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THE ANTIPOLITICS' DOUBLE SIEGE. NEOLIBERAL TECHNOCRACY AND POPULIST ILLUSION AS A TEST FOR DEMOCRACY[1]

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Abstract

The forms of the representative politics are in crisis. Besieging them are two diametrically opposed yet deeply anti-political approaches. On the one hand, the neoliberal technocracy, which grounds the government of the population on knowledge in terms of maximisation of economic value; on the other hand, the populist molarity, which assigns to the fictitious unity of a people - as mythologized in its purity - the seat of an incomprehensible decision. Still, it might be inferred that one very way to revitalize the democratic eidos lies precisely in the power to enhance the complexity and plurality of the social organizations, in the sole attempt to pattern a constant and never definitive composition of diversity.

Keywords

Democracy, Neoliberalism, Populism, Technocracy.

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Resumen

Las formas de la política representativa están en crisis. Les asedian dos enfoques diametralmente opuestos pero profundamente antipolíticos. Por un lado, la tecnocracia neoliberal, que basa el gobierno de la población en el conocimiento dirigido a la maximización del valor económico; por otro lado, la molaridad populista, que asigna a la unidad ficticia de un pueblo mitificado en su pureza la sede de una decisión incomprensible. Pero quizás la forma de revitalizar el eidos democrático radique precisamente en potenciar la complejidad y pluralidad de las organizaciones sociales, en un intento de composición constante y nunca definitiva de la diversidad.

Palabras clave

Democracia, Neoliberalismo, Populismo, Tecnocracia.

The double mask of antipolitics

According to the Non-governmental organization (NGO) Freedom House's report, the last ten years have witnessed a steady decline of the number of democratic countries, as well as of the very quality of national democracies. As a matter of fact, a grounding proof to this situation includes the success gained by the numerous populist movements in the heart of the West, and the emergence of national leaderships which have demonstrated themselves refractory to the typical forms of parliamentary democracies (Freedomhouse, 2019).

Having emerged victorious from the ideological clashes of the 20th century, the grand liberal narrative is now being called into question by the wavering evolution of an international community torn apart by inequalities and political, social and economic crises. The modern dream of democratisation appears to be withdrawing in the face of those specters which bear at once a past very well present, and a future deeply threatening. The global scene shows a substantial ambivalence: the freedom of capital is overflowing, insofar as it is redrawing the boundaries of the legal terms by its own image, exactly while the "populist moment" is reaping its own successes by re-proposing the image of a strongly identitarian *Gemeinshaft*, which is attempting to seize all the political energies at stake, all the complex needs of plural coexistence, in order to reshape them once again into a molarity as easily manipulated by the means of rhetoric. In an attempt to get a first insight into one general framework, we might infer that the reticular and fluid image of governance (Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992) is flanked by that of the *wall* (Brown, 2013), an almost dystopian structure in the age of information technology and low-cost flights: the boundless openness of global capital and the omnipresent neoliberal ethos are expected to be getting along with a tightening of borders and barriers of entry, resulting in violent acts of exclusion as well as insistent demands for security and expulsion against a stranger whose presence gets to be held according to time and events as an absolute enemy.

It will be useful right now to recall precisely the well-known definition of governance provided by Rosenau thirty years ago:

> [...] governance is not synonymous with government. Both refer to purposive behavior, to goal-oriented activities, to systems of rule; but government suggests activities that are backed by formal authority, by police powers to insure the implementation of duly constituted policies, whereas governance refers to activi-

> ties backed by shared goals that may or may not derive from legal and formally prescribed responsibilities and that do not necessarily rely on police powers to overcome defiance and attain compliance. Governance, in other words, is a more encompassing phenomenon than government. It embraces governmental institutions, but it also subsumes informal, non-governmental mechanisms whereby those persons and organizations within its purview move ahead, satisfy their needs, and fulfill their wants (Rosenau, 1992, pp. 4-5).

By disentangling the spaces, times and status of the forms as constituting the modern molar representation, the escape lines of neoliberal governance neutralize the mechanism of democratic decision-making legitimacy in as different ways as they are co-acting. Along a similar rationale, the insecurity generated by this openness engenders a response which translates itself in a demand for security; which turns to nothing short than secured identity watchwords, as well as to the often dramatic re-presentation of the friend/foe dichotomous dynamic.

All at once this situation urges to re-imagine the democratic institutions: on the one hand they are expected to claim the autonomy of political decision-making as discharged from the economic logic of pure competition; on the other hand, democratic institutions bear upon themselves the call to recover that flexibility of forms capable of guaranteeing effective participation in an increasingly plural world.

In short, in the contemporary mingled context, the fragile and perfectible forms of representative democracy seem to hold a growing resemblance with a fragile earthenware vase, which is all at once separate from the classical epitaph; that which is doomed to disappoint whomever fancies itself with the illusion of having carved on the granite of History, whether past (as the theorists of the end of history would have it) or future (as those who take progress as an inevitable action forward. A vessel particularly in danger now, wavering as it is within the flows of time, between two containers whose withstanding qualities have turned hard to defeat: neoliberal hyper-individualism and populist communitarianism.

