

Dissertation Prospectus

Another Meta-Ideology Is Possible*

~ Liberal Hegemony And Its Alternatives ~

* Working Title
Spring 06

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0. INTRODUCING THE PROBLEMATIC

0.1. ABSTRACT

As the deepening and widening of ever closer interconnections across countries, cultures and societies ceases to be a remote perspective and becomes a tangible reality in the experience of many people in the world, the study of politics acquires a crucial importance that extends beyond its traditional areas of specialty. In this mutated context, while ideological distinctions seem to recede or even fade away at the domestic level, the resurgence or the new elaboration of alternative systems of political thought and political action in different arenas impose the necessity of a careful evaluation of their implications and potentialities.

In my Doctoral Dissertation I will consider some of the aspects that make liberalism, in its various articulations, the dominant ideology in much of “the West” today. Among these, I will concentrate in particular on the ability of liberalism to act as a meta-ideology capable to “speak” alternative positions through its vocabulary. In this sense I explain the success and endurance of various branches of liberal ideologies as a function of the flexibility of liberal discourse, a relatively small and agile set of theoretical propositions that by virtue of their semantic richness can accommodate visions of the world (and of politics) often times in stark discordance with each other. Such characteristics, in turn, do not constitute liberalism as a neutral language, but reinforce its hegemony through the reassertion of its foundational principles appropriated by, and re-inscribed into diverging ideologies.

I plan on inquiring into the possibility that different ideological constellations may coagulate, both at a theoretical level, on the edges of liberalism, and, concretely, in the

geographical peripheries of the contemporary world. Theoretically, I purport to focus on the contribution of French philosopher Jan-Luc Nancy, and in particular on his ontology based on concepts such as the “inoperative community” and the dynamic formation of “singularity” and “being-in-common,” that replace the liberal tenet of individualism as basic assumptions on human nature. These foundations, I argue, can sustain the intellectual effort necessary to configure a meta-ideological model alternative to the currently hegemonic one. I then invest these abstract reflections onto the concrete reality of communities that do actually organize and understand themselves through principles not easily reducible to those of liberal individualism.

0.2. A PLAN OF THE WORK

In order to discuss the possibility of the emergence of meta-ideological alternatives, both theoretically and empirically, I shall first need to establish some premises. A preliminary discussion will attempt to define the grounds on which liberalism is to be understood and its alternatives are to be looked for and examined. This will identify two planes, practically interpolated, but logically distinct.

I will start by briefly recounting some of the main approaches and some of the most enduring debates around the concept of ideology. For the purposes of simplifying the navigation through a profoundly complex subject matter, and at the cost of introducing an element of rigidity and schematism, the theoretical discussion on ideology will be organized on a continuum stretching from positions maintaining the “falsity” of ideology to positions emphasizing its “reality.” In a somewhat similar fashion, Nancy Hirschmann identifies two dimensions that have historically defined the debate on social construction: the level of “ideological misinterpretation,” intuitively familiar for most people and not uncommon even among theorists; and that of “materialization,” corresponding to the belief that “how we think about, talk about, interpret, and understand social phenomena produces material effects on the phenomena themselves.”¹ Lamenting the inadequacy of both these positions, Hirschmann also proposes a third level of social construction, that she calls “the discursive construction of social meaning:” this move out of an otherwise inescapable logical impasse proves very fruitful for the concrete analysis of the workings of ideological discourses.²

In this vein, I will also engage the study of ideology from another perspective, opposing “horizontal,” more theoretical analyses, to “vertical,” more pragmatic ones. On the first

dimension I will consider the interrelations, and in particular internal consistency of the different claims that form a given ideology; on the second axis I purport to investigate the relation between a given ideology, taken as a whole, and the pattern of political actions that it is most likely to determine, or at least to correlate with.

In light of these forethoughts, I will then reflect on the ideology of liberalism. Loosely applying the model delineated by the “horizontal” and “vertical” axes, I will first identify some of its main tenets, as well as their functional interrelations. In particular, I will study liberal strategies of disambiguation and the attempted decontestation of concepts like individuation, freedom, rationality, as well as the historical trajectory of the ideal of tolerance. Then, I will outline the contours of a concrete example of political action consistent with such values. In doing so I will study the case of Italy in the 1990s, focusing in particular on its alleged “liberal revolution.”

Methodologically, I will advance my claims through the application of basic instruments of textual analysis. Illustrative texts in the liberal tradition will be sampled for the purposes of isolating in them elements pertinent to a possible definition of the ideology. In particular, I will concentrate on the classic formulations of John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and John Rawls. Then I will also examine the discourse pronounced by Silvio Berlusconi in 1994, as it can be considered the foundational act of liberalism in Italy, as well as, more generally, an ideological manifesto of the centrality of liberalism in the contemporary political scenario.

In investigating the reach and the characteristics of liberal hegemony in contemporary political discourse, I will concentrate the scope of my analysis both historically, to the 1990s, and geo-politically, to Western Europe. In recent years, in fact, two events seem to have detonated with such magnitudes of symbolic power as to justify referring to them as the

¹ N. Hirschmann, *The Subject of Liberty: Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom* (Princeton University Press, Princeton:

terminus a quo and the *terminus ad quem* of a distinct period of time. As Thomas Friedman has observed, they can both be expressed as 9/11.³ In European notation, this stands for the ninth of November, and is intended to pertain to the year 1989, the date of the fall of the Berlin Wall. In American usage, on the other hand, 9/11 is read as September eleven, and since 2001 it unmistakably designates the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, and on the Pentagon, in Washington D.C.

Between 9/11 and 9/11, there spans a period of time that, with hindsight and questionable nostalgia, could be dubbed a new *belle époque*. From the triumphant tones of liberal apologists proclaiming *The End of History*, to the hopeful attitude of progressive idealists delivered from the yoke of obedience to the countries of “really existing socialism,” the long decade – to paraphrase historian Eric Hobsbawm’s *Short Twentieth Century* – bred expectations of international peace and political renovation. In Western Europe this “settled time”⁴ corresponded to the dispersion of liberal pollens across the political spectrum: on the right, where the neo-liberal wind continued to blow from across the Channel; as well as on the left, where liberal ideas proved their extraordinary adaptability to new environments, even on a terrain that had previously being defined by its stark anti-liberal character.

Functionally, I will reason on what this change might entail. In particular, I will advance the hypothesis that liberalism today, while maintaining its own ideological specificity, has also come to function as a meta-ideology. The way in which liberalism asserts its hegemony, it would then seem, is not only and not so much through the belligerent expulsion of competing ideologies from society, but mainly by absorbing and incorporating them. Liberalism, in other words, acts as the default operating system of contemporary politics,

2003), pp. 78-79

² *ibid*, p. 81

³ See: T. Friedman, “Commencement Address at Washington University in St. Louis, MO,” 05/21/04. Available at: <http://news-info.wustl.edu/news/page/normal/887.html>

establishing the limits, the objectives and the rules of the game by which different political views confront each other.

In this sense, then, the question about liberalism and its alternatives becomes relevant at two levels, the ideological and the meta-ideological. Here I will mostly focus on the second dimension, as it seems to precede the first, logically. Moreover, it is in the elaboration of an alternative grammar for the interaction of different political positions that lies the most promising potential. The emergence of such alternatives is not to be understood as a process of frontal opposition to liberalism. On the contrary, it is the syncretic coagulation of elements already located at the edges of the current hegemony, as well as their re-signification, that can relax the grip of the dominant system of thought on politics, and prospectively challenge its very dominance. The first move, then, consists in the identification of pockets of resistance to liberalism, both theoretically and empirically.

Theoretically, I purport to study the ways in which the meta-ideology of Liberalism has appropriated and enclosed within its confines elements of competing ideologies, while expelling or neutralizing the claims irreducible to its own articulations. In light of these experiences I will then discuss some elements of Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy, in order to assess its viability as the catalyst of an ideological constellation alternative to liberalism. Postulating the "inoperative community" as the natural inclination of human beings, Nancy's ontology promises to escape the rigidity of liberal individualism, while proposing a view flexible enough as to adapt to different positions on human nature and on politics.

Empirically, I will orient my research in two main directions. First, I will consider communities that occupy marginal positions in the Liberal episteme and that understand their being political through categories other than those advanced by Liberalism. Such cases

⁴ see A. Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategy," in *American Sociological Review* 51:1 (April 1986)

are more likely to be found in polities eccentrically situated with regards to a “modern normality.” To the extent that the syndrome of modernity can be understood as the articulation of a series of social, economic, political phenomena specifically situated in history, different political communities can be compared on the basis of their degrees of approximation of some abstract ideal-type of modernity. In this sense, then, and with a largely unwarranted emphasis on the temporal datum, two sets of positions could be identified, respectively preceding and following a period of modernity. To put it very schematically, I will study societies that a modernist historiography might label pre-modern or post-modern. Among these, I will present two cases: Freetown Christiania, the self-governing community established by hippie squatters in Copenhagen in 1971; and Badolato, a village in Calabria in which a small group of Kurdish illegal immigrants, arrived in 1997, was welcomed and successfully integrated by the local community. I will then move my reflection towards a possible abstraction and generalization of the conditions under which a meta-ideology inspired by Nancy’s concept of inoperative community might be successful.

1. CRITIQUE OF IDEOLOGY AND OF LIBERALISM

1.1. A PRELIMINARY INTRODUCTION TO IDEOLOGY

1.1.1. IDEOLOGY: SEMANTIC, NOT APOPHANTIC

Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.

K. Marx & F. Engels, *The German Ideology*

Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions.

F. Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in an Trans-Moral Sense*

When I use a word [...] it means just what
I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.

Humpty Dumpty, *Alice in Wonderland*

Over the last two centuries many political thinkers and cultural analysts have debated the intellectual status of ideology, as well as on how to approach its academic study. In particular, to Marx's early marginalization of ideology, as a purely derivative and superstructural category, other positions have responded, both within and without the traditions of Marxism. Ideology has gradually become an object of study in its own right, as its dismissal as "false consciousness" and epiphenomenon has evolved into a full appreciation of its importance and even materiality. As the question on the falsity or truth of ideology seems to have receded, then, the focus must shift to the study of its actual mechanisms, and in particular on ideology's capacity of eliciting effects of sense that can determine political action.

