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DEMOCRACY – OR A SHORT HISTORY OF POWERLESSNESS

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Abstract: Our democracies presently face a set of unique challenges. In this article we argue that the current crisis needs to be understood as resulting from the convergence of two historical transformations: the paradigm of boundlessness; and what we term "endividualismo", a novel mutation of individualism in the context of the financial age. The result is a novel political reality where individual rights are ever-expanding and the opportunities for collective action have shrunk to the point of impossibility. The resulting powerlessness of the polity demands new answers: we need to reconfigure the relationship between citizens and political power.

Key words: political philosophy; democracy; debt.

A new sort of crisis

Is there anything truly special about the crisis faced today by our democracies? In this article we will argue that is indeed the case and will outline the three main factors that make it unique.

First, and as has been clear since the summer of 2008, it is impossible to identify a clear "solution" to the present crisis that eliminates the problems that gave rise to it. Piles of private debt were converted into an immense public debt, making states and their institutions extremely vulnerable to financial shocks. Meanwhile, perplexed citizens looked on, trying to make sense of the logic of privatizing profits and socializing losses that has, by now, grown universal.

The second reason why this crisis is unlike previous ones is its breadth. Is anyone able to identify a domain of human activity that is not "in crisis"? A field that might conceivably be discussed (e.g., by the media) in terms other than "[...] the crisis which is currently felt in this field [...]"?

The very notion of "crisis" has become a lens through which one interprets the contemporary world. The media play an important role in this dynamic, at times dramatizing it to exasperating levels. Real or imagined, "the crisis" looms large as the inescapable horizon of our age: from education to justice, from employment to culture, from healthcare to "national security", what escapes it? One perverse side-effect of this dynamic is precisely

that whichever phenomena *resist* fitting into this narrative easily get wiped away as being irrelevant.

The third reason points to a deeper issue, one that we might conceivably call "civilizational". We have now arrived at the final stage of a cycle of transformations that has without a doubt been the most intense, and also the most disturbing, of our history.

In little more than one century we truly changed the world, but failed to change our institutions and ideas. We became urban: at the start of this process, 70% of the population was rural—now that figure stands at 2%. The human population jumped from 2 to 7 billion. Our notion of space was radically transformed by improvements in transportation and similarly our notion of time has been deeply reconfigured by communication technology. Not only space and time, but also what it means to belong to a community, to a collectivity of any sort, has now acquired novel meaning through technology. Life expectancy constantly increased at an unseen pace and physical pain, historically one of the key elements of human experience, has almost disappeared. The list could be extended, filling pages and pages. And yet, in spite of these huge differences, everywhere one looks one finds the same institutions—schools, political parties, public institutions, etc.—as well as the same ideas, the latter living on tied to the inertia and routines that characterize the reality of institutional life.

Pressing changes

The combination of the different crises that line up in our horizon—having to do with challenges as distinct as energy production, raw materials, finance, etc.—and, above all, our growing understanding of the nature and interaction between these different problems—drive us towards the inescapable conclusion that it is a crisis of civilization we are dealing with. It is in this context that we need to understand the challenges currently faced by our democracies. To place the crisis of democracy in the context of these civilizational challenges has a precise meaning: it implies that the assumptions, convictions and expectations that sustain our individual and collective lives in the last few decades have changed profoundly. And that the solution for this ensemble of crises that we face today will have to involve a substantial change in our habits and behavior, ambitions and imaginaries, ideas and policies.

This makes the present situation a very dire one, especially because, while on the one hand the present crisis results from the uncontrolled expansion of the paradigm of credit-fuelled consumption, with all the somber consequences that time has made clear, on the other our societies seem quite unable to draw any conclusions from this fact. Doing so is, however, necessary for the real economy to reassert itself over the virtual, finance- and speculation-driven, economy that in the last decades has dominated our societies, making them live in a fairy tale of imaginary riches that hid the episodes of terror we all know.

What we have today are national and international institutions that are paralyzed after years of installed interests having their way. These institutions function based on models that are severely misaligned from present-day reality. We have political leaders that prefer the fantasies of political marketing to a proper knowledge of history and who have traded their vision of the future for an obsession with electoral cycles. We have weak states, very often in a close to terminal condition, and that we now watch being shamelessly parasited

by those who so weakened them in the first place. What we have today is a Europe with neither élan nor ambition, tied to its historical privilege(s) and its national interests. For these decades have also been a time of ideological emptying and constant "virtualization" of reality, both carried out in the name of ever shallower demands: to speak of reforms is now a vacuous stereotype. To speak of "modernization" (of institutions, of practices, of social arrangements) is little more than an aimless hobby. To invoke the "revolutionary" potential of new technologies has become a "get-out-of-jail" card for use at all strategic crossroads. The essential remains to be done: to overcome, with concrete decisions and measures, the huge gap that now separates the power of the finance world from that of the state, between market dynamics and the demands of a liberal democracy. Because it is here that lies the origin of our main problems, namely that of the withering away of our democracies, held in the vice of an ever-increasing techno-bureaucratic elitism and a populism that now approaches unseen levels of demagoguery.

