

Responsibility, from the «me-first» Culture to Common Life. An Empirical Study With Young, Female Trainee Teachers

Paola Dusi

Antonia De Vita

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Abstract

What is an adult? According to Arendt an adult is a person who assumes the task of caring for the world, who takes responsibility – in the sight of younger generations – for what happens, how the world is. In global societies, where the actions of individual agents reverberate across national boundaries, does the traditional construct of political responsibility still hold water? Given the historical-cultural changes that the concept has undergone, we ask: what notion do our younger generations have of responsibility and how do they put it into practice? Is it important to them? To explore the perspectives of young people, we administered 167 questionnaires to students on the Primary Teaching degree course at the University of Verona. The experiences identified by the students as examples of responsibility relate, primarily, to their daily lives and their immediate context, while the public sphere, in a political sense, is almost entirely absent.

Che cos'è un adulto? Secondo Arendt l'adulto è colui che si prende cura del mondo, che si assume la responsabilità di fronte alle nuove generazioni per quello che accade, per come è il mondo. Nel mondo globalizzato, dove le azioni del singolo individuo producono effetti che travalicano i confini nazionali, il tradizionale costrutto di responsabilità politica ha ancora senso? Avendo presente i cambiamenti subiti dal concetto di responsabilità ci si è chiesti: in che termini le nuove generazioni significano la responsabilità e come l'agiscono? E' importante per loro? Al fine di indagare il punto di vista dei giovani adulti, sono stati raccolti 167 questionari, somministrati alle/agli studenti del corso di Laurea Magistrale in Scienze della Formazione Primaria dell'Università di Verona. Le esperienze indicate dalle/gli studenti come esempi di assunzione di responsabilità riguardano essenzialmente la loro vita quotidiana e i contesti di prossimità mentre la sfera pubblica, in senso politico, è quasi del tutto assente.

Keywords: Responsibility for Education; Responsibility in the Public Sphere; Reconfiguration of Common Space; The Political Void; Shortcomings of the Adult World.

Paola Dusi: Università degli studi di Verona (Italy)

✉ paola.dusi@univr.it

Paola Dusi is Associate professor of Education at the University of Verona. Her main areas of research interest are social justice, theory of recognition and processes of subjectivisation in complex, heterogeneous social contexts; educative relationships within the family and at school; primary teacher training. She has published articles at national and international level.

Antonia De Vita: Università degli studi di Verona (Italy)

✉ antonia.devita@univr.it

Antonia De Vita is education researcher at the University of Verona. Her work focuses on: female thought and gender education; adult education and training, particularly that of women; education for participation, active citizenship and the common good in urban contexts, alternative practices and inclusion.

1. Politics as a space of plural freedom

Beginning with her own consideration of the post-totalitarian experience, Hannah Arendt traced the ways in which the concept of politics has changed over the history of Western society and thought. Posing herself the question “what is politics?,” she came to anchor her own interpretation in the concept of plurality as a human condition. It is in the plurality of single beings that the political space can take form, a space populated by individuals who are different but acknowledge each other’s equal value. “Politics deals with the coexistence and association of *different* men” (Arendt, 2009, p. 93), men who are able to engage with one another freely as equals, provided the social space they inhabit is essentially free from “compulsion, force and rule over one another” (Arendt, 2009, p. 117). Real politics is only created and given «meaning» in the presence of others who enjoy the same state of freedom.

Politics—understood as the space in which different individuals are able to define the forms and systems of their common life, recognising one another as equals through dialectical dialogue—is created by, and in the presence of, a free plurality. In the “shared world,” in relations between free individuals, politics—in the classic sense (traceable to the *polis* of Athens) of the space in which every aspect of human activity can be regulated through dialogue and reciprocal persuasion—can approach its true meaning and its highest manifestation: “Politics arises in what lies between men and is established as relationships” (Arendt, 2009, p. 7).