Addressing the question of democracy today means, therefore, being aware of the (apparent) paradox of contemporary society, as characterized by the coexistence of a capitalist schizophrenia and a paranoid communitarianism. The openness towards a boundless exterior seems to be going along with the proliferation of identity closures, sectarian and armed localisms, in a device that does not show any signals of a coming explosion/eruption as a consequence of its contradictions; on the contrary it is rather

thriving on them, and in such a way that demands to call into question those assumptions on which the democratic project was borne.

The therein dissertation stands as a chance to supply a response on the matter, as grounded on my exploration of what these two words, populism and neoliberalism, contain and the risks which they carry.

Neoliberalism as technocracy

Neoliberalism's lexicon of interests transforms the subject both collectively and individually. The people – as the political actor – is replaced by the population as the object of government, while the figure of the rights-holding citizen is overwritten by that of the homo economicus, called upon to compete in the free market.

It becomes relevant at this point to note that, as suggested by Provasi, the neoliberal competition is nothing short than *a proactive* — and not merely adaptive — competition between a multiplicity of enterprises that are different from each other, and it is this competition that fuels the process of discovery and thus ensures innovation, economic growth and social development, even under the occurrence of the ruptures of the market equilibrium and *creative destruction* (Provasi, 2019).

As a point of fact, it is the competition that supplies the grounds whereon the eventual framework for evaluation and legitimation is soundly set, and in so doing it constitutes the ideology that informs society. This model holds little or no concern in synthesizing eventual differences; on the contrary, it casts its power to multiply them, in that it selects them by using a knowledge/power scheme that promises the economic optimum (Davies, 2014).

Within this framework, the boundary between public and private blows itself up, in an illusion of freedom that risks masking conflicts, inequalities, and above all unequal power dynamics. Subjectivities become then, "fractal": by way of multiplying in their differences, they endlessly repeat the general design, as they are in-formed by the same device of which they constitute a part. Each actor reproduces in his own individual way the mandala of competition. Each one, from the macro collective subject (multinational, NGO, State) to the embodied individual, is urged to make of its own specific quality a most effective weapon to compete with each and every other. As a consequence, it is now explainable why the governance model only creates surpluses, rejects, deviances: the centripetal drive towards normalization marginalizes those who are unable to adapt,

or do not change their survival strategy as quickly as it was originally required. Thus, it is that, aback to the inclusion/exclusion pair, — as typical of the modern narrative — governmentality turns to a by far more mobile and nuanced dynamic. Inclusion is defined as never definitive, but always conditionally submitted to the individual's capability to invest in itself, in the constant increase of one's human capital. What disappears/fades out in neoliberal capitalism is the very distinction between working time and leisure time, with a progressive valorisation and extraction of surplus value out of every instant of human life (Fumagalli, 2017).

The homo economicus is granted no definite position, whereas he is forced into perpetual incremental movement. As a subject of the Queen of Hearts, he cannot slow down even when it would mean holding his site. Provided that, it is a fact that exclusion is never total, as it rarely projects itself into the pure negative of indistinction. As a matter of fact, the techniques of governmentality are likely to include, even if it'd result in a differential, strategic, graduated manner. They do not exclude anyone in principle, but rather they selectively include everyone on the basis of a shifting compatibility, according to the objectives for which the governance's exercise is implemented (Tucci, 2018).

Unleashed to coordinate themselves, opposing agencies are able to set up the order of the norm/normality on the basis of the immanent chaos of their actions. Alongside the permanence of modern transcendence and the constraints of a superordinate decision, governmentality imposes a direction by inscribing it in the very immanence of events.

As a complex and multiform power device, governmentality distances itself from sovereign power in terms of its productive and incremental character. Yet, it also differs from disciplinary power on this regard, for it acts on the species body rather than on the machine body, on the population rather than on the individual, it is compelled to produce the freedom on which it feeds. By way of adopting the tradition of the medieval pastorate, the governmental device is ultimately engendered to take care, *omnes et singulatim*. It becomes able to act out not through the sharp distinctions of sovereign power, the right of the sword, but through the persuasion of a pervasive and incremental power/knowledge (Foucault, 2004).

Governmentality is thus inherently liberogenic: it imposes a freedom that coincides with the responsibility to conform in the best way to the winning model. But the latter, in turn, emerges directly from the practices of competitive adaptation that the free market space constantly imposes. The optimum required in order not to be marginalized is never the same, it is always something different from itself, as the very effort to

constantly adapt itself generates a different equilibrium, or rather a different normality from that which originally stirred the effort; henceforth stems the constant need to adapt one's own personal strategies. The *mise en forme* proposed (and imposed) by the neo-liberal *ethos* is therefore always momentary, transitory, uncertain.

In the wake of the above discussion, Aiwha Ong's anthropological reconstruction becomes particularly interesting. By navigating the constellations of the social, economic and ethical milieux of South-East Asia, the author has been able to identify the characteristics of neoliberalism in all their ambivalence. First step goes along the line of understanding the role of the exception within the governmental paradigm, which in the author's original application, liberates itself from its traditional reading by rigidly dichotomous terms, in order that it becomes able to reveal itself as the fulcrum of a complex and ambivalent power device. Rather than a clear-cut distinction, the exception must herein be read as an extraordinary political device developed as much to include as to exclude (Ong, 2006).

