

Symbolic resources and the elaboration of crises

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Abstract

In “The affectivization of the public sphere (...)”, Sergio Salvatore, Raffaele De Luca Picione and their colleagues (2021) propose a psychoanalytically informed sociocultural reading of the current state of our societies. They invite us to read the current “crisis” scenario, manifested by the spreading of fake-news, the radicalisation of social movements, the mistrust in institutions, etc. as symptom of what they call the “affectivization of the public sphere”, which they explain as being due to people lack of means for elaborating affective experience. They also propose a solution to the problem: the creation of “intermediate settings” in which people can develop interpersonal relations and use semiotic resources supporting the elaboration of affect. In this commentary, I expand on this proposition; drawing on Hanna Arendt and psychoanalysis, I question the relation between affects, sense-making and rationality; arguing that people may need to make sense of crises in a non-rational way, I emphasize the role of symbolic resources in the solution proposed by the authors.

Keywords: *Sense-making, psychoanalysis, affects, imagination, symbolic resources.*

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The biggest result of poetry is to give to insensible and unanimated things, sense and passion.

Giambattista Vico (1725)¹

Introduction

In “The affectivization of the public sphere (...)” (2021), Sergio Salvatore, Raffaele De Luca Picione and their colleagues propose a psychoanalytically informed sociocultural reading of the current state of our societies. They argue that the current “crisis” scenario, manifested by the spreading of fake-news, the radicalisation of social movements, the mistrust in institutions, etc. is to be read as symptom of what they call the “affectivization of the public sphere”. This is characterised by people’s unbound affective reactions, which function individually and collectively as in primary processes, per contiguity. It is manifested through six indications – the publicization of the private life, turning the other into an enemy, irradiation of identity, atemporality of social life, externalisation in an unelaborated way, and more generally, a “dereferentialisation of the signifier” (p.5). Such affectivization of the public sphere, the authors argue, can be explained by a psychoanalytical – semiotic theory of affects, where affective meanings are defined as embodied, a-semantic and hypergeneralised phenomena shaped by sociocultural models. From that perspective, then, current crises can be read as due to people’s lack of means or modes of elaborating affective experience, which then both individually and collectively run free and conduct to such decomposition of meaning, time and social bonds. As alternative, they propose

to support “intermediate settings” in which people can develop interpersonal relations and find cultural elements that can become semiotic resources supporting the elaboration of affect into symbolic form, that is, a form of thirdness between self and the world. This proposition is elegant and encompassing; it is based on a diagnostic of contemporary societies; it proposes a cure. In what follows, I discuss one of its theoretical assumptions, which leads me to a complementary reading of the diagnostic and its cure.

Affectivization of the social world

The reading proposed by Sergio Salvatore, Raffaele De Luca Picione and colleagues is theoretically grounded in a long tradition of analysis of collective conduct, notably developed by Sigmund Freud, now invigorated by the Semiotic dynamic cultural psychology theory (SCDPT), and doubly supported by research on a large scale, as well as clinical practice. The core theoretical proposition of this semiotic dynamic psychology theory is that affects are a sort of meaning, if meaning is “a certain state of mind able to relate with/trigger certain other mental states” (p.10): indeed, affects also are “able to trigger further mental states” (p.10). Affects are defined as “embodied, a-semantic, hypergeneralisation of significance” (p.10) – that is, they can be activated or not, pleasant, or not; they create equivalences between classes of objects based on their valence, not their content; and they designate the whole field of an experience, not subcomponents. However volatile, such

¹ (Vico, 1993, p. 79, my translation from French edition)

affects however “ground cognition” (p.11): they have an anticipatory function in our meeting the world, as they guide our inferences about what is likely to happen. In addition, affective meanings are also vehiculated by social representations and other cultural constructs which we meet.

Affective meanings are always present; yet their saliency in cognition, the authors propose, is dependent on uncertainty: the higher the uncertainty, the more salient affective meanings are leading cognition, in a need to reduce energetical expenses: they indeed unable us to predict the environment at minimal costs. However, people may develop means to resist this immediate affective response, especially if they have developed “high-dimension” meanings (p. 15), supported by both semiotic resources and community bonds. In other words, when we are exposed to highly uncertain issue, we tend to react emotionally in a way that simplifies the environment, turns different people in enemies, make us go blindly toward solutions or messages that seem consonant with our intuitions, and feel immediately closer to people that seem to think like us. Alternatively, being educated, in a strong community, where there are complex semiotic resources – theoretical models, a tradition to draw on, semiotic resources that mediate our thinking – people are able to take distance from these immediate reactions – if they feel them at all - and possibly, to elaborate more complex reading of the uncertain situation. Of course, as the authors note, in an unequal society, such capacity to elaborate experience will remain the privilege of a small group who also share other privileges - which anyway are likely to reduce uncertainty in daily life.