Yet, assailed by despotism, redistributive injustice and commoditisation, this concept of politics—rooted in a plurality of unique beings who recognise themselves as equals within a diverse community—has continuously been challenged throughout history. Politics, in the traditional sense in which Western culture and citizenship are anchored, has been worn away by multiple forces. The space it once occupied has been invaded by a self-referential market that bypasses the institutions of politics (absorbing them in the process) and leaves individuals and communities vulnerable to the reification of a manipulative mass consumerism, which in turn feeds a narcissistic individualism and the correlated flight into a sort of private panopticon (Han, 2016). We are facing an epoch-defining transition that marks a rupture in the history of Western societies. It is one we must pause to consider insofar as it relates to the end of a certain understanding of politics and responsibility, and to ask ourselves what new configurations these two dimensions might adopt from here forward.

2. A void at the heart of our modern world: the “me-first” culture and the demise of politics

In a discussion televised by the UK’s *Channel 4* in March 1986—and transcribed, translated and published in French and Italian (in the latter case in *La cultura dell’egoismo. L’anima umana sotto il capitalismo*, 2014)—the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis and the American historian Christopher Lasch offered an astute analysis of the transformation of politics and the public space it occupies as seen through the prism of the consolidation of advanced capitalism and the consumerist society that came with it. Chairing the discussion, Michael Ignatieff reflects on the price of modernity, questioning whether the greatest cost has been the loss of community and neighbourhood bonds.

In a world of strangers, we seem to withdraw more and more to the family and home, our haven from a heartless world. Yet our oldest political traditions tell us that a sense of community is a human necessity, that we can only become full human beings when we belong to each other as citizens and neighbours. Without such a public life, our selves begin to shrink to a hollow, private core (Ignatieff, Castoriadis, & Lasch, 1986, p. 20).

The question, then, is: how has modernity influenced and transformed our identities? Have we become more self-focused, incapable of engaging in politics, ever suspicious of those around us?

Deliberating on these questions, Castoriadis and Lasch outline the transformation of public life, beginning with the late 1950s and the disintegration of the working-class movement and the associated “revolutionary project.” For Castoriadis, a combination of factors were at work in those years: on the

one side, “the bankruptcy of traditional work-class organisations—trade unions, parties and so on” and, on the other, “the ability during this period of capitalism to grant a rising standard of living and to enter the period of consumerism” (Ignatieff *et al.*, 1986, p. 20). The contemporaneous emergence of these conditions led people to focus on themselves and cultivate their own narcissism. By dispensing with the idea of the common interest, it discentivised participation in public life and collective activities. People, Castoriadis continues, were “refusing to take responsibility. In effect, they were retrenching—retreating into a sort of [...] ‘private’ world, that is family and a very few relations” (Ignatieff *et al.*, 1986, p. 20). The individual self has become a “minimal” and “narcissistic” self (Lasch, 1981).

The two thinkers’ critique of contemporary individualism and the culture of narcissism emphasises the consequences of this folding-in of the self, of individualism as an escape from the political and social spheres that redefines people’s objectives in life in narrow terms of “raw survival, daily survival.” In the capitalist society, the self thinks in terms of “one day at a time.” However, this is not the same condition that, throughout the history of Western politics, has served as a necessary stepping stone on the path to a moral life underpinned by participation in the life of the community: life is no longer «lived» in the public sphere (Arendt, 2000). But this is a life reduced to its naked essence, to no more than survival in what is now an unstable reality quite unlike that once solid world full of real objects that were destined to outlive us. Which is to say that, unlike in past generations, the new individualism cannot cling to the sense of historical continuity imparted by a world that existed before us and will exist after we are gone. As such, it is deprived of the foundation required for any sort of long-termist outlook, on either a personal or societal level. For Castoriadis and Lasch, the public space has been emptied of political meaning, filled instead by hallucinatory, phantasmal images thrown at us by mass media and marketing.

At this rupture in the Western political tradition—so eloquently evoked by Arendt, Castoriadis and Lasch—it seems to us that, if we hope to compile a picture of the new forms that the political sphere and associated areas of life are actually adopting, and not fall into the trap of interpreting the crisis in politics (as it is traditionally understood) as the end of politics full stop, then there is much to be gained by exploring how young people understand politics in terms of participation and responsibility.

