

[Old and New Political Subjects]

Abstract: With the end of the twentieth century there has been a radical change of society and political culture that has had a profound impact on the functioning of democracies even where these have maintained unchanged its institutional structures. Starting point of the article presented is thus: who are the protagonists of politics? And therefore proper reflection about politics nowadays should start with the question of who should take part in it and which the new and old political issues are, if it should be the purview of a select few or open to everyone, to experts or to what we call the people, a difficult concept to define longer available, in a space which is no longer clearly structured by social classes, nor mobilized by political parties.

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Political transformations, either revolutionary or evolutionary, modify three different issues: *subjects*, *themes* or *conditions*. There are political changes which are due to a change in the *subjects* considered legitimate enough to participate in politics, which contest the fact that politics is the purview of some and not others, of a certain social class and not every social class (democratic revolutions), of the state and not the civil society (a neoliberal twist). In other cases, this change takes place because there is a variation in the most important *themes* (political agenda) or in government priorities. This has occurred at times because of a certain weakening of social issues as articulated in the left-right axis or with the eruption of identity politics and the environment issue. In politics same themes that had disappeared may reappear and others which are vital today just fall permanently by the wayside. The third group concerns the *conditions* in which politics is carried out, because - as we can see today - events accelerate and new spaces open up, due to cutting-edge technologies or financial instruments that change the rules of the game and governments. Public issues, sovereignty and limits become something very different from what they used to be and, most importantly, new realities no longer permit us to go on as we once did.

A proper reflection about politics nowadays should start with the question of *who* should take part in it and *which* the new and old political issues are, if it should be the purview of a select few or open to everyone, to experts or to what we call *the people*, such a difficult concept to define, in a space which is no longer clearly structured by social classes, nor mobilized by political parties. The most reasonable answer to this question should be that participation in politics should be open to everyone, but this affirmation does not provide any information about how these different types of authority relate to each other, especially when their aims are incompatible. Should we pay more attention to surveys or to experts? Stock prices or popular sovereignty? Political parties or social movements? We must determine what is old and what is new - where political participation is concerned - in the age of social networks, with active societies, global responsibilities and more complex problems. How shall we divide empowerment anew among ordinary citizens, experts, parties, the people (as a national entity) and social movements? The intensity of our political debate ultimately follows from the fact that we are living through a time of redistribution of political authority among different levels of government, with different claims of authority, representation and identification that are very hard to organize. Obviously this redistribution produces a notable degree of perplexity and disorientation, and comes about in the midst of intense conflicts. It is clear to everybody that the way in which the subject issue is solved will have consequences in the sectors of themes and conditions.

We are in the midst of a crisis of democratic authorization, and it is painfully clear that we do not know if we

should listen to what extent we should leave things to experts, if judges are the only ones capable of resolving political problems, what to make of leadership in a democratic society, who represents us, who decides to what (from which the territory debates or European governance proceed) or to whom political parties belong (whence the controversies about political primaries, whether candidates should be drawn from leading cadres, militants, voters or everyone).

The task of organizing the world by stuffing some things into an old drawer and arranging others on a new shelf entails the danger that the hindsight of history may prove us wrong. This should not keep us from venturing a hypothesis as to how things will evolve. But we need to be cautious before definitively interring what seems debilitated or heralding the advent of something that may wind up straying afar or proving ephemeral. Who knows, when dealing with political issues, if we are at a funeral or a baptism, at the beginning of a new cycle, a trend, a reinstatement or a historical turningpoint? Likewise, there was no decision in virtue of which our ancestors decided the precise moment to leave the Stone Age and enter the Iron Age, because they were in no condition to recognize such a momentous change. The job of being history's undertakers and midwives is never left to contemporaries but to future historians. In the world of politics everything, as Raymond Aron said of ideologies, is «anticipations waiting for time to judge» (1948: 313). In any case, intellectual honesty forces us to distinguish the old from the new and to ask ourselves if the death of something was due to natural causes or a lynching.

