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The Transformations of Online Social Life and the Contrast of Hate Speech

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[Review of the book: *Razzismi 2.0. Analisi socio-educativa dell'odio online*, by S. Pasta, Brescia, Morcelliana, 2018. ISBN: 9788828400301].

The volume *Razzismi 2.0*, by Stefano Pasta, educational scholar, social service worker and journalist as well, deals with the growingly important topic of online hate speech, in the context of its spread today in all spheres of social life, even at the institutionally legitimized levels, and in the digital communication of politics. It is also relevant for the field of media education, as it brings forward the use of social networks by young people and the creation of an “online sense of belonging”. The aim of this work is to document, interpret, analyse forms of online racism and to describe existing approaches to contrast it. Important contribution is also the presentation of an empirically-informed typology of online racisms and the attention to multiple forms and targets of this racism, among which, i.e., that against the Roma people.

The theoretical analysis stretches from classical sociological literature to current cognitive-psychological interpretations of the interaction between users and online platforms. The first chapter situates the discourse within the vast literature on racism and hate speech, starting from the early social psychology studies on group identity and the sense of belonging (Allport, 1973; Tajfel, 1981, among others) and from classical theories of authoritarianism (Adorno, et al., 1950/1993), clearing out concepts such as hate speech, bias, ethnocentrism and racism (in its diverse various forms, from biological racism to resistance to affirmative action). It presents research on the state of the art of nationalistic sentiment in Europe and Italy today.

The psychologically informed analysis Pasta proposes deals with the factors activating specific, automatized cognitive processes for web users,

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evoking intuitive and biased reasoning, in a context of increased speed. On the basis of a multidisciplinary literature review, he identifies the communication tendencies of the Web 2.0: the increasing subjectivity of culture, the speed of communicative exchanges, the banalization of the contents, the emergence of multiple knowledge authorities and legitimizing channels. These factors seem an update to the contemporary technology of those Thompson described in 1995 as mass-media effects on communication, vehicles of symbolic power. According to Thompson (1995), symbolic forms were influenced by the possibility to record and stock, to reproduce (thus leading to their commercialisation) and by the time and space separation between their production and fruition.

The third chapter focuses more specifically on social media, and on the group-building potentialities of Web 2.0, trying to answer to the difficult question of how relationships changed in the age of social networks. The reproduction of symbolic and relational forms in online public arenas entails that human information processing and computer automated cognition, implemented by algorithms, intertwine.

In the fifth chapter, Pasta gives his own empirical contribution by analysing a composite sample of 130 “racist performances online” (comments, posts) coming from administrative sources (complaints filed to the Italian office against discrimination) and recorded online by himself. For the analysis he takes into consideration the age of users and the more frequently discussed topics. It is not very clear which criteria the researcher has applied to define “racist” an online performance, the selection may be based on more than one expert opinion only in the case of the institutional sample.

The empirically-informed typologies of racism Pasta proposes are twofold: lexicographic and motivational. By using T-Lab software, he analyses the linguistic co-occurrences and, with vivid metaphors, connects the emerging clusters to the processes of negotiation of group orientation and boundaries. Then he mirrors this analysis to a qualitative-motivational typology of racist discourses: circumstantial, ideological, reactionary and oppositional racism, taking into consideration the meaning, intentions and types of argumentation employed by the authors of performances.

But Pasta goes beyond the mere review and measurement of racism; his pedagogical point of view leads him to give some answers against the proliferation of online racism. Pasta overviews the dilemmas of legislative and regulatory approaches, i.e., the conflicting views between contrasting hate speech and allowing freedom of expression. He argues that the clear approach of the EU in regulating discriminatory acts and online crimes is not so well reflected in the Italian legislative framework, which is still poor and insufficient. Various efforts driven by EU financing, under the line of countering hate speech, have worked towards developing awareness, strength-

ening the capacity of authorities and professionals to intervene and encouraging citizen reports in cases of hate speech in various EU countries (e.g. Light-on project, www.lighton-project.eu).

Adding complexity to the line of reasoning proposed by the book, the author also looks at the responsibility of online services providers and the distributed control they mostly use – by means of reports from users – thus limiting their efforts to actively monitor and counter hate-speech. Unfortunately, according to the data brought by Pasta, many reports remain unanswered. Web companies also seem to intervene little in cases of biased algorithm results, such as the automatic search results of Google, that the author convincingly exposes as an example. On the institutional side, monitoring centres and authorities, whose data Pasta also uses for his empirical analysis, experience an under-reporting issue (Fondazione per la sussidiarietà, 2010).

Pasta proposes a conversational approach to contrast the online hate speech, by approaching directly Ask.fm users in order to discuss and challenge their views on their own racist comments or contents. This educational proposal, although original, is not methodologically informed by other intervention methods for behaviour/attitude change, such as the motivational interview (Miller & Rollnick, 1991) or conversational approaches, that could be sources of inspiration as well.

From my view, a strong point of the volume is the attention given to the phenomenon of racism across targets. According to one of his main interests of study (Pasta, 2017), he raises attention to anti-gypsism too, by discussing many cases. The dynamics of interaction between Roma groups and other European populations have been the object of scholarship in the field of Romani Studies, who have long denounced cultural and institutional racism spread throughout Europe against this minority (Matras, 2002; Okely, 1992; Stewart, 1997; Tremlett, 2009) while deconstructing the image of difference, the status of a somewhat “special” ethnical group (Tremlett, 2009). European research, activists and think tanks have showed alarming levels of anti-Roma sentiment, strongest than for other stigmatized categories (European Values Survey based - Rovati, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2014; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016). Its propagation has been shown to be reinforced by negative media images (NAGA, 2013). Bringing anti-gypsism to the front, next to other forms of racism allows for commonalities and differences to emerge, while looking for the roots to all kinds of biased discourse.

Even if most of the book speaks to an academic public, practitioners will find particularly useful the review of the most common strategies to fight hate speech online, with indications and reflections for application. For example, in the last chapter we find (well explained and exemplified) anti-racism apps, empowerment/response campaigns for victims, storytelling

and counter-narratives, click-activism, and fact-checking, leaving the reader with important tools to help their anti-racist online activities. Still, a systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of anti-racist interventions would still need to account for large group effects, continuity of interventions, long-term effects, qualitative differences in results and context-specific factors, as other scholars have pointed out (Pedersen, Walker, Rapley, & Wise, 2003).

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