In order to navigate through the various positions that have emerged historically, I will here adopt a categorical distinction originally elaborated by Aristotle in *De Interpretatione*. In

his systematic discussion of linguistic elements, Aristotle distinguishes between “*phásis*” (“what is said”) and *katáphasis* (an “affirmation”).⁵ To this opposition corresponds the opposition between *meaning* and *truth conditions*: only *katáphasis* can be discussed as being true or false, whereas *phásis* is not concerned with this question, and it can only be considered in the definition of its meaning.⁶ As an example Aristotle speaks of names taken on their own (a “cat” cannot be said to be either true or false, but what a cat is can certainly be discussed) as opposed to propositions (that “the cat is on the mat” can be true or false). To the first category of linguistic statements (those in which questions of meaning are pertinent) “semantic” judgment can be attached; to the second category (in which questions of truth and falsehood are relevant) “apophantic” judgements can be referred. Moreover, semantic judgments are “governed by rules which are very different from those of referentiality:” in Aristotle’s example the *tragélapbos*, a monstrous creature half goat and half stag, cannot be stated to be true or false, but judgment on what it means can be passed nonetheless.⁷

In this sense, then, the status of ideology resemble closely that of Aristotle’s *tragélapbos*, and the consequent attitude should be that of studying its meaning, rather than its truth or falsehood. Yet, for a long time, apophantic themes have been prominent in most debates.

The classic apophantic statement was formulated by Marx in *The German Ideology*. There Marx famously affirmed the fundamental falsity of ideology as a legitimate object of analysis, and dismissed it as the immaterial by-product of the real, material conditions of production:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to the mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion,

⁵ G. Manetti, *Theories of the Sign in Classical Antiquity* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington: 1993), p. 76

⁶ *ibidem*

⁷ *ibidem*

metaphysics, etc., of a people.⁸

He also specified the dynamics by which certain ideas emerge as dominant in a given society, confirming an attitude scarcely interested in assessing their “meaning,” and more immediately concerned with discrediting their claims to truth.

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. [...] The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance.⁹

Whereas the phrase and the very concept of “false consciousness” are to be imputed more to orthodox Marxism (as codified primarily by Engles) than to Marx himself, it is undeniable that the emphasis placed on the economic factor paved the way for this oversimplification. Confronted with the incongruence between objective class conditions and inconsequential class consciousness, Marxist thinkers liquidated the latter as plainly mistaken, and elaborated the category of false consciousness as an umbrella term to explain the “error.” As Chantal Mouffe has observed, “the economic problematic of ideology” entailed both a dismissal of superstructures as epiphenomena of the structure, and an acknowledgment of their possible efficacy.¹⁰ Similarly, David McLellan sums up Marx’s pejorative treatment of ideology as being comprised of two main elements:

[F]irst, ideology was connected with idealism which, as a philosophic outlook, was unfavourably contrasted with materialism: any correct view of the world had to be, in some sense, a materialist view. Second, ideology was connected with the uneven distribution of resources and power in society: if the

⁸ K. Marx, *The German Ideology*, in R. Tucker, ed. by *The Marx-Engels Reader* (W.W. Norton & Company, New York: 1978), p. 154

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 172-3. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁰ C. Mouffe, *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London: 1979), p. 169

social and economic arrangements were suspect then so was the ideology that was part of them.¹¹

Faced with these largely contradictory claims, Marxist theory was in need of creative rethinking and disambiguation. As Mouffe points out “Antonio Gramsci must surely be the first to have undertaken a complete and radical critique of economism.”¹² While the second of the two points identified by McLellan remains a central aspect of all Marxist thinking on ideology, the first critique is crucially relaxed in Gramsci’s reflection. Responding mostly to the codification of orthodox Marxism, as well as to the elaborations of revisionism and revolutionary syndicalism, Gramsci explicitly denounces as an error the reduction of ideology to a purely negative or trivial concept.¹³ Instead, he distinguishes between “historically organic ideologies” and “ideologies that are arbitrary, rationalistic, or “willed”.”¹⁴ Rather than being just the passive, inert perspiration of the material conditions of production, “[t]o the extent that ideologies are historically necessary they have a validity which is “psychological”; they “organise” human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.”¹⁵

In this sense, then, Gramsci radically redefines the significance of ideology within a Marxist paradigm. Not only is its alleged falsity contested, but it becomes a productive force in turn. Moreover, the almost tangible materiality of an “ideological structure” is affirmed, as it is embodied in agencies like the press, “its most dynamic part,” but also: “libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, even architecture and the layout and names of the streets.”¹⁶ As Laclau and Mouffe observe:

¹¹ D. McLellan, *Ideology* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis: 1995), p. 9

¹² C. Mouffe, *op. cit.*, pp. 169-170

¹³ see E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Verso, London: 1985)

¹⁴ A. Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks*, in M. Durham and D. Kellner, ed. by, *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works* (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford: 2001, 2006), p. 15

¹⁵ *ibidem*

¹⁶ A Gramsci, “Cultural Themes: Ideological Material,” in M. Durham and D. Kellner, ed. by, *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works* (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford: 2001, 2006)

Ideology is not identified with a 'system of ideas' or with the 'false consciousness' of social agents; it is instead an organic and relational whole, embodied in institutions and apparatuses, which welds together a historical bloc around a number of basic articulatory principles. [...] In fact, through the concepts of historical bloc and of ideology as organic cement, a new totalizing category takes us beyond the old base/superstructure distinction.¹⁷

Central to Gramsci's political thought is the concept of hegemony, intended as the moral and intellectual leadership that emanates from a class, but that at the same time transcends the old strategy of "class alliances" and purports to become the "collective will" of a "historical bloc".¹⁸ This result can only be achieved through a patient "war of position" aimed at the constitution of a new historical bloc, i.e.: the capillary penetration of society and the proposal of a counter-hegemony capable of insinuating itself within the system of the dominant values, and ultimately capable of replacing it. This process, and the political finesse of the project, are clearly explicated by Mouffe:

[A] class is hegemonic when it has managed to articulate to its discourse the overwhelming majority of ideological elements characteristic of a given social formation, in particular the national-popular elements which allow it to become the class expressing the national interest. A class's hegemony is, therefore, a more complex phenomenon than simple political leadership [which depends on] the creation of a unified coherent ideological discourse which will be the product of the articulation to its value system of the ideological elements existing within a determinate historical conjuncture of the society in question.¹⁹

Gramsci's contributions, then, include both the formulation of the concept of hegemony, with a strategy to achieve it, and also the full appreciation of the productive and material aspects of ideology. The theme of the materiality of ideology is also central in Louis Althusser's reflection. In Mouffe's account, Althusser's structuralist position:

¹⁷ E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Verso, London: 1985), p. 67

¹⁸ see *ibi*, pp. 66-67

understan[ds] by ideology a practice producing subjects. The subject is not the originating source of consciousness, the expression of the irruption of a subjective principle into objective historical processes, but the *product* of a specific practice operating through the mechanism of interpellation.²⁰

For Althusser the materiality of ideology is embodied in the “Ideological State Apparatuses a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions,” such as the religious, the educational, the family, the legal, the political, the trade-union, the communications, the cultural Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA).²¹ Alongside the Repressive State Apparatuses, such as the army or the police, these ISAs ensure the societal function of the reproduction of labor-power, both in its skills and, crucially, in its submission to the ruling order, to the ruling ideology.

To this state-centric conception of Althusser reacts Michel Foucault. For Foucault the reproduction of the structures of power in society always happens from below, without any central point of origin, in a complex web of interrelations. However, as Slavoj Žižek observes, “one can never arrive at Power this way – the abyss that separates micro-procedures from the spectre of Power remains unbridgeable.”²² Foucault, nevertheless, has other reasons too to reject the very notion of ideology, and to prefer speaking of “discourse.” Among these one is especially relevant in this context:

The notion of ideology appears to me to be difficult to make use of, for three reasons. The first is that, like it or not, it always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth. Now I believe that the problem does not consist in drawing the line between that in a discourse that falls under the category of scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category, but in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in

¹⁹ C. Mouffe, *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London: 1979), p. 195

²⁰ *ibi*, p. 171

²¹ L. Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” [1969] in S. Žižek, ed. by, *Mapping Ideology* (Verso, London: 1994), pp. 110-111

²² S. Žižek, “Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology,” in S. Žižek, ed. by, *Mapping Ideology* (Verso, London: 1994), p. 13

themselves are neither true nor false.²³

Foucault's position is clear here. Especially the last sentence seems to complete the expulsion of any apophantic overtones in the discourse on ideology, together with distancing Foucault from the Marxist tradition. In spite of his discomfort with the notion of ideology, and of his rejection of the very term, however, Foucault's contribution is significant, at least in identifying a possible way out of conceptions, like Althusser's, that suffer from their own rigidity.

An interesting intermediate position between the fluidity of Foucault's discourse and the rigidity of Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses is proposed, in a very pragmatic way, by Arjun Appadurai. Without attempting to solve the Gordian knot of the inner nature of ideology, Appadurai focuses on the workings of ideological forces in action, bracketing more intricate definitional questions. In his study on the contemporary global dynamics of cultural homogeneization and cultural heterogeneization, he introduces the vocabulary of *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *financescapes* and *ideoscapes*.²⁴ According to the author,

The suffix –scape allows us to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes [...] These terms [...] also indicate that these are not objectively given relations that look the same from every angle of vision, but, rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as subnational groupings and movements [...].²⁵

Considering cultural elements through the lens of these landscapes presents the advantage of offering a view that is at the same time general enough to allow interrelations to be observed, but without projecting an overarching sense of unity that might be

²³ M. Foucault, "Truth and Power" in *Power/Knowledge* (Pantheon Books, New York: 1980), p. 118

²⁴ A. Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," in *Public Culture*, 2:2 (1990), in M. Durham and D. Kellner, ed. by, *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works* (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford: 2001, 2006), p. 589

²⁵ *ibidem*

unwarranted, especially in the contemporary conditions of disjuncture. Between Althusser's structuralism and Foucault's radical refusal to acknowledge any overarching structure of society, Appadurai seems to present a third position that, while probably closer to Foucault, still makes it possible to consider the ideological elements at works in society, as well as the real displacements and syncretic recombination that happen at the encounter of different cultural and ideological systems. More precisely, *ideoscapes* are:

concatenation of images [and] they are often directly political and frequently have to do with the ideologies of states and the counterideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it. These ideoscapes are composed of elements of the Enlightenment worldview, which consists of a chain of ideas, terms, and images, including *freedom, welfare, rights, sovereignty, representation* and the master term *democracy*. [...] But the diaspora of these terms and images across the world, especially since the nineteenth century, has loosened the internal coherence that held them together in the Euro-American master narrative and provided instead a loosely structured synopticon of politics, in which different nation-states, as part of their evolution, have organized their political cultures around different keywords.²⁶

As Appadurai notices, thinking in terms of ideoscapes requires placing a special attention on the semantics of ideological elements. In fact, as the local adaptation, cultural contamination and political appropriation of ideas, terms, images that are the basic components of ideologies becomes a more frequent phenomenon, it is all the more important to be sensitive to the polysemic possibilities of meaning encompassed by those elements. While most of these possibilities might remain latent in a given context, being cognizant of their existence may render us more intelligent of the real functioning of ideologies on the ground. I will now turn to the study of ideologies as both complex systems of ideas, and as sets more or less coherent wholes in relation to political action.