Meanwhile, what we can do is analyze things as rigorously as possible and be reasonably skeptical when tagging things as old or new. It could very well be that they are neither the one nor the other, that we are facing transformations rather than substitutions, so that the old participants of politics must be thought of in a different light rather than of being replaced by new candidates. We must address the problem of how to bring about, in a mature democracy, the principle of universal citizenship, and how to cope with new forms of exclusion, what the role of experts is in a decisional process that requires a vast knowledge but that cannot do without democratic legitimation, which political party models have become obsolete and to what extent we can still rely on them; how we can understand the people in a way that is compatible with other often troublesome realities, such as individual rights or the duties of interdependence... Ultimately in short: Who are the protagonists of politics?

Praise and scorn of political class

Surveys remind us that this is our major concern. Even the expression «political class» includes a disaffection, alluding to a distance and a lack of correspondence between its interests and ours. Peter Mair called this «the Toqueville syndrome» (1995). As occurred with the nobility, politicians have a hard time nowadays justifying their privileges when they carry out tasks that are increasingly less important (or they can scarcely carry out those assigned).

This critical attitude towards politicians is nothing new; their detractors allow us to make an inventory of the real nature of politics throughout history (Palonen 2012). The novelty is perhaps that, thanks to the amplificatory power of the media and the internet, criticism has gained the dimensions of an authentic lynching. Beyond the objective causes for this discontent (which go from incompetence to corruption), a hostile constellation has been formed around politics for many reasons, some even contradictory, as is often the case with the motives for indignation: some are seduced by the ecstasy of direct democracy; others long for more modest aspirations such as electoral reform; some make monetary calculations and worry because politicians might be too numerous and too overpaid; some rub their hands together gleefully because a weak political system benefits them... In the forefront of our expressions of discontent is parliamentary *performance*, a habit that makes as much sense as the old British law prohibiting parliamentarians to die in the parliament building. Maybe we should turn our attention to the rest of the world - especially the media and financial powers - so that parliament - under scrutiny but without any pressure - exercises the functions we expect of it in a democratic society?

That politicians of either gender leave much to be desired is so evident that is not worth wasting too much time over. This should be no surprise to whoever knows how other professions work, none of which comes off unscathed from a serious review of greater or lesser harshness. It happens, however, that these other professions, which are just as much in need of improvement, have the good fortune to be less exposed to public scrutiny. My question is,

how on earth such a vilified, difficult, competitive, discontinuous, scrutinized and poorly understood activity still attracts so many practitioners. I am convinced that, in general, politicians are better than their reputation would have them be. But the problem, I anticipate here my position, is not *exactly* this. If it had been, it would have been easier to solve with a simple substitution. What we are referring to when we take note of political disaffection is the unqualified criticism towards anyone who takes up the task (“they are all alike”, etc.) and herein the problem becomes very serious indeed.

Let us start by recognizing that a critical attitude towards politics is a sign of democratic maturity and not the anteroom of its demise. The fact that everybody feels competent to judge their representatives, even in regard to decisions of enormous complexity, is something that should reassure us, because the opposite would worry us more. A society can call itself democratically mature only when it ceases to worship its representatives and maintains jealously its confidence on them.

Much political disaffection derives from an error of perception. In any established democracy there is a multitude of political representatives who do their job with profound honesty, but only the few corrupt ones make the headlines. Our underlying sensation is that politics is a synonym of corruption, and we do not realize that scandals are newsworthy as long as the norm is for things to trot along moderately well. The same holds true for medical mistakes: the news media never talks about well-performed surgeries but about their failures, and from there the belief that all doctors are quacks and butchers is just a step away. Thanks to the communications media power has become more vulnerable to criticism, but their spun language and underlying message has fostered a widespread anti-political mentality. It is one thing to reveal a lie, to ridicule arrogance and to air different points of view, but insisting on negative aspects tends to obscure other equally important political dimensions, such as the value of accords or the little spectacular normality of honest behavior. We should not worry so much about cases of corruption as about the ordinary weakness of politics, and, most of all, that focusing on the former keeps us from noting the latter. All this taken into consideration, and without denying that most criticisms are justified, I propose a reversal of perspective, asking ourselves whether behind some of our less substantiated versions there is not a lack of sincerity of society towards itself. In a representative democracy *they* are there because *we* are not there, or rather, in order for *us* not to be there. It is certainly true that the best do not enter politics, but that should worry us more than it does them.