Along the conventional reading of the sovereign exception as that which indicates excludable subjects — i.e., those who are denied legal guarantees — Ong places a "positive" aspect: a decision to include specific populations and spaces as targets of value-oriented programmatic choices associated with neoliberal reforms (Ong, 2006). Rather than producing a sharp distinction between citizens endowed with rights and bare life, the exception multiplies social, economic and political statuses, by way of insisting on ethnic, racial and cultural fault lines that ultimately cross national and regional realities, to reach a point where the production of localized and renegotiable realities becomes effectual. Realities that struggle to fit into the rigidity of categories inherited from the forms of the modern. In this sense, the exception takes on the dual role of *neoliberal exception* and *neoliberalism as exception*. The two aspects do coexist, giving rise to an overall technique of biopolitical governmental power, acting on and through the multiple but opening and preserving glimpses of sovereignty and disciplinary power.

Within this framework, then, endures the sovereignty, often revealing itself in all its normative and repressive power, but renouncing — at least in part — to its role as a transcendent third party. Sovereignty becomes "graduated" in this sense, according to the author's felicitous expression.

Taken as examples on this regard are the technologies of zoning, analysed above all in the Chinese landscape. They are the result of "techniques of programmatic choice" (Ong, 2006) by public power, functionalized according to the needs of global capital, within the normalising logic of competition. In China, zoning has reached some of its

most refined results: Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and Special Administrative Regions (SARs, such as Hong Kong and Macao) interrupt the normal centralised management of the Chinese state, carrying out the "one China two systems" project coined by Deng Xiaoping in 1998. As Ong writes:

> In Asian milieus, the option of exception has allowed states to carve up their own territory so they can better engage and compete in global markets. Neoliberal calculations are applied to practice of human territoriality, or to the control of population through the re-inscription of geographical space. As the case of China illustrates, zoning technologies encode alternative territorialities for experiments in economic freedom and entrepreneurial activity (Ong, 2006, p. 19).

Instead of a hierarchy which is devised on those levels fitting the global, the national, the metropolitan and the local or, of a completely fluctuating and denationalized relocation of labour, we are witnessing a complex coexistence of sovereign, disciplinary and securitarian power techniques, produced by the intersection of actors whose legitimacy is granted by different levels of legal formality. As Ong's reconstructions show, methods of prison control continue to be used by transnational production systems. Whereas state measures are upheld by the administrative action of private actors, interested in exploiting the subjectivities as produced by the prison institution, such are the cheap workers for global capital (Ong & Collier, 2005; see also Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013).

To describe this, Ong uses the effective expression *graduated sovereignty*, referring to

> […] the effects of a flexible management of sovereignty, as government adjust political space to the dictates of global capital, giving corporations an indirect power over the political condition of citizens in zone that are differently articulated to global production and financial circuits. […] In short, "graduated sovereignty" is an effect of states moving from being administrators of a watertight national entity to regulators of diverse spaces and populations that link with global markets (2006, p. 78).

Inhabited and produced by divergent agencies, through specific, changing and localized strategies, this constellation of spaces brings out its quality of a product of an immanence whose efficacy comes to be its only element of evaluation and legitimisation. That which is able to endure, that which proves itself useful in avoiding marginalisa-

tion, or at least allows for possible resistance, can ultimately endure. Following this lead, NGOs, might very well be regarded as a "form of social technology", which in concert with other governing entities, defines objects, rules of action and strategic games of freedom. Normative transcendence does not disappear all at once, but is absorbed by such logic, becoming eventually a fundamental node within it.

A paradigmatic case is offered precisely by the Chinese context. What here lies manifest as my object of reference is the legal and social condition of the Uyghur minority. An outcasted ethnic group which has been forced by Chinese sovereign action into re-educational camps, located mainly within the Xianjiang region. Under the initiative of private companies, unprotected prisoners have been transformed into a reservoir of cheap labour for numerous multinationals. A resource as crucial for the Western production chain as it has involved those multinationals which are lobbying the United States parliament to prevent or at least delay any legislation that could possibly disrupt the production chain by implementing human rights checks (Xiuzhong, Cave, Leibold, Munro, Ruser, 2020).

Rather than a situated and definable entity, governmentality appears in its very making, as a force of constant actions and reactions distributed in a mobile constellation of agencies under continuous adaptation: from states, interested in acting as best they can within the framework of capitalist competition, to NGOs that are instead exploiting situated ethics of religious, traditional and cultural matrixes to provide specific protections to workers and refugees otherwise deprived of legal and political recognition.

As a point of fact, in certain realities such are those in South East Asia, rather than invoking human rights, NGOs appeal to religious, ethical or caring principles to provide migrant workers — too often victims of violence and exploitation — with bio-welfare that guarantees them the right to life and physical integrity, rather than those rights recognized by a universal legal status. These stem from a form of bio-legitimacy, understood as a new legal claim whereby health and illness become the legitimate basis for granting citizenship to asylum seekers. Such claims, crucial for domestic workers subjected to violence by their employers in countries such as Malaysia, are in Ong's words: something that can solicit more moral sympathy from Asian society than demanding gender and migrant rights. (Ong, 2006). As it is then, the fight for the protection and recognition of rights by the social agencies in defence of workers moves strategically, by applying the tools of communication and conviction rather than acting on a strictly legal level: that is, the strategy is to literally arouse sympathy, the moral sharing of the suffering of female migrant workers, in the population.