²⁶ *ibi*, p. 591

1.1.2. STUDYING IDEOLOGY: HORIZONTAL V. VERTICAL

Philological analyses of ‘ideology’ generally point to Antoine Destutt de Tracy's usage of the term as its first recorded occurrence. In the intellectual milieu of the French Enlightenment, Destutt de Tracy “sought to establish ideals of thought and action on an empirically verifiable basis, from which both the criticism of ideas and a science of ideas would emerge.”²⁷ While the strong positivistic overtones of this enterprise tend to discredit it with much of the contemporary epistemological sensibility, some of its elements are not to be dismissed altogether. In particular, the ambition to systematize the study of ideas, and of political ideas in particular (a hopelessly disorderly universe by most accounts), provides an ideal aspiration that, when purged of its rationalistic *hubris*, can usefully orient the scholarly treatment of ideology.

When the focus is shifted from ideology's etymological meaning as the ‘science of ideas’ to the current acception of the term, a different set of problematics is likely to ensue. In particular, it seems that the less emphasis is placed on the formal characteristics of how ideas are organized in more or less coherent systems, the more attention is reserved to the fundamental issue of how political action is influenced (if not determined) by concrete systems of ideas. Obviously, these two objects of study constitute the two poles of a continuum, two modalities of investigation whose porous boundaries in real analysis are often transgressed. Nevertheless, simplifying a great deal, it could be argued that the study of ideology is organized around a horizontal dimension, testing the relations among different concepts and ideas and their degree of cogency within one system of political thought; and a vertical one, exploring the relations between an entire system of concepts and ideas (or parts thereof) and established and recurrent patterns of political action.

Much closer to this vertical, pragmatic pole than to Destutt de Tracy's original project are many of the contemporary approaches to the study of ideologies. Among other definitions, Andrew Heywood's presents the advantage of being very concise while at the same time pointing out some important complexities: "An ideology is a more or less coherent set of ideas that provides the basis for organized political action, whether this is intended to preserve, modify or overthrow the existing system of power."²⁸ The same author explains that "the complexity of ideology derives from the fact that it straddles the conventional boundaries between descriptive and normative thought" and that "[i]deology [...] brings about two kinds of synthesis: between understanding and commitment, and between thought and action."²⁹

²⁷ M. Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, Oxford: 2003), p. 4

²⁸ A. Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction, 3rd ed.* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York: 2003), p. 12. Still a "placeholder" citation at this point.

²⁹ *ibid*

1.1.3. THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF SEMIOTICS TO THE STUDY OF IDEOLOGY

Umberto Eco declares his purpose to show: “in what sense many of the discussions about 'ideology' and 'ideological discourse' come within the scope of a semiotically oriented rhetoric and how the entire problem of ideology can be studied from a semiotic point of view.”³⁰ Technically, classical rhetoric distinguished itself from other styles of discourse because of its reliance not on apodictic syllogisms deduced from 'first principles,' but on *enthymemes*, “i.e. syllogisms that [...] moved from probable premises, [...] to *emotionally* and *pragmatically* influence the listener.”³¹ Such distinction was not merely an operational one, but also, fundamentally, a definitional feature, an element on which rhetoric based its self-awareness. Rhetoric, in other words, was founded on the explicit recognition of the probable, not certain character of its premises, and consequently on the admission that its conclusions depended heavily on certain semantic choices operated within the confines of the semantic space opened by the non unambiguous premises.

Ideology, on the contrary, omits to acknowledge its limits as a truth-oriented style of discourse, when it does not actively seek to conceal them. As Eco clearly puts it:

I mean by ideological discourse a mode of argument that, while using probable premises and considering only a partial section of a given semantic field, pretends to develop a 'true' argument, thus covering up the contradictory nature of the Global Semantic System and presenting its own point of view as the only possible conclusion (whether this attitude is deliberately and cynically adopted by a sender in order to deceive a naïve addressee, or whether the sender is simply the victim of his own one-sidedness).³²

Parallel to rhetoric, then, ideology too can be analyzed in its basic components. In the classic *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian distinguishes five canons of what he calls interchangeably

³⁰ U. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington: 1976), p. 277

³¹ *ibid.* Emphasis in the original.

³² *ibi*, p. 278

retorica or *oratoria*: “The art of oratory, as taught by most authorities, and those the best, consists of five parts:— *invention*, *arrangement*, *expression*, *memory*, and *delivery* or *action* (the two latter terms being used synonymously).”³³ The first three elements, usually referred to with their Latin names of *inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio*, constitute the core aspects to be considered when applying rhetorical categories to the study of ideology.

However, before examining the role of *inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio* for a semiotic analysis of ideology, a few basic concepts of semiotics need to be introduced. Eco, in fact, further defines ideology as “a message which starts with a factual description, and then tries to justify it theoretically, gradually being accepted by society through a process of overcoding.”³⁴ Overcoding, in turn, is defined as the operation by which “on the basis of a pre-established rule, a new rule [is] proposed which govern[s] a rarer application of the previous rule.”³⁵ This is a specification of a concept that Eco derives from Charles Sanders Peirce, that of 'abduction.'

Alongside the familiar categories of deduction and induction, abduction too provides a pattern of logic operations aimed at the elaboration of inferences.³⁶ In the case of deduction, given a rule and a case, a result is deduced, the classic formula being: All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; Socrates is mortal. In the case of induction, given a case and a result, a *probable* rule is inferred. In the early 1990s, when vast corruption scandals ignited by the investigations on minor socialist exponent Mario Chiesa eventually swamped the Italian Socialist Party, a running joke exemplified this logic of induction: Mario Chiesa is a socialist; Mario Chiesa is a thief; all socialists *are* thieves. In the case of abduction, finally, given a rule and a result, a *probable* case is inferred. For instance: All hippies are pacifists; these people are

³³ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, tr. by H. E. Butler (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MS: 1980), p. 383

³⁴ U. Eco, *op. cit.*, p. 290

³⁵ *ibi*, p. 133

³⁶ see *ibi*, p. 131

pacifists; these people *are* (or rather, “must be;” or rather, “probably are”) hippies.

It is evident that abduction does not provide the kind of certain knowledge that deduction guarantees. Also, unlike induction, abduction cannot hope to increase the probability of its inferences through the accumulation of different cases. However, abduction is the typical method by which human beings make sense of the world around them. In the case of overcoding, the probable inference is that of a surplus of meaning that is circumstantially associated to a message that is already literally understood through a certain code. For instance, in the case of slang, overcoding enables us to understand a message beyond (and sometimes regardless of) its literal meaning.

When overcoding is successful and established over time and over a definite community of speakers, certain ready-made expressions, sequential linkings of concepts and ideas, or simply recurrent portions of discourse acquire the power of immediately evoking certain signifieds, which in turn are associated with certain emotional states, either euphoric or dysphoric. This linkage of cognitive and emotional elements is one of the most important finalities that ideologies possess. In order to achieve these effects of sense, ideologies resort to the devices already recognized in rhetoric.

As for *elocutio*, it represents both the most immediately recognizable case of overcoding, and the most apparent aspect of rhetoric altogether, so much so as to be often taken to coincide with rhetoric *tout court*. *Elocutio* explicitly deals with the aesthetic dimension of language, enlisting its services for the overall purpose of persuasion. This is done primarily through the use of the various rhetorical figures, whose function is both hedonistic, stimulating in the addressee the pleasure of being addressed with a certain style of discourse; and at the same time instrumental for the very first requirement of any persuasive discourse: that the attention of the receiver is gained and maintained.

A fundamental characteristic of rhetorical figures should consequently be their novelty and originality. However, due to the accumulation of such tropes over the centuries, a more or less codified canon has been established that correspond to the model of “good writing” or “good public speaking” and that is often reduced to the triteness and predictability that are often associated to rhetoric today. Rhetoric can then be considered as “the result of a millenary overcoding that has in some cases produced catachreses, that is, figures of speech so strictly coded that the entity for which they stood has definitely lost its sign-vehicle, as in the case of the /table's legs/.”³⁷

In the case of ideology, however, the significance of *elocutio* lays not so much in the pleurability or refinement of the figures of speech that it employs, but with their covert function of presenting a side of an argument especially favorable for the general goal of achieving the desired effect of sense, cognitively and emotionally. Especially relevant is in this context a device like euphemism, as it exemplifies the way in which ideology typically manipulates information by selectively obfuscating some portions of it, while presenting others in an embellished manner. However, since *elocutio* is situated at the most superficial level of ideology, the concrete manifestations of which change with the various ideological discourses, a more precise discussion of its functioning will be postponed to a section below dealing with more concrete occurrences of an ideological discourse.

As for *inventio* and *dispositio*, Eco advances quite precise accounts. 'Ideological' *inventio* is defined as “a series of semiotic statements based on a previous bias (either explicit or otherwise), i.e.: the choice of a given circumstantial selection that attributes a certain property to a sememe, while concealing or ignoring other contradictory properties that are equally predicible to that sememe, granted the non-linear and contradictory format of its

³⁷ *ibi*, p. 279

semantic space.”³⁸ In other words, for each sememe (i.e.: for each minimal, atomic, indivisible unit of meaning) a privileged path is identified out of the semantic web that surrounds it. For instance, for a concept like /industrialization/ all the attributes and effects generally deemed to be positive would be selected, while glossing over negative attributes and effects that could be just as validly associated to that sememe.