Ritual criticism of politicians allows us to avoid certain criticisms that, if they were not aimed at them, we would have to aim at ourselves. Does it make any sense to harp at the same time on certain criticisms of our political representatives and claim that the represented are innocent? It is contradictory to claim that our representatives are like us and at the same time expect them to possess exceptional qualities. It is impossible that such incompetent elites have emerged from a society that seems to know exactly what needs to be done. This shows that populism is an “inverted egalitarianism”, to wit, a mentality that is not based on the conviction that the people is equal to its rulers, but better than them (Shils 1956:191). If politicians do everything so wrong, it cannot be that we have done everything well.

There is a growing intolerance of voters against the oligarchic connotations of consolidated systems of representation. But let us not simplify the complexity of democratic life to the populist format of a victimized, healthy, virtuous common people, as against a corrupt and disoriented institutional body, a format that finds ardent supporters in the whole ideological gamut, that have in common the stigmatization of whatever seems to oppose the homogeneity of an imaginary common people; be it the enemy, the foreigner, the oligarchy, or the institutional bodies (Rosanvallon 2006).

There is a paradox behind political criticism that can be named “the paradox of the last wagon”. I refer to an old joke about railroad authorities who, after finding out that train accidents mostly affected the last wagon, decided to eliminate the last wagon in all trains. Now, let us suppose that politics does not function. How can we suppress the whole political class? Who could substitute it? Who could be sent into a social space without political formatting? Who would benefit from such a world? In the last instance, we could even ask ourselves if there exists a “political class” and, above all, if it is possible that there is nothing similar to it? Obviously, when we use this expression as a means of expressing our discontent we are complaining about their distant attitude, their elitism

and indifference towards the problems of the common people which they should represent. Well, can we imagine a society whose political protagonists are a mere transmission belt of society's aims?

Politics is an activity that can be improved, but above all it is something inevitable. Populisms ignore and hide this inevitability; they foster mistrust in politicians, as if their activities could possibly be carried out by others who are not politicians or who act as if they were not. There are even those who at bottom would like to suppress the mediation which lies at the core of political representation: consultations without deliberation, irreversible constitutional frameworks, taxation without representation, binding mandates ... It is one thing to introduce procedures to contrast the popular will, to prevent representatives from taking too many liberties, or hold onto their positions forever - participation, accountability, rotation of responsibilities, prohibiting re-election - and attempting to overthrow representative democracy.

In our contempt for the political class there lurk no few platitudes and some discredit that betray a great ignorance about the nature of politics and promote contempt for politics as such. Let me remind those critics of the principle that whenever we challenge something, we have the right to know who or what will take its place. In order to be reasonable criticism should ascertain who at times its disproportion favors. We are talking about incompetence and thus we encourage technicians to take over the job of governing; we criticize their wages and so justify placing politics in the hands of the rich; we totally discredit politics and entrust it enthusiastically to those who owe nothing to politics because they already have other kinds of power.

Is there anything worse than bad politics? Yes, its absence, an anti-politics mentality that would extinguish the desires of those who count only on politics because they are powerless in other areas. In a world without politics we would save some on wages and avoid certain shameful spectacles, but we would lose the representation of our interests and the ambitions for equality of those who have no other means for achieving them. Politics isn't much of a help? Consider then what their fate would be if they couldn't even count on a political enunciation of their rights.

Politics for all, politics of a few

When the political waters are troubled - and this happens quite often - the eternal question arises as to who is the right person for the job. Attention is given not so much (or not only) to *how* it is done but to *who* does it. This triggers a suspicion that maybe it is a career monopolized by unworthy people. Negative opinions polarize around those who believe that it is the purview of an élite and those who believe it is too easily accessible to anyone. That is, some believe that the political fields are monopolized by the few and others that it is invaded by a mob of upstarts. Thus there appears once again the same old tension typical of democracies, between the old guard and the newcomers, the man-in-the-street and the élites, the professionals and the amateurs, the well-paid and the volunteers.