However, as the NGO itself admits, these claims remain on a purely moral level, precisely because it would be much more complex to get a more general and abstract type of claim accepted. The problem, therefore, remains that of a lack of formalization of the activities and political energies at stake, despite their ability to achieve concrete results in realities where the struggle for recognition is fairly far from turning easy. Broadly speaking, the Sovereign molds upon itself the face of an (economic) actor among others, evoked to defend and protect its economic interests and power in the best possible way. But assuming that this is true, then the question of technocracy resurges once again. The source of the legitimacy of decisions no longer becomes the plural set of values that the discursive and decision-making process of democracy is expected to enshrine and guarantee, rather the guarantee of optimization (economic growth, productivity, bio-welfare, progress), stained by the seal of expert knowledge. The decision passes on the technicians, who act as guarantors of the rationality of the choices, and thus of their objective, and unquestionable rightness. Albeit under very specific and defined conditions.

What emerges is a substantial instrumentalization of the concept and practice of freedom. In the neo-liberal regime, the latter is indeed stimulated, rather as a function of capital. As a means of extracting surplus value, rather than being a meaning in itself, it can also have an end. That is, it can be limited when the ends of the market require it. Tracing this limitation is precisely the role of what Ong calls exceptions to neo-liberalism: a series of decisions that, by graduating sovereignty, regulate the level of freedom of different segments of the population, producing docile subjects, functionalized within the chain of production. Yet, reacting to market organization, emerging subjectivities shape alternative social models and lifestyles. The struggle thus generates an informal and decentralized adaptation, in which inequality not only does not stop growing, but shows to be the engine of an increasingly unequal and repressive dynamic of subjectivation and subjugation.

The result is a plurality that overflows from the forms of modern democracy, which are linked to a clear distinction between citizens — endowed among others with political rights — and subjects excluded from citizenship, and an increase in uncertainty and insecurity. In many respects, neoliberal governance constitutes the most up-to-date face of the old technocratic utopia.

In a space of freedom, governance promises to guide the lives and choices of individuals and societies on the basis of the indisputable objectivity of expert knowledge, nevertheless It promises efficiency and effectiveness at the aggregate level (the market) and at the individual level (the individual as the bearer of interests). On these criteria rest

the legitimacy of decisions, which are therefore moved out from public debate, since it becomes a scientific discourse that guarantees their justness, as well as their conformity to the common good.

In this logic then, the clash between decision-making efficiency and representative guarantees turns all in favour of the former. There is no need for a composition between authentically different and plural entities, which legitimize the final decision, as long as the legitimacy of the latter rests on the unequivocal guarantee of the best result, nourished with technical-scientific knowledge.

Such an approach, on the other hand, is not something which belongs to our times. Without seeking the occurrence of the Platonic conception of the philosopher-king but looking shorty backward in time, the 1940s authors — one among others was Thomas Harding — considered the claim of parties to run the government to be unfashionable, since decisions had to be made on the basis of scientifically established facts interpreted by specialists. It was precisely Harding who assessed that the role of experts should have been binding, not merely advisory. (Meynaud, 1960; Escobar, 2017). For Meynaud, that of the American chemist would be an apologia, which implies the prejudice according to which the technocrat would have such qualities as to remove him from the politician's tendency to "amicably overcome human resistance" with accommodations and transactions. Strengthened in its superiority, which derives from both a scientific and a moral quality, the technocrat would instead remain faithful to administrative rationality (Escobar, 2017).

Escobar rightly highlights how the assertion that within politics compromise is a deficiency instead of a virtue, seems an ideological prejudice.

But even if we agreed with this assertion, the self-portrait of the technocrat would still remain idealised and, as Meynaud warns again, often belied by experience. Indeed, in addition to the morality and consistency of technocrats, the *technocratic self-apology* overestimates their talent and the extent of their knowledge, producing a *technocratic temptation*. The technocratic temptation characterizes who is driven and urge others to assess the appropriateness of a form of government with the criterion of their own knowledge. This temptation, therefore, starts from the unprovable assumption that the rationality of the expert is not limited, as it is that of ordinary individuals (Escobar, 2017; Meynaud, 1960).

The problem is not only that this assumption does not stand the test of facts. The real question lies on the reason why it does not hold up to the test of facts, and that is because, like any other individual, the expert is precisely no more than an individual. He is undoubtedly in possession of a greater awareness in his own field of knowledge,

but the error lies in mistaking this knowledge for the ultimate truth, capable of ultimately legitimizing the government of all. Scientific knowledge in other words is but one perspective, which, carried onto the political level, must be synthesized in the light of the plurality of interests, values and collective positions. Technocratic utopia, on the contrary, pursues a homogeneity and synthesis guaranteed by a perspective in which the competent decision would be able to identify the best solution.

