified by the spread of dystopian theories, which fuel the feeling of an unstoppable «Orwellian drift», in «a decomposing world, in which the sacred selfishness of tribes, individuals and clans prevails» (Maalouf 2019: 315).

The most obvious expression of this disorientation is the crisis of the future, which has become a central issue in the contemporary political-cultural debate, especially when attention is focused on the younger generations.

However, we cannot ignore that, in the ambivalence inherent in every aspect of social life, there are not only risks, but also opportunities for the present. These opportunities are often hidden in the folds of everyday life, and we need to identify and enhance them in order to overcome the stalemate of thought and action that hinders projection into the future. This task involves a multiplicity of subjects, but it places a specific responsibility on the sociologist. I am referring to the responsibility to activate the «sociological imagination» in order to make visible the dimension of choice in what is happening in our world and to shift attention to the possibilities of alternative arrangements to current trends. The assumption of this responsibility is the pivot of the book by Carmen Leccardi, Paolo Jedlowski and Alessandro Cavalli. The authors' commitment is made explicit right from the introduction, where they specify the hypothesis they want to develop and the goals they aim at.

Their analysis is based on the concept of time as an ordering principle of social life and, at the same time, as a basis for the expression of agency at the collective and individual level. In particular, temporal *experience* is taken as a privileged point of observation to focus on the set of problems, levels and areas of action that are constantly combined and recombined in shaping social life. In this perspective, contemporaries' difficulties can be analysed in the light of the effects produced on institutions, social groups, and individual biographies by the progressive «closure of time on the present» (1) underway, supported by the «acceleration» pointed out by Hartmut Rosa (2013). Hence the hypothesis of using «the study of temporal perspectives and the changes brought about by the historical process» (3) to build a global approach to the problems of the present, usually analysed in a partial and segmented way. Such an approach is essential to understand the meaning of the ongoing processes, to relocate the study of reality in the historical perspective of the long term and to contribute «to the understanding of new codes of communication and the construction of meaning in a global society, where information has become a fundamental resource» (3).

Around this hypothesis, the text develops an analytical path that lends itself to a double reading. On the one hand, it is a theoretical contribution to sociological reflection on continuity and social change. On the other hand, it is an exercise in sociological imagination put at the service of a political project: «the defence of life in the Anthropocene and the fight against unacceptable levels of economic and social inequality» (1). It is a project that calls for individual and collective responsibility. From this point of view, it is noteworthy the choice of an agile format for the text and a writing style that is also accessible to an audience of non-experts, especially to political and civil society actors. Equally noteworthy is the coherence that the book manages to preserve between stylistic simplicity and a theoretically rigorous study, open to multidisciplinary contributions, rich in food for thought.

In order to summarize the conceptual complexity of the book, we can refer to four key elements, three of which already appear in the title. The first is the focus on *time horizons*, based on the consideration that «the horizon is at the centre of the relationship between what is determined and what is not» (4). By opening up reflection to the dimension of the *possible*, this concept draws attention to the new types of utopia that can be discerned today, particularly in the commitment of the ecological and feminist movements. The second element is the link between *memories and futures*, declined in the plural, in line with the phenomenologically-inspired approach adopted. The authors therefore speak of memories as the result of selective processes, of continuous construction and reconstruction of past events and their meaning. And the futures imply changing representations, both in terms of the dominant cultural climate in different historical contexts, and in terms of evaluations, desires, expectations in the different situations that characterize the present of individuals and social groups. The third element is the idea of *making* memory studies *dialogue* with future studies, to reflect on how the circularity between past, present and future develops, or breaks up in different historical times. The fourth key element is the role of *generations* as «mediators between the collective and individual dimensions of time [...] both the outcome of processes of socio-historical change and the origin of social and political transformation» (7). The last of the three chapters of the book is dedicated to them.

The first chapter, on «Memories: what Memories does the Future need?», starts from the dynamic, selective and interpretative character of memory processes to illustrate the multiple features assumed within them by *mental representations* of the future, in changing historical contexts and in different social and personal situations. What makes the analysis particularly interesting, in addition to a stimulating theoretical discussion, full of scientific and

artistic-literary references, is the enhancement of the *ambivalence* inherent in the processes considered. This makes it possible to overcome the tendency, which is widespread today, to reduce contemporary temporal experience to the phenomenon of «presentism» alone, and to pay attention also to the existing symptoms of possible «counter-thrusts to it» (43).

