

The Psychosocial Dimension of Power: Analysis of the Davos Elite's Discourse on Globalization

By [Mario D'Andreta](#)

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Understanding for intervening

Constructivist and psychoanalytic oriented social research provides evidence that human behaviour is driven by the shared meanings of the subjective social experience (Blumer 1969, Mead 1934, Berger and Luckmann 1966, Moscovici 1961, Matte Blanco 1975, Carli 1993). This perspective can be used to understand the cultural drivers underlying the elite's political and economic action.

The understanding of these meanings allows to identify possible strategies of intervention to induce change and enhance democracy, social and economic justice, quality of life and civil coexistence.

This knowledge can be gained by the analysis of socially produced discourses on relevant topics such as globalization, intended as the current *common horizon of sense* that guides social action.

On the basis of these assumptions, I conducted an analysis of the globalization discourse of the World Economic Forum Board members (TNI 2015) by applying the methodological approach of *Text Emotional Analysis* developed within the Carli and Paniccia's *model of collusion* [1].

The image of globalization

The elite's image of globalization that arises from this work is not univocal and monolithic, but composed of four cultural dimensions corresponding to the clusters of *dense words* [2], obtained through the statistical analysis of texts under examination.

The first dimension is characterized by the following elements:

- a negative representation of the *other*, conceived as a featureless anonymous mass of persons acting solely on the basis of emotional factors (e.g. trust), instead of rational ones;
- the proposition of three main symbolic frames for the attribution of meaning to life experiences in the globalization age that are expressed by the words *world*, *time* and *grow*;
- the idea that globalization impacts over people's life and especially over that of *young people*;
- a form of thought based on genetic determinism and a pragmatic knowledge oriented to take possession of reality through technology.

The second dimension revolves around the three following aspects:

- the *messianic hope* in the dimension of bigness, represented by the international financial institutions (e.g. *African Development Bank* and *International Monetary Fund*) and by the *Big Science* approach of projects like the *Human Genome Project*;
- the social cost of the international financial institution's intervention represented by the risk of failing in the pursuit of the imposed ideal of 'growth, strength and power' based development, expressed by the threat of inflation and the imposition of living conditions to the limits of survival (e.g. Greece situation) that put under stress the European countries;
- the predominance of the economic factor in determining public policies, under the dogma of free market and personal gain.

The third dimension is focused on the following five points:

- the pursuit of strengthening the ability to provide, invest and manage budget and funds;
- a warped view of competition based on the search for *conditions of privilege* to successfully compete, that is strictly linked to the negative perception towards the taxes, seen as an authoritarian imposition that limits the satisfaction of one's needs;
- the consequent need of developing a social order based on the idea of freedom, conceived as absence of restraints to one's continuous expansion;
- the key importance of cognitive tools concerning capacities such as perceiving, recognizing, distinguishing, choosing and establishing, in the pursuit of this ideal of success;
- the increasingly relevant role of women in facilitating the access to the needed reforms to pursue this end.

The fourth dimension embodies the following fundamental elements:

- the role of supranational finance institutions (e.g. *InterAmerican Development Bank Group*) in producing a new sort of colonialism through the form of development aid based on providing sureness through financings in exchange of the gradual expropriation of local political and economic power;
- the effects of innovative financing schemes, such as *impact investment*, which despite being aimed at generating social benefit, actually becomes a way for taking possess of the last remaining fields of public intervention such as welfare, health, education and energy;
- the need of integrating development assistance recipient countries into the myth of *making money* in their regions;
- the tendency to interface solely with the business elite of these countries (lead companies' CEOs).

Emotions, relations and organizational level of the Davos elite

The central feature of the Davos elite culture of globalization that emerged from this analysis is the lack of democracy in the decision-making processes, both at relational and organizational level.

At relational level, this is expressed by specific patterns of intersubjective emotional and motivational dynamics. The former is characterized by the following elements: the provocation represented by the claim of imposing a specific dogmatic vision of reality, the control of the compliance to the obligations deriving from it, the distrust towards the *other* (due to its negative connotation and to the risk of non-repayment of the financings received), and the worries and complaints against limits.

These emotional dynamics reveal an approach to social relations oriented to the possession of the *other* rather than to a productive and creative exchange with it. This can be read as an expression of the fear towards the *other* and its unpredictable *unknownness*, grounded in the representation of it as *enemy*. This leads to the tendency of attempting to transform the *unknown other* into a *well-known friend*, a priori given and assimilated to one's own categories, in the effort of eliminating its unpredictability and the risk of its possible manifestations of *enemy-ness*. This, however, inevitably implies denying differences and missing the opportunities they offer.

The motivational pattern [3] is characterized by the prevalence of the *need for power*, as dominant social motivation, that articulates itself into three dimensions: a *hierarchical pattern* that counterposes elite and people, the *big* and who hopes in it, CEOs and employees and backers and recipients; a polar dynamic of *belonging to/exclusion from* the system of power based on the *affective dependency* to the *other* (expression of the motivational *need for affiliation*) induced by the logic of financial support to development programs; and a *manipulative dynamics* based on the contraposition between *appearance* and *reality*, as evidenced by the contrast between the positive image of development assistance policies and the expropriation of local political and economic powers produced by its exclusively financial logic.

