BOOK REVIEWS

Pasta S., Razzismi 2.0. Analisi socio-educativa dell'odio online, Brescia: Morcelliana, 2018, pp. 224.

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In the early years of its diffusion, the Internet was hailed by many as an opportunity for developing a more direct democracy (Slaton, 1992) and a new feeling of community (Rheingold, 1993). Also more recently, social media have been praised for favouring collective action and democratic movements, such as during the Arab Spring (Howard et al., 2011). However, as observed by Castells (2001, p.6), "neither utopia nor dystopia, the Internet is the expression of ourselves – through a specific code of communication, which we must understand if we want to change our reality". In his book *Razzismi 2.0*, Pasta puts Castells' words into practice by thoroughly investigating the darker side of the Internet (online racism) in order to identify its potentiality for education and new forms of digital citizenship.

Based on his PhD thesis in Education, Pasta's work explores the phenomenon of online racism in six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the concepts related to racism (such as ethnocentrism, authoritarianism, and nationalism) and highlight how what today is called 'racism' is based on an opposition between nationals and foreigners, as well as often on an accusation of government laxity. Not least the Durkheimian notion of 'anomie', i.e. a sense of being lost due to weakened normative and value systems, is identified as a social condition fueling racism. The chapter then distinguishes between vari-

ous types and forms of racism: prejudices, active discrimination and violence, and racist ideologies. Furthermore, Pasta discusses two main racist logics: biological and cultural racism, whereby the former is characterised by the belief in the racial superiority of certain peoples, while the latter is based on an alleged cultural incompatibility between different ethnic groups. Cultural racism is the most diffused today and can be partly read as a result of anti-racism, which has successfully shifted the public debate away from the biological notion of race, nevertheless implicitly reinforcing a cultural understanding of ethnic differences as threatening and dangerous for national identities. Within this wave of contemporary racism, Pasta also differentiates aversive from symbolic racism: the former is characterised by a contrast between non-racist deeds and discriminatory acts, while the latter centres around hostility and denies the existence of disparities between groups. Pasta argues that, in the Web Age, episodes of online racism manifest a resurgence of the biological idea of race, this time not supported by scientific theories but simply by common sense, as opposed to an alleged 'gone mad' political correctness and moralism shaping the public debate. Common sense expresses suspicion towards ethnic mixing and calls for the separation of groups, justified either as a way to avoid 'contamination' by ethnic minorities or to preserve ethnic order (e.g. sending ethnic minorities back to 'where they come from/belong').

Chapter 2 explores the digital space and how it influences the diffusion of prejudices and racism. The Internet is defined as a perfect example of Austin's (1975) theory of the performativity of language: it is a way to do things with words. This is especially important in the so-called Web 2.0, where sociality has become the core of online interactions. Internet users today are no longer a passive audience at the receiving end of information delivery, but they are proactive subjects who build their own reflectivity and subjectivity by acting and making choices online. This leads to fragmentation and isolation, whereby Internet users can select their own preferred web contents, further fostering cultural individualism. Almost paradoxically, social networks are among the causes of this 'individualising' revolution since, unlike other older information and communication technologies such as emails or websites, they are used to develop, use and make visible social networks and hence social identities. Furthermore, what makes online social networks and interactions different from those offline is the fact that the former become traces, automatically recorded, which remain in the online spaces and which can reach a wide visibility (Pasta here draws on boyd's [2008)] work). This accumulation of information is also mentally overloading, which aggravate the overuse of 'fast thinking' (i.e. automatic and intuitive cognitive responses) to process incoming news more quickly, instead of 'slow thinking', based on reflection and self-control. This increases prejudices in online social interactions, as these are less mediated by rational