The end point of the analysis is the concept of «memories of the future», with particular emphasis on «memories of the futures we once imagined» (31): an expression referring to futures which, although not always realized, remain in the memory as traces of the «horizons of expectations in which past events took place» (32). The retrieval of these traces, often latent, calls into question the critical role of memory. The awareness that the past, as well as the present, «is a receptacle of possibilities» (35), to be rediscovered, elaborated, narrated can transform criticism into a *political fact* in particular historical moments. These are moments in which the circularity between the different dimensions of temporality is interrupted, with dramatic effects on human capacity to act. The interruption may depend on the permanence of unresolved traumas or obscure points of the past that have never been clarified, which hold hostage the planning capacity of the present and the projection into the future. Circularity can also be put at risk, as is the case today, by changes so rapid and unpredictable as to make it impossible «to confront our legacies: the legacies we leave to ourselves and others through our lifetime, and the ones others have left to us» (44). Furthermore, the ambivalent role of the Internet and new media on the content of this legacy should not be underestimated. On the one hand, they feed the difficulty of making sense of experience, to the extent that «they seem to have caused not only a huge expansion of what is memorisable, but also a fragmentation and, in some ways, a progressive evanescence of what can be defined memorable» (41). On the other hand, however, the web is also a receptacle for «memory currents», i.e., «traces of the past that survive in the recesses of social memory and lend themselves to being re-actualized by subjects in unexpected times and places» (41). Ambivalence opens up new spaces for action, suggesting the possibility of mending the relationship between generations that is disrupted today.

In the second chapter, on «Futurity: Changing Futures in a Changing World», the issue of legacy is taken up again with reference to the difficulties of connecting past and future «when the inheritance received is not legitimized by any tradition (the testament)» (46). This is the difficulty evoked by Hanna Arendt (1961) in relation to the problematic relationship with the past that marked the post-World War II period. There are two aspects of Arendt's theses taken up in the text. The first concerns the risks to democracy, when individuals lose the sense of «acting with others», to become stuck in a «privatized present» (46). The second refers to the concept of «natal time», as the time of «a new beginning» made possible by the turnover of generations, that «can combat the crisis of the present by forging new and unprecedented forms of acting-with-others» (46). In order to assess whether the possibility of a new beginning is looming today, and what the vectors of this change may be, the text reconstructs the historical evolution of the idea of the future.

This reconstruction is an opportunity for the authors to propose an effective synthesis of the changes that have taken place in the temporal horizons of humanity, in parallel with the development of knowledge. It is a conceptual path of extreme interest, in which different areas and levels of analysis are intertwined and multi-disciplinary conceptual references are combined, in a coherent and unitary argumentation.

The focal point of the analysis is the modern conception of the future «as an open and progressive time» (47): the point of arrival of a trajectory that goes from the concrete to the abstract, from static to dynamism, with the passage from the cyclical time of archaic societies, to the linear Judaeo-Christian time, up to that of modernity. Each step is associated with a radical change of human relationship with history. To limit ourselves to modernity, its temporality – abstract, oriented by a spasmodic tension towards the future, understood as a horizon of continuous renewal – is supported by the emerging idea of «Worldly progress». Thanks to this conception – functional to the affirmation of modern capitalism –, «for the first time, the future is removed from the double influence of nature and the divine, becoming subject to human domination» (53). The traditional relationship between nature and culture is being turned upside down and the idea that there is a *limit* to human capacities, including that of thoughtless exploitation of natural environment, vanishes.

Behind the current crisis of the future, there is the dissolution of this «model of historicity», accelerated by the digital revolution and by «the cultures of instantaneity that characterize our time» (47). An in-depth examination of the concepts of acceleration, presentism, instantaneity and de-temporalization brings to light the current identity difficulties of the younger generations, which go hand in hand with a drying up of ethics and politics. It is worth mentioning the attention paid to the issue of utopia in modern culture, to its disappearance from the contemporary political-cultural landscape and to the parallel possibility that the projection into an extended future connected to it can be recovered in the form of «reasonable utopias» (1).

