

This [special issue](#) of *Nordicum-Mediterraneum* contains the refined version of the papers presented at the conference on reason and passion in politics, held in a period of two days at the University of Bergen in November 2019. The conference was organised as a joint effort by the Department of Philosophy of the University of Bergen (UiB), Norway, and the Department of Antiquity, Philosophy and History (DAFIST) of the University of Genoa, Italy.

The purpose of this conference was to approach the topic of the relations between rationality and emotions, wondering which part do they actually play in politics. In many ways, politics is the art of persuasion and often people are indeed persuaded to position themselves on a given subject by emotional appeals rather than reasonable arguments. Within the political sphere, both past and present, one can actually find a complex mixture of rational arguments and emotional discourses.

In the dominant Western philosophical tradition, the relationship between reason and emotions has been marked by a conflict between various contrasting models of rationality and emotions. The sphere of rationality and that of passions have been often categorized according to a fundamental dichotomy: either the triumph of reason against the weakness of sentiments or, in the popular interpretation of Hume, the triumph of passions over reason. This dichotomy has also served as a starting base for conceptualizing politics, where already early-modern political theorists defined political autonomy as reason dominating the emotions and passions.

In *The Passions and the Interests* (1977), Albert Hirschman described how, in the process of modernization, the “passions”, motivating social and political behavior were transformed into modern “interests” and they were thereby assigned the role of containing the social and political destructive passions.

Until recent times, theorists have described both political movements and political affiliation as based on beliefs, ethics, and sentiments. In the last years, though, an “Affective Turn” has taken place both in analytic and continental philosophy, and in contemporary political studies. Emotions and affects are now becoming the object of extensive, multidisciplinary studies that challenge political liberalism’s idea that the emotions must be relegated to the private sphere. This “turn” highlights that the political cannot be understood without reference to human feelings.

However, the fundamental dichotomy between emotions and reason has not at all been overcome in the forms of current politics. While it is true that, today, emotions and passions are returning to the centre of the political scene, they often do so in a passive form. Contemporary politics consists more and more in an abuse and manipulation of the

passions. Social media, for instance, has redefined the public sphere in ways that allow charismatic, intimidating and even hateful rhetoric to stand unchecked by editorial control. The space of public discussion has also increased to the point where quick “instinctive reactions” replace careful reasoning. One could ask if the “affective” political change consists in an increasingly oppressive use of the passions as forms of domination. The active function of passions and the way they can contribute to the processes of political democratisation and the conscious involvement of citizens need to be duly analysed; albeit always keeping in mind that passions are ambiguous, for any feeling within a given political context, even the noblest - compassion and love, *inter alia* -, holds its limits and presupposes dangers.

This motivates the following questions: Do emotions, of any kind, pose a dangerous threat to rationality and political life? What, for instance, becomes of democracy when a rigorous and rational language in political debates is replaced by one that focuses on emotions, like hope or fear? Is it possible to build up a democratic society with no recourse to passions, mutual trust and a belief in the right of every individual to participate in the social and political debates? If so, what kind of emotions are positive and what kind of emotions do hinder this development?

A key aim of the conference was seeking to define the possible paths of reflection on this topic and study the relationships between reason and emotions, concepts of rationality and “structures of feelings” as a marker of the political arena.

The European research team that has long been engaged in social and ethical reflection about cultural changes in the modern and contemporary epoch chose to address these questions by a variety of approaches.

(Paola De Cuzzani & Mirella Pasini)

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