‘Ideological’ *dispositio* is defined as “an argument which, while explicitly choosing one possible circumstantial selection as its main premise, does not make clear that there exists a contradictory premise or an apparently complementary premise which leads to contradictory conclusions – thus concealing the contradictory nature of its semantic space.”³⁹ In this sense, then, the phase of *dispositio* operationalizes the choices made during the phase of *inventio*: the positive attributes of a given sememe are arranged in a logical order so as to conduce to the desired conclusion. Furthermore, ‘ideological’ *dispositio* is also defined as “an argument which although undertaking the comparison of two different premises, chooses ones that do not possess mutually contradictory markers, thus consciously or unconsciously concealing those that could upset the ‘linearity’ of the argument.”⁴⁰

³⁸ *ibi*, pp. 292-3

³⁹ *ibi*, pp. 293

⁴⁰ *ibid*

1.2. THE IDEOLOGY OF LIBERALISM

1.2.1. LIBERAL SAMPLES: LOCKE, J. S. MILL, RAWLS

The constellation of ideological positions variously defined as liberal today can be understood as the result of an historical process of stratification of a series of more or less coherent theoretical formulations. Various authors, in different periods have identified a range of themes, concepts, terms that concur to the synthesis of a liberal mode of political discourse. Here I will consider some key authors and their main contributions to the elaboration of the currently hegemonic ideological paradigm. In particular, I will concentrate on the figures of John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and John Rawls.

In the case of Locke, I will mostly focus on his *Second Treatise of Government*. Following David Held's schema, I will characterize Locke's conception of politics as a "protective" doctrine. Moreover, I will analyze the trope of the free, rational and industrious individual in the *Second Treatise* as the foundational myth of liberalism.

Most famously, Locke conceptualizes the right to self-preservation as a relation of possession: of "life, liberty and estates." This in turn betrays the notion of a self that, being the possessor of its own life, rather than coterminous with it, somehow exists externally to the specific circumstances of life. Even more explicit is Locke's aversion towards all that is "common:" what is common is useless until it is appropriated.⁴¹ Only by mixing the labor of an individual with what is originally common property originates.⁴² Extraneous to this labor theory of property is the notion that labor can be a social act (in fact, it typically is), and that

⁴¹ J. Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, par. 28

⁴² see *ibi*, par. 27

consequently property is not necessarily to be ascribed to the “industrious and rational” individual.⁴³

To the extent that the move outside of the State of Nature, into political society, relies on a process of socialization, the creation of civil society, politics is still fundamentally understood as the means for the realization of the individual’s ends. Free, rational individuals are assumed to want the protection of Property (life, liberty and estates);⁴⁴ this fundamental want exists outside of their relational dimension. Everything else in the theory is instrumental to this unique protective aim: law is needed to sanction violations of Property (to enable liberty); community is needed to enforce the law. The individual is not only left unaltered, but its dominant position is crucially reinforced by Locke’s political project.

As David Held aptly synthesizes:

Political activity for Locke is instrumental; that is, it secures the framework or conditions for freedom so that the private ends of individuals might be met in civil society. The creation of a political community or government is the burden individuals have to bear to secure their ends.⁴⁵

In the case of J. S. Mill, I will follow C. B. MacPherson and Held’s characterization of his position as one of developmental liberalism. In particular, I will analyze the text of *On Liberty*, to identify the elements of continuity and discontinuity with Locke’s formulation. Concerning the “harm principle” I will argue that it functions today (in a largely implicit manner) as one of the key elements in ensuring the self-perpetuation of liberal hegemony. Identifying an under-specified notion of “harm” as the criterion of legitimacy for the use of power over an individual opens such a wide interpretive window as to potentially block almost any change. In particular, the case could be easily made that calling into question the

⁴³ *ibi*, par. 34

⁴⁴ see *ibi*, par. 124

current liberal ideological hegemony could cause “harm” to the individual.

As for Rawls, I will briefly consider the evolution of his thought from *A Theory of Justice*, of 1971, and *Political Liberalism*, of 1993. The revisions and re-elaborations of Rawls’ theory, I argue, constitute a prime example of the malleability of a liberal conception, but at the same time they also reveal a hard core of principles and premises that are not negotiable (and that, in fact, are not even called into question).

In particular, I intend to distinguish instances in which Rawls does not explain or question his own project’s assumption (problems with the premises) and instances in which the development of his philosophy in light of the critiques remains not convincing (problems with the solutions). Some of the problematic implications of the theory’s foundations will be discussed; then a brief assessment of how Rawls fails to respond to some relevant arguments will be presented.

Rawls’ reflection can be characterized as an attempt to devise concrete solutions to cope with the friction between individual and society that characterizes the many articulations of political liberalism. His project, however, remains fundamentally liberal throughout its evolution, and within the limits of liberalism he articulates his social vision: there seems to be an element of meta-theoretical inertia that impedes Rawls from coming to terms with the essential foundations of his construction. Two tenets, in particular, testify of the quintessentially liberal character of justice as fairness. First and foremost, an unquestioned ontological individualism leads Rawls to reify a peculiar set of anthropological assumptions. Secondly, and connectedly, the emphasis placed on human reason – intended as rationality and reasonableness in early and late versions of the theory respectively – leads Rawls to neglect those aspects of politics and human action in general that reason does not explain.

⁴⁵ D. Held, *Models of Democracy* (Stanford University Press, Stanford: 1996), p. 81

1.2.2. CTRL + ALT + DEL: ITALY'S REBOOTING

On the evening of January 26th, 1994, a quite extraordinary program – if not a fully revolutionary one – was televised by the Italian networks. Comfortably sitting in their sofas, in the private of their homes, Italian citizens watched a man deliver an elegant speech, comfortably sitting on his chair, in the private of his office. “Italy is the country I love” reassuringly began the performance, to then continue with “Here I have my roots, my hopes, my horizons. Here I have learned, from my father and from life, my job as an entrepreneur” and crucially escalate in “Here I have learned the passion for freedom.”⁴⁶

These were the words that Silvio Berlusconi chose to announce his engagement in politics, or as he preferred to characterize it, his “*discesa in campo*,” his “going down onto the field,” a phrase that was to foreshadow the many soccer metaphors – and metonymies – of his political career. “I have chosen to go down onto the field and to attend to public affairs because I do not want to live in an illiberal country [...]” In a rhetorical crescendo, artfully crafted and masterfully delivered in front of familiar cameras, the speech went on to touch on all the main tropes of anti-Communist political discourse, insistently discrediting the claims of the Italian Left of having broken with that tradition and of having embraced liberal-democratic values. It then climaxed with the programmatic enunciation of Berlusconi’s own political mission, as well as the “marketing” mission of Forza Italia (corresponding to the popular soccer chant: *Go Italy!*), the party that he was illocutionarily founding:

This is why we are compelled to oppose them. Because we believe in the individual, in family, in enterprise, in competition, in development, in efficiency, in the free market and in solidarity, the

⁴⁶ Available in Italian at: <http://www.forza-italia.it/10anni/discesaincampo.htm>. My translation.

daughter of justice and liberty. [...] because I dream, with my eyes wide open, of a free society, of women and of men, where there be no fear, where instead of social covetousness and of class hatred there be generosity, commitment, solidarity, love for work, tolerance and respect for life.

On that memorable night, together with Mr. Berlusconi's *pronunciamento*, liberal discourse broke into the Italian political arena. Long a bitterly divided polity, post-war Italy had been diagnosed by countless political scientists and various luminaries with the most pernicious social diseases, ranging from lack of civic culture to amoral familism, from the persistence of a Machiavellian ethos to the petty corruption of politicians, from the inability and unwillingness to fully come to terms with the legacies of fascism to the recurrence over the history of the republic of *golpista* plots, often involving the secret services and parts of the armed forces. These *cabiers des doléances* could extend indefinitely, without ever hoping to exhaust the list of the Italian system's illnesses.

Prominent in many accounts, especially those coming from foreign scholars, was a specific social, political and institutional syndrome. Unlike the developed countries of the West, and in ways uncannily similar to some troubled developing countries, Italy featured a bimodal distribution of voters. Instead of converging onto a crowded center, Italian voters stood defiantly polarized. In time of elections, the higher of the two main peaks voted for the party of Christian Democracy (DC), the lower for the Communist Party (PCI). Moreover, under the extant *conventio ad excludendum* (an implicit agreement to exclude) against the Communists, for reasons pertaining to both domestic and especially international politics, the Italian system was *de facto* a blocked one. In particular, it managed to combine two seemingly antithetical attributes: the stagnant stability brought by the codified impossibility of alternation in office; and the spastic instability brought by the proverbial volatility of the executives.

To this political discontinuity corresponded in society the co-existence of two

“subcultures.” One, the dominant, oldest and more resilient, was centered upon a system of values loosely based on religious doctrine and more intimately connected to revered traditions and uncontested practices inherited from the past. A socially complex and locally diverse universe, the world of catholic associations had proven itself to be a very efficient machine for political parties to mobilize, at least since the lifting of the *Non Expedit* (“It is not expedient”) act with which the Papacy had interdicted believers to participate in elections.

Confronted with this catholic hegemony of which the DC was the undisputed beneficiary, and informed by the Gramscian strategy for the pursuit of a counter-hegemony, the PCI had embarked in a patient “war of position” to be fought via the capillary penetration of society. In the context of Italy this meant first and foremost establishing a social net alternative to that of the Catholic Church, as aptly synthesized by the motto “A party branch for every church bell tower.” On the basis of this remarkable organizational success, the PCI was able to express a cultural project capable of challenging the traditional deference to religious authorities. While the areas of overlapping and ambiguity between these two blocs were more significant than what either of them was ready to admit, DC and PCI tended to present theirs as mutually exclusive visions of Italian politics and society.

These two subcultures practically defined the confines of the agible space of political action in Italy for almost five decades. Diametrically opposed on most everything else, however, they shared common foundations for their very different *Weltanschauungen*. In both its catholic and communist variants, Italian political culture was a collectivistic one. Disagreeing on both the means and the ends of their politics, both Christian Democrats and Communists agreed that the agent of politics, and of life more generally was not and could not be the individual human being, but an association of a higher order that transcended the

mere aggregation of individuals *qua* individuals. Such were the values loudly proclaimed, acting with centripetal force on the members of society. Underlying was a perennial feature of the Italian national character, the centrifugal force with which individuals tended to often bracket their social concerns, and act in utter disregard of the social good. Identified already in the sixteenth century by historian Francesco Guicciardini, this force stymied the deployment of Machiavelli's ideal of *virtu'*, and was chastised as the attitude to only care for one's own *particolare*. This tension was to resurface at various stages of the Italian political development.