Although under the intention of avoiding a rigid and authoritarian — at least in appearance — state, yet the neoliberal *eidos* embraces exactly this perspective. In it, the best solution, although constantly changing, can only coincide with the good of the market, economic growth. Blatant echoes of this approach are clearly readable in the positions manifested by various expertise. In this sense, the well-known report by JPMorgan, which in 2013 blamed the 2008 financial crisis on the socialist influence of the constitutional charters of European countries, gets to be paradigmatic. According to the authors of the report:

> The political systems in the periphery were established in the aftermath of dictatorship, and were defined by that experience. Constitutions tend to show a strong socialist influence, reflecting the political strength that left wing parties gained after the defeat of fascism. Political systems around the periphery typically display several of the following features: weak executives; weak central states relative to regions; constitutional protection of labor rights; consensus building systems which foster political clientelism; and the right to protest if unwelcome changes are made to the political status quo. The shortcomings of this political legacy have been revealed by the crisis. Countries around the periphery have only been partially successful in producing fiscal and economic reform agendas, with governments constrained by constitutions (Portugal), powerful regions (Spain), and the rise of populist parties (Italy and Greece).
>
> There is a growing recognition of the extent of this problem, both in the core and in the periphery. Change is beginning to take place. Spain took steps to address some of the contradictions of the post-Franco settlement with last year's legislation enabling closer fiscal oversight of the regions. But, outside Spain little has happened thus far. The key test in the coming year will be in Italy, where the new government clearly has an opportunity to engage in meaningful political reform. But, in terms of the idea of a journey, the process of political reform has barely begun» (Mackie & Barr, 2013, pp. 12-13).

In wake of this approach, the set of political and social guarantees enshrined in post-war democratic constitutions would be nothing short than a brake on the ability of the executives to implement those reforms as urged by the market. Within this framework, the executives themselves appear as a transmission belt between the *efficientist* logic of the market imagined by the experts and the legal-regulatory dimension of the reforms necessary to booster this logic.

The outcome of this tandem may not have had much direct impact on the constitutional texts, but in recent years it has undoubtedly influenced their interpretation and application, which is blatantly showed with the several reforms that have succeeded in weakening, in legislative and regulative terms, labour protection, welfare and even certain aspects of the political life and organization.

The populist illusion

Those who take populism as an answer to neoliberalism, its other face, might be right (Villacañas, 2015). In wake of our late discussion, the neo-liberal ethos attacks social bonds: «There is no such things as society, there are only individual men, women and families» (Thatcher, 1987), to borrow Margaret Thatcher's well-known quote. It weakens the sense of belonging and solidarity, that *munus* that runs through the community binding it in mutual debt (Esposito, 2020), diluting identity and belonging, social responsibility and solidarity. The homo economicus that emerges from neo-liberal ethics arises thus as an isolated individual, constantly called to bear upon himself the individual responsibility of his choices. He is compelled, by his own freedom, to decide for the best, where the best signifies solely the enhancement of his own *fitness*, his own chances of success. The subject of interests is expected to be liable exclusively for himself; whose fact means that as long as he pursues the objective to save himself, he must understand and seek his own ends.

Within such a changing and unpredictable social framework, the coils of the snake, in Deleuze's (1990) well-known zoological metaphor, continually threaten to crush those who are left behind, who are guilty of not adapting to the new normality. This boundless and continuous openness does nothing short than generate a sense of economic and existential insecurity.

There lies no surprise in the fact that the response to such widespread uncertainty is a demand for security, which also passes through the recovery of substantial identities

and rigid boundaries. This comes to be spatially witnessed as mentioned above, by the apparently paradoxical phenomenon of the new walls. As a point of fact these last may in fact represent a *theatricalisation* of conflict and the classic friend/foe dynamic, which seems even more tragic today, after February 24, 2022.

Back to 2008, for instance, Wendy Brown emphasised the relationship of identity between the macro-subject state and the micro-subject individual, showing how the weakening of national borders, and the progressive decrease in the capacity of state decisions to affect national life independently of global pressures, reverberate negatively in citizens' sense of security and identity. It is precisely insecurity that is likely to lead to citizens" demands for greater certainty on the one hand, and governments" nationalist responses on the other (Brown, 2010).

If the lexicon of interests unites everyone in a pulverized and generalized clash, the lexicon of identity unites fragmented and insecure individuals under a single banner, endowing them with the unifying sense of one great enemy and a noble mission, as tentative as it is hard to reject.

Now, on a closer look, within its various incarnations, populism acts precisely in this way: it provides a community and an otherness, both gigantic, definitive molars, capable of giving meaning to the pulverised existences of those who are, or feel, marginalised.

On regard to populism, it has been emphasised the enormous polysemy and uncertainty of meaning. They derive from the fact that the term has a history of usage dated back to the mid-19th century as applied for very different social and political phenomena: from Russian *narodničestvo* to 19th century American populism, to the so-called neo-populism, passing through Latin American experiences. The word has come across such a wide range of applications that it is difficult to provide a final definition; and those attempts to define it have extended from ideology to mentality, to a political style to a type of discourse (Palano, 2017).

Without doubt, one of the most effective and successful readings on the subject are that of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The two authors understand populism as a rhetorical device that aggregates heterogeneous democratic demands, linking them through a chain of equivalences, to an empty signifier and a "first-tier" leader, who is in turn able to embody the unity of the people. The entire process thus represents the performative construction of the people itself, which does not pre-exist the chain of signifiers, but is only constituted at the moment when the plurality (of questions) merges into a single image, finding expression in it.

It is precisely within this image that a particular conflictual model of politics holds its place of birth. A model wherein the construction of the people is embedded in an affective, libidinal, emotional involvement: the "*We*" is constitutively in conflict with a they, with an otherness, for the conquest of hegemony. In many respects this conflict recalls — by bringing it back to the discursive level and thus renouncing the link with the element of objectivity provided by Hobbesian negative anthropology — the great optical illusion of Leviathan. Even in that representation, the Sovereign appears as a molar subject, whose existence is indistinguishable from the unity of his subjects, which he himself ensures through the immunization of the principle of violence and uncertainty that runs through the multitude. The Sovereign himself does not exist without the people over whom he exercises his power, yet without the Sovereign the people who provide him with that power, and with it his own consistency, would reduce themselves to nothing short than a multitude in eternal conflict.