3. The forms assumed by politics in the minds of young people.

The study

The research presented here is part of an empirical study titled «Trainee Primary Teachers and what Responsibility Means for Adults», which aims to elucidate the new ways in which today’s youth, and aspiring teachers in particular, have come to understand the concept of responsibility. If we hope to compile even a snapshot of what responsibility means to, and among, young people, who after all have a quite different perspective on the world from previous generations, it seems to us that there is much to be gained by questioning them about it directly.

In terms of theory, the study adopts an ecological paradigm, by which knowledge is understood as being rooted in the various contexts of natural life, and in which particular consideration is given to the role of subjectivity and relationships between individuals in the process of constructing both reality itself and our understanding of it (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The choice of a phenomenological methodology, which takes human experience as the principal subject of investigation and recognises the significance of “inexact” and “non-mathematical” concepts (Husserl, 1983, p. 166), is consistent with both the aims of the study and the choice of demographic, namely young adults in university education.

3.1. Methodology

To date, 226 students from the Primary Teaching degree course at the University of Verona have participated in what will be a three-year study. Specifically, students in the 1st and 5th years of the university’s Combined Bachelor’s/Master’s course were invited to complete the research questionnaire. Almost all the students on this course are female, and typically aged between 19 and 23. The study is still in progress,

with two phases still to be carried out (focus groups with 5th-year students and, subsequently, the development of a participatory training programme).

Two versions of the research questionnaire have been used over the course of the study. The first, which was administered to students in the 2015–2016 academic session, consisted solely of two open questions. Based on the analysis of this first body of data, it was decided to introduce a third item to the questionnaire to investigate the participants' experiences and conceptions in relation to the social and political arenas (this became item 2).

As such, the final version of the questionnaire comprised the following items:

- i. How, and from whom, have you learned to recognise your own responsibilities? Tell me about an important event that has had a bearing on your sense of responsibility.
- ii. Can you identify examples of people assuming responsibility in public, social and political arenas?
- iii. What does it mean, to you, to be responsible?

This second version of the questionnaire was administered to students in the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 academic sessions. 83 questionnaires were collected from 1st-year students, and 84 from students in the 5th year, giving a total of 167.

All of the data collected in this way were processed using NVivo, a software package developed for use with qualitative research methodologies (Coppola, 2011) that facilitates the gradual development of theoretical models and lines of thinking as the data are processed using various «memos». Using this software not only ensures the traceability of the research process, but also allows researchers to process the material collected on multiple levels. For instance, it is possible to move from a particular node to a higher level of categorisation, and to supplement the categorisation process with useful visual representations. During the codification process, using the software, the two researchers involved were continuously in contact to compare their respective viewpoints.

3.2. Younger generations and the public world

This paper is concerned with the analysis of the data collected in relation to the second item on the questionnaire: «Can you identify examples of people assuming responsibility in public, social and political arenas?»

What beliefs, meanings and wants conditions these young women's understanding of the «outside», the external world? Who is it populated by? What people, what groups?

Analysing the responses to the 167 questionnaires using NVivo gave rise to a ramified, multi-dimensional representation of the concept of responsibility. This «structure» was common to both the 1st-year and 5th-year students, even if, in symbolic and discursive terms, the responses from the latter group reveal a more subtle understanding of the concept.

The structure rests on four «macro-categories», three of which can be further broken down into «categories». The different dimensions of responsibility that emerged were labelled as follows:

- i. *Common life* (the political-institutional sphere; social work, associations and clubs, voluntary work; citizenship)
- ii. *Work-related responsibilities*
- iii. *Absolute responsibility* (the responsibility inherent to existence; the responsibility inherent to relationships; mindset)
- iv. *Responsibility for younger generations* (responsibility for education—subdivided into «teachers' responsibility» and «parental responsibility»; responsibility for the living world).

The diagram below illustrates the theoretical structure that emerged from the analysis in greater detail.

