

A Politics of Exemplarity

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Abstract: This essay addresses the focus on exemplars, imagination, affect and democracy at the heart of Ferrara's democratic vision. It argues that Ferrara's account of politics represents an important but incomplete step towards an understanding of "politics at its best" and the developing Ferrara's account helps to support his arguments on hyperpluralism and to indicate ways of extending his analysis.

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It is one of the hallmarks of Alessandro Ferrara's *The Democratic Horizon* that it offers a much needed renewal of attention to the affective and imaginative dimensions of democratic politics. Ferrara's claim that "politics at its best is *the prioritization of ends in the light of good reasons that can move our imagination*"¹ echoes Jacques Rancière's view that "politics is both argument and opening up the world where argument can be received and have an impact"² – and, despite their difference concerning the character of politics, this shared attention to the *aesthetic* dimension of politics as a human activity is clearly to the fore in Ferrara's anti-rationalist account of political innovation:

All the important junctures where something new has emerged in politics and has transformed the world – the idea of natural rights, the idea that the legitimacy of government rested on the "consent of the governed", the inalienable right to the "pursuit of happiness", "liberté, égalité, fraternité", the abolition of slavery, universal suffrage, human rights, the Welfare State, gender equality, the idea of sustainability, the idea of a right of future generations – were junctures where what is new never prevailed by virtue of following logically from what already existed, but rather by virtue of its conveying a new vista on the world we share in common and highlighting some unnoticed potentialities of it. Like the work of art, so the outstanding political deed arouses a sense of "enrichment of life", the enriching and enhancement of a life lived in common, and commands our consent by virtue of its ability to reconcile what exists and what we value (*DH*, p. 38).

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¹ A. Ferrara, *The Democratic Horizon: Hyperpluralism and the Renewal of Political Liberalism*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2014, henceforth *DH*, p. 38.

² J. Rancière, *Disagreement*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 56.



In what follows, I will be concerned to explore this focus on exemplars, imagination, affect and democracy at the heart of Ferrara's democratic vision.

Although the passage from Ferrara just quoted is concerned with political innovation, it is important to note that, in contrast to Rancière, his conceptualization of *politics at its best* is not limited to contexts of emancipatory political innovation but may also encompass political actions that do not break with the existing political grammar of liberal democratic societies. At first glance, this might strike one as odd: as Ferrara is all too aware, our societies are riven with domination, exploitation and other forms of injustice – so surely *politics at its best* must push us beyond our current political order to a less unjust political condition? If we are disconcerted by this move on Ferrara's part, however, it is because we are caught up in an overly simple picture of politics, one that I think Ferrara himself does not fully escape.

To draw out both these points, that it is an overly simple picture and that Ferrara's is not entirely immune to its hold, we can start by noting a tension in Ferrara's argument concerning politics at its best. On the one hand, Ferrara draws on the Kuhnian distinction between "normal" and "revolutionary" science to argue, by analogy, that "Ordinary politics is to politics at its best as normal science is to those paradigm-founding moments and those crises or transformations of paradigms in science that Kuhnian postempirical philosophy of science has shed light on" (*DH*, p. 39). On the other hand, and at the same time, Ferrara claims that

it should also be emphasized that politics at its best need not necessarily be transformative at the constitutional level, though most of the time it is. It can amount to the exemplary realization of norms and principles that are long established but rarely put into practice (*DH*, p. 40).

The second claim entails that politics at its best may also be analogous to "normal science" and even here it seems to me that Ferrara is still in the grip of the identification of alignment of politics at its best and paradigm-change in the sense that he wants to emphasize its atypicality in line with his view that "politics at its best can be experienced only a few times in a lifetime" (*DH*, p. 39). To see why we might want both to embrace the idea that politics at its best can take "normal" and "revolutionary" forms and to resist the view that in the "normal" mode it is restricted to rare realizations of formally



established but practically ignored norms and principles, we can take up Ferrara's own emphasis on the analogy between politics and art by looking at the issue of profundity in music.

We can start this discussion by distinguishing between "epistemic profundity" as the capacity of something to show us something significant about a matter that is (appropriately seen as) of real importance to us, on the one hand, and "structural profundity" as the centrality of something to an organized unity of heterogeneous elements, on the other hand.³ The senses are related in the following way:

The distinctive value of things that are epistemically profound [...] lies in the kinds of understanding they make possible; by bringing to light features of the world or the human condition that may be structurally profound for our grasp of them. This relation is not reversible. [...] And the reason for that, straightforwardly enough, is that not every system that is capable of being understood in terms of its structurally profound features is one that is, or deserves to be taken as being, or real interest or importance to us.⁴

This general analysis of the concept of profundity enables us to link together the features of the concept of profundity that are intuitively central to its use, namely, depth, insight, significance and value. However, the point on which I want to focus is that it also enables us to distinguish at least two modes of epistemic profundity which, and here is the analogy with Kuhn, we may call "normal" and "revolutionary" in that the former can be seen as developing a style and working within the grammar of a practice, whereas the latter transforms the style by changing the grammar of a practice. So, for example, we might see Mozart and Haydn as exemplars of the Classical Style; whereas Beethoven stands as an exemplar of the revolutionary transformation from the Classical to the Romantic style. All of these composers succeed in disclosing to us features of the human conditions that are important to us but whereas Mozart and Haydn do so by developing the expressive resources of the Classical style and in doing so reveal, for example, the place of sensuality (Mozart) and cheerfulness (Haydn) within a world that is still conceived in terms of a rational natural order, Beethoven transforms the style in order to be able to give expression to another way of seeing the world, and our place in it, in which

³ Cf. A. Ridley, *A Philosophy of Music*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p. 144.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 145.



rational order is not given but, rather, is something humans must struggle to create. Few would, I think, doubt that many of the works by Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven represent exemplars of “music at its best” that move our imaginations.

