

Digital citizenship: a way out of the crisis of politics?

Cidadania digital: uma saída para a crise da política?

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La cittadinanza digitale:

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ABSTRACT

In *La cittadinanza digitale: La crisi dell'idea occidentale di democrazia e la partecipazione nelle reti digitali*, Massimo Di Felice describes two fundamental transformations that characterize our time: the advent of digital networks and the environmental crisis. This conjunction would lead the traditional forms of politics – eminently human – to an aporia, since now, in a context of widespread connectivity, elements of other natures – nonhuman – would also act. His proposal for the crisis: to bring all together in a new and diverse common, the *digital citizenship*. In this regard, he recommends an epistemological review and the formulation of a new lexicon, problematizing concepts such as *society*, *individual* and *politics*.

Keywords: Citizenship, common, democracy, political participation, digital networks

RESUMO

Na obra *La cittadinanza digitale: La crisi dell'idea occidentale di democrazia e la partecipazione nelle reti digitali*, Massimo Di Felice descreve duas transformações fundamentais que caracterizariam nossa época: o advento das redes digitais e a crise ambiental. Essa conjunção levaria as formas tradicionais do fazer político – eminentemente humanas – a uma certa aporia, já que agora, em um contexto de conectividade generalizada, elementos de outras naturezas – não humanas – passariam também a agir. Sua proposta à crise: reunir todos em um novo e diverso comum, a *cidadania digital*. Defende, para isso, uma revisão epistemológica e a formulação de um novo léxico, problematizando conceitos como *sociedade*, *indivíduo* e mesmo *política*.

Palavras-chave: Cidadania, comum, democracia, participação política, redes digitais

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ONCE ABY WARBURG, a great art historian, would use the metaphor of the seismograph to describe the historian's role, which we could very well extend to that of the intellectual: just like this apparatus, she/he can pick up the vibrations of her/his time, record them, but never isolated, since at the same time she/he participates in the earthquake itself, she/he also vibrates with it. This is often why their seismograms – almost indecipherable scribbles–will only become clearer in times of calm (see Warburg, 1927/1999, p. 21, and Didi-Huberman, 2002, pp. 117-125). Massimo Di Felice's latest work, *La cittadinanza digitale* (*Digital citizenship*, published in Italian by Meltemi Publishing), is suggested as one of these seismograms: it grows from an urgent problem, from a “global” earthquake, announced by its subtitle: “the crisis of the Western idea of democracy and the participation in the digital networks”.

The emergency of the moment and its troubled and uncomfortable aspect would require bold and extremely disturbing work, which seems to want to take the price of its propositions. Di Felice starts from recognizing a problem, describing this crisis and the aporia of the Western politics, and goes beyond: takes the risk of this movement, by proposing not his antidote to the dilemma, but a kind of orientation from which we can see possibilities to get around it. The work seems to fulfill another chapter of the author's theoretical trajectory, deepening, reviewing or repositioning issues such as the “communicative dwelling” theme of his *Paisagens pós-urbanas* (Di Felice, 2009), or the contemporary relationships between environment and information technologies, main theme of *Redes digitais e sustentabilidade* (Di Felice, Cutolo, & Yanaze, 2012). But it is in *Net-ativismo* (Di Felice, 2017), his penultimate work, that the author seems to prepare the reader for what would be the motto of *A cidadania digital*: the advent of another kind of action and the participation of nonhuman elements.

This latest book by Di Felice (2019) can be read in several ways, and one of them is to conceive it in two main movements. In the first, the author aims to handle the problem by situating the reader: he briefly discusses the evolution of the web, from its earliest to the most complex forms of connection with its “network of networks” (p. 36), pointing emerging themes such as Internet of Things, Internet of Everything, Big Data, platforms and blockchain. He then marks two profound and converging transformations: the first related to the advent of digital technologies, and the second, marked by climate issues that would originate an acute ecological crisis (p. 13). These are, in fact, two complementary phenomena, and this conjunction is a fundamental key and a *tour de force* within the text: more than a technical change, these technologies

hypertrophy would mean a real alteration of our own “housing condition,” dizzyingly transforming the most distinct spheres of social life: a “transfiguration of the world” (p. 23) indeed. It is interesting to understand how the feeling of crisis relates to a change in the perception of ourselves and of the world, how the transformation of our notions of time and space, possible by these devices, eventually redefined our own sense of “common” and what traditionally operated it, namely, politics.

This new perception is precisely what makes us recognize what have led us to a crisis of such proportions. An important part of this could be explained, according to the author, by the Western idea on the human, which always narrates it as “the independent and free subject,” as “separate from the environment” and “autonomous in relation to technique” (Di Felice, 2019, p. 15). This distinction between the acting subject and the object receiving the action would have created an idea of ecology in which the human element is always surrounded by other beings, things or other living beings: the environment then becomes something, in the limit, defined and controlled by the human. This conception would not only be “unsustainable” but also “dangerous” and could be one of the cornerstones of the current ecological crisis.