Exactly as in the image of Leviathan, the people of populism can thus be represented as a kind of optical illusion. Only in this case, unity is conferred by a name, that is, by what Laclau calls along the lead of Lacanian psychoanalytic studies, an *empty signifier*: something that embodies in its particularity an unrealizable fullness, since «the category of totality can never be eradicated, but it remains, as a failed totality, a horizon and not a foundation» (Laclau 2005, p. 64).

The fact is that all of populism's responses in this way risk proving themselves illusory, for the people — the sole and ultimate repository of upon which these responses' legitimacy stand — coincide with the illusion of totality. If the totality subsists given that the aggregate of questions subsists, the answer to the aggregate questions must never be reached. If the populist questions were to be satisfied, the people would disintegrate in conjunction with them, returning to the complexity and plurality of the institution. In this sense, populism is fully traceable to a vision or project of *reductio ad unum* that holds more than one link to the modern narrative. It is no coincidence that Laclau and Mouffe precisely recover the dichotomous category friend/enemy, of Schmittian derivation, to explain its dynamics (Schmitt, 1922). It should be borne in mind that the enemy, in this theoretical context, is the one who endangers the very existence of the community. As it is, this opposition, as placed under Schmitt's claim at the origin of the *political*, is radical, existential and therefore non-composable. The political order of Schmitt's exception begins with a mortal danger that can only unite the people in the total exclusion of what is designated as other than itself.

The full extent of this unbridgeable fracture is present in the phenomena of neo-populism and is what generates a widespread distrust of both political institutions and official expertise. This also explains the obvious link that unites these phenomena to the so-called conspiracy: what unites them is the fear of one great enemy of all the "good people", the victims of a total conspiracy against them.

Rather than a precise definition of the concept — a long-standing issue that is herein impossible to address fully — it becomes interesting to dwell on some common characteristics that different authors, from different perspectives, have emphasized on regard to populist phenomena. These seem to be linked to the idea of purity: a "pure people" is the fundamental object of populism, and it is opposed to an equally unified enemy, the incarnation of absolute evil.

Whether this enemy is internal to society (a corrupt institutional and bureaucratic system, corrupt elites) or external to it (the xenophobic fear of an ethnic invasion), it does not matter much, as it is only the signifiers that change. The underlying dynamic remains the same: that of an unbridgeable and non-synthesizing fracture between a we who are the depository of an uncompromising truth and justice, and a corrupt and chaotic otherness.

In this sense, the innermost core of populism can be said to be formed by a *unanimist nostalgia* (Escobar 2017). Such is the dream that feeds the populist imaginary: that of regenerating a primal unity, a natural harmony, a shared identity, a lost community. At the expenses of an oppressive molarity, all-inclusive and exclusionary at once, which sacrifices as much the positions of excluded enemies as the real interests of the parts that make up the "body" of the people. This organic conception of the people does ultimately refer to a conception of politics that adopts the lexicon, the watchwords and the myths of democracy. In other words, populism is based on democracy's principle of legitimization, i.e., popular sovereignty. But it takes it to extremes, interpreting it in a fundamentalist key. Therefore, Meny and Surel claim populism is a sort of fever, resulting from an excess, not a defect of democracy. And more to this they consider populism to ultimately be identified with the properly democratic component of that composite regime that is constitutional democracy: the principle of the rule of the people. But this principle, if not contained and curbed by the rule of law, runs the risk of deploying perverse effects. If the people claim to sovereignly dispose even of those rights and freedoms that represent the conditions and preconditions of democracy, populism turns from being a useful "corrective" into a serious "threat" to the democratic institutions themselves. (Escobar, 2017; Meny & Surel, 2002).

As a matter of fact, populism has also been regarded as a kind of shadow of democracy, which is inevitably bound to cast out (Canovan, 2002). For Urbinati (2013), it even takes on the connotation of a parasite capable of developing within the democratic organism.

Have we been allowed few words only, we might very well state, that the organic concept of the majority invoked by populism constitutes the dark face of the democratic principle. It is an extremization of its principles, which paradoxically is capable of reversing its logic. This is because the organic molarity of the people is based on an unbridgeable divide that, by entrusting all legitimacy to a party that presents itself as the whole, eliminates dissent.

Yet, as Norberto Bobbio pointed out, as long as democracy bases the legitimacy of its decisions on consensus, then it cannot possibly do so without dissent. If the majority decision had the power to conceal differences indefinitely, the democratic mechanism itself would be overwhelmed. The majority cannot be exchanged for the totality. The price would be that dictatorship of the majority feared by Tocqueville (2003). Worse still, the phantasmal molarity of the people incurs in the risk of hiding the diversity of the instances that constitute it, and thus alluring the majority against itself. Different problems require, after all, different solutions, and the task of political confrontation must be the search for concrete and specific answers, the decision among ways, priorities and the actual distribution of resources.