considerations. Pasta identifies other aspects of the Web 2.0 that can exacerbate racism. One is the banalisation of web contents and the de-responsibilisation of the users: what happens online is usually considered as less important than the same happening offline (e.g. racial slurs). The de-hierarchisation of the concept of authorship in the Digital Age, which affects the reliability of sources, undermines the capacity of distinguishing what is true and what is not – for example, the case of fake news, which the majority of American junior high school students is not able to recognise, as Pasta reports in the book. Whilst in the ideal free space of the Internet every user is an author, information proliferates and the distinction between reality and 'virtuality' blurs, worsening the diffusion of prejudices and hate speech. This adds to the centrality of images on social media, which exacerbate the banalisation of differences, reinforcing derogatory stereotypes. The 'halo effect' on social media also tends to reinforce conformism, further weakening the possibility to counter episodes of racism. Finally, social media users in their online interactions develop emotional reactions that are different from those characterising the offline social world: even though we witness a proliferation of images circulating online, which spur quick intense emotional reactions (such as that of Alan Kurdi, the young boy who drowned and whose body was swept ashore a Turkish beach [see Sirriyeh, 2018]), when we act online we do not fully grasp the emotions of our interlocutors, and thus empathy diminishes.

Chapter 3 looks at online groups and how they emerge through the use of social media. As argued by Castells (2002), in the networked society sociability is based on selection, leading to and increasing interaction with like-minded people and the emergence of so-called 'echo chambers', which reinforce instead of challenging one's own opinions. This process of creation of homologous groups goes hand in hand with the increasing self-reflexivity promoted by social media (e.g. the Facebook status update question 'What's on your mind?'). Yet this reflexivity is outwardly oriented, it is not a private thought on one's own condition but a public statement for an online audience, feeding into the 'halo effect' and online conformism mentioned above. Moreover, social media behaviours can be shaped by so-called persuasive computing, i.e. flexible strategies for influencing web users, for instance through the suggestion of new Facebook friends. This can lead to the creation of so-called Filter Bubbles typical of the personalised Web, through which users are then exposed to similar points of view and opinions and, therefore, become more intellectually isolated. An example of this is Google autocompletion function, which offers search suggestions based on past records and online behaviour. In terms of online social groups, there is also a looser distinction between weak and strong ties as compared to offline networks.

Chapter 4 introduces the empirical part of the research and advances a classification of online racism. The sample of the research comprises 130 online episodes of racism (in Italian) on social networks, websites and social forums: 40 of them were officially treated by the Italian National Office for Antiracial Discrimination, while the remaining 90 were collected online by the researcher. These episodes were analysed with the use of T-Lab software through a semiotic approach drawing on Lotman's work (2005 [1984]), which aims to identify how online racist conversations are signified and made sense of. Through text analysis Pasta has identified five typologies of online racism that develop along two axes: the indoor/outdoor axis, i.e. if racist harassments target subjects sharing the perpetrators' world of signs and meanings – i.e. the 'semiosphere' in Lotman's terms (2005 [1984]); and the global/local axis, i.e. if the target of racist discrimination is a group or an individual. The first type of online racism is called 'tribal' (*tribale*) and consists in frequent use of swear words against another group, who is perceived as part of the same semiosphere. 'Targeted racism' (*razzismo mirato*) is the second type and is aimed at specific people, whose perceived diversity is seen as a threat. The third form of online racism is called 'factual' (*razzismo dei fatti*) and it is based on an instrumental use of what is presented as 'truth' to discredit welcoming policies through seemingly rational argumentation. In this case the target is not directly addressed as it not seen as part of the same semiosphere. Follows the so-called 'necessary racism' (*razzismo di necessità*), based on the combination of a non-acceptance of the other with a simultaneous acknowledgment of its unavoidability, therefore requiring institutions to give clear rules for managing this 'forced cohabitation'. Finally comes 'extreme racism' (*razzismo estremo*), which indicates the most extreme derogatory insults towards both groups and individuals that are utterly rejected. To this, Pasta adds four other types of racism, classified not on the basis of a lexicographical analysis but on a qualitative-motivational one. The first is 'circumstanced racism' (*razzismo di circostanza*), which occurs during conflictual interactions and is used to demean the interlocutor. 'Ideological racism' (*razzismo ideologico*) is characterised by the prominence of pseudo-scientific arguments and is motivated by hate. 'Provocation racism' (*razzismo di provocazione*), the third type, is a reaction to a perceived injustice (whereby a minority group is represented as allegedly favoured) and is also used as a form of self-affirmation. Finally, 'oppositional racism' (*razzismo di opposizione*), often rooted in ethnocentrism and authoritarianism, centres on the opposition between stereotypical cultural and religious factions (e.g. the condemnation of the supposed general antisemitism of Arabic culture).

Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 are dedicated respectively to the analysis of tools to contrast online racism and to the role of education for a more inclusive use of social me-

dia. In terms of Internet hate speech regulation, Pasta highlights how the transnational nature of the Web hinders the development of a global governance. For example, different countries have different cultures and histories of regulation policies, from a more interventionist framework in Europe to a more liberal approach characterising the US, where every restriction of hate speech is perceived as a limitation to freedom of expression. As a result, since most website companies are legally based in the US, the capacity of regulation of the EU is restricted. In this context, companies are encouraged to self-regulate, for instance social network platforms have adopted codes of conduct, such as the 2016 Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online, through which they commit themselves to intervene within 24 hours after a racist content has been reported. Chapter 6 ends on a hopeful note, focusing on online responses to episodes of online racism, which directly target racist events and promote counter-narratives against xenophobia. Pasta aims to build on these already existing counter-reactions to online racism, showing how the Internet is not simply a space of diffused intolerance and discrimination but also a resource for challenging hostile views. Indeed, as pointed out by Castells (2001), the Internet is neither utopia nor dystopia: we just need to learn how it works if we want to effect change. And this last chapter of the book does exactly this. Pasta illustrates the online interviews he conducted with young people who posted racist comments or participated in hateful conversations on social networks. The aim of these interviews was to promote self-reflexivity on online conducts and hate speech. In order to do that Pasta sometimes disclosed his position as researcher while in other occasions he played the role of someone who directly felt targeted and offended by the racist comments of the interviewee (e.g. a Pakistani woman in the case of an anti-Muslim comment). The simulated identity was chosen to promote empathy and to check if empathy can contrast online hate and foster education and new forms of digital citizenship. Pasta finds that, by eliciting awareness through verbal accounts on episodes of hate speech, the authors of racist comments can realise the consequences of their online actions – which led them to even apologise in certain cases. This shows how overcoming the false juxtaposition between emotions and rationality can be fruitful for new pedagogical methodologies based on responsibilisation and on open reflections on emotional skills. Pasta concludes by presenting cases of online activism that counter hate speech and promote the so-called 'wisdom of the crowd', i.e. collective intelligence to stop (online) racism. These include Click Against Hate and Everyday Racism App to report episodes of online racism, and YouthCAN that develops counter narratives to stop violence – for instance, through the strategy of storytelling, which aims to produce alternative accounts of a story, like in

the case of the clearance of the Roma camp in Rubattino street in Milan, which was retold by the words of the teachers and friends of the evicted children.

Razzismi 2.0 offers a fascinating insight into the online dimension of racism and is the first systematic study of this still under-explored yet alarming phenomenon. Pasta develops a very thorough and theoretically informed analysis of online hate speech, but does not stop at the level of analysis: he also gives grounded suggestions to tackle this phenomenon and makes important contributions to the field of education in the age of social media. There are only two aspects that I would have liked to see further developed in the book. The first is a more explicit reflection on the types of racism targeting the groups mentioned in the book, i.e. Muslims, Jews and Roma. Although Chapter 1 presents an exhaustive overview of the phenomenon of racism, it does not provide details about the specificities of racist discourses targeting different ethnicities. Especially anti-Roma racism presents several peculiarities if compared to other migrant and minority groups. For instance, it is very much connected to Roma dwelling and mobility practices (see Lucassen, 1998; Okely, 1983). It would have been interesting to read more about the various historical genealogies of racist discourses in Italy and how these are translated and evolve online. If, according to Pasta, online racism seems to revert to a form of 'biological racism', does it merely reflect historically-rooted offline racist discursive argumentations or does it also change them? Is anti-gypsyism the same online and offline, or does it become more similar to other forms, such as anti-Muslim racism? A second point that could have been elaborated further is the analysis of the responses to racist episodes. I appreciate that the research is about racism and hate speech, but I think that it would have been important to better analyse the counter-strategies as well, in order not to replicate the passivity of the targets of these racist episodes and their allies. This is briefly done in the beginning of Chapter 6 so it could have been expanded easily. To more fully grasp discriminatory practices it is indeed very important to understand how they are responded to by the individuals who are subject to or do not agree with them. Moreover, this could be useful to understand if coping strategies with online racism are similar or different to offline ones (see Wacquant, Slater, & Pereira, 2014): are they more about online silence and disengagement or stigma inversion? This in itself could be the subject of a brand-new research, and I understand that it goes beyond the scope of the book, but I think that giving more details on the comments criticising online racist posts would have added an important dimension to the illustration of this phenomenon.