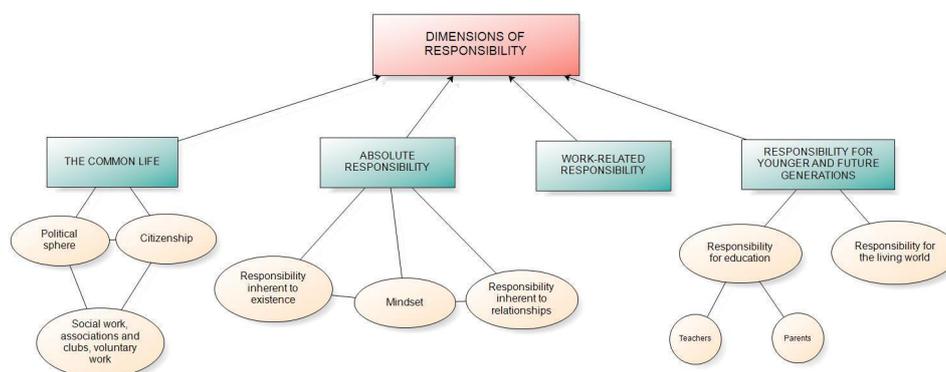


Fig. 1 – Chart of the different dimensions of responsibility (developed with NVivo)

3.2.1. Meaning of responsibility in the public sphere: initial results

In the first macro-category—*Common life*—responsibility is enacted through the following areas: the political-institutional sphere; citizenship; social work, clubs and associations, and voluntary work.

- a. *The political-institutional sphere* is treated by the students as the arena of responsibility par excellence, albeit one marked by stark contradictions and facing a crisis of identity. On the one hand, there is the claim that “certainly, anyone who works in a political setting will also have a lot of responsibility” (1st year). On the other, the political-institutional sphere is also described as a sort of responsibility-free zone: “politicians ought to have a very strong sense of responsibility, but most of the time they don’t show it” (1st year).

These two aspects, trust and expectation on the one side, and distrust and resignation on the other, are what most stand out from the answers, and are indicative of the close link between crises in politics and crises of responsibility: where we might wish to see responsibility embodied in the practices of public institutions, and among their leaders, there appears to be a substantial deficit in this regard. A better example of exercised responsibility emerges, however, at a smaller scale of public governance, for instance with the mayor of a small town who manages to earn the trust of the people who know him or her personally. This proximity in relationships, which is possible within the public space at a local level, expose the politician to a «first-person» variety of responsibility, which is perceived as being more practicable, more reliable. As such, “the small-town mayor offers a clear example of assuming responsibility, because he or she takes the time and works hard to identify the problems affecting citizens, and takes responsibility for solving them” (5th year).

Cited among the most significant institutions in the public sphere are the media, with their ability to influence people by spreading what can become pervasive forms of culture and collective imagination.

- b. *Social work, associations and clubs, voluntary work*. In this category, according to the students, we find not only a pervasive sense of responsibility, but also some of its finest expressions: “we find the most beautiful examples of responsibility in the sphere of social work” (1st year). In the majority of cases, free and voluntary action in social contexts means working with disadvantaged members of society, minorities, whichever part of humanity is suffering. “One situation where we see responsibility in the social sphere is when associations take on the job of caring for the homeless, poor people, immigrants and everyone else in need” (1st year). This sort of spontaneous activation, as a free and willing act, is recognised as the most authentic face of responsibility.
- c. *Citizenship*. In the answers, particularly those of the 1st-year students, the exercise of citizenship is seen in its barest terms and can be boiled down to the basic elements of civic education—“getting

your licence, going out and voting” (1st year)—or in more general terms, to respecting other people. In the 5th-years’ answers, we find a more robust awareness of the meaning of citizenship: “examples of taking responsibility are when every individual is aware of their own role within society, respects it, respects other people and is prepared to answer for their actions” (5th year).

The second macro-category, *Work-related responsibility*, is concerned with the responsibility that emerges in a job or work activity. The students are particularly sensitive to the importance of work. In this, they are most-likely conditioned by the prevalent culture and work ethic of the Veneto and Lombardy regions (from which the majority come). The exercise of responsibility is considered to be particularly pertinent to jobs in education and healthcare. The 5th-year students, on the cusp of a career in teaching, emphasise the nexus between education and responsibility (which reappears in the *responsibility for education* category): “all the various actors in an education setting have a degree of responsibility towards younger generations” (5th year).

The third macro-category, *Absolute responsibility*, evokes the radical nature of responsibility as a constituent dimension of our very existence. To exist means being unable to escape responsibility; responsibility “attests to the non-autocracy” of each individual, to the interweaving of our separate existences. It reflects the “state of dependence” (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 63) that characterises the human condition.

