ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AS PHENOMENON AND CONCEPT

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Introduction

The starting point of this paper is that the recent changes in public life all over the world created a quite strange situation regarding citizenship.

We have, indeed, on the one hand a crisis of the traditional idea of citizenship in opposition to new social phenomena. On the other hand, we have new phenomena that have yet not been fully interpreted so to explain their various aspects and dimensions.

We could say, therefore, that in the field of citizenship there is *a concept in search of its phenomenon, and a phenomenon in search of its concept*.

This paper focuses on the second part of this paradoxical situation: that of new phenomena that are looking for an appropriate conceptualization. "Active Citizenship" is the term that will be proposed and discussed to address the problem (cfr. Moro, 1998).

The crisis of the traditional approach to citizenship

As we all know, citizenship, in its traditional meaning and in an elementary way, can be defined as the belonging to a particular country, with the rights and duties that involves (cfr. Zolo, 1994).

More precisely, it can be said that *citizenship is the belonging to a national identity, that is realized through a set of rights and duties that rule the relationship between the state and the individuals or the social groups*.

Two sets of meanings are considered in this definition.

The first regards rights and duties, such as the rights to vote, to have residence, to obtain protection, up to the fiscal duties or the duty to enroll in the military. The set of social rights linked to the welfare systems can be placed in this first frame. The rights can be individual or collective: but they are anyway connected to the relations of civil society with the state.

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The second set of meanings concerns the belonging of the individual to a community that, for ethnic, religious, historical, cultural or *de facto* reasons, is institutionalized in a state entity. In this sense, it is true that the concept of citizenship, as a legitimation principle, creates in the community a separation between included and excluded people.

As we noted, this traditional idea of citizenship is living through a complex situation because of the very deep and quick change of some social conditions.

Some of the most important of these conditions are the following.

1. The double process of globalization and localization, that affects the ability of the state to give identity and to put together the civil society.

2. Migrations, that complexify the distinction in the communities between "who is in" and "who is out".

3. The crisis of effectiveness of public institutions in their ability to manage social problems, to prevent and solve conflicts, and to implement citizens' rights.

4. The lack of consensus of political institutions and representative democracy, as is showed by, for instance, the distrust in political leaders and parties or the dramatic decrease of electoral participation.

5. The crisis of traditional welfare systems and their ongoing transformation towards welfare mix or welfare community models.

This citizenship in transition is, of course, dealt with by the scientific community, and also by the political and social actors. Many studies, discussions and public programs on this question were promoted during the last years. This paper, nonetheless, will not address this issue primarily.

It is therefore enough to highlight this situation: new social trends are questioning the old concept of citizenship.

Civic participation as a new social phenomenon

As a relevant part of those social changes noted above, during the past 20-30 years the worldwide phenomenon of citizens participation in many fields of public life has emerged and consolidated. When we speak about voluntary organizations, consumers' associations, third sector initiatives, nonprofit services, grassroots movements, environmentalist groups, community organizations, and so on, we refer to a new kind of civic activism in social and political life.

As all of us know, civic participation is really an important fact, both from a quantitative and a qualitative point of view.

As far as the quantitative dimension of the phenomenon, I am convinced that we don't have complete and satisfactory empirical data, due primarily to a theoretical *deficit*. Nevertheless, many researches at global and national level, show that civic participation has a great impact. For instance, according to Wiesbrod (1996, p. 14), in the US there are nowadays about one million NPOs, whose total revenues in 1990 reached 10.4% of GNP. According to the survey directed by Lester M. Salamon and Helmut K. Anheier (1996, pp. xvii ff.), in 7 of the 12 countries involved in the research, the nonprofit sector employes 11,8 million workers, to whom we must add volunteer labour equivalent to 4,7 million workers. In these 7 countries, the operating expenditures of the nonprofit sector represent the equivalent of 4.5% of GNP.

From the qualitative point of view, it's enough to refer to the growing attention that the United Nations system and the international financial institutions are giving to citizens' initiatives. In the 1994-1997 cycle of UN World Summits on the main issues of global governance (environment, population, human rights, social development, women, urban settlements), the primary role of organized citizens in the policy making was strongly maintained. The permanent councils and commissions, as well as the agencies and programs, of the United Nations are opened to cooperation with NGOs and other citizens' organizations. The projects of the World Bank and other financial institutions have often as crucial partners civil society organizations.