Outside of the agile political space, on the right wing, lay the neo-fascists, political pariahs; and, after the late 1960s, on the ultra-left, various ephemeral *groupuscules* sometimes sharing porous boundaries with "respectable" political parties. Both areas, for different reasons, were most improbable breeding grounds for the ideas of individualism. Inside the normal political spectrum, topologically and ideologically located between the two poles of the DC and the PCI, the Socialist Party and a congeries of minor lists competed for a residual electorate.

Among these, a small Liberal Party championed some liberal issues in some campaigns; but for the most part it remained a socially and economically conservative party of notables and clientele. All in all, it was a dismal performance for the party that had once counted among its members leading intellectual Benedetto Croce. To be sure, elements of liberalism were disseminated across the political spectrum; however, they never reached widespread significance, left alone hegemony.

All in all, Italian television watchers of 1994 had good reasons to find Berlusconi's appeal to liberal values novel and original. And new values, new faces resonated extremely well in 1994 with a citizenship fed up with the scandals that had been uncovered in the

previous two years and that had left the ruling elite of the country decimated or tainted. The *Tangentopoli* (“Bribesville”) trials had invested the highest echelons of the DC, the Socialist Party and their minor allies (including the Liberal Party) eroding what little credibility that decades of inefficient administration had left them. Meanwhile the PCI, following the fall of international Communism, had undergone a painful process of self-criticism and transition, culminating in 1991 with the change of the very name and platform of the party, and with the ensuing splinter of a sizeable minority, to then become the Party of Communist Refoundation.

Having experienced a critical failure, the system needed to reboot. In order to fix the problems, many analysts agreed, something new was needed. And what was definitely new in Italian politics was precisely liberalism. As a shrewd political entrepreneur, Silvio Berlusconi did not fail to capitalize on this. The famous and successful entrepreneur with interests ranging from a media empire to insurance companies, from retail shopping to construction building, and not lastly to soccer, came to embody the idea of the new, in a personalistic turn of Italian politics that paralleled the concurrent affirmation of individual values.

As Italians became more and more intrigued by the figure of Berlusconi, and enamoured with the political program that he put forth, helped in this by the deluge of Forza Italia commercials on Berlusconi’s own televisions, the Liberal Revolution really seemed afoot. With hindsight, however, both the revolutionary and the liberal have been called into question, and much of what is left of this intense love affair with “the new” is a sense of disappointment. If the system of Italian politics was really in need of being rebooted, does it follow that liberalism was to be the obvious choice, or even the necessary one for the new operating system?

With all its egregious idiosyncrasies, moreover, much of the Italian experience is largely

the epiphenomenon of broader trends in international politics. Whether in the triumphant tone of *The End of History*, or in more sober analyses, the early 1990s did see a vast consensus coagulating around the notion that liberalism had won the day in the political battle, and that it was the most credible candidate, if not the only one possible, for structuring the political consciousness of humankind. The above question then becomes, more generally, one about the actual existence and nature of such liberal hegemony on a global scale, and, connectedly, about the feasibility and nature of alternatives.

2.3.3. LIBERAL INTERPRETATIONS: BERLUSCONI'S RHETORICAL TURN

In this section I will focus on the gulf between Berlusconi's rhetoric and the substance of his political actions. While the eccentricity of the character certainly explains much of this discrepancy, I argue that the especially versatile nature of liberal discourse enabled him to bend it for decidedly non-liberal political purposes. In particular, I will argue that, behind the liberal façade, the phenomenon of *Berlusconismo* runs parallel to another peculiarly Italian episode, that of *Qualunquismo*.

Active in the immediate post-war period, the Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque (Common Man's Front) had expressed attitudes roughly analogous to those of French *Poujadisme*. In both cases, there was an underlying "lack of any sense of social responsibility and an 'I'm all right Jack' attitude."⁴⁷ *Qualunquismo* "waged war unceasingly on everything that threatened the 'ordinary Italian': the anti-Fascist government coalition, the Allies [...] etc."⁴⁸ *Qualunquista* soon became a derogatory epithet, "meaning a digger of one's own garden, a cynic, a

potential Fascist.”⁴⁹ In the radically transformed scenario of contemporary Italy, more than a shallow analogy connects the anti-political appeal of Berlusconi (and especially of the first Berlusconi) to that tradition. That such a political platform can be advanced through the language of liberalism is both remarkable and troubling.

Here I will analyze some of Berlusconi’s most notable speeches, in order to reflect on whether they constitute a “sub-genre” of pseudo-liberal claims and “deviant” elements of liberalism, or whether there is a latent potential for crypto-*Qualunquismo* inherent in liberal discourse per se.

⁴⁷ P. Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943-1988* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York: 2003), p. 2

⁴⁸ *ibi*, p. 99

⁴⁹ *ibi*, p. 100

1.3. LIBERALISM AS A META-IDEOLOGY

1.3.1. LIBERAL FOUNDATIONS ACROSS LANGUAGE AND POLITICS

The various ideological positions that can be meaningfully recognized as liberal cognates typically exhibit concentrations of recurrent assumptions and claims, variously combined and not necessarily organized in coherent systems. As such, the analysis of ideological texts can be carried out at the macroscopic level, through the study of distinct clusters of meaning. There is, however, a subtler way in which a liberal discourse signifies at the meta-ideological (or perhaps, infra-ideological) level: in the microscopic structures of language there resides the possibility to orient the constitution of meaning in ways that, by virtue of their pulverulent diffusion, might escape an inspection focusing on already constituted units of meaning.

Simplifying a great deal, it could be said that whereas ideological analysis concentrates on *what* a certain text says, a meta-ideological study would focus on *how* certain claims are expressed within a text. In principle, similar strings of “raw” ideological content could be manifested in different meta-ideological systems, in ways that would in turn not be neutral with respects to content. Similarly, concepts and ideas can be translated across different languages, and in this process they get continuously reconstituted, by bringing to surface some of the possibilities of meaning that had previously being left in latency, while at the same time obliterating others.

As Eco notices, developing a theme already prefigured by Barthes, ideological positions are often intimately associated with specific rhetorical formulae.⁵⁰ In the context of the Cold War, he observes, it would be highly unlikely for a Communist to encourage the struggle of

the Third World against the Western powers as /the defense of the free world/, while the same claim would be typically characterized as /brotherly help to the socialist allies/.⁵¹ In Eco's phrase, "a certain way of using a language is identified with a certain way of viewing society."⁵² Updating the example, it could be said with Huntington that "what is universalism to the West is imperialism to the rest."⁵³

What these examples are indicative of, at the macroscopic level, are in fact the underlying trends by which meaning is linguistically constituted, to put it with Hirschmann. Among these, especially important is what could be termed a "syntax of action." Elements of this syntax include the identification of subjects of agency, of modes of deployment of such agency, and of objects on which to exercise such agency.

In the case of liberal meta-ideology, for instance, those categories are typically activated in distinct ways. In a preliminary and somewhat simplistic way, it can be noted that the supreme subject of agency in liberal discourse is the individual human being. The way in which individuals realize their agency, then, is identifiable as radically free, and discernible insofar as it is informed by the principles of rationality. Finally, the entities upon which free and rational individuals act, are inert objects, either essentially non-human, or fundamentally de-humanized.

On the basis of rules much more complex and refined than these, but at the same time derived from principles as simple as these, liberal discourse can speak the world, or rather, it can articulate a variety of political claims. Understandably, a liberal meta-ideology will be especially well-equipped to speak liberal claims; nonetheless, by virtue of its simple rules, it also proves versatile enough to allow for an array of alternative ideological positions to be

⁵⁰ see U. Eco, *op. cit.*, p. 312, n. 53

⁵¹ *ibi*

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ S. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Touchstone, New York: 1997), p. 184

spoken through its syntax. Inherent in this latter process is the re-signification of the originally non-liberal claims, in ways that tend to reshape their ideological content.

Here I will first briefly consider the ways in which some of the early theorists of Liberalism contributed not only to define its ideological core, but also to affirm its meta-ideological bases. In particular, I will concentrate on Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* and on John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*. Then I will discuss how a liberal discourse can envelop foreign themes, and express them through its vocabulary. A recent example of this is provided by Will Kymlicka's work on "right to culture" as the liberal mithridate against identity politics.

1.3.2. DEFINING A LANGUAGE OF LIBERALISM: HOBBS AND LOCKE

Thomas Hobbes' political reflection exhibits an underlying conception of the world and of human beings that is materialistic, mechanistic and individualistic. Foundational to the philosophical and political project of the *Leviathan* is a first order distinction between reason and absurdity. The first is described simply as a process of additions and subtractions, operations that are applied both to the abstract content of mathematics, and to the meaningful world expressed by language.⁵⁴ By contrast, the category of absurdity is derived as the transgression of the rules of reason; in a quite detailed way, Hobbes specifies a sort of 'grammar for reasoning' outside of which absurdity lies.⁵⁵

In this view sense is given to the world in discrete, objective units, and the task of humans is just to take notice of them, passively. Much like Plato had talked of the Forms that "carve Nature at her joints," so here Hobbes implies a precise segmentation of sense in consistent units expressed through words. When humans come into contact with such units

⁵⁴ see T. Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Penguin Books, London: 1951), [chp. V] p. 110

of sense, precise combinatory rules (modeled on addition and subtraction) are prescribed for their aggregation. Whatever subverts those rules is both dangerous and absurd, whatever in language cannot be reduced to the operations of addition and subtraction, is an aberration that should be purged as meaningless.

This is the case, typically, of metaphor, the figure of speech that transfers the sense of a concept to another. Beyond the merely linguistic level, this discussion is very relevant because it reflects Hobbes' general conception of society. Just like language is segmented in units of sense, so humanity is segmented in individuals; just as unruly combinations of words are to be banned, so interactions of men need to be codified in order to be acceptable. Just like in the sphere of language, where a similitude is much more innocuous and less subversive than a metaphor, because it explicitly declares the analogy of sense between two concepts (through the particle "like"), so in the world of men regulated interactions are permissible, as long as they do not threaten to transcend the separation between individuals.