Let us acknowledge from the outset that we observe all this with a certain perplexity and that is why we often ply politicians with contradictory demands. We want expertise to be taken into account in making political decisions but do not want to be governed by experts; we demand that our interests be defended, but we despise politicians who only defend interests and are unable to compromise and agree; we demand that only the best should go into parliament but are unwilling to pay them accordingly; we want them to speak frankly, but are not always content to hear the truth. There is also an unresolved contradiction between assuming that anyone can engage in politics and arranging things in a such a way that it ends up in the hands of experts or the rich.

Further demands: we want participation, but there is little willingness to participate; we would like open lists, but only 3% of voters take advantage of those offered for the Senate ¹; we would like politicians to have less of a say but would strongly protest against leaving government in the hands of civil servants...

So who should take on the job of politics? The answer to this question about the "who" of political involvement, who can and should do it, is one alone: everyone. There is no one we can forbid to take this step or declare unfit to exercise it (except for specific cases of eligibility dictated very restrictively by law). In a democracy there is no sense in the phrase "eligible citizen" to elect or be elected, which Guizot talked about. If a political career is open

¹ Referred to the Spanish Senate (tr. note).

to all it is because we assume that everyone has a capacity for judgment and decision.

This indeterminacy of political occupation contrasts with the fact that politics usually ends up being monopolized by a caste with little turnover, which is one of our main complaints about political parties; but every now and then we also move in the opposite, direction, and once in a while, outsiders take the system by storm to renew it. This was the case of Ross Perot, the Texas businessman who burst onto the scene of the 1992 presidential elections, or of Ruiz Mateos, or Mario Conde in Spain, or Beppe Grillo in Italy. In many countries there are politicians whose validity derives precisely from their running as enemies of the political establishment (in a certain sense, this was the case of Obama) and, on occasion, they have proven successful in other areas of social life (communications, business, law, academia...). It is a very old idea, that of discrediting other politicians and presenting oneself as a non-politician, i.e., as objective, disinterested, suprapartisan (Schmitt 1932: 21). In all these cases, success depends on a nimble management of the tension between exteriority vis-à-vis the system and the need to act - with the original contributions one wishes to promote - according to a political logic. Otherwise the tension gets transformed into a self-destructive contradiction.

In any case, in a democratic society we must be careful about qualifying those who have political aspirations as outsiders because politics is open to all and requires no particular qualification. No one is an intruder because he or she is an unknown in the political system; what can make him/her an intruder in the worst sense of the term is seeking to behave in politics with a different logic and trying to turn it into a media issue, a business arrangement or a self-righteous mission.

That politics is open to everyone means, first, that it is not the exclusive purview of the rich. This has not always been so and the democratization of the political profession is a recent and not always guaranteed conquest of humanity. The pre-democratic politician was an aristocrat who lived *for* politics and not *from* it, a gentleman politician.

Since the French Revolution parliamentarians' allowances have been a remuneration enabling those who were not aristocrats to participate in politics. The fact that parliamentarians could make a living from politics gave people from varied backgrounds the chance to be part of the game. The salary of politicians, slender but sufficient, is a guarantee of equal access to political activity.

The powerful often have other means of furthering their interests, but the surprising thing is that we put at risk the achievement of equal access to politics with such stupid proposals. I will not even judge whether they are too many or they earn too much. I merely point out that this debate harms its legitimacy and hints at a future ideal of parliaments that are weak and in the hands of the rich. A parliament of a few idle gentlemen would be a parliament even less able to keep a rein on its executives. If politicians earned no wages, only the rich or their flunkies would devote themselves to it. Defending the number and salaries of parliamentarians may sound today like a provocation but it is more egalitarian than certain populist measures that weaken democracy.