In the description of civic activism, we should take into consideration a number of features.

Civic participation has a complexity of forms and kinds. As for the *forms*, they go from little, informal, local or one issue groups and committees to big, structured and differentiated associations, movements and networks.

As for the *kinds*, we could distinguish at least six "families" of organizations:
- voluntary organizations, engaged in assistance and rehabilitation;
- associations, that stress the value of togetherness;
- movements aimed at representing citizens (as consumers, minorities, women, people affected by environmental risks, etc.);
- social enterprises (services, cooperatives, communities, etc.);
- professional reform movements (of medical doctors, journalistis, lawyers, etc.);
- "second degree" structures (networks, service centres, etc.).

Motivations too seem to be various and complex. Five clusters can be identified:
- providing services in favour of weak or disadvantaged people;
- changing reality;
- promoting justice and protection of rights;
- enhancing solidarity;
- promoting knowledge of reality, an open-mindedness in front of the world.
These motivations are often mixed in the reality.

Regarding the *fields of action*, civic participation organizations cover a wide area of issues. With regard to Italy, it can be identified 16 policies in which citizens are engaged (cfr. Moro, 1998, pp. 73-82):
1. Consumers protection in the market of large consumption goods;
2. Consumers protection in public interest services;
3. Struggle against social exclusion;
4. Health services and policies;
5. Equal opportunities;
6. International cooperation to development;
7. Environment;
8. Care of the territory;
9. Civil defence;
10. Public administration reform;
11. Justice system;
12. Safety;
13. Information and media;
14. Training;
15. School, university and education;
16. Human resources.

In brief, it can be said that the *arena* of civic activism is that of public policies. It means that citizens tend to participate to the whole cycle of policies that affect them: setting the agenda, planning, deciding, implementing, evaluating. Organized or active citizens, in other words, are less and less mere targets of public programs, and more and more actors in policy making.

In the arena of public policies, the *role* of civic participation, can be defined in terms of exercise of powers. Five of them seem the most important:

- the power to produce informations and interpretations of concrete situations that affect people (from the violation of human rights to the quality of public services);
- the power to change the field of perception and the conscience of actors involved in public policies by using symbols (e.g. the perception of public servants about the strikes in public services);
- the power to promote the consistency of institutions with their mission (e.g., a service must serve users and not workers, a City Council must manage public problems and not private interests, etc.);
- the power to change material conditions (doors to be opened, architectural barriers to be destroyed, services to be built, etc.);
- the power to promote partnerships and collaborations between the stakeholders and to combine their different interests (for instance in the well-known case of employement-environment conflict).

Looking for a *common operational modality* of the various experiences of civic participation, I argue that such a modality could be the protection of rights, i.e. the use of appropriate technologies (civic action technologies) to promote the real implementation of the rights stated in laws or in the collective awareness, that public institutions don't succeed in implementing. This commitment to the protection of rights has different forms, two of which appear to be the main ones:

- the representation of citizens' legitimate interests and points of view in front of policies stakeholders (for instance, in the consumers policy);
- the creation and management of services (for instance, in front of the new needs of social protection not satisfied by traditional welfare systems).

As for the *results*, in a very partial and incomplete way (yet for theoretical reasons), we could say that the action of organized citizens has reached objectives such as:

- * new laws;
- * mobilization of human, technical and financial resources;
- * changes in the behaviour of social and collective actors;
- * modifications of mass culture and common sense;
- * definition of new patterns of social organization;
- * changes in the paradigms of management of public or private services and public functions;
- * modifications in political agendas, styles and languages;
- * modifications of the market rules.

A conceptual, not linguistic, question and how it could be addressed

The problem we face, therefore, is if the phenomenon of civic activism can be observed, studied and interpreted using the concept of citizenship.

It must be stressed out that we are not dealing with a mere linguistic problem, but with a conceptual and theoretical one. It is indeed very different whether the participation in public life of various civic initiatives can be considered as an expression of a new kind of citizenship, or whether it is possible to attribute to that initiatives the status of citizenship.

