



NiSA

LIFE!

MOTIONS, MOTIVES, EMOTIONS

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University of California, Los Angeles – Istituto Italiano di Cultura di Los Angeles

Introductory note by Giulia Sissa (UCLA)

In 2011, NISA plans to hold its second plenary meeting. In Los Angeles we intend to discuss a pervasive challenge to our understanding of human life: the question of life itself, in its experience through science and knowledge, but also through a different kind of intelligence. Human beings are moved by pleasure and pain. Emotions make us act and deliberate and relate to others. Passions are reasons. Passions are actions. We trust that such a collaborative update, on a paradigm shift that is affecting all disciplines, will be timely and strategic.

Why timely?

Every day, we can hear, on the Internet and the media, a language that describes, and explains, what happens in the world, in terms of anger, terror, empathy, compassion. The increase in the use of this vocabulary has been staggering, in the last ten years. The same rhetoric resounds in the social sciences and the humanities. More and more intellectual historians help us understand that, in all major philosophical systems, be they modern or

classic, a theory of the emotions is far more important than previously claimed. Historians of revolutions do justice to the affective awareness of those engaged in dissent, insurgency and rebellion, and to the transformation of the self, indispensable to a declaration of rights. Political history demands the study of “emotional backgrounds”, against which to understand narratives and identities. Observers of politics invite us to measure the cost of underrating the passions – right now, when the passions are taking their revenge. The anthropology of the emotions, already flourishing, is finally connecting to politics. The sociology of organizations and corporate culture is taking a new direction by including the reasons of *pathos* in its rationality. Economists are intent on quantifying the quality of life; on pinning down a subjective feeling of happiness, the fluctuations of which elude PIL and incomes. All these approaches go far beyond the scope of emotivism, a path-breaking vision of human agency and knowledge, important in Anglo-American philosophy. We are taking an emotional turn.

Why strategic?

There are many reasons. Thanks to the variety of our many areas of expertise and thanks, *also*, to our interactions with different intellectual environments, we can include all the fields and all the learned languages which are involved in this turn. As we did in Naples, we will involve members of NISA and international scholars from outside the Network and we will cover everything from the economy to poetry.

The emotions are exiting from the disciplines conventionally dedicated to the individual (history of art, literature, psychology, psychoanalysis and philosophy), in order to become -- or to become again -- an object of attention in the social sciences. The diffusion of this language is made possible by various factors. The first demand comes from the neurosciences. Contemporary research has abundantly stressed the importance of emotional intelligence. It has also confirmed empirically the philosophical definition of the emotions as sensible responses, more or less complex, to the challenges of the environment. Interestingly, these ideas in progress reconnect us to the great moral philosophers of the past who, from Aristotle or Hobbes, consider the passions to be judgments, beliefs, thoughts (although hasty and stubborn), which occur in reaction to real situations. Accompanied by somatic alterations and pleasure or pain, the passions are essentially cognitive facts. Second, less mainstream circumstances that contribute to the “emotional turn”, are, on the one hand, a critical reconsideration of the degree of reasonableness that we can ascribe to liberal democracy, and, on the other, the obsolescence of Marxist determinism. Liberal political theorists tend to ground democracy on reasonable disagreement and dispassionate deliberation, while despising the interference of the emotions. On the contrary, to accept that the thoughtfulness of democracy is compatible with the acknowledgement of pathetic motivations, expectations or claims seems to make democracy even more democratic. Marxists, in their vision of history, used to minimize any form of individual intention or feeling, as illusory and irrelevant. In contrast, when naming and examining political emotions, we give recognition to subjective motives and experiences, especially in collective

movements; we admit that a singular, feeling/thinking subject is always at work, even in the social plural; and finally we refuse to deny that politics is made, essentially, of pleasure and pain.

Finally, a new kind of scholar has become more and more present and vocal, in all of these fields, a scholar for whom NOT to articulate thinking, acting and feeling would be just *simply* absurd. These are queer theorists, theorists of gender and race, and women engaged in all aspects of political theory. Feminist theory has contributed to unmask the Platonizing attempts to forget the material experience of the sensitive body. Feminine authors are massively engaged in the abundant scholarship that tackles the sensual, intense, energetic, and caring dimension of human life, from the most different points of views, and in the most different *diverse* contexts. This kind of political theory challenges us to rethink pleasure and pain, when it theorizes, as it does more and more forcefully, the imperative of recognition. Made urgent by cultural diversity in all its forms -- migrations, cohabitations, the disintegration and resetting of communities – the duty to respect other people's reasons, rights, habits and bodies is the only intelligent perspective for a civil globalization.

As citizens of the world, as members of NISA, we want to have a say in this process. Our Italian training and our trans-cultural experiences place us at a strategic stand-point. This is particularly true for this particular project: **Life! Motions, Motives, Emotions**.

Why us?

The language of emotions is a refreshing, creative, and promising language, but it also reconnects us to the great historians of the past. For Herodotus and Machiavelli, for Cicero or Manzoni, human beings were political animals – but they were political because they were pathetic. They suffered fear, envy and ire; they enjoyed pride, glory or greed – and these emotions, kept them going. Emotions moved them not to weep or faint, but to make decisions and take action. Individuals and society, leaders and multitudes: they all sensed and acted because of passions that were, for them, reasons -- and reasons not less real than power or money. Money and power, indeed, can become *real* for human beings, only because they are felt through humiliation and misery; arrogance and contempt.

The awareness of history is the strength of our education. We are not afraid or surprised that the past matters. We have learned how to navigate between Foucault, Dante, Pirandello and Pyrrho. We know that even the most urgent challenges become more intelligible when placed in a longer perspective – in the economy or in linguistics. More to the point, the theme we are launching for Los Angeles 2011, **Life! Motions, Motives, Emotions**, tackles a core of ideas that have always been dear to Italian culture. The experience of life through pain and pleasure: this is a concern that runs deep, from Lorenzo Valla to Giacomo Leopardi. So many voices agree that the world is the world of life: here is our project.

2011 is the **150th anniversary of the Unification of Italy**. Although the scope of our international conference goes beyond Italian Studies, we will seize the occasion. Passions are always crucial in the building of a nation: in political theory, in literature, in the theatre, opera in particular. They were critical in Italy. We will question the passions that made Italy, those that are still missing and those that are overwhelming.

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