Overall, Pasta should be commended for his very thought-provoking work, especially in three areas. Firstly, the book is an important testimony to the ever-worrying presence and transformation of racism in contemporary societies, marked by an increasing

digitalisation of social relations. As argued by Picker (2017), despite the public discourse in Western societies is today predominantly based on a neoliberal doxa that underplays – if not omits – the role of race in shaping patterns of segregation and discrimination, racial thinking still has a very important place in contemporary societies, policies and, as Pasta shows, social interactions, including those occurring in the virtual space of social networks. Secondly, Pasta's book helps debunking the myth of the opposition between online and offline and it shows through strong empirical evidences that these are not juxtaposed and different realms but are co-constitutive. Initially the Internet was understood as a virtual world, parallel to the 'real' one, where everyone could construct their virtual 'self', hidden and separate from the real-life one. But today the virtual has become real, in the sense that – mostly through social networks – it has become part of the social sphere and it can also influence cognitive structures and interaction behaviours (see Chapter 2). Nevertheless, the way it is debated in the public and political sphere is still based on an understanding of the Internet as a virtual and digital space that is less important than the offline social space. For example, in Italy, hate speech is regulated by the Mancino Law which, however, only applies to offline episodes. The book therefore warns that legal frameworks and educational approaches are still based on an outdated understanding of the Internet and that more research is needed on this front. Finally, Pasta's research is a reminder that emotions and rationality should not be considered in opposition. In fact, pedagogy can strongly benefit by working on both simultaneously. Emotions can be defined as a means of experiencing the world (see Hochschild, 2012) that is different from a cognitive way of connecting to the surrounding environment – rather based on argumentation – but that is not necessarily irrational. Indeed, as argued by Jasper (1998) emotions can be used rationally, for instance by social movement actors in their campaigns. Specifically, they are inextricably linked to moral values and thought (see Nussbaum, 1996). Thus, emotions can be changed and steered by reasoning, which is what Pasta tries to do when he interviews and discusses with young Internet users who engage with hate speech. Pasta argues that pedagogic methods in the Web Age should educate youth on empathy. Compassion is also mentioned in the book, but not as often as empathy, which is defined as the root of altruism (Pasta, 2018, p.93). However, I would argue that compassion is probably a more important emotion if we want to combat online hate speech and racism. Even though compassion is often criticised for establishing an unequal relation between a 'saviour' and a pitied 'sufferer' (see Berlant, 2004), Bloom (2017) defends what he terms 'rational compassion' instead of the more seemingly neutral and diffused idea of empathy (also evoked by Barack Obama as a crucial element for a thriving and more caring democracy). Indeed, while empathy can be biased as people feels it

towards others who they perceived like themselves (and therefore it risks being potentially exclusionary), compassion is already based on unequal grounds and, because of this, it is intrinsically orientated towards the different other. Therefore, I fully support what Pasta argues in the final part of the book but I would put a stronger accent on compassion. As argued by Nussbaum (1996), 50), "public education at every level should cultivate the ability to imagine the experiences of others and to participate in their sufferings", including online others. Nevertheless, fully empathising with the unknown will be always difficult, but learning how to respect groups also perceived as complete strangers could be the real key to a compassionate citizenship for the future mediapolis.

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