The book identifies two possible lines of resistance to current trends, focusing, as mentioned, on the action of the new movements. The first line of resistance takes shape from the struggle for a «cosmopolitan democracy» (76) that stems from the critique of neoliberal globalization, considered responsible for the environmental emergency and the continuing violations of human rights in the world. The second «is related to the feminist movement and to the centrality within it of daily life as a temporal and spatial realm, in which the plural times of the living make their voices heard» (76). In this context, the crucial role of individual and collective responsibility comes to the fore as a potential «form of re-temporalization of action» (78), an essential condition for mending the connection between generations.

This connection is the subject of the third chapter, on «Memory and Future through the Generations». After evoking the historicizing role of the concept of generation in the social sciences, the authors illustrate the problem «of the synchronization of two different calendars: the individual's vital cycle and historical experience» (78). Today, this synchronization is made increasingly difficult by the acceleration of change, which introduces multiple elements of discontinuity into social life and into people's biographical paths. This discontinuity is a factor in the erosion of relations between generations. With regard to young people, in particular, the distance of language, knowledge, cultural references, combined with the non-linearity of the models of life proposed by adults, seems to cancel out any possibility of dialogue and even conflict with them. The issue is the subject of a detailed analysis, with references to the consolidated literature and with empirical considerations on the distance and/or closeness between subjects of different ages in the family, in education, in the public sphere.

Moving on to consider generations as potential political actors, the text proposes an interesting application of Karl Mannheim's conceptual framework to the study of discontinuities, conflicts, silences and removals that have conditioned in different ways the development of these potentialities in different historical-political moments. The point of arrival is the analysis of the emerging novelties on the world scene, of the possible spaces for political action, of the responsibilities that loom for the generations co-present on the contemporary scene. The main novelty is represented by the awareness of the same destiny that unites humanity faced with emerging global risks. About environmental problem, in particular, recent research data show very different attitudes, connected to different temporal horizons. Alongside the underestimation, rejection, and disinterest of some subjects oriented in an individualistic, or at most familistic sense, there is also the engagement of those who express forms of collective identification. «These people, whatever their age, feel a duty to face the environmental problem because they feel responsible for future generations [...] for everyone who will be born on Earth» (112). Responsibility projects action into the extended horizons of history. From the sharing of these horizons, the text suggests, a pact between generations can take shape, which re-establishes on a new basis the circularity interrupted between past, present and future.

The conclusion concerns the way in which this responsibility can be exercised at the scientific-disciplinary level and in collective political engagement.

As far as the social sciences are concerned, the authors reiterate the need to activate *imagination* in order to highlight alternative futures, using new conceptual categories, consistent with the challenges of the present. This implies the recovery of long-term historical processes, in the light of the new temporality of the Anthropocene (Chakrabarty 2021). The book is a contribution in this direction as I have tried to show in these pages. I will just recall here that the perspective adopted by the authors makes it possible to overcome the limits of some concepts that are widely used today. And it is a stimulus to revisit the debate on modernity and post-modernity in the light of the critical analysis of the model of civilization we have inherited from Western culture, whose social and environmental implications are no more sustainable now.

On a more strictly political level, the conclusion outlines a similar reversal of perspective in the interpretation of the current crisis of democracy. The left/right, conservative/progressive dynamics in the national framework are not adequate both to explain it and to propose solutions. National democracies are powerless faced with the new risks to the survival of mankind because global problems require an equally global capacity to intervene. Specifically, the authors suggest new institutional arrangements and new forms of citizenship – from the local community to the world – recalling that the idea of «a unified world and global citizenship has already emerged through history» (125). For the realists, closed in on the defence of established interests and privileges, this is an unthinkable idea, an unattainable utopia. However, if we look at the new movements, we notice that the recovery of this idea from historical memory and its actualization as a «possible» utopia are already underway and are orienting new forms of commitment, within a new pact between generations.

The debate on these proposals is open. Our scientific and generational responsibility is to continue in this direction.

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