My opinion is that out of the semantic area of citizenship, the phenomenon of civic participation is condemned to remain a residual reality in public life and in political systems, while all of us know that this is no longer true. It is evident that other kind of definitions - such as "no profit sector", "third sector", "non governmental organizations" - cannot overcome this residuality (according to these visions, citizens are the ones that are neither the public institutions nor the entrepreneurial world, but not a positive entity).

Such visions, furthermore, are not consistent with the new situation, that is emerging following the crisis of the states that can be defined in terms of shift from government-centered systems to the governance context. Leaving out in this paper the well-known discussions and polemics on this concept (cfr. ISSC, 1998), it can be simply said that the governance context is the one in which public, private, and social actors of policies exercise, in an interactive modality, powers and responsibilities in the entire policy making process, at the end of caring for those common goods that are addressed by these policies. Among these actors there are citizens too; and of course we cannot consider them as "not-something".

Other definitions, linked to concepts as "volunteerism", "associationism", "social/collective movements" (opposite to institutions), "social economy", "social private organizations", and so on, in my opinion highlight only single parts of the phenomenon, often not the more important.

These are the reasons why I am convinced that a definition of civic activism in terms of citizenship is better than others.

But it must be considered that the phenomenon we are dealing with is evidently unlike the traditional citizenship. Main differences are highlighted in the following scheme.

TRADITIONAL CITIZENSHIP	?
rights and duties	powers and responsibilities
in the relations between state and civil society	in public policies (everyday life politics)
in the government context	in the governance context
electoral participation	civic participation

With what concept is it possible to substitute that question mark in the scheme above?

I suggest that we can use the expression "active citizenship" to identify the new kind of civic committment.

More precisely, active citizenship can be defined as *the capacity of citizens to self-organize in a multiplicity of forms, to mobilize resources and to exercise powers for the protection of rights in the arena of public policies, to achieve the end of caring and developing common goods*.

Two questions emerge from this definition. The first question is: is it possible to adapt the concept of citizenship to this case? The second question is: is it useful?

Regarding to the first question, it can be said that the concept of active citizenship is included in the fundamental paradigms of the general concept of citizenship:
   *   the recognition of sovereignty of citizens, also as an identity tool;
   *   the idea of a central and constructive role of citizens in public life;
   *   the paradigms of reciprocity and interdependency.

Regarding to the second question, I want to stress some features and implications of this definition of active citizenship.

-   It is not holistic: not all social organizations are active citizenship, not only in the obvious sense of the classical debate on the nature of collective action of Mafia, but also in the sense that a club of soccer sup-

porters or a network of motorcyclists can be nice, interesting and of course civil, but not an active citizenship expression.

- It is inclusive, in the sense that there's no organization that *prima facie* appears as an active citizenship organization that is excluded from the semantic field of the definition.

- It gives a representation of the phenomenon that is appropriate, i.e. consistent with the social trends mentioned above.

- It seems able to explain more facts than other definitions do, both about the nature of the phenomenon (for instance, that it is not a temporary substitution of state responsibilities), and about its role and its relations with other social, political and cultural phenomena.

The points mentioned above give, according to me, permission to consider the concept of active citizenship appropriate to the new phenomenon I described above.

Some final observations must be made on the relation between old and new citizenship.

The first is that the connection between traditional and new citizenship is, in my opinion, in the idea of a responsible, sovereign, anyway primary role of citizens in public life. Don't forget that the concept of citizen was borned in opposition to the *ancien regime* concept of subject (*subditum,* submissive). From a theoretical point of view, therefore, we can say that the semantic field of citizenship can be extended to the new features I mentioned above and includes both kind of citizenship.

The second comment is that while in the traditional approach this role of citizens had its higher expression in the exercise of the right to vote, in the new citizenship it is more active, because it regards, as someone says, the politics of everyday life. The electoral participation, indeed, implies an understating vision of the role of citizens: they don't have the information, the capacities and the link to general interest, so they can express their sovereignty only in the selection of people able to manage public affairs.

The third comment is that in principle there is no contradiction between old and new citizenship. The latter is indeed devoted to enrich and complete the first. In fact, instead, it seems that active citizenship tends to grow as the electoral participation tends to decrease (see also Verba, 1992; Verba et. al., 1993). This is, of course, a problem and not a solution; but we cannot rethink and renew citizenship without taking into account this matter.

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