That Western idea of human would resonate with our conceptions of “society” and “politics,” reproducing the centrality of a rational subject, not considering elements of other natures or other kinds of action than those eminently human. This is what would make it, writes the author, “a poor and simplified idea of society, made up of individuals organized in classes and institutions, located in urban spaces, states and nations and therefore separated from the nonhuman world, reduced to thing, ‘*rex extensa*’ and raw material” (Di Felice, 2019, p. 16). This is the keynote of Di Felice’s critique on the social sciences, which notably appears in previous works such as *Redes digitais e sustentabilidade* and *Net-ativismo*, in which the author problematizes, among others, concepts such as Weberian “social action” (Weber, 1922/1968) or Habermas’ “communicative action” (1981/1985).

Di Felice (2019) intends to demarcate here a theoretical crisis, the crisis of a model of thought that, to a large extent, can be unfolded from both an epistemological and a methodological perspective. Thus, he visualizes the need for questioning the potentialities of the traditional scientific method (marked by the clear distinction between a subject, a human, and its object), of the possibility to get to know in depth. According to the author, to rethink the whole nature of this new action made feasible by network connectivity is necessary. This is because the “last generations of networks” (p. 39), with their sensors, databases, algorithms, and geographic location systems, would make

room for the emergence of a kind of action that no longer suggests human being as its center; an action that, instead of being precipitated by it, operates in a network, connecting, on a global level, humans, territories, plants, animals and technological devices.

But how to rethink this knowing task considering other modes of leading role? Denouncing his Heideggerian heritage of appreciation for the etymology of terms, Di Felice proposes the constitution of a new lexicon, capable of accounting for the singularities of this other epistemological stance. This effort results in concepts, coined or resignified by him, such as “infoecology,” “act,” “infoividual,” “infomatter,” “datavidual,” “coworld.” This marks what we could describe as the second movement of the book, in which the author presents, responding to this new nature of action and to the participation of elements of various kinds, the main foundations of what he calls *digital citizenship*.

With the concept of “digital citizenship,” Di Felice (2019) describes a new type of “common,” which, considering this new character of action, surpasses the “humancentric” idea of society. Faced with the ecological crisis and the new possibilities of connectivity inaugurated by network technologies, it is necessary, according to him, to redefine the very idea of participation. The tone really is that of a manifesto: we must admit, in this sense, new actors, not only human, thus constituting “a new morphology of the social” (p. 20). And so Di Felice develops the central chapters of his index, introducing the “new citizens” of his “coworld”: rivers, ecosystems and climate (p. 148), holograms (p. 153), humanoids and robots (p. 161), “computer entities,” avatars and digital assistants (p. 173).

But Di Felice (2019) points out that this new morphology would not mean a mere “expansion of parliamentary rights and administrative forms” (p. 20), since to expand them would be to perpetuate the very humancentric characteristic of these forms. This is why notions such as “parliament of things” (Latour, 1994/2018) seem insufficient to him, given the contemporary crisis of “parliamentary form” and the advent of decision-making processes that, according to the author, would surpass human sphere (Di Felice, 2019, p. 174). In this sense, shifting the idea of “State” to that of “coworld” and packed by Michel Serres’s notion of “natural contract” (1990/2009), he proposes the concept of “platform,” an informative architecture that tends to transform the concepts of “representative democracy” and “public administration.” In it,

the management of complex interactive ecologies will require the dialogue between the various intelligences, which, besides the human, will form the network of informational flow networks: data, climate, economic flux, and territorial data flux intelligences. (Di Felice, 2019, p. 176)

Those who venture into the bold journey designed by the author will find, at the end of the book, what could be considered as his project great theoretical underpinning: *The Manifesto for Digital Citizenship*. Interesting synthesis of the work, it is divided in four parts and its first signatory researchers are from important institutions of the United States, Canada, Portugal, Italy and Mexico. By proposing this manifesto, inserting his reflection into an important circle of debate with renowned institutions such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology or the University of Toronto, Di Felice goes beyond critique: he thus throws himself into the field of proposition, of conceptual experimentation, of the form of “essay” as a possibility to rethink urgent phenomena, possibilities always subject, of course, to the unforeseen – and earthquakes – of our time.

The way he does it all is quite interesting: he has a deep insight into the present, resorting occasionally to important orientations of tradition. He thus shows his strong classical heritage – Roman as he is – without, however, being seduced by the misplacements of erudition. The task is challenging but necessary in our times. After all, as he brings in a part of his text, recalling Walter Benjamin (quoted in Di Felice, 2019), “it is only for today that the past acquires meaning” (p. 31). ■

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