Three categories of absolute responsibility emerge from the results: *responsibility inherent to existence*, *responsibility inherent to relationships* and *mindset*.

- a. *The responsibility inherent to existence*. Being born brings responsibility both “for yourself and for others” (1st year). A responsibility inherent in being here, in existing, in being part of society, of the world: “being an inhabitant of this planet is already,” in itself, “an assumption of responsibility” (1st year).

The condition of responsibility is manifest in every aspect of existence, in every choice or decision. Life asks us—calls us—to take responsibility by asking that we make decisions, take on one role or another, fulfil our duties, first and foremost that of realising our own selves. It is a responsibility that is fulfilled by setting an example, above all, “in the little things” (5th year).

It is generated by the awareness of one’s own power to be and to act: “being responsible means being aware of your own actions, your words and gestures” (5th year). Being aware—whether with the world or merely ourselves as witness—translates into keeping our word, fulfilling our assumed obligations which, by binding us to our word, become promises (Arendt, 2000). It is a responsibility that extends to our “personal values,” to the sense of justice that drives us to “make difficult—but right—decisions” (5th year).

Concern for the consequences of our thoughts and deeds emerges as a key aspect of the students’ conceptions of responsibility. Actions lead to consequences—always, mercilessly—consequences that “always” (5th year) come to pass, and involve others (or the other). It is for this reason that we, as humans, are asked to “stand up and take responsibility for our actions” (1st and 5th year).

- b. *The responsibility inherent to relationships*. In their consideration of the “public, social and political space,” these young people identify the origin and requirement for responsible action in the fact that at an ontological level, in the presence of the other, humans are relational beings. Alongside the responsibility of taking care “every day, in everyday things” (1st year), the moral obligation to which we are summoned by the face of the other (Lévinas, 2002), conditions our actions beyond the immediate—what is present—and encompasses what is still to come. Being responsible “means thinking about what is good for other people and about their future” (5th year), and “acting with your own and other people’s future at heart” (1st year).
- c. *Responsibility as mindset*. Being responsible means fully embracing your potential to be the origin of something, to deploy your capacity to bring something new into the world. This will to be *initium* (Arendt, 2000) is manifested in action that seeks to “offer something that goes against the crowd, against conformism” (5th year). Those who “are able to swim against the tide—standing

up to be counted—to defend their ideas, to assert their rights” (1st year) are held up as examples of responsibility in action. Responsibility is enacted from the ground up, in person, by whoever “in their own small way, with small actions” (1st year), “tries to carry forward that which they believe in” (1th year).

Looking around them, in the public space, these young adults are struck by the declining tendency to take responsibility among the generations that preside over the governance of the world. They note the prevalence of negative examples “especially at higher levels,” the adults who “really” seem to struggle with taking on their responsibilities (5th year).

Faced with a “missing” adult world that offers “little in the way of examples” to follow in terms of exercising responsibility, they underline the need to adopt an ethical position that challenges “that which is not [ethical]” (5th year). But how can they do this? It is a case of taking a position, fighting every day to defend your convictions and values. The desire to embody our own responsibility emerges in the interstices of existence, those that depend on us ourselves, and within which our own agency is revealed. By undermining the sense of powerlessness that—often at the encouragement of demagogues—afflicts contemporary society, these young people achieve the “resolve to do the little that [is] in my power” (S. Teresa of Avila, 2000, p. 37), to make themselves spokespeople “for a group, and not simply for an idea” (5th year), by enacting small, everyday gestures.

Responsibility for younger and future generations. This macro-category introduces the dimension of time and the possibility of a future existence for all living things. It comprises two categories: a. *responsibility for education* (subdivided into the sub-categories *teacher’s responsibility* and *parental responsibility*), and b. *responsibility for the living world*).

- a. *Responsibility for education.* For the students, the duty to educate represents an essential, exemplary aspect of what it means to be responsible. “I think that the single area of life that—more than any other—has the meaning of responsibility at its heart is education” (5th year). “The world of education offers an example of what it is to really take responsibility” (5th year).