We therefore find ourselves in the position to still bear upon us the following question: how to deal with dissenters, once we admit unanimous consent is impossible and that where someone claims it exist, it cannot be other than organised, manipulated, manoeuvred, and therefore fictitious? Is it still consenting the one of those who, according to Rousseau, are obliged to be free? In other words, what value bears consent where dissent must be forbidden? (Bobbio, 1995). We could go on to ask, as long as it has been decided that the majority counts as the totality and that it cannot but be right, what is the point of dissent, and thus the existence of dissenters? What, in other words, do we make of the spurious element constituted by minorities who do not recognize themselves in the (mythical) representation of a pure people?

Against purity: democracy as composition

The people evoked by populism resembles a destructive and deconstructive force, incapable by its very nature of producing effective and concrete answers for the dem-

ocratic questions from which it springs. The construction of the People depends on the non-satisfaction of the questions and the rhetorical illusion of their equivalence. It follows then, that the political subject evoked by it also takes on a phantasmal and contradictory character. Born out of the dissatisfaction of unanswered social questions, it remains tied to the persistence and possible expansion of those dissatisfactions; the mythical people of populism deconstruct without ordering.

On the contrary, democracy is something as complex as it is fragile. It relies as much on institutions as on the possibility of questioning them. If democratic action is a source of legitimation of real, concrete choices, the discourse that precedes and produces the decision must be based on the existence and recognition of different, non-unique actors. The legitimacy of such decisions, if it is to be an effective response to real demands, cannot disregard their heterogeneity.

This is why institutional complexity is incompatible with both the neoliberal lexicon of interests, steeped in technocratic governmentality, and the rigid identity dichotomy of populism. Both solutions — neoliberalism and populism — imply an anti-political twist. The former, just like the technocratic ideology, of which it constitutes one face (the seemingly kinder one) subordinates every possible value to the economic one, causing a centrifugal acceleration towards an ultra-individualist logic, which disintegrates the very possibility of political dialogue. The power-knowledge that guides individual subjects through conviction towards their own salvation can only negate any political discussion. It is expert knowledge that legitimizes choices, starting from an objective optimization that assumes a normality whose nature is by no means neutral.

In contrast, the populist solution denies political conflict through its very radicalization. The construction of the people reduces the conflict to an irreducible head-on clash with no possibility of synthesis between a part that presents itself as the whole — the repository of truth and justice by definition (the mythical people) — and an inexorably negative part (the enemy), whose purpose is to threaten the very existence and freedom of the former. Since dealing with those who represent the absolute threat is impossible, the idea of compromise, inherently central to the complex functioning of the forms of institutional democracy, takes on an irredeemably sinister value.

Thus, it has been hitherto analysed how no democratic question can really be answered, and whose implication might be advanced to consist of two intertwined/intersecting reasons. Firstly, the existence of the chain of aggregate questions stems the very construction of the people, which would weaken to the point of disintegration, leaving

room for the forms of the institution, if those questions were to be answered. Secondly, at a more pragmatic level, the very concordance on which the chain of signifiers is based is illusory: the questions that form the popular identity are not necessarily compatible with each other, indeed they are much more often contradictory and competing. A resolution of the needs and demands underlying them would imply complex reasoning on the division of available resources, the priority to be accorded to each demand, and the need to sacrifice at least some of the different interests at stake. Here it raises once again how concrete answers, require a compromising discourse, in the noblest (and most authentically political) sense of the term: an agreement downstream — and not upstream — between bearers of divergent visions and interests, which strives to understand the complexity of reality, without sublimating it into an illusorily simplified unity.

Such a discourse can only be addressed through an institutional structure that allows for the expression and representation of diversity, complexity and the multiple. What is needed, in other words, is an institutional structure that allows for both authentic conflict as well as the resolution of that conflict into authentic decisions.

As Mény and Surel write, unlike technocracy, democracy knows no certainties or promised lands, (2004). This point of difference further distances democracy from populism. An authentically democratic discourse cannot know the fullness of a single and definitive locus of great legitimation, whether it is represented by the techno-scientific (and economic) elite or by the overall body of a people organically unified to its leader. In Claude Lefort"s terms, borrowed from Merlau-Ponty, democracy is that political regime that ontologically dispenses with a point of *surplomb*, of overflight, relying by definition on the uncertainty of a place of power - and of decision - that remains empty. But it is precisely this emptiness that allows, and at the same time demands, participation and complexity (Lefort, 1986).

Rethinking democracy in this framework, then, means first and foremost to closely analyse the localized practices and solutions that innervate global reality. To reactivate the democratic eidos in this framework, it is therefore necessary to look closely at the practices of power and resistance that innervate global reality.

The dissatisfaction that undermines the current institutional order, cannot be addressed either by a return to the molarity of a mythologized people or by recourse to technocratic knowledge that claims to have got already all the necessary answers. Populism and neo-liberal technocracy represent a double challenge to democracy, the challenge being understood as something that aims to weaken, but also to test someone or something that one cares about, to spur one to give one's best: challenge as a threat,

therefore, but also as opportunity (Caramani 2022). The double challenge is thus to reactivate the project of constant *autonomization* of political freedom, proper to the democratic eidos, respecting and with the help of the heterogeneous political energies that in the practices of resistance and subjectivation animate the constellation of contemporary milieux. The willingness to rethink the democratic eidos must, then, lead to a resolution which looks forward to coming to terms with the multiplicity of the network, avoiding to neglect the unequal dynamics of power. This would mean the simple neutralization of the conflicts and political energies running throughout society, animating forms of subjectivity in ferment. A possible answer may come from the practices of direct democracy. As early as the 1980s, Bobbio recalled that, when political democracy was achieved, it became clear how the political is ultimately one part of a much wider sphere: the sphere of society as a whole; and that there is no political decision which is not conditioned by what happens in civil society (Bobbio, 1984).