The second consequence of keeping politics open to all is that, in principle, it makes little sense to divide people between those who are competent for it and those who are not, and turn it over to the so-called experts. However, this declaration of universality poses some problems: certain types of decisions are at stake. Some have argued that recourse to experts is justified by the greater ease of experts in managing the complexity of decisive issues and because only experts provide the political system with attention to long-term interests, while politicians work only in the short term and in accordance with the electoral cycle.

Hence the tendency of the political system to delegate to non-representative institutions that are not obliged to account to anyone (or only indirectly), institutions called «non-majoritarian» (Majone 1996: 3) and that Everson has defended for counteracting the «predatory inclinations of a transitional political class» (2000: 110). This is why a purely tactical approach to politics leads inexorably to technocracy. Either politics introduces long-term strategies and learns to deal with complexity, or the increased use of experts will be the only way to avoid the dysfunctionality of that simplification and tactical approach in which, too often, elected politicians fall.

However, one thing is that the use of experts must occupy a prominent place in complex democracies and another is that expert knowledge can do without any democratic legitimacy. One thing is to take into consideration the opinion of experts and another is to leave governing in the hands of someone who supposedly decides according to objective criteria. For how can we know who are the best and how can we be sure that, if we do find them, they

would make the best decisions? Who decides when experts disagree and construe objectivity in a different way?

Politics is an activity that requires maintaining balance among people, experts, civil servants and political professionals. And the latter, politicians, play a key role if we consider the type of activity that is involved.

Politics is a vague occupation which calls for judgment capacity, comprehensive vision, prudence, intuition, sense of timing and opportuneness, communication skills, and a willingness to make decisions about which there is no absolute certainty. Whoever dedicates himself to it should also accept a certain superficiality that allows him to form an overview of things, a vision that would be lost if it delved too much into details. One can be neither an amateur nor a specialist (Bullit 1977). Herein lie many of the reasons for the low esteem of politicians: we respect specialists more than laymen; the former protect themselves better from criticism than the latter. Administrators of objectivity who would like politics to be an exact science, have great difficulty in understanding its true purpose because they do not take into account that politics, rather than managing objectivities, involves weighing the social significance of decisions, their opportuneness in certain contexts, the way they affect people.

Hence there is no specific training for politics and anyone can in principle exercise it. Politicians are necessarily self-taught (Scheer 2003: 33). It requires learning skills that have little to do with a technical objectivity of the issues at hand; this is why highly qualified persons in their fields (doctors or professors, for example) can be very bad ministers of that same field (health and education) and vice versa (without being experts in that field they can manage it well politically). Thanks to this versatility politicians can move from one ministry to another and whoever mistakes this will interpret this versatility as incompetence, an interpretation that is at the origin of the populist contempt for those who govern us. It is a paradox of the current disaffection towards politics: behind the complaint about the incompetence of politicians there all too often lurks an elitist contempt for ordinary people.

Why is it not a good idea to put the experts at the head of government? Because there are bad experiences with technocrats, because they have a tendency to persist in their mistakes, to defend their position not as the product of a decision but as a logical deduction of a truth, but above all because they would stop fulfilling their role as allies in the task of reducing the complexity of the world and building trust.

Democracy is a political system that involves experts in the decision-making process but refuses to leave everything in their hands, to replace politicians with civil servants and experts. At the apex of politics there is a precarious balance between administration and government, between technical skill and politics. This scale should never become imbalanced because it is as bad to rely only on the continuity of the bureaucracy as it is to risk everything with political creativity. Without ordinary administration, politics would turn into a solution of ineffectual improvisation; without politics, nothing would protect us from the machinery of self-conservation into which ordinary administration would degenerate.

Now if we remain confident that politics has the final say in administration or that parliaments can oversee governments, we need a certain degree of professionalization of politics. «Politics as Vocation» (Weber 1919) is as necessary for fulfilling its functions as a major consideration for the role of expert knowledge in our decisions to increasingly complex problems (Innerarity 2013). A democracy requires both experts and the wisdom to protect itself from experts.

