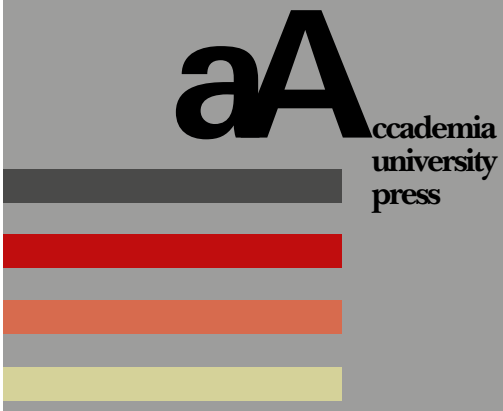
A Lonely Road. Collective Reflections on Political Solitude

edited by
Camilla Emmenegger
Gaia Gondino
Moreno Stambazzi



Nowadays solitude is everywhere. Increasingly similar to monads, we are losing the ability to build solid connections between us, and to convert our private experience into public matter. What is becoming lost is an «art of translation», the capacity to build bridges between private problems and troubles and common causes, something that may connect people and make them act in accord: that is, politics as an art to «bring us together».

The goal of this book is to question, in many different ways, the link between solitude and politics. It is the result of a collective work of young researchers, trying to understand, and to fight, their own solitude and loneliness within the academia. It offers a preliminary interdisciplinary discussion aiming to forge the tools to grasp this strange oxymoron, to better comprehend this simultaneously individual and collective condition.

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Il volume è frutto della conferenza
"Political solitude. Between participation, marginalization, and indifference",
svolta presso il Dipartimento di Scienze politiche e sociali
dell'Università degli Studi di Firenze,
e beneficia per la pubblicazione di un contributo a carico dei fondi
del Dipartimento di scienze politiche e sociali dell'Università di Firenze
e del Dipartimento di Culture, Politica e Società dell'Università di Torino.

© 2019
Accademia University Press
via Carlo Alberto 55
I-10123 Torino

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Attribuzione – Non commerciale – Non opere derivate 4.0



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prima edizione novembre 2019
isbn 978-88-31978-76-7
edizioni digitali www.aAccademia.it/politicalsolitude

book design boffetta.com

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About Political Solitude: Notes for an Introduction

Camilla Emmenegger, Gaia Gondino, Moreno Stambazzi

I walk a lonely road
The only one that I have ever known
Don't know where it goes
But it's only me, and I walk alone

(Green Day,
Boulevard Of Broken Dreams)

Nowadays, solitude is everywhere. Sociological data and surveys bring out that solitude is widespread among young (Larson 1997) and elderly people (Singh, Misra 2009), the employed (Vidalie 2002) and the unemployed (François 2015), men and women (Thomson 2017), people at the margins of society and educated professionals (Bpifrance Le Lab 2016). Solitude is so pervasive that it has entered the agenda of many governments and international organizations. The UK Government's decision to institute an *ad hoc* Ministry of Loneliness has been widely discussed and commented (Noack 2018), and it is not impossible that it will be imitated by other European countries in the near future. Some of these countries experience so many cases of solitude that the portal Euronews went so far as to draw up a list of the 'loneliest' countries in the continent (Euronews 2016).

Yet, solitude is not at all new, either as a social phenomenon or as concept. Nor has it always been given a negative connotation. If we consider it historically, we will see that over the centuries many chose solitude as a form of approach to God and, more generally, to the world of the sacred. Some of our ancestors felt the need to detach them-

selves from 'the world'. The case of Asceticism, a practice common to several religions for millennia, may be worth a mention. For the Latins solitude was linked to *otium*: a moment separated from public affairs, dedicated to contemplation and study. During the Middle Ages, one of the mottos of the Carthusian order was '*O beata solitudo, o sola beatitudo!*'[1] These examples, few as they are, show that there is nothing new in solitude as a concept or as an aspect characterizing our lives.

Nevertheless, if we compare it with previous centuries, solitude seems to have changed radically. Firstly, it has spread, becoming massive, involving very different social categories: as a recent survey has shown, the number of people who have no one to ask for help if they need it is increasing (Eurostat 2017). Secondly, it is not freely chosen as a way of life as it used to be for monks, but it has become a permanent constraint that people have to face, whether they like it or not. In particular, we can see that social conditions such as economic precarity and social vulnerability contribute to intensify the feeling of loneliness (Office for National Statistics 2018).

Although pinning down the causes of this contemporary phenomenon is outside the goals of this book, it seems appropriate to mention the multifaceted socio-political framework in which contemporary solitude seems to have grown. This scenario is perfectly summed up by Margaret Thatcher's well-known statement: «who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women» (Thatcher 1987, 8). This statement was meant to be a normative orientation for politics; now it has become reality — or more correctly, it has created its own reality. Indeed, the fulfillment of an extreme individualism in our time is accompanied by a related weakening of the social fabric: our individualistic societies — where the individual is the fundamental atom and the primary addressee of politics (and policies) — have seen a progressive undermining of social relations and collective bodies. A good summary of this phenomenon can be found on the columns of the *New York Times*, where the American sociologist Eric M. Klinenberg has described this trend as

1. «Oh, blessed solitude! Oh, only beatitude!».

follows: «Neoliberal social policies have turned workers into precarious free agents, and when jobs disappear, things fall apart fast. Labor unions, civic associations, neighborhood organizations, religious groups and other traditional sources of social solidarity are in steady decline. Increasingly, we all feel that we're on our own» (Klinenberg 2018). We cannot but agree with this presentation. Workers are a case in point: after a significant weakening of trade unions, they face the reality of their jobs and related challenges almost on their own. As surveys have recently demonstrated, only one third of Italians trust trade unions (they were 48% in 2006) (Zapperi 2017). Things are even worse for political parties, which used to be among the most powerful social aggregators and nowadays have lost all popular trust: in 2018 only 8% of the interviewees declared that they trusted parties (Diamanti 2018).