Therefore, the very assessment of the degree of democratic development of a country, according to the author, should change. Rather than referring to the number of people with the right to vote, it should consist of the number of seats other than political ones in which this right is exercised. In short, democracy as seriously taken, demands a topological expansion and a qualitative and quantitative increase in participation. In this sense, all those experiences of participation such as social forums etc. becomes interesting subject matters. After all, it is precisely the participation of different subjectivities and the valorisation of differences that soundly constitute the basic values reclaimed by the activists. As a matter of fact, they define their own individual participation, building a conception of militancy within which, in contrast to the past totalising models, individual experiences and capabilities are positively valued. Traditionally, the individualisation of "postmodern" cultures has been seen as an obstacle to collective action, isolating individuals from the sources of collective solidarity and accentuating selfishness and egocentrism. Instead, globalization movements seem to develop a type of militancy able to take subjectivity in consideration (Della Porta, 2005).

Of course, such forms of mediation and settlement cannot find themselves unburdened of any issues and risks. The activists often point out how the discussion can be monopolized by better organized groups. The fear of many participants, as Della Porte reconstructs, is that someone might "put the cap" on collective activities. The disparity in discursive abilities and differences in the possibility of participation mean that decisions are often taken not only informally but also *elitistically*. Participatory democracy basically poses a number of other "paradoxical" questions. As Luigi Bobbio points out,

does everyone should participate in participatory democracy? Or just someone? Here lies its main paradox: participatory democracy aspires to include everyone, but actually it only succeeds in involving a small fraction of concerned population. How can this contradiction be resolved, avoiding the distortions that it may ensue? (Bobbio, 2006).

The practice of democratic organizations has devised various ways to address these issues, fostering inclusive participation that ensures undistorted inclusion in debate and decision-making. But what is useful to emphasize here is the role that such an organizational force can assume within the current framework, which is crushed between technocratic neutralization and populist molarities. As Alberto Magnaghi writes, participatory democracy can be a tool for the *liberation* of individual and collective daily life from the overdeterminations and compulsions of the market and an important antidote to the imperial-military models of economic globalisation (Magnaghi, 2006). In this liberating role, the option between immanence and transcendence in the organizational practices of democratic participation returns central. Should democracy be something that arises exclusively from below, dealing with specific and perhaps local issues? Or should it retain a hierarchical and pyramidal dimension, capable of defining decisions? In other words, before asking what the organization should be, one is required to find out what the organization truly is. Compelling in this sense is the perspective proposed by Rodrigo Nunes. For Nunes, the very contraposition between organizational verticality and horizontality must be overcome, in favour of a point of view "internal" to the organization that advocates for the participatory, and therefore political, dimension of the participating subject, to the detriment of any mechanical reading of the social:

> In a nutshell, this gesture consists in resituating the observer in the world regarding which an observation is made, exposing the falsehood of assuming a contemplative stance. If we are not outside the world that we describe, but inside or alongside it, not only are the descriptions we make themselves actions within that world, our actions in general have effects on what is described. In second-order cybernetics, this amounted to making the observer who describes a system into the object of a description by another observer, thus showing that all descriptions are partial perspectives within a shared world (Nunes, 2022, p. 11).

The parallel-set double challenge represented by the technocratic face of governmentality and the populist molarities can be summed up in the need to reject any temptation of an "Archimedean lever", capable of relieving "humanity" once and for all of

its laborious and constant confrontation with reality. By this I intend to mean not only — and not so much — a material reality which seriously retains its concrete weight as geopolitical discourse and recent events have revealed — but above all the friction that otherness itself generates within any social organization. Especially in a complex framework, characterized by a growing polytheism of values and forms of life, imagining a complex participation, which avoids thinking of reality as univocal and making legitimacy rest on a single principle — elitist/sapiential or populist — becomes all the more important the more difficult it gets. This does not imply that top-down and transcendent forms of organization would be opted out in favour of an impossible total spontaneism. Rather, it means recognizing the plurality of forms that the concept of organization itself contains, and at the same time the dynamic role that subjectivities assume in it. As Nunes writes again:

The point is not, however, to dismiss the notion of social self-organisation, but to reframe it in the only way in which we can experience it: from the inside. From this perspective, it cannot be separated from what we and others do, and therefore does not exclude but rather demands a politics that implicates itself subjectively; a politics in the first-person plural or a politics with the subject in (2022, p. 14).

Recognizing the authentically plural dimension of society, inherent in the democratic eidos, does not lead to the removal of the necessary transcendence which the forms must assume at some point, in order to save themselves from the destructive impulse that generated them. On the contrary, it must promise the acceptance of the immanent, uncertain and historical feature of every form of organization. Ultimately, society's plural dimension is set to escape the machinic logic of technocratic objectivity, and the irredeemable conflicting character inherent to the populist *identitarianism* by widening the eyes to behold the land of the possible.

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