

Comment

Dialogue is bliss

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In the past few years, at local and global level, democratic societies have been shaken by an increasing number of conflicts on the management of the technological risks of industrialisation. Popular (even violent) resistance to innovations – deemed to be too impacting on health and the environment – is now reported wherever there is democracy, from the US to Japan, from the EU to India.

Against all of that, and often aiming at favouring the public acceptance of the most controversial technologies, many efforts have been made, yet fruitless most of the times. On the ground where the diffusion of a scientific literacy and the most sophisticated public relation techniques have already failed, now investments are made in the promotion of a dialogue between the parties in conflict. Dialogue is the new password for whoever deals with the relations between science and society: it is needed to win European projects, to draw the public closer to labs, to provide science festivals and science centres with a social role, to leave ultimately behind the now awkward legacy of the Public Understanding of Science and to exorcise through modernist rituals the ghosts of the rejection of technological innovation and of decisional paralysis. In summary, dialogue as an antidote, as a sort of holy water to wash away any sinful stain.

And yet dialogue remains an ambiguous instrument. On the one hand, one cannot deny it is an indispensable means to negotiate within a society like ours, where literacy skills are largely widespread and the spreading of the media have favoured the enlargement of the discussion arena: consumer councils, citizen organisations, environmentalist movements, political parties, governmental institutions, NGOs, industry managers and many other social actors and stakeholders, as much as scientists, technicians and experts, have today prominent voices in the controversies on the risks and benefits of science and technology. At the same time, however, the rhetoric of dialogue is frequently so manipulated that, outside any sort of irony, one can legitimately wonder whether it is once again a disguised form of persuasion to impose a social acceptance of the most controversial technological innovations.

Moreover, dialoguing does not erase some of the factors that feed the conflicts on the industrialisation risks: the piling up of negative experiences (from Bhopal to Chernobyl, up to BSE) in the risk management strategies; the actual sustainability of the current development model introduced by technological innovation; the more and more explicit links of science with economic, political and military powers; the uncertainty permeating causes, consequences, solutions and, sometimes, the definition of risks itself (think for instance of the controversies on transgenic food or the long-time effects of environment pollutants), which divides experts and thwarts a guidance to decision-making on the basis of a shared technical solution.

Actually, the point is that dialogue and conflict are not like oil and water, which don't mix. They are not two opposite entities, rejecting each other and incompatible. On the contrary, they are two entities that feed on each other, veins and arteries of a system of circulation of ideas in modern democratic societies. However, to really understand it, the term 'dialogue' should be given back its real meaning: not a quiet exchange of opinions, an accommodating discussion, a pacific form of bidirectional communication, but a real clash of values and colliding views on the world. In summary, a conflict, sometimes harsh, yet carried out through words instead of weapons: *dia* (through) *logos* (discourse). Albeit in a different context, the Italian psychoanalyst Umberto Galimberti has indeed noted that – like as all Greek terms with a *dia* prefix – even in "dialogue" lies a meaning of maximum opposition, precisely as "diameter" (the maximum length connecting two opposite points on a circumference) or the Italian word "*diavolo*" (meaning 'devil'), which may be interpreted as 'the farthest distance from God'.

Hence, not a dialogue as antithesis or a solution to the conflict, but as an instrument to impose, within the conflict, your own language or your own view on the world or, in the most positive of the

hypotheses, to negotiate a socially sustainable solution between the parties. Even in that case: not a dialogue meant to achieve a utopian unitary view able to level all divergences, but to allow the expression of different perspectives and of legitimate interests. The final aim should be to make a choice shared as much as possible within the legal system of a democratic country.

Apparently, it is possible under three conditions. Firstly, dialogue must be *a priori*, i.e. it should not be called for when the chips are down, when relevant decisions are already made, only to use it as a vulgar persuasion method. Secondly, it should be based on the mutual acknowledgement of different types of knowledge and experiences, as well as on the availability to give up the primacy of one's reasons: those willing to dialogue should admit that, at list in principle, the reasons of the others may be as grounded as their own. Thirdly, each phase of the dispute – including the decision-making phase – should be inclusive: it should envisage the active participation of any party in the conflict, still respecting everyone's role.

Without mutual acknowledgement and the inclusion of all the parties involved (experts, citizens, institutions), dialogue remains an empty word, a slogan, a charm, or even worse, a disguised persuasion instrument.

Even the maieutic method based on Socratic debate envisaged the irony phase in which Socrates pretended to be on the cultural level of the disciple to make him participate in the dialogue. However, Socrates' purpose was not to instill his ideas in his interlocutors' mind after having soothed them, but to help them to "give birth" to truth by themselves. The Socratic dialogue is acknowledged to have a deep moral value precisely because it is based on the respect for the interlocutor. They are encouraged to leave aside the passive attitude of those who take shelter in the knowledge of an authority and, through the dialogic instrument, are invited to participate actively in the knowledge-building process.

In modern industrial societies, the need to enlarge the involvement in decision-making processes and in the knowledge-building processes does not only meet a democratic demand: it is necessary because controversies often arise from the urgency to make decisions under uncertain conditions, in which, as previously mentioned, the technical-scientific knowledge available is not enough to find a univocal solution. Therefore, decisions should not be totally entrusted to a technocratic elite, they should rather be discussed within democratic politics.

All different types of knowledge should be enhanced, including knowledge founded on experience and on the familiarity with the territory, to admit that in conflict situations, the reasons of a "no" are ever more often followed (and not contrasted) by a real production of new scientific knowledge "from the bottom", entrusted to experts publicly renowned, but considered as "independent".

At the same time, it should not be forgotten that these controversies never have exclusively a technical-scientific nature, but they hide a contrast between opposite views on progress, social-economic development and the relation between the environment and human activities, where values and reasons of a economic, cultural, ethical and political nature play a fundamental role. The controversies on science and technology, in other words, hide a clash between opposite views on the world and implicit moral judgments on the way industrialized societies decide to develop.

It should not be so surprising to see a growing number of people claiming the right to participate in the policies of technological innovation: there is an increasingly widespread awareness that, at every level, local and global, the decisions we make in this field – from energetic sources to transgenic food, from agreements on the climate to large engineering works – will determine the society development in the next future.

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