Among recent events, the end of the Trump regime, the debates around covid, or climate

change, all seem to correspond the diagnostic of an affectivized public sphere. Many people react fast to unchecked opinion, seem not to tolerate uncertainty, or seem unable to reason rationally about possible solutions. Hence, this reading of the situation seems immediately convincing, even if slightly depressing. Can we perhaps nuance it?

Rethinking affects, sense-making and rationality

Sergio Salvatore, Raffaele De Luca Picione and colleagues are one of the pioneering group in the articulation of semiotic cultural psychology and psychoanalysis, and especially for their attempt to examine unconscious affective processes at a collective level (see also Neuman, 2009, 2014). In my work, I have also explored the complementarity of sociocultural psychology and psychoanalytical theorising to better understand affects, fantasy and unconscious processes in human development (Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011; Zittoun, 2014a, 2017a; Zittoun & Cabra, 2020). On this basis I will interrogate one theoretical point in the authors’ proposition: the relation between affects, rationality, and sense-making. I will first pinpoint two difficulties in their text, before proposing my reading of this issue.

First, Salvatore, De Lucca Picione and colleagues explain the psychic processes underlying the affectivization of the social sphere in terms of primary and secondary processes. Drawing on Freud, they recall that primary processes function as free circulation of charges that can move from representation to representation through condensation and displacement, without logical links; secondary processes in turn need the slowing down of energy, bound in more stable, “tied” systems.

It is thus what “makes thinking, causal reasoning and logical thinking possible” (p. 5). Based on such reading, they say, the phenomena they describe “represent the multiple symptoms of a progressive global loss of momentum of the role of rational thinking” (p. 5), together with a weakening sense of reality. Now, if we admit the diagnostic of the authors, do we have necessarily to admit that they indicate the loss of “rational thinking”? There is indeed a bit of instability in the text, which at times addresses rational thinking, and at times symbolisation and the construction of meaning.

Second, in Salvatore, De Lucca Picione and colleagues’ text, there is an apparent tension between two formulations of the relation between affects and meaning. In some places, “affects are embodied, a-semiotic, hyper-generalised classes of significance” (p. 10); yet also there are “affective meanings [which] frame cognition” (p. 11). The tension here lies between a version of affects which are a-semiotic, that is, before any connexion to sign, and what can be called “affective meanings”, which are necessarily already semiotic – otherwise there would be no meaning.

The two points demand to address the relationship between affects, sense-making and rationality. My argument is that it is important to distinguish sense-making in thinking, from rational thinking. One way to ground this distinction is to draw on the conceptual distinction proposed by Hanna Arendt in *The life of the mind* (Arendt, 1978; Zittoun, In preparation). For the philosopher, rational thinking, or cognition, is related to knowing, and aims at truth, ultimately verified in reality. We are rational when we plan a table which will hold or not, or reason in science, which is either logically true, or able to send rockets to the moon. Thinking as sense-making, on the other

hand, has no “true” meaning; it is about examining anything that happens, as well as ultimate questions. Thinking demands to “stop and think”, a withdrawal from the flow of action, to enter in an inner-dialogue by which we examine the reasons of our actions or the sense of things – a mode of thinking withdrawn from the temporality and appearances of the world, yet making it present to mind, notably through metaphors.

If we follow this proposition, then, sense-making can be distinguished from rationality. Like rational thinking, it demands the binding of affects and energy in more stable wholes, semiotic mediation, and the organisation of experience; but it is not oriented toward a rational experience of the world. Sense-making can take diverse forms, from daydreaming to narration, in imagination and through fiction; it can happen in mind, it can be externalised in many forms, and even collectively practised (Cole, 1996; Gillespie & Zittoun, 2016; Josephs et al., 1999; Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003; Valsiner, 1999, 2014; Zittoun, 2017b). So, how does sense-making work, and how is it connected to affects?