When questioned about the examples of responsibility that might be found in the public sphere, these young people point, on the one hand, to their own choice of profession, i.e. teaching, and on the other to the adult figures with whom they have had direct experience, i.e. parents.

- *Parental responsibility.* In terms of responsibility, parents are “the first people that come to mind” (5th year). The answers reveal an outlook in which “parenthood cannot be separated from responsibility,” insofar as mothers and fathers “take responsibility for raising their children” (1st year). Parenthood, then, is considered a textbook example of what it means to take responsibility—“In the social sphere, we can find examples [of responsibility] in the many parents who are not afraid to educate their children, even though it demands work and dedication” (5th year)—a responsibility that one takes in respect to the other, to the world: “a couple that decides to bring a child into the world takes on responsibilities, towards the child and towards society” (5th year).

It is a concept that we find in Hans Jonas, for whom parental responsibility is a form of absolute responsibility that introduces the dimension of time to the discussion: the futurity of that for which we are responsible “is the truest future aspect of the responsibility” (1985, p. 107).

- *Teachers’ responsibility.* The students’ chosen path of study, their status as teachers in training and, perhaps, their awareness of the teacher’s role in society, place this duty to educate at the heart of their conceptualisation. “As future teachers, we have a number of responsibilities for the children, their parents, and society” (5th year). Responsibility is a central characteristic of the educational relationship, and as such pervades the school setting: “the school environment is [...] a situation in which you take on responsibilities” (5th year)

These responsibilities are seen as radical, decisive. After all, “there are responsibilities that have a greater impact than others on our own future, and the future of those around us” (1st year). The

students' responses bring the etymological root of the word "responsibility" to the fore, setting out the principle of concern for others in terms of relationships and society (Ricoeur, 1999), and the present and the future (Jonas, 2009). Taking responsibility means to *respond* to the call of the other, of the vulnerable who need care and attention from those adults who, in their concern for younger generations (Dusi, 2006), take responsibility on behalf of the world.

Thus, for these students, the concept of responsibility in action in the public sphere brings to mind, "above all, the school in a general sense" (1st year), to the point that the public sphere and the school are virtually synonymous: "when I think of the public world, I think of a school" (1st year).

- b. *Responsibility for the living world.* With this category, responsibility reaches all of the different dimensions in which human life is embedded, a living world that finds room not only for human beings but for plants and animals too. Here, there is consideration for the planet's finite resources, for those parts of nature that demand a more responsible approach to the entire system of life: "the resources we have are not limitless, so we need to use them in a more intelligent and responsible manner" (1st year).

4. From the void of politics to the fullness of society: a brief consideration of new configurations of responsibility

Analysed separately, the answers to the second item on the questionnaire—which asks for examples rather than definitions—reveal a specific interpretation of the ethics of responsibility, which is broken down by the young respondents along two basic lines of interpretation:

- i. the first considers responsibility in terms of discipline, as though it were a mode of controlling activity using the principle of reciprocal assurances, these being underwritten by the individual's self-limitation of his or her actions, which in turn is born of a preoccupation with the consequences of these actions and the sense that he or she is called to answer for them;
- ii. the second, rooted in the concept of aid, considers responsibility in terms of an openness to alterity, of solicitude, giving rise to a broader perspective on one's actions that is open to the other, an entity that is recognised as extending to encompass future generations and the environment.

The former understanding, with its sense that we are called to answer for ourselves, is consonant with action theory. The second brings into play the theory of moral obligation, in which we feel we have a responsibility towards the other, that we are called to respond to its appeal (Vergani, 2015). Inherent in the human condition is the requirement that we take action within a world of inter-relationships and inter-actions. As such, responsibility must contend both with the unpredictability of our own and others' actions, and with the moral obligation that arises from the presence of the other.

In any case, the most significant feature to emerge from the analysis is the presence in the students' conceptions of three principal orientations in their vision of the public space (both social and political):

- 1) The first of these identifies a sort of responsibility vacuum in the political sphere. Here, a clear contradiction emerges between the historical expectation that politics be the locus of responsibility par excellence—as our Western political tradition has taught us—and the disappointing reality of a «responsibility betrayed», almost entirely, by our most important institutions and their representatives.
- 2) The second finds the responsibility of the individual in the overlap between the political sphere and more immediate contexts marked by educational, relational and political responsibility (family, school, village, small town), contexts in which we can reconstruct the spaces of trust, relationships and responsibility.