Interdependence: The new vulnerability

We must not fool ourselves: the "changes" we are living through are not those that political marketers keep telling us about in their exalted discourse. On the contrary, we are speaking of deep-level historical transformations. As Jacques Attali wrote,

> even if stock markets rise, there is no lack of insolvent banks. Dangerous speculative financial products keep piling up in balance sheets. Public debts grow. Production levels and asset valuations remain generally below their pre-crisis levels. The number of company bankruptcies keeps rising, unemployment spreads, and families cannot pay their bills. In short, and in spite of all the speeches and promises, no meaningful regulation of the financial system and no structural changes that the crisis has proved necessary has taken place (Attali, 2009, pp. 16-17).

Seven years later, these words by Attali remain an accurate depiction of reality. After almost two decades of globalization, so enthusiastic in its (perceived) triumph as careless in the evaluation of its own effects, its first "true" crisis has shown itself unexpectedly severe. There are two reasons for this—or, more precisely, a double incapacity: (i) the inability to think the countless interdependences that characterize our present societies; and (ii) our inability to act in a way that is meaningful, pedagogical and effective.

The regulation that is so urgently necessary should address precisely these interdependences: the interdependences between finance, the environment, labor, etc. These are the links that, if left unaddressed, can wreak havoc. If there is a lesson to be drawn from the way globalization has evolved, it is that a more open, interconnected world seemingly leaves us more—not less—exposed to risk.

It is, therefore, necessary to focus on two distinct aspects.

The first is that the main "novelty" of globalization stems from the combination of information technology with the organization of labor at a planetary scale. The only comparable parallel is with the role of the steam engine in the Industrial Revolution and, later, with the combination of electricity with the Fordist model.

And, secondly, that this historical development manifests itself in an age that is characterized by a choice between an economic model rooted in the Western paradigm (that

we know is hardly sustainable in the long term, if only in environmental terms) and the search for an alternative that breaks free from the implausible notion of perpetual growth, endless consumption and infinite credit (cf. Gordon, 2016).

But what might this option be? This is, without a question, the hardest of all questions. From it flow a number of other big issues in serious need of being addressed: with what will we replace the social roles, behavioral models and human expectations that are so deeply tied to the current model? How will we collectively redefine our notion of happiness, both individual as well as collective, without the perspective for such growth? Is it possible to (re)articulate a notion of progress outside this dimension of production and consumption? And what about democracy—will it become a political system truly open to the citizenry or instead consolidate its transition to a mere form of managing the polity?

The collapse of a model

These are some of the questions that, as economist Daniel Cohen highlighted in La Prospérité du Vice (2009), are today at the center of the three main utopia of our days. The first of these is the ecological utopia, which tries to establish some universal ground rules that ensure the survival of life on our planet. The second is the technological utopia, which bets on "greening" economic growth, believing that humanity will always end up finding technical solutions to its problems—namely, those that stem from the crises arising out of scarcity. And, finally, the anthropological utopia that aims to stimulate a deep reflection about the way our societies live, with a special focus on the origins and effects of our extreme dependence on hyperconsumption. As Cohen points out, this is the most important of these three utopias, because it is the one that demands that we question some of the most fundamental aspect of our societies.

The crisis we have been living through in recent times shows well how there are always two modes of looking at what happens, especially when events suddenly challenge ideas that are dear to us and make the language we had been using obsolete. One is anchored in the need to return, as quickly as possible, to the previous normality, without paying too much attention to whatever disturbed it. The other instead looks at the disruption that occurred and tries to make sense of it, for it can contain vitally important information about the future to come.

The first of these models is the one at work in the narratives commonly found in our media and political discourse(s). It provides plenty of distraction, but blocks a deeper understanding of reality. For example, one might speak of the current crisis as if it were a film, neatly structured by conventional plot devices such as its "arrival" and later "demise". All of it accompanied by the comments and forecasts of "specialists" whose historical track record of forecasting future events is dubious, to say the least.