As far as concerns the organizational level, the lack of democracy reveals itself in a dogmatic a priori conception of the international financial institutions grounded in a *mythical dimension* and hence appearing as immutable and little inclined to change and improvement. The functioning of these organizations seems to be based almost exclusively on the *social mandate* provided by the respect of socially grounded systems of values compliant with their ends and on a *substitutive function* in the delivery of their services (development aid and sovereign debt crisis management). These institutions are permeated by a *technocratic spirit*, by virtue of which *technicians* (the *experts*) substitute themselves to the users of their services, expropriating them of their decisional power. In this way, these organizations operate without a real commission from their *beneficiaries*, thus not addressing nor being held accountable for their needs, expectations and objectives and for the efficacy of provided services.

Possible pathways for change and development

On the basis of results of the analysis carried out, several intervention strategies can be proposed to improve the above outlined scenario. The implementation of these strategies, however, requires an active and accountable involvement of all the interlocutors of the global elite.

The main relation-related goal to be pursued regards the participative definition and implementation of new *rules of game* for social coexistence, that allow to contain the possible manifestations of *enemyness* within the relationship between *belonging*

systems and the *unknown others* [4]. This requires to configure the *other* not anymore as *enemy* or *well-known friend*, but as *unknown friend* to become acquainted with in a relationship of reciprocal exchange, creatively producing together for the common good. This model of social relations allows to unleash one's creative power (*power of doing*), avoiding the risk of transforming one's creative impotence into forms of *power over* someone or something (intended as a form of possession).

Regarding the motivation to power, the passage from a relational model grounded in the *power over* the *other* to the one characterized by the productive exchange with it, allows to by-pass the *hierarchical model* of relationship with the *other*, by focusing on goals and products of the relationship with it and on the development of competencies necessary to pursue them effectively. Consequently, also the dynamics of belonging, grounded in the emotions of power and affiliation, can evolve, passing from the model of *possession of the other* to that of *exchange with the other*. As a result, by overcoming the *possession of the other* as the dominant expression of power, the manipulative forms of power can also be contrasted (such as the current forms of development assistance that lead to the expropriation of local power), since the power becomes shifted towards more creative construction of the common good.

At organizational level, the main objective of improvement concerns the passage from a *compliance based logic* of action to the approach based on the *commonly agreed goals and products*, regarded as means of verification of the effectiveness of social action. This would consent to move from an organizational modality entirely grounded in *social legitimation* to one driven by the *commission* of verifiable products and services by their recipients, on the basis of their needs and goals. As a result, the recipients could increase their active role in the relation with *the technical function*, which hence could be oriented to integrate their decisional power, facilitating the development of their competences in the autonomous achievement of their own goals.

This requires questioning, in ever more dialectical and argumentative ways, the dogma of the development vision proposed by the elite and to work on the definition and implementation of alternative hypothesis and models, for instance aimed at the *re-embeddedness* of economy in society and culture, as proposed by Polanyi (1944) and Granovetter (1985).

In order to push the process of change of the Davos elite's organizational culture, it is necessary, for instance, that the beneficiaries of the international financial institutions change their attitude toward these organizations, acting as commissioning party requesting their services, on the basis of their specific needs, goals and expected products. These latter represent, in fact, the verification means by which to assess the effectiveness of these organizations in fulfilling the proposed aims and to promote change and improvement of their ways of functioning.

The precondition to advance in this direction is the change of the social image of the elite's interlocutors by overcoming the negative connotation attributed by the elite referring to them as *people* (referable to the etymological meaning of the term *plebs*), by recuperating the sense of the Greek word *démos*, referring to the *democratic governing power* of citizens. Thus reconfigured, in terms of global citizenship, the elite's interlocutors can regain decisional and self-ruling autonomy and boost bottom-up democratization of *government political systems* (in terms of both participative and representative democracy), in a perspective of a collective and shared construction of the common future. This entails

recovering the sense of *public good*, conceived as pertaining to the collectivity, in contrast to the *private good*, referring to an exclusive possession, that *deprives* someone of something.

The pursuit of this process of cultural transformation requires the development of specific competences, oriented to the development of an active and aware citizenship: this can become the goal and the product on which to rebuild the sense of the social purpose of public education and of its productive efficacy.

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Mario D'Andreta is a psychologist. He works as clinical and organizational psychologist and conducts independent research on the psychosocial dimensions of globalization and power. On his own blog, mariodandreta.net, he writes about psychosocial and socio-political issues concerned with social coexistence, local development, power elites, biopsychosocial wellbeing and acoustic ecology, aiming at promoting the development of a culture of pacific and creatively productive social coexistence. He can be contacted at mario.dandreta@libero.it.

Notes

[1] The *model of collusion* is a psychoanalytic theory of social bonds grounded in the shared emotional symbolization of reality (Carli & Paniccchia 2002)

[2] The *dense words* are those words that convey emotional meaning by themselves, independently from the narrative sense of the text (Carli & Paniccia 2002), such as, in this case, *growth, hope, big, freedom, crisis, limit, fall, advantage, need, threat* and *lower*.

[3] The motivational pattern has been analysed under the McClelland's *human motivations model* (McClelland 1987)

[4] Relationship on which coexistence is based according to the Carli and Paniccia's theory (Carli & Paniccia 2002).

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