- 3) The third is concerned with what we might term the new «configurations of responsibility» that are taking shape in the very space left open by the responsibility vacuum of politics, a void that is continually exposed by the significance that social activity in the public sphere has acquired in recent times. Amidst the various macro and micro contexts, we find a plurality and richness of social activity (clubs, societies, voluntary work, free-time activities, etc.) that demonstrate how responsibility has been displaced from the political dimension, in the strictest sense, into a wider social sphere.

5. The future on their shoulders

In the past, responsibility was enacted by adults who presented the world to new generations saying, “Here is our world.” The situation today is radically different. The crisis of authority that Hannah Arendt perceived in the 1950s has seeped across society, starting in the public sphere and progressing to the private pre-political realms of the family and the school (Arendt, 2006, p. 187). This crisis has turned 180 degrees and, moving from the family environment and the (normative and legal) eclipse of the father—whose authority has faded “irreversibly” (Pati, 2016, p. 11)—has invaded the public sphere. The challenge to authority in its various forms and the proposal of different models of governance (in both the private and public realms), is married to two, mutually reinforcing trends, the rejection of established norms and the advance of subjectivism.

To these we must also add the emergence of the neo-liberal model, which feeds a narcissist mindset that severs existing bonds on its path to dominating our minds and societies. With the demise of political authority, the public sphere—placed in the hands of multinational companies and the financial sector, and deprived of political and societal protections—becomes less predictable. As the system undertakes to “privatise, by depriving,” to “reduce politics to mere technique” and to “train docile souls” (Deneault, 2018) who serve to keep the system alive without any responsibility beyond assenting to the governance of the market, adults appear to be entirely at the mercy of the market, of their own narcissistic natures, and of the angst that accompanies an insecure, and increasingly decadent world in which the societal protections won over countless battles for recognition are evaporating.

The real danger in contemporary societies is that the bureaucratic, technocratic, and de-politicized structures of modern life encourage indifference and increasingly render men less discriminating, less capable of critical thinking, and less inclined to assume responsibility (Beiner, 1992, p. 113).

With the degeneration of the political space, it is in new forms, emerging from the ground up (De Vita & Bertell, 2018), that we witness adults taking action to reclaim control over their lives, restore meaning to their existence in the world and put their individual responsibility into effect. They start with “that small part that is up to me,” but it is something that can have an impact on both the private and public spheres. The new clothes of politics have been shown for what they are and, in the face of supranational mechanisms and invisible agents, freedom seems to have been emptied of any possibility of action. “We are citizens of the world, but each of us is burdened by the weight of not feeling recognised, so that we can’t get our own dreams for our own lives off the ground” (5th year).

These young people offer a glimpse of a world in which “thinking and acting politically” can be shared in new ways, in which the inherent responsibility of politics—that which governs the everyday life of the social sphere—is instilled in the individual’s everyday practices. By bringing the responsibility for education to the fore, these students—perhaps unconsciously—reveal the profound link between politics and education by virtue of which every form of education is an act of political education, of education *in* politics and in favour of a certain shared existence (Bertolini, 2003). What is the weakness of this emergent line of thinking? Perhaps it needs to acquire a more complex picture of reality, and to create closer bonds between the individual and the multiplicity, between the private and the public, recognising that if “in the center of moral considerations of human conduct stands the self; in the center of political considerations of conduct stands the world” (Arendt, 2003, p. 153).

Does this mean introducing to a naive philosophy the capacity to think more critically? Guiding younger generations in reinterpreting politics in such a way that they do not choose to liberate them-

selves from politics, but instead free themselves from the very policy of “freedom from politics” (Arendt, 2003, p. 154)?

Are we walking a cliff edge? Perhaps. Certainly, in the longer term, the risk of toppling into the abyss—and taking the whole world with us, as Jonas illustrated (2009)—grows with each passing day. It may be that only younger, more responsible generations that have no fear of losing something that is already lost, that have no interest for an empty public space, that are searching for new paths to a shared existence with other beings, can find the courage to call out this disappearance for what it is.

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