The second way of glancing at reality tries to understand the present moment, even if doing so causes discomfort, and to explore the future, even if it appears disheartening. It tries to decipher what Marshall McLuhan called the "invisible present—something that is out there, conditioning our lives, our problems and our expectations, but in forms that, both individually as well as collectively, we are not yet able to grasp or formulate clearly" (McLuhan, 1987).

Only this second way of looking at the world allows us to advance, to find out the small cues that might serve as guide posts towards a true change of paradigm. A change that prevents any sort of return to the modus vivendi of the last few decades and makes it dangerous for us to continue thinking—and talking—based on its tired clichés. The challenge is, therefore, to understand the transformations the world is undergoing that play the greatest role in conditioning our choices.

The crisis that began in 2008 was not, as is so commonly said, an "accident" provoked by the greed of a handful of individuals at the helm of hedge funds and other more traditional financial institutions. Instead, it was the result of a model of economic growth whose history can be precisely traced over the last few decades. When wages stagnated due to the pressures of globalization, this model focused on credit as the main driver of demand. That was the only way to resuscitate the economy.

The United States, as Alan Greenspan said, "wanted to live on credit". It is worthwhile remembering that this credit was partially made possible by the acquisition of dollar-denominated debt by Chinese corporations, giving rise to an intricate economic entity that Neil Ferguson called "Chimerica" (cf. Ferguson, 2008). Financial institutions, having more and more forgotten their obligations towards the real economy in favor of "creative" activities, took care of the rest.

The economic model of the last few decades seemed self-evident, but in the end proved itself to be an illusion: its notion of growth assumed a never-ending rise in consumption, all the while that same consumption was meant to be fuelled by infinite credit. It was this model that collapsed—and, with it, a world view and its civilizational basis came crashing down, which provided a serious jolt to our democracies.

The reign of the market

The fact is inescapable: capitalism seems unable to find solutions to the crisis it is undergoing, but neither do we see any structured, credible alternatives arising. Only in this way is it possible to make sense of the fact that a crisis of this nature, dimension and consequences—the largest that capitalism has undergone since 1929—has completely evaded political capitalization by the left.

There are obviously reasons for this. First, the idea that the fall of the Berlin Wall was a victory of one particular form of democracy—one that equals democracy with free markets—has firmly taken root. Second, the left took too long to realize that globalization undermined the social democratic entente between capital and labor. Labor remained firmly tied to its national roots while capital became freer and freer in an increasingly global market. And, third, we have come to identify the values of modernity with the mutation of global capitalism into its most recent, more purely financial, incarnation.

Looking more concretely at Europe, it is worthwhile pointing that in the 1980s and 1990s the European integration project obfuscated some of the debilitating weaknesses that were rotting away at the heart of social democracy. With F. Mitterrand, M. Soares or F. González, and (later) with L. Jospin, A. Guterres or G. Schroeder, we witnessed an effort to conjure, out of European integration, an ersatz of the lost hopes of democratic socialism.

This "substitution" was carried out, however, without properly evaluating the increasing

ideological distance that separated "Europe"—understood as a political project—from the basic tenets of social democracy. Only through a sheer miracle could Europe—a polity that was forgetting its own history at the same time it embraced the free market—have avoided deeply embarrassing the European socialist tradition. The "Lisbon Strategy", defined by the European Union in 2000 and since then largely abandoned, powerfully illustrates the unavoidable tensions. This was how democratic socialism and social democracy entered the 21st century, "unarmed" and faltering when asked to articulate their key values—or when even merely asked to provide a cogent, critical reflection on capitalism.

Part of the story is that we have followed the modern Western trajectory of "abandoning religion" (Gauchet, 1998 and 2002). Yet, we have then followed suit to adopt a new god that promptly took over the space many of us assumed would be that of our new found freedom: the market. In spite of thinking that we liberated ourselves from all the gods, we are more and more the devout followership of that new and uncontested deity of the present. And the market is not merely responsible for determining the value of goods, services and assets, as is commonly said. Even more importantly, it is also the very arbiter of all other competing valuation logics. Aided by the modern marketing apparatus, that captures and manages the majority of human attention (cf. Jackson, 2009), the market presides over the decline of its potential challengers across fields as diverse as the cultural production, social initiatives and education.

