

**Maurizio Ferrera (MF):** Your work has spanned across several disciplines, in particular, philosophy and sociology. What is the contribution that the philosophy of the social sciences can offer for a better understanding of social and political reality?

**Daniel Little (DL):** Reflecting on his role as a philosopher, John Locke said that he felt “employed as an under-labourer in clearing the ground ... and removing some of the rubbish which lies in the way to knowledge.” This is still a good account of what philosophers do. Philosophy and epistemology clarify the concepts and theories used by empirical social scientists, make them aware and sensitive to the importance of robust methodologies and spur them to refrain from dogmatism and misleading assumptions, not only about the empirical world but also about science as such. Contemporary philosophical analysis has for instance squarely challenged the key tenets of positivist approaches, such as the claim that all science must be quantitative and observational, that the social sciences are (or ought to be) no different from the natural sciences and that they should aim at unveiling general laws. Such beliefs were mere “dogmas”. Positivism has not disappeared from economics, sociology or political science. But the philosophical critique has paved the way for epistemological and methodological innovations which now inspire frontier research in these three disciplines.

**MF:** One of these innovations – which you have in fact pioneered – is the shift from methodological to ontological individualism, which acknowledges distinctive causal properties to collective entities, including shared mental constructs. Let us take “ideologies”, for example. In what ways do these abstract thought-entities produce recognizable effects in a real world made up, ultimately, only by individuals?

**DL:** Let us take a concrete ideology, for example, “patriotism”. This entity is a cluster of values and their relations: one’s homeland is “good”, it is right to make sacrifices to defend it, to give priority to fellow nationals and so on. Patriotism is clearly a collective phenomenon. It is generated from individual mental lives, but then acquires a dynamic of its own, for example by infusing certain social institutions and practices (school education of children, or military service) which in turn shape, locally, individual mentalities.

**MF:** But over time we do observe changes in ideologies and individual mentalities, regardless of the supporting practices. How does this happen?

**DL:** Because old values can be always challenged by single individuals or groups. Take the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, recently formed in the wake of police acts of

violence against some black people. This movement is not “unpatriotic”, but it challenges an assumption shared by hegemonic views on patriotism, i.e. that the government is indifferent to race. What the new movement argues is that yes, indeed, the law ought to be indifferent to race, but factually it is not, because young African-American males are more exposed to police violence. Redressing this racial bias is thus a normative duty which should become a key component, in present times, of the value cluster associated with US patriotism.

**MF:** Let us stay with the topic of racism in the US. However lamentable, violence exposure is only the tip of the iceberg: empirical research demonstrates that African-Americans are more vulnerable than whites in a host of different domains, from the labour market to social security. Can we say that racism is not only a mental construct, but a real property of the US economic, social and political structure?

**DL:** Yes, I believe so. The US still have today a degree of “structural racism” which has no parallel in other advanced democracies. Such racism has historically co-evolved with a wide range of social and organizational practices, which have concurred to reproduce and even amplify it. Take urban systems of mass transportation in the US. For those who live in inner cities – predominantly African Americans- it is much more difficult and to reach the suburbs where jobs are concentrated than it is for people who live in the suburbs, typically the white middle classes.

**MF:** In this case, an unrelated social practice – public transport- ends up supporting structural racism...

**DL:** Well, yes and no. When the Washington Metro was built, black organizations did voice their concerns about the territorial design of the network. But the existing power constellation – itself imbued with racist norms- inhibited changes that would have inner-city dwellers. Again an example of the causal impact that collective phenomena deeply embedded in societal structures does exert on individual choices and behaviours.

**MF:** Racism and more generally “hate speech” is, unfortunately, resurrecting on this side of the Atlantic as well. You have addressed this topic several times on your blog...

**DL:** This is one of the most challenging developments that North America and Europe are currently facing. National societies always contain latent xenophobic dispositions and mutual resentments and even hatred between social groups. What has happened in recent years is that opportunistic leaders have been able to activate these dispositions and built on them to

construct a racist agenda. Such dynamic are virulent, they tend to spread throughout and across societies very quickly. Hate is to politics what Ebola is to viruses: it triggers off life-threatening epidemics. Perhaps hate is a human property which has resulted from social evolution and still latently has the potential to prevail over the trust. This might explain why it is easier to activate feelings of division and separateness than it is to activate altruistic and other-regarding disposition: under certain conditions, Trump is inherently likely to be more politically successful than Obama. Once opportunistically activated the politics of hatred – like Ebola- may contaminate the whole political sphere.

**MF:** This syndrome has probably something to do with the rise of immigration flows and the economic crisis. We know from cognitive sciences that humans are more sensitive to potential losses (for example due to higher job competition) than they are to potential gains (for example the contribution that immigrants could give to pension funding).

**DL:** Yes, that might also be a hypothesis. In the case of racism, especially in the US, I think it is hard to explain it in rational terms. I believe that it has more to do with structural features of the economic and social systems.

**MF:** How could this virulent epidemic of hatred in our democratic societies be contained?

**DL:** A general question must first be raised: can we think of social practices and institutional designs which have the capacity to alter from above (downward causation) the mentality of hatred and racial (or religious, ethnic ) conflict at the individual level? Yes, we can. I am thinking of organizations and ideologies that are explicitly established and promoted with a view to favouring inter-group collaboration and understanding.

**MF:** Social psychologists have indeed proposed a “contact theory” of intergroup trust: practical interactions and mutual knowledge are able to neutralize or at least contain suspicions, resentments and divisions. In my research on intra EU migration, I have indeed found that what I call “EU-politan” experiences and cross-national contacts to reduce chauvinist dispositions.

**DL:** Very interesting. In the area where I live, historically characterized by high ethnic and religious pluralism, the early creation (by wise local politicians) of intercommunity organizations has prevented the spread of divisions and conflicts.

**MF:** What type of organisations, exactly?

**DL:** One of the most successful is ACCESS (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services) originally founded by some enlightened leaders of the large Arab community in the Detroit area. This organization has played a double role: helping Arab immigrants to adapt to the American way of life, but also promoting harmonious inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations through educational and cultural activities and social assistance open to all Americans. Southern Michigan has now the lowest level of violent conflict in the US. The ACCESS experience has attracted US-wide and even international attention, for example in the Netherlands.

**MF:** Perhaps we should bring this experience to the attention of our new Minister of the Interior... Is there any chance that initiatives like this can drive some political countermovement against the politics of hatred?

**DL:** The US problem today is that at the national level the politics of hatred and hate speech are accepted by the governing party, the Republicans and that the Democrats seem unable to react effectively. The local level is the only promising arena where a countermovement against hatred can take off.

**MF:** Well, after all, Obama's "yes, we can" discourse and politics grew out of a local context precisely, that of Chicago.

**DL:** Right. So I am worried but not entirely pessimistic. There are possibilities for reversing the trend, both in the US and in Europe. As I said above, ideologies and practices are fluid and amenable to change. Social reality is heterogeneous and plastic, very sensitive to contingent events and developments. The microfoundations of social processes are always individuals, with their capacity for political imagination and choice.



*An abridged version of this conversation was published in the Corriere della Sera.*

---

Photo Credits CC: [William J Serson](#)