Consequently, liberty is defined as the "absence of external impediments"⁵⁶ to motion; and law provides the edges that enable such motion, substantially keeping different individuals (potential impediments for each other) from colliding. Political order assumes therefore the role of a sort of 'grammar of interactions' among individuals. However, both the essences of language and of humanity are postulated as such, without defending them contra alternative views, which would be rather relegated to a condition of absurdity. Hobbes' linguistic and anthropological premises, then, are both enthymematic, and the conclusions reached through a famously rigorous logical edifice of *dispositio* are heavily dependent on them.

⁵⁵ see *ibi*, [chp. V] pp. 114 – 115

⁵⁶ *ibi*, [chp. XIV] p. 189

Ironically, there is one circumstance in which Hobbes prescribes human interaction outside of a set grammar of laws. This is the act of simultaneous laying down of rights of all the individual parties in the social contract.⁵⁷ Conducive to a peaceful and lawful society, but originating in the conflictual and amoral state of nature, the covenant is paradoxical in its nature, as it needs to produce the conditions of its own existence.

As all contracts are void in the State of Nature that predates this covenant, it would seem that even that special contract that governs for any given society the association of signifiers and signifieds in linguistic signs is no exception. For, even subscribing to the idea that an essential segmentation of sense in discrete units is immanent in the world, a conventional agreement among the members of a given community of speakers would have to be reached in order to establish how to render it manifest through a shared meaning like language.

This conclusion had already been reached in classical antiquity by Socrates in Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*, in ways that foreshadow many of the medieval debates between nominalists and realists, of strong and weak persuasions. Rejecting the radical conventionalism of Hermogenes (the belief that names are purely conventional and that therefore they can be altered as one wishes) and the extreme naturalism of Cratylus (the belief that the name does and should express the true essence of the referent which is named), Socrates proposes the view that language is both conventional and natural at the same time. Things do have natural names, and therefore an innermost essence that is captured by that name; however, because of the sounds of words and the patterns of language are imperfect in their imitation of the world, a conventional element needs to be introduced in order to secure the social function of language.

⁵⁷ see *ibi*, [chp. XIV] pp. 190 – 191

In absence of such an instrument, however, Hobbes has to conjure up the role of God as the guarantor of the covenant (that ideally happens instantaneously).⁵⁸ The (explicit or tacit) consent of the contractors, the hallmark of modernity in the social contract theory, does not seem enough on its own to sustain the foundations of a politically legitimate government. This is, to a considerable extent, a linguistic problem, and one that highlights the profound interrelations between the political and the linguistic aspects of this early formulation of liberalism.

Such interrelations are also evident when the philosophy of John Locke is considered. In Locke the linguistic question is more explicitly developed than in Hobbes, and its elements appear to be consistent and complementary with the fully realized conception of political liberalism.

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke begins by rejecting “the received doctrine that men have native ideas.”⁵⁹ On the contrary, he claims “the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas.”⁶⁰ This *tabula rasa* then comes to be impressed with two orders of perceptions: perceptions of things, coming from outside and called sensations; and perceptions of its own operations, or reflection.⁶¹ In other words, for Locke all knowledge comes from experience, and nothing is innate in the mind.

Parallel to this notion of a mind devoid of intrinsic meaning is the fundamental liberal precept of a radically independent self. As it does not inherit any knowledge from its being situated in specific conditions of existence, the self is free to develop its own identity and to be impressed with stimuli coming from the world and from within the mind. Moreover, for Locke language is to be understood fundamentally as a neutral instrument that enables the

⁵⁸ see *ibi*, [chp. XIV] p. 201

⁵⁹ J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Penguin Books, London: 1997), p. 109

⁶⁰ *ibid*

⁶¹ see *ibi*, pp. 109-110

relations among humans and between them and the external reality.

The old debate about the natural or conventional character of language is resolved by Locke in favor of a position that distinguishes between natural Ideas and the arbitrary words that express them. Ideas, in fact emanate naturally from the objects of the world, the referents, and as such they impress our mind as perceptions. Words, specific articulations of sounds, however, do not follow naturally from definite Ideas, and conventions need to be established among speakers, “a voluntary imposition, whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea.”⁶²

In this sense, then, language for Locke has an arbitrary dimension to it, “for [otherwise] there would be but one language amongst all men,” since Ideas are the immanent carriers of an objective reality.⁶³ However, such arbitrariness is only expressive in nature, while the true essence of language is objective and neutral with regards to the world. Language is therefore for Locke an instrument to be used by free selves to articulate their own individual arguments about the external reality, without either such reality, or the freedom to judge it being affected. This is a crucial background consideration for the ideology of liberalism, as it enables its adherents to postulate the free and rational individual as the fundamental position of existence for humans. Not encumbered in any given linguistic and cultural community, individuals can speak themselves through a neutral code without at the same time “being spoken” in ways that the free exercise of their rationality is not able to control.

⁶² *ibid*, p. 363

⁶³ *ibid*

1.3.3. LIBERAL INCORPORATIONS: KYMLICKA AND THE “RIGHT TO CULTURE”

During the 1980s and early '90s the most robust critique of liberalism came from the communitarian camp. Authors as diverse as Sandel, MacIntyre, Taylor, Bellah, Selznick advanced a series of arguments exposing various shortcomings of contemporary liberal theory. In particular, many of the controversies concentrated on areas like: the critique of the liberal notion of self; the critique of the liberal pretense to neutrality; the critique of the liberal conception of rights.⁶⁴

This, in turn, sparked long-lasting debates with liberal writers like Rawls, Dworkin, Larmore, eventually leading to profound re-definitions in both camps. In many ways, it has been noted, the communitarian critique can be seen as the other side of the liberal coin, the manifestation of a tension that resurfaces periodically. As Michael Walzer put it:

[the communitarian critique of liberalism] is a consistently intermittent feature of liberal politics and social organization. No liberal success will make it permanently unattractive. At the same time, no communitarian critique, however penetrating, will ever be anything more than an inconstant feature of liberalism.⁶⁵

In Walzer's reading, then, communitarianism functions mostly as a stimulus to liberal thinking, but it cannot, by itself, sustain a radically alternative political project. The tension produced by the communitarian engagement, in other words, is destined to produce a force within liberalism, ultimately strengthening its theory and securing the continuation of its practices. Some of the most relevant political phenomena of the last decades, however, seem to contradict such faith in the eternal success of liberalism to cope with the communitarian critique.

The emergence of claims based on the politics of recognition, in particular, appeared to

⁶⁴ see A. Ferrara, ed. by, *Comunitarismo e Liberalismo*, 2nd edn. (Editori Riuniti, Roma: 2000 [1992]).

⁶⁵ M. Walzer, "The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism," in *Political Theory* 18:1 (February 1990), p. 6

have identified a crack in the seemingly sturdy edifice of liberalism. While the degree of contiguity between the elaborations of communitarianism and the politics of recognition should not be exaggerated, it is safe to point to their common bases. In particular, the emphasis on the recognition of group-based claims conflicted with the fundamental liberal tenet of individualism, while the notion of a community-based identity called into question the vision of the self as radically unencumbered and prior to its ends.

In this context, an especially bold attempt to reconcile communitarian claims with the overarching system of thought of liberalism is that operated by Will Kymlicka in his *Multicultural Citizenship*, of 1995. The aim is declared by the author as: “to show that the liberal value of freedom of choice has certain cultural preconditions, and hence that issues of cultural membership must be *incorporated* into liberal principles.”⁶⁶

Grappling with the phenomenon of the emergence of the politics of recognition, Kymlicka intends to operate a theoretical redescription in order to make it more palatable for a liberal sensibility. He maintains that the characteristic object of the politics of recognition, collective rights, should, in fact, be understood and interpreted as rights of the individual. Such a redescription, he claims, is also validated by a largely forgotten strain of thought *within* the liberal tradition.⁶⁷

More precisely, Kymlicka distinguishes among the “group-differentiated rights” based on their consistency with the rights of the individual.⁶⁸ In so doing he designs a tripartite schema: self-government rights, polyethnic rights, and special representation rights.⁶⁹ However, the core of the argument lays in the articulation of “collective rights” into

⁶⁶ W. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1995), p. 76. Emphasis added.

⁶⁷ see *ibi*, pp. 49 and ff.

⁶⁸ cfr. *ibi*, p. 45

⁶⁹ cfr. *ibi*, pp. 26 - 33

“internal restrictions” and “external protections.”⁷⁰ The first involve “restrict[ing] the liberty of [a group’s] members in the name of group solidarity;” the second involve “protect[ing a group’s] distinct existence and identity by limiting the impact of the decisions of the larger society.”⁷¹ When group rights infringe on the freedom of the individual within the group, they are not defensible in a liberal perspective; when they focus on the defense of a specific group identity from outside, they are.

Central to this argument is the notion that (societal) culture is valuable in that it provides individuals with options on “meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities.”⁷² The most obstinate liberal rhetoric of choice is clearly at work in this reductionist redefinition of culture. However, this emphasis on individual choice is originally extraneous to (if not contradictory of) the politics of recognition. To solve the problems posited by recognition, Kymlicka has to subdue them under a liberal paradigm.

More generally, these kinds of incorporations constitute both a strength of the liberal meta-ideology and one of its inherent limits. Insofar as it is able to speak alternative positions, in fact, a liberal vocabulary proves its versatility and its adaptability to varying political contexts. To the extent that it typically needs to rearticulate different claims in terms of individual rights, on the other hand, liberal hegemony proves its dependence on the successful decontestation of some crucial concepts. In particular, it seems that the equation of the essential position of human nature with the centrality of the individual is the *condicio sine qua non* for all liberal discourse. Political claims fundamentally irreducible to the level of the individual, then, expose liberalism’s nerves and point to an especially weak spot.

Here I propose to further investigate Kymlicka’s argument, as it seems both a very ambitious attempt to conquer foreign political terrain, and ultimately one destined to fail. In

⁷⁰ *ibi*, p. 35

particular, I will argue that the “right to culture” is an inadequate surrogate of genuine recognition of group-based identities. Also, more generally, I will try and estimate the extent to which its dependence on ontological individualism can jeopardize liberalism’s role as a meta-ideology.