"Endividualismo"

While the market is the deity that now rules over our common existence, it is also important to give some thought to how freedom has evolved[1]. This matters especially because freedom—in particular, the freedom so commonly celebrated in the context of the market—has given rise to new forms of voluntary servitude, a freedom that seems to have forgotten Kant's lesson that things necessarily have either a price or a dignity. In other words: that which does not have a price, necessarily has a dignity of some sort. We need to pay attention to the internalization of the market mentality by individuals. The power of the market imagery manifests itself in the frequency with which the word "market" itself shows up across domains—"market of ideas", "sexual market", "political market", etc., a pattern that extends from the most intimate to the most global and points at an anthropological mutation.

It was in this context that endividualismo (cf. Carrilho, 2015) emerged. It developed out of the paradigm of the boundless—boundless energy, boundless consumption, boundless rights, boundless debt—and a convergence of several deep changes in both individuals as well as their consumption behaviors. Endividualismo is what shaped both the ultraliberalism as well as the mini-socialism of our day. It is a new kind of individualism, a "mass individualism", which, in the last few decades, has completely changed the rules that govern the political game. It is responsible for imbuing the modern forms of liberalism and socialism with shared values and aspirations, ensuring that the two become increasingly alike. That is certainly the reason why so little political change

[1] This portmanteau results from the combination of two Portuguese words: "individualismo" (individualism) and "endividado" (indebted).

seems possible in our days—and, concurrently, why small variations in the personal leadership style of politicians are so heavily emphasized. Endividualismo is, without a doubt, the result of the ultimate transformation of the modern individual, of the process of its limitless affirmation and expansion. But it is also the product of the individual's deep complicity with the "paradigm of the boundless" that has left such a deep mark in the past century, in particular its second half, with its promises of endless energy, consumption and credit for everyone.

In other words, endividualismo represents the climax of the individual that attains plenitude, that fulfills her- or himself, through credit (i.e., debt). This individual is the most common—and perhaps even the most resistant—pillar of today's crisis-struck paradigm. It is the result of the boundless affirmation of individual rights, of the identification of the notion of "rights" with the protection of the private sphere and the hitherto unseen erasure of any references to shared values or beliefs. The so-called big "values" questions that divide electorates beyond differing preferences in terms of economic policy have their roots in endividualismo—and the latter is also where they derive much of their appeal from.

Paradoxically, endividualismo was made possible—and even stimulated—by the powerful affirmation of the welfare state. Individuals, for the first time in history liberated from the necessity to ensure their future and that of their relatives (thanks to pensions, public education and healthcare systems, etc.), became increasingly the masters of their own fates and, thus, centered their focus in themselves. Endividualismo accelerated the internal disarticulation of our democracies by digging a hole between the affirmation of individual liberties and the ability for collective action. As a result, citizens became, at an individual level, freer than ever; but, at the same time and taken as members of the polity, they also became more and more impotent.

This is what makes this battle of ideas the biggest challenge of our times. And, regrettably, this is a challenge for which it is impossible to identify, in the political arena, the necessary prerequisites to address it. Over the last couple of decades, the left has allowed the consecration of ultraliberalism to happen unchallenged. It watched the simultaneous and intertwined triumph of financism, technologism and individualism—first in awe, then bemused and, finally, with regret.

Perhaps the most serious problem is that we continue to interpret reality through the same prism that we were using 20 or 30 years ago, the same that drove the left to fail to foresee the consequences of globalization, to not understand the transformation of capitalism into financism, to undervalue the impact of demographic changes, to neglect redistribution, not to detect the return of the most brutal inequalities, to ignore the growing frailty of the welfare state, to welcome the "systemic stupidity" brought along by technological progress.

The left failed to understand the meaning of unfettered individualism and the new subjectivities that it creates; it grew comfortable with the changes introduced to the labor market; it went along with the demonization of taxation and the increase in debt, failing to recognize the ticking time-bomb of the Euro in the absence of a political union or being unable to evaluate the consequences of globalization for culture. That is why, unlike what happened with the crisis of capitalism in the 1930s, that triggered a wealth of ideological proposals, today we face a dearth of ideas. As if, in the face of ultraliberalism, socialism was sentenced to a minimalist form of survival.

This happens because we remain in the grip of a way of life marked by excess, a boundlessness folly—or, quite simply, hubris. Ancient Greek has this extraordinary ability to give us a cluster of meanings, of suggestions and ideas in a single word. "Hubris" is one of them, having come to us through the ages and still so necessary to lucidly see what stands before us. It is equally useful to summarize two fundamental aspects of present reality, both the boundless ambition governing—and advertised by—the financial system as well as the affirmation of hyperindividualism.