There are different profiles of politicians and there is no ideal type. The best case scenario is a balance between amateur and professional politicians. The absolute professionalization of politics should be limited as much as its absolute lack of professionalism. It is a good sign that accredited professionals in other fields enter politics, but we should not let them replace political logic with what rules their specific areas. If we keep this tension alive we can free ourselves as much from the experts' presumption of exactitude as from the frivolity of politicians, thus taking advantage of the competence of the former and the creativity of the latter. Because political problems are too complex to be left in the hands of those who deal in exactitude, for they also require an effort of political imagination.

The end of political parties?

The current crisis of political parties, their discredit, loss of relevance or fragmentation, is a manifestation of a deeper crisis. In my opinion we are at the end of a political era that we may call "the era of containers" and we

still do not know what material can be salvaged from the old containers and what new institutional forms will adopt the new.

A container is the symbol of globalized commerce, a device for storing things, fitting them into homogeneous, standardized, classifiable, manageable spaces so that nothing is left out. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz (2000) criticized this concept of the world as a puzzle of same-sized (or type of) pieces, developed under the assumption that nations and cultures can be matched up indifferently; he announced for the future a new disharmony among spaces, greater heterogeneity of the elements that make up social reality. This coincided with Ulrich Beck's criticism of the container model of society and nation states (1997), as if we were locked up inside self-sufficient capsules endowed with sovereign authority. Reality has long been out of whack with this definition, nor can we govern from such assumptions; free trade and communicative connectivity make it very difficult to maintain a national container with which to protect the unity of economy, culture and politics.

The world of containers presupposed a social context structured into stable communities with specific occupational roles and forms of recognition and established reputation. In that social reality political machines were developed which are our classic mass parties. «Party democracy» was the political form appropriate for a society structured stably into social classes, groups clearly defined by their own productive function, whose social and cultural identifications were destined to find a correspondence in terms of representation. Like other social organizations, parties acted as containers in that they were ponderous organizations that were not confined to managing institutional processes of representation but that also incorporated into their structures entire areas of society, culture and their values, and therefore could ensure the predictability of its political and electoral behavior.

Probably our social practices continue to take for granted the existence of a world that has disappeared or, at least, has undergone a transformation that has made few inroads in our concepts and actions. What happens when interactions multiply, social functions become evanescent and identities precarious, when the logic of flows is stronger than the logic of places? We have to answer these questions instead of displaying the perplexity that it produces in us, for example, the fact that the logic of pork-barreling has stopped working with mechanical precision (between left and right, depending on who governs and who is in the opposition). Maybe this scheme of communicating vessels has lost much of its plausibility because there are phenomena that are no longer explainable as adjustments or rebalancing within the system but obey deeper changes.

When mass democracy arose, political parties stabilized over a long period both political identities and their corresponding electoral choices. To speak, at that time, of voters «choosing» a specific political option had as little sense as saying that a believer chose to go the Anglican Sunday Mass instead of the Presbyterian or Baptist, as Rose and Mossawir keenly observed in a classic study (1967: 186). According to the best studies, the class vote has declined significantly since the mid-70s, especially in those countries in which class identity had been a fairly certain determiner of electoral preferences (Knutson 2006).

The period of «party democracy» as we have known it represented a solid geography, while today we seem to be moving more towards a liquid scenario, an instability and even a volatility which has had an affect on the great containers of the past (parties, churches, identities, communication media and even states). Bernard Manin years ago warned us about this change in our schemes of representation, which he summarized in the idea of a shift from a «party democracy» to a «democracy of the public» or «audience» (Manin 1997). All this is what lies at the origin of the widespread crisis of confidence that has eroded channels of representation and the traditional organizations of consensus and antagonism.

This liquid panorama, to use the expression coined by Bauman, whose flows do not have any recognizable direction, affects both the public and its representatives, society and political parties. What the former receive from it confers a disconcerting unpredictability. Citizens are fleeing the venues of conventional politics. «The democracy of the public» takes on the fluidity of a fickle, unpredictable electorate. In marketing terminology we can speak of a less loyal, intermittent, volatile electorate. There has been what we might call a liquification of the electoral body, which at other times was a rather viscous, stable and loyal material. We have gone from an «electoral body» to a «political market» with all the rules (or lack thereof), all the risks and all the unpredictability of the market.

