Book Forum

Political correctness, and the relentless decline of critical reason

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Comment on Jonathan Friedman, *Politicamente corretto. Il conformismo morale come regime*, edited by Piero Zanini, translation by Francesca Nicola and Piero Zanini, Milano, Meltemi, 2018, pp. 348.

I met Jonathan Friedman in the early 2000s, when I had decided to make my research training evolve from archaeology to anthropology. The wish I then expressed to Friedman was to study radical right wing social movements: a phenomenon that was – to my mind – poorly understood, and – at that time – largely ignored by the social sciences.

The early 2000s (perhaps not coincidentally the era in which many of the debates that spurred the writing of this book took place) was a time of social optimism in the West, and celebratory narratives of globalisation were predicting a bright future of freedom of movement and thought, racial diversity, and cultural hybridity. In this context, not many social scientists were happy to supervise research on right wing movements, cultural racism, and political violence of the neo-fascist kind. Friedman was then the one scholar (and such he remained for long) I could find, who was willing to engage in long discussions around this topic, and the one academic who accepted to supervise my MA, and eventually PhD research on this theme. I say all this in order to situate my relationship with the author, as well as the theme of right-wing ideologies (somehow involved in the topic of this book), which is in both cases certainly partial and biased.

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2018 | Anuac. Vol. 7, n° 2, dicembre 2018: 241-245.
ISSN: 2239-625X – DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-3515

At the same time, if I were to pick one thing among the very many that I have learnt from Jonathan Friedman, it would be the crucial value of critique for the evolution of knowledge, and how science is always about the possibility of being wrong. This book itself, I would say, appears to me as a bold – if polemical – act of strenuous intellectual opposition to (I am tempted to write revolt against) the ever expanding breach of this principle. In my review, I will try to stick to this idea myself, and possibly use it against Friedman, by trying to bring to light what I am critical about, before I move to what I find important and productive.

The book represents an extensive effort to deal with the establishment of political correctness (PC) as a regime of sociality, and an attempt to understand it from the analysis of the general conditions of its emergence. The essay has an explicitly structuralist approach and – within this frame – it combines Marxian political economy with Global Systems theory, and a processual understanding of social reality, we could say, à la Victor Turner.

An important social fact Friedman puts into relation with the emergence of PC, is the establishment of multiculturalism as a political ideology increasingly hegemonizing governmental policies, established discourses, and the organisation of the everyday interactions in social life.

In this frame, Friedman sees PC situations emerge as a defence mechanism, protecting the ideological formations of multiculturalism from critical attacks, dissent, or even scepticism.

Such defence operates via repression of any critique, where those who are critical of – or simply do not comply with – the multicultural grand narrative, are silenced by means of moral accusation. The imputation itself is analysed in terms of the creation of associative chains leading to the re-definition of the accused through morally essentialized categories such as racism, fascism, nazism, and the like.

The very necessity of writing this book – Friedman tells us – originates from within the author's personal life. The theoretical/analytical work around PC was triggered by a series of attacks to Kajsa Ekholm Friedman -– the author's wife, herself an anthropologist – from different segments of Swedish academia and the press, after Ekholm Friedman gave a talk where some problematic aspects of policies where exposed (pp. 76-78) to an audience that the press initially categorised as "right wing" (pp. 78-83).

The organisation of the book – as it appears to me – is divided in three parts. In the introduction and the first chapter Friedman positions himself as a writer, and introduces the reader to the problematic of political correctness, while situating his work in relation to the existing literature. In the

second part (chapters two, three, and four) he describes the series of events and attacks, that eventually led to his and Ekholm Friedman's work on PC. The third part (chapters five, six and conclusion) is devoted to the analysis of the PC phenomenon and its structural conditions of emergence.

I find two issues problematic: one is more research/ethnography related, the second concerns instead some aspects of Friedman's analysis. I will start with the first and move then to the second.