It is in this world that we urgently need to recognize that, as our societies have warmed to unmeasured ambition and hyperindividualism, they have almost forgotten the most elemental duties of citizenship towards the community and the nation, instead focusing exclusively on the individual and her personal, material interests at different life stages. As Dominique Schnapper (2014) points out (channeling Montesquieu in his book L'esprit démocratique des lois), a democracy lives in permanent danger of corruption and that danger grows much stronger when the notion of public interest begins to wither, when the projects and values that extend beyond the cycle of the everyday disappear, when a strong notion of a "general will" unravels. Few would claim that this is not an apt portrayal of our present reality. For that reason, we should not be surprised if our democracies seem to be faltering.

The paradigm of the boundless

The risk that grows, in parallel with this weakening of our democracies, is that of the disappearance of all limits, of the permanent institutionalization of the limitless as the new horizon for our individual and collective lives alike. That is why it is important to understand the deep-seated connection between the current phase of capitalism and the paradigm of boundlessness, rooted as it is in a spiral of increasing rights and vanishing obligations.

The unbounded individual can be understood as an echo of a capitalism that accepts no limits to its actions. And this connection has its origin in the egalitarian passion of homo democraticus, which has increasingly led us to refuse all differences and institutional mediations. This, in turn, is what best explains the so often discussed crisis of representation in our democracies.

We currently live the climax of the democratic paradox: on the one hand, we have increasing demands for equality, yet, at the same time, we are determined to ignore the very differences that the conquest of equality exposes. We thus move towards a situation where, as D. Schnapper (2014) affirms, soon no authority—be it based on competence, expertise or institutional credibility—will be accepted.

This situation, in which all difference is experienced as inequality, introduces serious challenges of a new type into the social fabric. This was what Montesquieu had in mind when he warned of the dangers of "extreme democracy", capable as it is to simultaneously bring down the different sorts of social ties; the authority on which the education system relies to reproduce knowledge and culture across generations; the legitimacy of the different forms of authority; the critique of the cult of success and performance; as well as the ability to draw lessons from the past to inform future behavior.

Put differently, we now live at all levels (subjective or social, national or global) under the sign of the limitless. A boundlessness that everyone either seeks after or (at the very least)

accepts, but whose unavoidable consequences—from the individual to the civilizational levels—seem very hard to identify and correct. The difficulty to negotiate compromises powerfully illustrates this dynamic, since it follows from the unstoppable process of limits becoming inconceivable on the part of social agents—and, thus, compromising on middle-of-the-ground solutions, as typically occurs in mature democracies, becoming impossible.

Looking at the world, it is easy to notice the never before seen levels of interdependence. However, used to a narrative that equates "openness" with "resilience", we often fail to realize the vulnerabilities these interdependencies introduce. And, the more vulnerable we grow, the more it matters that we realize that democracy is not merely a political system that results from a set of formal egalitarian norms but instead a culture that is built over time and through an ongoing debate of individual and collective choices. Our destiny thus plays itself out in the tension between these two contradictory demands: our passion for boundlessness and the need for limits. Be they about energy, consumption, credit, our conception of rights, duties, waste, life, boundaries. In summary, life plays itself out between hubris and metis, that other word that Ancient Greeks used to designate practical intelligence, simultaneously prudent and wise.

A new agenda?

The lack of political reflection on the main problems of our age is startling across a variety of domains: when one tries to rethink the welfare state; when one tries to devise new ways to deal with globalization; when one tries to agree on a new vision for Europe; or when one tries to rethink the way our democracies work.

The "dominant ideology" of financial capitalism has been shaken, but not challenged by any true alternative able to capture and hold the attention of citizens. This reflection is the answer to the present crisis that has so far been missing. Which topics would it need to address? To clarify what the "public interest" means nowadays, redefining the boundaries that separate the public from the private spheres; to once again make finance serve the real economy and the interests of the citizenry; to rethink the notion of development, both with regard to its implications on (un)employment as well as the ecological imperative; to combat the different forms of inequality; and, centrally, to revitalize our democracies, as to better enable us to collectively address the rest of these challenges.

It is from this that the need for a new political agenda emerges, one characterized by a strong political motivation and a clear awareness that the task requires rethinking deep-seated beliefs about the way how our societies function.

Our democracies live squeezed in a vise: squeezed between a techno-bureaucratic elitism and demagogical populism. It is this polarization that has intensified in the last two decades. This happens both because we lack an alternative economic model to capitalism as well as because democratic socialism has lost the element that gave coherence to its key causes: a belief in (the possibility of) progress.