For Salvatore, de Lucca Picione et al., affects are one modality of sense-making. This is different from approaches that would consider affects as energy for thinking (Piaget, 1971), for example, or as an mode of functioning that is radically opposed to thinking. The psychoanalytical conception of affects, to which the authors refer, indeed suggests that affects are one of the phenomenological experience of drives which have either an internal origin or are externally triggered; they can be experienced as intolerable tension when they are related to the amount of free, unbound energy in the psyche; complex linking may reduce and make acceptable these tensions and affects, and transform them (Bion, 1989; Freud, 1911,

1940; Green, 1999, 2005). Linking demands semiotic elaboration – association of affects to traces of experiences and preferably also to semiotic means – progressive organisation of this experience into more complex wholes, with more stability (Green, 2004). Drawing on these ideas, we have suggested that distancing is the process by which formerly internalised semiotic processes, or external semiotic mediation, enable such organisation of experience along three dimensions: first, by relating them to other instances or more semiotic or abstract semiotic means (Valsiner, 1997, 2014); second, by articulating them with past or future experiences; and third, by linking them to alternative scenario (Zittoun, 2014a, 2014b). In any case, affects cannot be “pure”; to come to mind or to action, they are always at least minimally semiotised – otherwise they would be purely somatic. This semiotic work can take various forms – the sense-making direction just evoked, or alternatively, following specific rules, and with truth-seeking as a goal, be oriented toward knowledge building.

Hence, from such perspective, the affectivization of the social sphere is due not solely to the fact that there is a lack of rationality in individual or collective functioning; it may also be due to the fact that there is insufficient sense-making.

The conditions of semiotic elaboration

Salvatore, De Lucca Picione and colleagues suggest that the lack of elaboration of affects is due to a form of semiotic deficit. The solution to this would be to provide people with means to support semiotic elaboration through different forms of mediation, or thirdness – acting both as intermediary between the social world at large and people, and between affects and elaborated are more complex forms of

thinking. For this, they suggest supporting people with intermediary settings, and with semiotic resources. Intermediary settings would offer a form of protection from the noise of the affectivized social sphere. Such settings would create the frame in which relationship can be developed, and mediated by semiotic constructs; there, affects could be contained, and semiotic resources be shared and used so that processes of containing and transforming affects through linking and distancing takes place; a-semantic affects could thus be turned, via shared social meanings, into personal sense.

The solution is interesting and its efficacy well documented. In my understanding, such intermediate settings can range from informal and emergent groups and networks to more formalised institutions. Self-organised, emergent subgroups can offer structure, meaningful relationships, symbolic resources, and semiotic guidance. Note here the role of symbolic resources – discrete cultural elements requiring an imaginary experiences and that have a socially shared meaning, which are used by persons in different ways depending the sense they elaborate – such as novels, films, songs or rituals (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2010; Zittoun, 2006, 2018a). Most “subcultures” actually work like this, from hunters to rappers. In her important work thirty years ago, Shirley Brice Heath did show how inner-city youth developed informal groups, organised around a specific activity – community services, theatre, music – under the guidance of the oldest among them (Heath, 1996, 2004). Her analysis showed that these inner-city youth group provided a safe frame, protecting them from the uncertainty and dangers of the gang neighbourhood. These frames brought young people to progressively learn to better master se-

miotic systems – mainly, they had to progressively learn to speak out, contain, formulate and share their experience. Through mutual acceptance and support, they also engaged in shared projects, them concretised into new semiotic constructs – a theatre play, a music show – to be shared with a broader community. The author, a sociolinguistic, was interested mainly in the acquisition of language that went with learning the rules and developing new social roles. For psychologists, it also appears that such setting offered a safe thinking space, or a form of transitional space, in which experiences could be safely externalised, worked through, and distanced (Perret-Clermont, 2004). There, the fact that the core activity was artistic or fictional – engaging imagination – was key. Altogether, uncertainty of living was replaced with shared meaning and sense, thus regulating affects (Zittoun, 2004). What was demonstrated here occurs in all kinds of manners, from underground networks in times of war or totalitarianism (Daiute, 2018; Gillespie et al., 2008; Marková, 2018; Zittoun, 2018b), to online gaming communities (Kuhn, 2013; Tisseron, 2013). Such intermediary spaces can also be institutionally designed. It is the sort of spaces that Winnicott proposed to young people growing during the war and who lacked the capacity to organise their experiences (Winnicott, 1941, 1943); it is what social workers or teachers create when they propose collective activities with free, often art related, activities to youth at risk (Daiute, 2018; Walker, 2014); it is the case of any therapeutic group working on content for which symbolic elaboration lacks, such as survivors of collective catastrophes and their descendants (Katz-Gilbert, 2020; Puget, 1989; Zajde, 2005). What makes these intermediary settings very pow-