⁷¹ *ibi*, p. 36

⁷² *ibi*, p. 76

2. ALTERNATIVES

2.1. THE INOPERATIVE COMMUNITY

2.1.1. RETHINKING COMMUNITY: NANCY AND BEYOND

*I love myself better than you
I know it's wrong, what should I do?!*
Nirvana, "On A Plain"

Can't catch me, I'm syntax free
Sonic Youth, "The Ineffable Me"

The individual that liberalism assumes as the essential ontological position of human beings is for Nancy "merely the residue of the dissolution of community."⁷³ In Democritean fashion then, Nancy identifies community as the inclination (*clinamen*) of the individual.⁷⁴ Characteristic of community thus understood is its resistance against immanent power: "[c]ommunity [...] assumes the impossibility of its own immanence, the impossibility of a communitarian being in the form of a subject."⁷⁵

The claim that "[c]ommunity is simply the real position of existence" is sustained by an ontology that identifies being-in-common as *the* essential condition of being.⁷⁶ The point here is not the affirmation of the *being* of community, but the acknowledgment of the

⁷³ J.L. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis: 1991), p. 3

⁷⁴ *ibi*, pp. 3 – 4

⁷⁵ *ibi*, p.15

⁷⁶ J.L. Nancy, "Of Being-in-Common," in *Community At Loose Ends* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis: 1991), p. 2

community of being, the inherently shared character of existence.⁷⁷ This logic of being-with also presupposes a notion of singularity. Being-with entails “being exposed simultaneously to relationship and to the absence of relationship,” and “singularity” designates “that which, each time, forms a point of exposure.”⁷⁸ Contra the fixed immanence that the dominant discourse attributes to the individual subject, therefore, singularities are continually reshaped and renegotiated, activated or left in latency.

A concrete example is helpful to clarify the sense in which the notions of “being-with” and “singularity” differ from those of “community” and “individual,” as they are typically utilized:

To begin with, the logic of being-with corresponds to nothing other than what we would call the banal phenomenology of unorganized groups of people. Passengers in the same train compartment are simply seated next to each other in an accidental, arbitrary, and completely exterior manner. They are not linked. But they are also quite together inasmuch as they are travelers on this train, in this same space and for the same period of time. They are between the disintegration of the “crowd” and the aggregation of the group, both extremes remaining possible, virtual and near at every moment. This suspension is what makes “being-with”: a relation without relation, or rather, being exposed simultaneously to relationship and to absence of relationship.⁷⁹

A strong emphasis on the inherent communal character of existence is also found in Hannah Arendt. The “human condition of plurality, [...] the fact that men, not Man live on the earth and inhabit the world” is identified as the fundamental premise of political action, and therefore of human existence *qua* human.⁸⁰ The noblest manifestation of being-in-common happens for Arendt in the public realm, that “as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other.”⁸¹ To be sure, the modalities of

⁷⁷ which would entail an immanent understanding of community

⁷⁸ *ibi*, p. 7

⁷⁹ J.L. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 7

⁸⁰ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (the University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1958), p.7

⁸¹ *ibi*, p. 52

relationality here are much more consonant with the traditional understandings of individuality and community than with Nancy's re-elaboration of being-in-common and singularity.

Nevertheless, as Patchen Markell points out, the Arendtian model does radically distance itself from the liberal rhetoric of the individual subject, and fundamentally acknowledges the inescapable condition of "human finitude."⁸² In other words, Markell denounces the gullibility of the "aspiration to *sovereignty*," the mistaken belief in the identity of identity with itself, or, in Nancy's terms, the immanence of identity.⁸³ An analysis of Sophocles' *Antigone* illustrates this point nicely. Drawing on Aristotle's distinction of 'characters and action' in the tragedy, and the ultimate primacy of the second, Markell presents the concept of *anagnôrisis* as the "acknowledgment of finitude under the weight of a (failed) effort to become sovereign through the recognition of identity."⁸⁴ On the one hand, Antigone and Creon "do *more* than they intend;" on the other hand, perhaps more significantly, "their actions place them into conflict [...] with their own deepest commitments."⁸⁵

Anagnôrisis, acknowledgment of finitude, then, seems a requirement for Nancy's polarity of being-in-common and singularity too. As Nancy puts it: "*Community does not sublimate the finitude it exposes. Community itself, in sum, is nothing but this exposition.* It is the community of finite beings, and as such it is itself a *finite* community [...] a community *of* finitude."⁸⁶ And he goes on to add that "the *singular being*, which is not the individual, is the finite being."⁸⁷ Exposition of finitude – that is to say, *anagnôrisis* – reveals itself as "compearance," the

⁸² P. Markell, *Bound By Recognition* (Princeton University Press, Princeton: 2003), p. 4

⁸³ *ibi*, p. 10

⁸⁴ *ibi*, p. 86

⁸⁵ *ibi*, pp. 80-81

⁸⁶ J.L. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 27

⁸⁷ *ibidem*

“appearance of the between as such,” and as such it constitutes “the essence of community.”⁸⁸

An insightful reading of the “trope of finitude” is offered by Georges Van Den Abbeele. In Nancy “finitude is not a negativity to overcome, but an event to dwell in and upon, the very advent of a thought which can never do more than exscribe its compearance.”⁸⁹ In this sense being-in-common is “not itself a horizon, but the undoing of all horizons, namely a community founded upon the compearance of singular beings in the commonality of their *difference*.”⁹⁰ Van Den Abbeele points to the poetic character of this thought, as, like in poetry, being-in-common entails “a making that is simultaneously an unmaking, a compearing of community that is also its withdrawal, an advent of sense in which sense is eclipsed, a speaking of what cannot be heard.”⁹¹

To be sure, Nancy’s discourse on ontology is not reducible to Foucault’s genealogical approach. Yet, the claim can be reasonably made that the essential foundation of being-in-common is neglected with particular resolution and persistence in the age of modernity. As Foucault argues, the functioning of power needs to be understood in order to explain the “individuation of the subject.” Fundamental is the role of the disciplines, a term that designates both the compartmentalized areas of knowledge and the inculcation of specific schemes of procedures. In this sense Foucault declares that “discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies.”⁹² More generally “[d]iscipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments

⁸⁸ *ibi*, p. 29

⁸⁹ G. Van Den Abbeele, “Lost Horizons And Uncommon Grounds: For A Poetics Of Finitude In The Work Of Jean-Luc Nancy,” in *On Jean-Luc Nancy*, ed. by D. Sheppard, S. Sparks, C. Thomas (Routledge, London: 1997), p. 14

⁹⁰ *ibi*, p. 15

⁹¹ *ibi*, p. 17

⁹² M. Foucault, *Discipline And Punish*, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by P. Rabinow (Pantheon Books, New York: 1984), p. 182

of its exercise;” and also “disciplines are techniques for assuring the ordering of human multiplicities.”⁹³

Even if Foucault clearly identifies a historical force, the Enlightenment, as the decisive factor in the affirmation of the individual subject, in principle this claim does not conflict with Nancy’s general idea of the ontological primacy of being-in-common.⁹⁴ In fact, Foucault’s rejection of an inner self pre-existent to the exercise of power resonates with Nancy’s refusal of immanentism. More generally, the Nietzschean lesson on the social construction of reality would have to be carefully assessed against the reality of being-in-common. Describing the moral creation of the modern individual as a process of “inpsychation,” Nietzsche points to “*the right to make promises*” that “nature” has imposed onto the originally forgetful nature of human beings.⁹⁵ With this “right to make promises” also comes the illusion of conscience and of responsibility, grounded at the level of the individual subject.

⁹³ *ibi*, p. 188; p. 207

⁹⁴ see *ibi*, p. 211

⁹⁵ F. Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals And Ecce Homo*, ed. by W. Kaufmann (Vintage Books, New York: 1989), p. 57. Emphasis in the original.

2.1.2. A META-IDEOLOGICAL ALTERNATIVE: THE INOPERATIVE COMMUNITY

If the deep logic by which a meta-ideology works is that of establishing rules and practices for the narrativization of ideological claims, then Nancy's conception can truly be helpful in conceiving a counter-hegemonic meta-ideology. Liberalism has gained its dominant position in the contemporary *ideoscape* through the concurrent action of two phenomena: 1) the successful decontestation of certain key-terms; and 2) the validation of a certain grammar for the articulation of political discourse that goes beyond the enforcement of any single set of ideological propositions. Leaving the first question aside, for the time being, I will now concentrate on the second aspect of liberal hegemony.

As noted above, since Hobbes' anticipation of it, liberalism has worked on the assumption that meaning is either self-evidently fixed, or that, at any rate, it needs to be fixated if mutual understanding, and ultimately the political existence of humans is to be achieved. Outside of fixed meaning, absurdity lies, and with absurdity chaos. Much like laws are compared to edges that enable motion, so too the combinatory rules of grammar enable the interaction among discrete units of meaning and the creation of new sense through processes of addition and subtraction.

With Locke, then, the linguistic dimension of the liberal meta-ideological project had reached a new level of awareness. Advancing a purely referential theory of language, Locke had characterized it as a neutral instrument to be used by humans in order to achieve their individual goals through the interaction with other individuals.

Both these premises – that meaning reveals itself in discrete, fixed units; and that individuals are the fundamental agents of communication, and by extension of political action – are challenged by Nancy's ontology. There is, in fact, an inescapable fluidity in the

oscillation of “being-in-common” and “singularity” that calls into question the unit of the “individual” both as a unit of sense and as a communicative agent. At the same time, many of the claims that can be expressed through the meta-ideology of liberalism might also be accommodated in a mode of discourse based on Nancy’s premises.

What would be lost in the translation from one meta-ideology to the other are some of the ideological elements of liberalism (*in primis*, the sacrality of the individual), not the flexibility.

2.2. INOPERATIVE COMMUNITIES IN ACTION

2.2.1. FREETOWN CHRISTIANIA

Young backpackers visiting Freetown Christiania after 2003 make a startling discovery upon their exit. On the portal that over the years has become a symbol of the self-governing community established in



1971 in the heart of Copenhagen, a sign informs: “You are now entering the EU.” Even for people who had just walked on *Pusher Street*, that comes as baffling news.

The idea of *entering* the EU from an unguarded, wooden portal is certainly puzzling and disorienting, more so than the implicit realization of having left it at the beginning of the visit of Christiania (no sign informs one of the passage). The irony that is inherent in the statement “You are now entering the EU” prompts one to re-map the physical space around, as well as the conceptual topography that accompanies our ideas of what is or is not “European.” What the announcement really stands for is a declaration of radical alterity in which the European Union is identified as the institutional receptacle of the dominant ideology of liberal capitalism.