I have been wondering if we can talk of this book as an ethnographically based anthropological work, and I have decided that it is. I do believe with Pierre Bourdieu (2003: 281) that «idiosyncratic personal experiences methodically subjected to sociological control, constitute irreplaceable analytic resources, and that mobilising one's social past through self-socio-analysis can and does produce epistemic as well as existential benefits», and this is certainly what Friedman does with his "participant observation" of the events, or even, following Bourdieu, his "participant objectivation". However, especially for a book that aims at being healthily polemical, there is a certain lack of clarity in the way ethnography and research are presented. Some of the texts Friedman refers to (from Ekholm Friedman's talk to – say – Sweden's "integration act", to media and academic reactions, etc) are simply evoked or summarised by the author, and poorly referenced (media quotes miss date and/or page, what was the radio/tv broadcast, etc). I think Friedman's polemical zest would gain critical momentum from actually presenting some more of these texts, while a more accurate referencing would provide us with further information about the context in which they have been used. Ethnographically, actors and characters should also be more precisely situated. «A group of (mainly female) anthropologists raises in indignation...» (p. 54); «A conversation with a Norwegian psychologists confirms...» (p. 284)[1]. Who are these people and where are they speaking from? How did Friedman get to interact with them, how did they get involved in the polemics? Friedman's argument would become more solid if they were presented with their own history and a description of the social relations they are immersed in. This would have situated them within the larger sequence of events and given the reader a more substantiated backup of the general theoretical argument.

With regard to Friedman's analysis, the Swedish situation comes about as the product of a decline (or rather collapse) of egalitarian individualism – in Dumontian terms –, and its fragmentation into a polarised geography of cultural identities, in competition with one another. Swedish individualism,

1. Translation by the Author.

moreover, has peculiar local specificities, as powerful collectivistic ideologies (which have taken shape during post-war economic expansion), and a strongly centralised state, seem to have somehow weakened the process of individualisation in the first place. Within this context, declining individualism seems thus to turn established ideologies of social control from below into mutual surveillance and social paranoia. So, the emergence of multicultural ideology and PC regimes are presented as the tools of "new" elites trying to establish themselves in power. The struggle for power creates a situation of fragmentation, social uncertainty and insecurity in which multicultural ideologies and the PC regimes are used as mechanisms of social control imposed from above.

The newness of this elite and its competition for power have implications that are not thoroughly explored. Which are the old ones? What is the historical dynamic of conflict and replacement among old and new elites? What is their composition? Are we talking of private or public elites? Is it economic, political elite, or media power, or both? How are the old and new elites defined by their reciprocal positionalities? In other words, what are *the logics* of the struggle for power within which multicultural ideologies and PC regimes are mobilized? A more thorough class analysis of the Swedish state in its historical transformation, as well as a deeper exploration of the upper echelons of the global society that seem to have hijacked it would be productive, here. Without that, the lack of clarity concerning the elites leaves the reader wondering about the structural role that is given to PC: does it defend some identities against others, or does it defend this newly established order as such?

Despite these aspects generating some confusion, however, the book does a brilliant job of exposing a phenomenon that is increasingly paralysing western societies, by disabling criticism both in the dynamics of knowledge production and in political arenas. With his refusal to abide by the general doxa protected and consolidated by PC dynamics, Friedman seems to open up a space of knowledge that wasn't accessible before: the global systemic anthropological explanation of the PC phenomenon is powerful, thorough, and original. Especially the comparison with the social logics of sorcery accusations in other parts of the world (appearing in the long, conclusive sections), makes structural invariants visible in differing contexts. This allows the reader to scale up from the specificity of the cases presented by Friedman, to the larger logics of reproduction of social systems that – under the current crisis – are undergoing powerful transformational pressures. Throughout his long career as one of the world's foremost anthropologists, Friedman has always had the impudent courage of polemics and critique,

never in and for itself, but always in the intent to open up the box of intellectual debate, expose contradictions, and demystify grand narratives that had become hegemonic. Also, and importantly, he always has been more than willing to take criticism of himself and his own work.

It appears somehow ironic that some of the polemics that have emerged around this book have resulted in certain accusations of the author as "fascist[2]". Daring to define myself a scholar of fascism, I would say that the most foundational functioning principle of this ideology is the repression of conflict and critique by means of externalization. Fascism as an ideology functions by creating a rigidly enclosed in-group and out-group, and repressing conflict and critique internal to the in-group via expulsion of the latter towards the out-group (Lefort 1986; Loperfido 2018; Sternhell 1984). What Jonathan Friedman does is precisely the contrary; his lucid work is so important because it brings the repressed critique back in, while rapidly verticalizing arenas of power suffocate critical discussions via the imposition of a PC logic.

While writing this review, I was tempted to suggest that some lack of clarity I imputed to the author might be coming from the emotionality involved in having to face moral attacks reaching into the intimacy of his personal life. Yet I decided not to venture into this territory. The private is private and it is only Friedman's job to respond to critique about his work. He will do that, and will most likely conclude that regardless who's right or wrong, a full, open possibility to discuss *anything* is what remains crucial for the progress of both, knowledge and society.

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2. Elisabetta Rosaspina, La ricerca è sempre «scorretta», *La lettura/Corriere della Sera*, 28 January 2018.