erful is, in addition to good enough relationships, the presence, the creation, or the use of cultural elements as symbolic resources. In any case, what is developed here is sense-making through triadic dynamics in secured intermediary spaces – not rational thinking.

On the importance of symbolic work

In summary, the diagnostic of the affectivization of the social sphere proposed by Salvatore, De Luca Picione and colleagues is convincing; as psychoanalysts and semiotic psychologists, they propose as a cure the creation of intermediary settings in which people may find relevant symbolic resources to support the semiotic elaboration of affective experiences. Here I only want to highlight the fact that such socially guided semiotic work shall not only aim at rational elaboration: it shall also, and perhaps foremost, provide space for imaginary experiences and symbolic work. In other words, to fight against the affectivization of the social sphere and its tendency to fire and spread irrationality, one should not only oppose rational reason: one should also guarantee that people find spaces and means for guided imagining and sense-making.

Let me support my argument by a recent observation during the recent pandemic covid-19 as I could observe it from Switzerland. The pandemic created a situation of heightened uncertainty, and all the process of affectivization of the social sphere described by Salvatore, De Luca Picione and colleagues could be observed in the public discourse: for many people, it was difficult to contain anxieties related to illness and death; attempts were made to identify “guilty” others – people from beyond the national borders, or older persons; many expressed mistrust of the authorities; scien-

tific discourse, with all its hesitations, was often confused with rumours; some people manifested their incapacity to tolerate the duration of the crises; and recently, the media reported violent acting outs through various forms of spectacular demonstrations. However, very interestingly, in absence of satisfying scientific discourses, and to manage the uncertainty of the confinement, people spontaneously also developed two types of regulatory dynamics. First, informal networks of solidarity appeared: balcony support to carers, free distribution of food, neighbourhood and village organisations to look after isolated persons at risk, online social life, etc. It could thus be said that, in some ways, intermediate settings spontaneously emerged: threatened by the loss of social link, people created new forms of sociality. Second, and more importantly for my argument, people needed to find cultural elements. On the one hand, bookshops that provided online book deliveries saw an increase of sales – people needed more fiction; on the other hand, online film platforms had to develop their offer, and suddenly new series or classical cinema could easily be accessible from home. People had different forms of cultural experiences, and used them as symbolic resources to temporarily escape from the anxiety of the present, to explore other realities, and connect the present to past or future experiences, and, very likely as well, to experience the intensity of affects triggered by reality in the safe space of fiction, under a transformed, fictionalised form (Hawlina & Zittoun, 2020). People could use art as a social technique of affects (Vygotsky, 1971), as spaces to contain and transform experiences, and perhaps also

to reinforce their own semiotic capacities (Tisseron, 2013; Zittoun, 2013, 2014a; Zittoun & Stenner, In press). People needed to have cultural, symbolic experiences; these are at the heart of human societies. It is not miracle that all cultural groups, through time and space, have created and transmitted myths, cultural artefacts, texts and rituals whose function is to support collective meaning making and personal sense-making. In that respect, it is important to note that the political response to the covid was in most countries technical and medical, and economical; if these two aspects were fundamental for individual and collective survival, the under-addressed aspect was people's need for sense-making in time of collective crises. From that perspective, then, it is hardly a surprise that some people were easily convinced by pseudo-scientific or conspirationist discourses which, at least, could be used to make sense... The fascinating analyses proposed by Salvatore, De Luca Picione and colleagues provides us means to read and interpret some of the worrying evolution of the social sphere; the authors also suggest which means may help societies to resist this evolution. My contributions here are, first, to differentiate sense-making from rationality; and second, to suggest that fiction and the arts can play an important role in the creation of safe spaces in which sense-making can take place. The enemy of reason and affect regulation in times of uncertainty is not imagination and fantasy; it is the absence of good enough symbolic resources to enable, contain, and guide imagination.

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