Instead of voters, a party is a hodgepodge of hooligans and clients (in variable percentages). The difficulty of identifying them and gaining their trust has to do with the fact that their demands have become more complex and fragmented. Individuals emit diffuse signals that the political system cannot identify, develop and adequately represent. So the parties have great difficulty listening to their constituents and understanding, collating or processing their claims. The electorate is less differentiated and presents issues of cross-convergence, with less transparent and identifiable demands and expectations. In all verisimilitude we can apply to it the property of an «undetectable people» (Rosanvallon 1998).

The personalization of electoral choice has much to do with that amorphous and dis-ideologized electoral market. As in the origins of parliamentarism before mass democracy, we do not vote in the first place for a party or a program but for a person. With the difference that then confidence in representation was the result of a more or less personal and immediate relationship, while now it is the product of a media image construct.

The volatility of voters, together with the acceleration of the processes of social change likewise affects political actors and parties. If voters are so «unfaithful», parties are increasingly less forced into ideological commitments. I do not mean this to excuse these failures but to try to understand their cause. It is the overall volatility of the political space which explains that the idea of an electoral program has weakened and imposed a certain randomness in decisions and programs, as subject to improvised adjuncts as to rapid retractions. Probably electoral programs can no longer be understood as the old «programming» was because of the extremized complexity within which political decisions have to be made, when relevant interdependencies and consequent unpredictability multiply. Strategic rationality has become very difficult when the circumstances of world stability that once made it possible no longer hold. An extreme case of this institutionalized improvisation is the proliferation of «instant parties,» which represent disaggregated interests and try to respond off the cuff to the often contradictory demands of different sectors of opinion, in former times formulated for example around the consistency of class coherence. Perhaps in this we find an explanation for the success of certain contemporary social movements, like the pirate parties in 2011-12, one of whose German leaders stated that they had «a procedureless program». And this is why today we call ideologies political «sensitivities», because we dare not use any other name that might refer to something more solid and stable.

While all this has been going on, parties have undergone a transformation that has distanced them from social reality. On the one hand, the distance between citizens and parties has increased at the same time that differences between parties have decreased, both processes becoming reciprocally reinforced, and causing public indifference to the world of politics in general. On the other hand, for some time now, in most democracies, parties have ceased to be organizations whose survival depends on the proportioned resources provided by its members and have become dependent on public funding, as if they were agents of the state. This linkage with the state has also been consolidated by the fact that parties have prioritized their role as instruments of government to the detriment of their representational function. Whoever is in opposition tends to consider himself so only temporarily because the name of the game is office-seeking; he is someone whose vocation is to achieve power rather than represent the people. Parties dedicate themselves above all to governing or waiting for their turn to govern. The center of gravity moves towards institutional responsibilities, parties are controlled by governments and their role in identifying and representing the interests and social demands weakens, which sometimes they are unable to perceive. «Parties have reduced their presence in society at large and have become part of the state. They have turned into actors who govern more than represent. They provide order rather than give voice (...). The result is a new form of democracy in which citizens stay at home and parties get on with governing» (Mair 2013: 97-98). The upshot is that the opposition often appears on the sidelines of conventional parties, in the form of social movements and protests.

The mass parties of the nineteenth century were organized according to the matrix of public bureaucracies and as centralized factories, these two great inventions of modernity that were the «Fordist factory» and «Weberian bureaucracy»: standardized production and formalization of functions. In both cases, in the assembly line and in bureaucratic organization, standardized processes made it possible, through container logic, to mete out similar treatment to diversity. The factory and the party were our major means for the standardized production of things and the serial management of mankind.