This belief, which came into being in the 17th century and has since then been a fundamental driver behind all civilizational pushes for emancipation, vanished in the 20th century. First with the great catastrophes (the Holocaust, the world wars, etc.), which threw into doubt the very notion of progress. And, later, with globalization and the financial

transformations of capitalism, which reshaped its meaning beyond all recognition. We have lost confidence in a positive evaluation of the world. The certainty that tomorrow will, on average, be better than today has dissipated. There are no more mobilizing causes for Humanity and pessimism spreads.

Faced with all this, the left and the right have switched positions. The left abandon its optimist inspiration and its genetic ambition for change. The latter were adopted by the right and reconfigured to serve contemporary financial capitalism. And the left became more and more tied to a defensive conservatism, which is defined by social policies aimed at remedying rather than reforming the economic outcomes produced by the unchallenged economic policies. As if the world had become a dangerous and unwelcoming place, and a mixture of consolation and remedial solutions were the best progressives could offer.

It is not, therefore, surprising, that a belief in the powerlessness of politicians (or of politics?) is by now widespread. The discredit of the political realm is not a temporary or purely subjective phenomenon, but instead an historical process that transcends nations, parties or individual politicians. It has its roots in the daily observation that politicians, regardless of their proclaimed political orientation, are unable to resolve the main problems we face today. Obviously, this deeply affects the trust—and, therefore, participation—of citizens in the democratic process. This is observable, among other ways, in rising abstention rates—and, thus, strikes a direct blow to political representation as it is presently conceived.

Power and powerlessness

This crisis of representation has led to a progressive transformation of the political condition. It was financism and technologism that, against a background of rising globalization and individualism, brought about the "pauperization" of politics. In Europe, this process was magnified by the loss of sovereignty of the state(s), which further contributed to what Wendy Brown called the "de-democratization" of contemporary societies (Brown, 2003). This idea was also present in "Post-Democracy" by Colin Crouch in 2004, which shows how, in the context of globalization, we are bound to continue witnessing states becoming increasingly weaker in the face of big corporations. Peter Mair (2014), too, explored this notion in his book "Ruling the Void". In this process, "democracy" is increasingly understood as just a set of formal procedures.

The fusion of the political and the media is also key part of this process. These two spheres now coproduce political reality, giving rise to a field which constantly aims to capture the attention of citizens and shape their opinions. It is through this fusion that the political is now in danger of disappearing. The media overexposure has proved deadly, simultaneously promoting the narcissistic side of the political world and invariably using the latter as the evident scapegoat for all societal ills.

But can any alternatives be found? Or is liberal democracy really falling apart, as Y. Mounk (2016) argues? It is hard to argue the case for optimism, but doing so does provide a small but promising window of opportunity if we notice that the discredit of our political representation mechanism has not been followed by a loss of interest in politics by most citizens.

On the contrary, we witness the emergence of new political behaviors that aim to revitalize democracy. They take different forms and aim at different results, e.g.: critically evaluating the performance of elected officials; closely scrutinizing their actions; or blocking political measures from being enacted. In recent years we have witnessed a steady, diverse stream of such behaviors. It is vitally important to recognize, when we regard them as an ensemble, material for a novel understanding of democracy that subsumes all its current complexity and richness.

Doing so, however, requires that we see through the fiction that equates the majority of votes with the general will. As Pierre Rosanvallon (2006) has argued, the "representationist" strand of democracy has become the latter's greatest vulnerability. We have collectively subscribed to a perversion of elementary arithmetic: the notion that a part is the same as the whole. If that wasn't enough, we have also accepted that the electoral moment is good for the full duration of the mandate/term.

This double illusion is no longer easily accepted by vast swaths of the population in modern democracies. The notion of "majority" is increasingly challenged and a multi-year "mandate" starts looking like an anachronism. As a result, elections seem like little more than a formal device for appointing officeholders rather than the legitimating mechanism behind political power.

These changes evidence (again) an expansion of contemporary individualism. The contemporary individual, in her role of citizen, does not easily accept that her voice can only be heard within such a rigid set of constraints. One resulting development is the emergence of novel legitimating logics of representation. Perhaps the most prominent of these is the logic of "proximity" between citizens and their representatives, whereby the "closer" the relationship between citizen and representative, the more legitimate that representation is perceived as being.

One possible form of optimism

It was in 2006 that in his book "La Contre-Démocratie" Pierre Rosanvallon drew our attention to the fact that the loss of trust in elected officials does not seem to translate into a general passivity on the part of citizens. Rosanvallon finds citizens being (pro)active by taking on a variety behaviors that characterize a "distrustful" society: vigilance and watchdogging; blocking, boycotting and other forms of resistance; and critical evaluation of other social agents. These are the ways, in Rosanvallon's framework, through which counter-power is exerted.