In this sense, contemporary solitude seems to be a (painful) consequence of a more general weakening of social relations and communications — or, more accurately, of their transformation: it is indeed a matter of fact that people are more and more interconnected, continuously sharing images and information. Nevertheless, more and more people feel alone: an image portraying a group of friends sitting at the same table, each chatting with his/her smartphone, could be an iconic picture of the twenty-first century. Literature on solitude and loneliness mostly agrees that internet and new technologies play a great role in amplifying this trend (Kraut *et al.* 1998), although they have not created, but intensified a long-lasting social reality.

The spread of connections seems thus to correspond to their thinning: in this sense, what is at stake is not necessarily an absence of communication and relation, but their quality, the substance they are made of. In this sense, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has connected the individual experience of solitude to a transformation in sociality: «Sociality, so to speak, is free-floating, seeking in vain solid ground in which to anchor, a visible-to-all target on which to converge, companions with which to close ranks» (Bauman 1999, 3). Increasingly similar to monads, we are losing the ability to build solid connections between us, and to convert our private experience into public matter. According

to Bauman, what is becoming lost is an «art of translation», the capacity to build bridges between private problems and troubles and common causes, something that may connect people and make them act in accord: that is, politics as an art to «bring us together» (Bauman 1999, 3). Contemporary solitude seems therefore to be tightly bound to a lack or change of politics: in this sense, the more one tries to understand solitude, the more one is forced to question politics.

The goal of this book is to question, in many different ways, the link between solitude and politics. As we have seen, solitude seems to be a very common and well-known condition of our time. If speaking of solitude with regard to the present time does not constitute a very original diagnosis of contemporaneity, it is rather less common to associate to it the adjective 'political'. The expression 'political solitude' is not immediately understandable, and is in fact rather difficult to grasp. At a first glance, a combination of the two concepts may seem like an antinomy. Solitude is by definition experienced by individuals, while the 'political' concerns *ipso facto* the *polis*, that is, a collective unit. All premises seem to invite one to regard such a research topic as contradictory, and consequently to drop it. But what if a multitude of people have the same experience, albeit individually? Can the *polis* still afford to ignore what takes place inside the buildings that surround the *agora*?

Before turning to the description of the content of this essays collection, it may be interesting to delve into this odd expression conceptually, trying to question it and to highlight its possible theoretical meanings.

Political Solitude: Theoretical Coordinates

As one of the most important political philosophers of the 20th century, Hannah Arendt, states, «plurality is specifically *the* condition — not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* — of all political life» (Arendt 1998, 7): that is, politics is only possible where two or more people are together. In this sense, if one considers the common meaning of the word «solitude», namely «the state or situation of being alone» (Oxford English Dictionary 2019), it can be seen as an apolitical condition, a situation in which politics is simply not possible, or thinkable. The apolitical nature of solitude seems to reveal a logical incompatibility

between politics and solitude: they simply cannot be paired, as solitude excludes politics, and politics implies the opposite of solitude. Speaking of 'political solitude', therefore, appears to be a contradiction in terms, as the two terms that compose the expression seem to exclude each other.

Nevertheless, as with many oxymora, the unusual juxtaposition of two contrasting terms can result in disorientation, opening different perspectives to consider a phenomenon. Indeed, the more one reflects on this oxymoronic expression, the more it shows its semantic richness and its heuristic potential. The two words can question each other: namely, each is able to show the various semantic nuances of the other. On the one hand, the adjective 'political', when added to 'solitude', can reveal further meanings of the condition of solitude, whereby it acquires a political relevance (first movement); on the other, speaking of solitude inside politics enables one to question what type of politics is at stake (second movement). In this way, politics and solitude reveal themselves as having a very high-tension semantic relationship.

Unlike other languages, English has a rich vocabulary to name the condition of being alone. Whereas in common parlance different semantic nuances can be mixed together (or not appear clearly distinct), emphasizing and differentiating them can be an interesting theoretical operation and result in a useful conceptual clarification. English distinguishes between several concepts: the physical condition of being alone (where no-one is in the same space with one, or when one is physically separated from others), called 'isolation'; the feeling of being alone, that is, to feel bereft of human companionship, called 'loneliness'; and finally 'solitude', which can be defined, in contrast to the previous meanings, as the fact of being alone in the sense of 'to be by oneself, to be on one's own'.

The political relevance of this distinction is asserted and illustrated by Hannah Arendt (1953): every different connotation is in fact linked to politics in a very peculiar way. As for isolation, Arendt understands the physical condition of being alone in the sense of impossibility of acting together: isolated people are politically powerless. As absence of plurality, then, isolation indicates here precisely the impossibility of politics in the sense seen above. However,