Founded in 1971 by hippie squatters who had occupied abandoned barracks in the homonymous quarter, Freetown Christiania (or, more ambitiously, the Free State of

Christiania) has emerged over the decades as one of the most credible and long-lasting experiences of resistance to the power of official states, numbering today circa 900 inhabitants. Permitted, tolerated or endured at various points in time by various Danish governments, it has succeeded to stay alive in spite of recurrent crises. Visited by thousands of young Europeans each year, it has become an important destination in that sort of new *Grand Tour* that defines the cultural education of well-traveled youths today.

Alongside ground rules as simple as: “no weapons; no hard drugs; no photos,” Christiania is centered on the concrete realization of the ideal of participation, consistent with the principle that working for the wellbeing of the whole community is the responsibility of each and every Christianite. Institutionally this is ensured through a simple system of collective bodies that work towards the goal of self-government and that are run in the spirit of direct democracy. The highest in authority, the Community Meeting, is a sort of General Assembly open to all Christianites, and whose decisions each Christianite has an obligation to follow. Area Meetings, then, function as neighborhood councils, and work in close contact with the Community Meeting. Similarly, various specific meetings deliberate on the various aspects of the life of the community, from economic planning, to budgetary decisions, to external relations. In all meetings, at all levels, decisions are taken by consensus, with the explicit recognition that this can both lead to indefinite stall, and exacerbate the agonistic aspects of collective decision-making, but also with the expectation that some form of Rousseauan General Will will eventually emerge.⁹⁶

A question might legitimately arise: has Christiania finally been able to solve the “fundamental problem” identified by Rousseau in the *Social Contract*? Have the stringent criteria been met of “how to find a form of association which will defend the person and the

goods of each member with the collective force of all, and under which each individual, while uniting himself with the others, obeys no one but himself, and remains as free as before”⁹⁷? Even in the somewhat idyllic self-representation of Christiania it is apparent that the circle is far from been squared.

Nevertheless, taking for granted the perfectibility of this social experiment, there are some important elements to be noticed. Most notably, the political principles on which the community is based certainly do not coincide with those of liberal individualism. At the same time, the ethos of the form of being-together that links its inhabitants cannot be said to be based on some notion of an immanently shared identity. While the public philosophy is not explicitly proclaimed as such, some of the characteristics of the inoperative community are exposed in Christiania.

More pragmatic considerations render Christiania an interesting case for testing the viability of non-liberal political cultures too. In particular, its continued duration over a time period of more than three decades indicates the solidity of a project that has outlived most of the communes and the other counter-cultural experiences of the 1970s. Moreover, the economic sustainability of the community, as well as its successful self-management, hamper most of the usual critiques and commonplace arguments indiscriminately levied against non-mainstream forms of association.

Most importantly, perhaps, the environment in which the experiment of Christiania takes place is to be considered as one of the key variables in determining its outcome. The fact that the “Freetown” has been able to exist side by side with the official State of Denmark, in its very capital, just a short walk away from the Royal Palace of Amalienborg, is a truly remarkable aspect of this story. However, it is also an aspect of its fragility, as some

⁹⁶ Information on Christiania’s style of self-government can be retrieved at:
<http://www.christiania.org/self/?what=0&lan=gb>

recent developments demonstrate. Centrally located in Copenhagen, the area of Christiania appeals to business interests eager to edify commercial buildings on its soil. This offers further incentives for the current conservative government of Denmark to assert its claims of sovereignty over the area, and to push for its “normalization,” by restoring capitalist relations of ownership in the occupied zone.

As the dispute escalates, the rhetoric employed by the different parties clearly reveals the underlying political philosophies. On the one hand, the government is adamant in upholding liberal values such as the rule of law and especially the principle of private property vested in the individual, menacing legal actions if the squatters refuse to conform. On the other hand, Christianites are equally determined in defending their collective right to the use of the whole area of Christiania. As the government refuses to consider the validity of “collective rights,” and announces its intention to enforce individual property rights, however, an alternative counter-strategy emerges as an option to save Christiania. In a rhetorical turn, that ironically involves the instrumental incorporation of some liberal elements in their discourse, the Christianites demand to be treated as individuals indeed, in the hope that individual trials and litigations will slow down the process of “normalization” for years, until a change in the government’s majority.

As Christiania experiences trying times, so too its political discourse is pressured to show that flexibility that could make it not only viable in itself, but also effective with its interlocutors. Studying both the concrete dynamics of the interactions between the Freetown and the official government, and the adaptability of the two political discourses can be a valuable test of the possibility that an alternative meta-ideology can emerge and survive in a polemic relation with a liberal hegemonic stance. Methodologically, such a study could be

⁹⁷ J.J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (Penguin Books, London: 1968), p. 60

conducted through open-ended interviews, to both citizens of Christiania and representatives of the Danish political elites. Moreover, monitoring the Danish media could offer an important contribution to understand what language is employed in describing Christiania and how public opinion is formed on the current events. Finally, participant observation in Christiania's meetings could provide meaningful insights in self-perception of both the community itself and of its political philosophy.

2.2.2. BADOLATO, KURDOLATO

While the phenomenon of clandestine migrants trying to reach the Mediterranean shores of Europe has become an increasingly frequent one in the last fifteen years, the experience of Badolato



presents some very interesting peculiarities. Founded in the XI century by the Normans of Robert Guiscard, this typical Calabrian village on the top of a hill thrived for centuries and became an important fortress in the defense of the coast from the attacks of the Saracens. However, by the end of the 20th century Badolato was experiencing a condition of seemingly irreversible decline typical of many small villages in Southern Italy and in other areas of the country. Unable to find adequate job opportunities in their town, many Badolatese had to emigrate elsewhere: either to the newly constructed Badolato Marina; or to the bigger cities of the region, or to the industrial areas of Northern Italy; or to various destinations in Northern Europe (Belgium, Germany, France); or, finally, to Australia and the Americas (the

“Big America,” South America, mostly Argentina; or the “Little America,” North America, mostly the US).

At the end of the century, though, this village plagued by emigration was to find unexpected opportunities of resurgence reinventing itself as a land of immigration. So the English daily *The Guardian* recounts the events of December 1997 in the issue of Wednesday, March 22, 2000:

It was December 27, 1997. Boats raced to the ship and ferried its human cargo to land. The Kurds were penniless and did not speak Italian, but for the villagers of Badolato, on Italy's toe, they had one priceless asset - youth.

Most of the houses in the 1,000-year-old village, 900ft above the Mediterranean, had been abandoned over four decades. A population of 7,000 had dwindled to 700.

Few babies were being born - most local couples had one child at the most. The elementary school had closed, businesses were failing, buildings were crumbling. It was just a matter of time before Badolato became a ghost town.

And then the *Ararat* arrived: a Russian-made rustbucket that had left Istanbul for Rome six days earlier. The perils and £1,500 price tag had deterred elderly Kurds from making the journey, so the new arrivals were mostly under 40. They had not planned to make a life in Calabria, one of Italy's poorest regions, but that was what they were offered.⁹⁸

Two days after Christmas, in 1997, therefore, the people of Badolato received the unexpected present of 825 Kurdish asylum seekers. Equally unexpected for the Kurds was the warm reception that the Badolatese reserved them. So *The Guardian* continues: “Central and regional government gave the Kurds food and money and promised to settle them in empty houses. Officials promised them work in new enterprises that would make the most of their skills.”⁹⁹ Despite these efforts, many of them soon left for their final destinations, Germany and Switzerland in particular. Yet, a few decided to stay. Some found jobs in agriculture, in construction, or in cleaning. One opened a laboratory of ceramic; another, a

⁹⁸ R. Carroll, “They were God-fearing people like us, and God knows we needed them,” in *The Guardian*, 02/22/’00, retrieved on 02/20/’05 at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/population/Story/0,2763,184291,00.html>

shop of fair trade. Others, finally, opened a Kurdish restaurant.¹⁰⁰

Shortly, Badolato had attracted the attention of national and international media, and television crews came to report on the strange case of the village that welcomed immigration. Despite some legitimate doubts, then, this very marginal case came soon to be seen as an interesting and largely successful experiment. The people of this little village had not only passively tolerated the presence of the Kurds on their territory (what in many other places would have been a remarkable achievement in and of itself). The locals had actively welcomed the guests with signs of *concrete hospitality*. Badolatese houses were literally opened for the Kurds, and the whole population participated in collective efforts to help the newcomers establish viable and durable premises for sound, if modest, economic subsistence.

In April 2000 a news report from BBC raised the very interesting question of whether this singular experience was generalizable. Some old Badolatese were interviewed on their relation with the Kurds. One said: “*We don't understand them and they don't understand us* but they are good, and the more people we have around the better it is for everyone.”¹⁰¹

This is an especially significant statement, as it entails an implicit endorsement of the value of being-in-common. Contra traditional understandings of community based primarily on a shared language, these elderly Badolatese point towards a more basic aspect of commonality, one that does not necessarily require shared instruments of commun-*ication* because it is rooted in the acknowledgement of something that is already *common*. To the question of hospitality posed by Derrida: “must we ask the foreigner to understand us, to

⁹⁹ *ibi*

¹⁰⁰ A. Bobbio, “Pizza curda e abbasso l’Onu, Badolato non ha paura,” in *Famiglia Cristiana*, n. 11, 03/21/’99, retrieved on 02/20/’05 at: <http://www.stpauls.it/fc99/1199fc/1199fc59.htm>. My translation

¹⁰¹ J. Gilhooly, “Italy: Immigration or extinction,” in *BBC News*, Wednesday, 19 April, 2000, 21:09 GMT 22:09 UK, retrieved on 02/20/’05 at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/719423.stm>. Emphasis added.

“speak our language [...] before being able and so as to be able to welcome him into our country?” the Badolatese implicitly respond in the negative.¹⁰²

Kurdolato, the nickname that some have used to refer to the Kurdish experience in Badolato, is today an example of social experimentation, with all its problems and potentialities. Studying the case in greater detail, focusing both on its historical dynamics and on its long-term developments, would provide a finer understanding of this concrete instantiation of the inoperative community. Methodologically, open-ended interviews promise to be a flexible instrument for engaging both Italian- and Kurdish-Badolatese on their personal experiences of the last ten years. Also, conversations with members of the local administration, as well as with representatives of important agencies of socialization, such as the church, could help identifying some of the institutional and cultural problems raised by the co-habitation. Based on this information, a more careful assessment of the case of Badolato and its implications could be elaborated.

¹⁰² J. Derrida and A. Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, trans. R. Bowlby (Stanford University Press, Stanford: 2000), p. 15

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