The central idea behind this perspective is that, besides the "voting citizenry", in the last few decades other manifestations of the popular will have developed: the "watching citizenry", the "vetoing citizenry" and the "judging citizenry". These novel manifestations co-occur with the rebirth of populism and the growing rejection of politics. The result is paradoxical: an "apolitical democracy" (Rosanvallon, 2008, p. 353). Thus, the great contemporary challenge results from the simultaneous increase in demands for more democracy and a generalized decline of politics.

This became the topic for Rosanvallon's later work, "La Legitimité Démocratique" (2008). Democracies have become less centered on elections, in good part because the

twin arguments that (i) a majority of votes conveys the general will and that (ii) an election legitimates the full duration of a mandate (term) have become less and less convincing. One reason why this double fiction has become so vulnerable is because the very notion of a "majority" has become sociologically challenging. "Elections now have a more limited role, they simply validate a form of appointing officeholders, no longer providing a priori legitimating for the policies they enact" (Rosanvallon, 2008, p.14).

After winning an election, in a contemporary democracy there are two other factors that either contribute to or detract from the legitimacy of a government. First, the ongoing evaluation of the latter's ability to address the challenges faced by the polity. Second, its adherence to the promises and commitments assumed before the election.

As Rosanvallon points out, the electorate is no longer interpretable as being made up of a small number of voting blocks. Instead, to adequately understand it one needs to think of the electorate as resulting from the convergence of a number of diverse minority perspectives. "The people has become the plural form of the term 'minority' ", as Rosanvallon wrote (2008, p.14).

If this is indeed the case, then representative democracy will face greater and greater strains towards greater citizen participation. Primary elections within parties, referenda, citizen juries, deliberative polls, etc. We will need to rethink our institutions that speak on behalf of the public, placing the question of the quality of democracy at the center of the debate.

We thus need to open up the traditional notion of legitimacy beyond the notion of voting. Rosanvallon identifies several dimensions for doing so, of which we highlight two: greater reflexivity on the part of the overall body politic and increased proximity between represented and representatives. Politics, against de Tocqueville's prevision, did not become simpler with the arrival of the democratic age: on the contrary, it became greatly more complex. And only by understanding the different forms of legitimacy that animate it (and which frequently do so in conflicting ways) will we be able to revitalize it in a meaningful way.

Revitalizing democracy?

When political crises become (more) severe, the discussion often turns to questioning whether democratic institutions are working adequately (cf. Runciland, 2013). Part of the reason for this lies in us having come to equate democracy not just with a constant expansion of individual rights but also with steady improvements in the general welfare of populations. It became, in addition to being a set of formal procedures that guarantee fundamental rights and the sovereignty of the polity, also a culture and a lifestyle.

When this culture and lifestyle falter, when this "engine" of steady material and expanding rights starts sputtering, the specter materializes and the question "so is this what you call a democracy?" becomes prevalent in common discourse. Because democracy is, primordially, a contract based on trust between citizens and their representatives. Without that trust, political legitimacy vanishes and all areas of society become frailer. Populism, in all its contemporary guises, is born here.

And, for all the centrality of elections in our common, "minimalist" view of democracy, trust doesn't simply flow from election results and the political leadership they determine

for the next political term. Instead, it very much depends on the complete, and delicate, trajectory of a government and its actions.

Thus, it is fundamental that we distinguish between two different forms of legitimacy: the legitimacy emanating from an *election* and the legitimacy resulting from *action*. The key point is that the latter of the two is something much more fragile and, by now, much more important for a government to be regarded as legitimate than a ("mere") electoral result. Many of our current problems—and the current populist tidal wave we are facing—stem from failing to distinguish between these two forms of legitimacy.

In parallel with the challenge of legitimacy, the question of invisibility also looms large. Most of the meaningful changes occurring in our societies are effectively invisible in the present media landscape. TV news, like most other media, successfully obscure the biggest problems faced by society. Not surprisingly, most citizens feel not just unrepresented but *invisible*: their problems are ignored and their voices are left inaudible. Hence Rosanvallon's proposal for the creation of a "Parliament of the Invisibles" and projects such as the website www.racontersavie.fr, where ordinary citizens are invited to make their everyday lives visible—and thus *real*—to the broader public. They both promise to increase "the dignity of individuals and the vitality of our democracies" (Rosanvallon, 2014, p. 10).