Returning to “politics at its best” in the light of this brief digression into the philosophy of music should, I think, alert us to the point that exemplars of politics at its best may be instances of “normal” politics that disclose with particular force and salience the meaning of political values that are already embedded and expressed within normal politics but, perhaps for this very reason, often do not strike us. We might recall Wittgenstein’s remark: “The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one’s eyes.)”.⁵

A legal judgment, a political debate, a piece of legislation, a popular protest – all of these may serve not to transform how we see our political relations to one another but to remind us, in a way that brings home to us what we easily forget, of the value of our existing political achievements: of respect for the rule of law, of electoral participation, of solidarity in the times of crisis, etc. This is not to deny that more needs to be done but to remind us that what previous generations of political struggle and ordinary politics have built has considerable political value. There is a reason why this point may be of particular importance for Ferrara’s argument rather than being a mere theoretical worry on my part. This reason emerges when we bring the (thus far elided) issue of audience into the discussion.

Exemplars are not given but constituted in the relationship between work-act and audience. The struggles of the Chartists, the Suffragettes and the Black Civil Rights Movement are constituted as exemplars because the values for which they struggled are, in large part, held by the majority of the political audience for whom these acts appear in collective memory. But the relationship between work-act and audience in the constitution of exemplars matters in contexts of “hyper-pluralism”. Ferrara’s acute diagnosis of this condition and his response to it in terms of the idea of a multivariate democratic polity containing both overlapping consensus and *modus vivendi* types of

⁵ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1958, s. 129.



relations points to the pluralisation of exemplars. So, for example, a political act may serve as an exemplar for those who have reached an overlapping consensus on a political conception of justice but not for those who stand in *modus vivendi* relations to the state, or alternatively what the act is exemplary of may be different for this latter group. It is a further implication of this point that what is “politics at its best” in its “normal” mode for those standing in overlapping consensus relations may be “revolutionary” for those standing in *modus vivendi* relations. Thus, for example, the current response to Trump’s travel ban serves to remind US citizens in overlapping consensus relation of the value of the rule of law, separation of powers and democratic protest, while perhaps also recruiting those (for example, Muslim immigrants) who stand in *modus vivendi* relations to the US state into the overlapping consensus. This is one reason why I have emphasized the need not to downplay “politics at its best” in its normal politics mode. Indeed, Ferrara’s sensitivity to hyperpluralism and the multivariate democratic polity helps to draw out the point that such a polity has good reason to be aware of the value of political acts that both *remind* and *recruit*, that is, that reinforce the values of democratic political justice for those standing in overlapping consensus relations and transform individuals from standing in relations of *modus vivendi* to those of overlapping consensus. It is a feature of Ferrara’s discussions of multiculturalism and multiple modernities that he provides many of the resources for addressing this topic, however, in my final set of comments I would like to touch on an issue that Ferrara pays little attention to but which I think is crucial for his account.

The preceding remarks drew attention to the point that the constitution of exemplars involves a relationship between work-act and audience. I now want to add the point that this relationship is mediated, that is, the relationship of the audience to the work-act takes place through media of communication and expression. Although these media are not limited to what we refer to as “the Media” even when expanded to include the “new” Media (YouTube, social media networks, etc.), there is little doubt both that the audience’s relation to political acts is highly mediatized in this narrow sense of “the Media” and that the scope of the audience as communicative community has widened considerably to encompass not only resident citizens and non-citizens but also a transnational audience that may include expatriate citizens, relatives of citizens and



residents, and non-citizens. However, although this process may have some benefits (abuses of human rights may, as Kant hoped, reverberate around the world), it has also seen a fragmentation and polarization of media in ways that fail to support and plausibly undermine the modest forms of “enlarged mentality” and the “common world” that democratic politics at its best requires. The demonization of political opponents and negative affective register of much contemporary politics as well as the rise of virulent forms of populism is symptomatic of this process. This matters particularly in terms of (a) sustaining overlapping consensus and (b) generating exemplars that “remind and recruit”. In this context, one problem that urgently need to be addressed is that of trust in media – or, more precisely, trustworthy media that audiences with internally diverse political views can take to offer reasonably unbiased reporting. For all its problems, the BBC still commands considerable public trust in the UK, certainly more than any privately-owned news outlet, and it may be that a publically funded, but independent of government, media source is a part of an adequate response to this first issue. However, what is clearly further needed is the training of a public in the arts of critical media scrutiny, that is, a public who have the skills required for critically reflecting on the ways in which their reception of acts and events is mediated through the media. Media education is now, more than ever, a key part of civic education. Ferrara’s book covers an already large range of issues and hence it may seem unreasonable to chide him for not addressing this topic, but it is precisely the welcome and important attention that he brings to the issues of exemplarity, imagination and affect that makes visible how central issues of media are to democratic life and politics at its best.

There is much more in this invigorating book than I have focused on these comments. The breadth of Ferrara’s engagement with democratic theory is remarkable. However, in limiting my critical attention, I hope to have raised some questions and issues that will resonate with the central theoretical approach and the democratic concerns that animate Ferrara’s work – and perhaps press him to develop them still further.

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