Making reality visible and regaining trust

Rosanvallon argues that to live in society is, first and foremost, to observe one's own reality noticed and recognized in one's everyday existence. It is easy to notice how far this is from contemporary political discourse, characterized by its distance from practical reality and stuffed to the brim with abstractions. That is where many of the present frustrations and disappointments with politics stem from.

A relationship built on trust between citizens and their leaders is a prerequisite for a functioning democracy. The sort of invisibility and lack of recognition we just described directly undermine that trust. For a democracy to function a "contract" needs to exist and that contract requires a feeling of empathy and some degree of shared beliefs in a political program. To create these, new spaces for public debate (of policies, of priorities, of visions for the future) are necessary. This is what is currently being attempted in Portugal, with the newly launched Fórum dos Cidad os, as well as in the proposals of Jean-Luc Wingert for the creation of a Sénat du Citoyen in France (cf. Wingert, 2015). Such initiatives are slowly multiplying over the globe.

The act is that nowadays citizens feel individually freer and freer, but, at the same time, they begin to realize that, collectively, they are increasingly powerless. Freedom does not become action, neither does it have direct consequences in the world, throwing democracy into a never before seen spiral of powerlessness. This is one of the central aspects of our democracy and (perhaps) the origin of its present gridlock.

Two ideas deserve to be highlighted, for they both give us a chance to better understand the big transformations currently happening in our democracies. The first is that democracy is not just a political regime, with the set of formal procedures that implies, but also a type of society, with all the tensions that presupposes. The second is that the extension and

cementing of democracy around the world has been met, in parallel, by a growing incapacity of societies to deal with the challenges they face and a growing feeling of powerlessness on the part of citizens.

At the roots of modern democracies the political regime and the model of society blended into one, effectively functioning as a whole. Democracy was understood as the convergence of two great ambitions: the sovereignty of a people and the equality of citizens. The French and American Revolutions of the 18th century both stemmed from this shared political perspective.

Today we are faced with a very different situation. A huge gap has opened between these two sides of our notion of democracy. In recent decades the democratic imperative has accommodated a steep rise in inequality. As if a strengthening of our notion of political citizenship happened in tandem with a weakening of our social and economic reading of what it means that we are all citizens. This paradox now lives at the center of contemporary democracies. The tensions between political formalities (voting, electoral system, parliamentary rules and procedures, etc.) and social ills (unemployment, recessions, etc.) will only become worse.

But a second phenomenon now joins the picture. Our original notion of democracy took for granted that individual freedom would eventually translate into collective action. This implied that a society where individuals were freer would, over time, become a fairer society. Alas, in this regard the disappointment could hardly have been more brutal. Freedom has brought about a greater emancipation of individuals, but this emancipation peters out in a frivolous individualism of asserting one's rights. These individual rights are constantly expanded, to the detriment of any notion of the collective.

As Marcel Gauchet (2002) has been arguing for long, the oligarchic evolution of our democracies is in tune with the deep depolitization of our societies. Societies that, taken as a unit, are so confused that they are unable to articulate what they need or refuse. After all, is this not what the contestation social movements of recent years have made so painfully clear in the streets all over the world? (For a contrasting perspective cf. Graeber, 2014.)

Truth be told, there are many elements that make political action extraordinarily difficult in our days. Globalization, the loss of sovereignty of nations, individualism and the erosion of political representation, the mercantilization of information, the tabloidization of the media—these are just a few of those we could list. We have to choose between the despair which these seem to dictate and the alternative route: to break free from the vanguardist illusion and recognize that, in today's world, it is silly to believe that politics somehow "leads" the rest of society.

This "heroic" vision of society (cf. Innerarity, 2002 and 2015) must be abandoned, because it blocks key channels connecting politics and society. We have to replace it with a more daring conception that embraces the throbbing of ideas stemming from unexpected corners of society rather than hold on to the ideological desert of our days. This new vision needs to give up on the obsession with consensus and instead embrace diversity, it will have to stop pretending that it "runs" society—without, obviously, giving up on influencing its path and destiny.

Whether you like it or not, this is the direction that contemporary democratic societies have followed. For this reason, more than "leadership", as we have come to understand the

term, meaningful reform efforts will need to reflect key aspects of the way our societies presently are: diversity, frailty and complexity. Only in this way is it possible to create political spaces where the answers to the present challenges might emerge. This demands a new approach to the so-called crisis of representation: one that brings about new ways to listen and engage with 21st century citizens. Our next article we will revisit sortition as a mechanism to do precisely that, trying to intersect its best historical examples with its still unexplored potential in the present age.

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