The transformations of the modes of organizing both entrepreneurial and managerial reality could not leave unscathed institutions such as political parties, designed with their logic. «Post-Fordism» has buried the Weberian bureaucratic model in favor of a light, open, diffused and polycentric one; it promotes a new socio-productive paradigm no longer characterized by the great processes of rationalization and centralization. New theories of organization that invite us to leave room for disorder in the form of irregularity, difference or periphery, and to distrust the container logic where everything fits together perfectly. It is a question of organizing without complaining of too much complexity, too many variables to control, too much subjectivity to sterilize, too much irreducible difference to a standard. The aim would be to create open systems, more like organisms than containers, more porous than closed, in a dialogue with what surrounds them and not protected against the outside.

The challenge that these changes pose to political organizations is how to operate in an environment that governs a new style of behavior characterized by dissemination, autonomy and horizontality, with a mobilization that is geared more to specific problems than specific actions through stable bureaucratic organizations such as parties and trade unions (Inglehart 1990).

What will the political landscape be like after the current political party crisis? From the outset, the political environment has become more complex with other forms of representation of interests, networks of parallel or alternative participation, participants or aggregations that have complicated the «game».

In these new circumstances political parties have not lost their reason for being, but their «political capital», which, like financed capitalism today, has ceased to be insured stably and depends continually on a flow of resources which they occasionally intercept but without being able to capitalize on it once and for all. This instability will force political organizations to develop an adaptive intelligence and rebuild their capacity to represent and govern a society that has become more demanding, keeping a jealous eye on their delegations of authority.

The current party crisis will be overcome only when there are better parties. Throwing away the baby with the bathwater, as they say, is not a good solution, and experience teaches us that even worse than a system with bad parties is a system with no parties at all; whoever complains about their oligarchic character will have more reason to complain if parties are weakened to the point of being unable to meet the expectations of representation, counseling, participation and configuration of the political will that is expected of them in constitutional democracies.

I say this as an invitation to explore the possibilities of disintermediation which lie before us - the expectations raised by social networks, conducting primaries or renewal via social movements, for example - but not without creating too many illusions about them.

As for the former, we can say that the new political organizations that have cropped up with the momentum of immediacy and horizontality of *the social networks* have had a rather poor showing against the expectations they raised. It is true that the network grants an unprecedented ability to interconnect instantaneously all those who had been reached separately (such as representatives and the represented), enabling observation and control, without the kind of organizational mediation that is provided by parties. It is something similar to what the invention of printing meant to the Protestant Reformation: the technical possibility of «free examination» without ecclesiastical mediation. Internet enables access of all citizens to the decisional process, making the interposition of political parties seem obsolete. However, turning that immediacy into a sole democratic register leads us to underestimate other central elements of democratic life, such as deliberation or organization. The time for decision is important, but it requires spaces and procedures of deliberation, whose importance is ignored by those who seem to conceive of democracy simply as a series of consultations.

As occurred with Margaret Thatcher, who weakened the state and strengthened herself – in some of the political movements that have emerged from the social networks, devoid of any structure, regulations or program, authority is exercised sometimes in a more despotic manner than in traditional parties, because their alleged flexibility allows a less limited adoption of decisions for the rights of its members, commissions of guarantee and reference to a body of doctrine or stable program. The destiny of the Italian Cinque Stelle movement is a very illustrative case of digital ambiguity. In such a disorganized organization who guarantees the rights of its members or who is responsible for the results? As Michels (1911) said in the early twentieth century in a famous essay on

the sociology of political parties, organization is the weapon of the weak against the power of the strong.

What can we say, secondly, about the primaries and other similar procedures by which internal democratization is seen as the best means for recovering the faith of voters? From the outset, it is an interesting resource that introduces an element of unpredictability in the life of political parties, but that should not be imposed by law, for among other reasons because it will be those parties that fail to mobilize their voters in this or any other way that will pay the price. But it also has its ambivalence, allowing parties to create a simulacrum of external democracy while maintaining an impoverished inner life, externalizing participation at a particular moment and around a choice of individuals, which is often resolved with media logic rather than political logic.

Nor should we expect from *social movements* what they cannot give. I do not say this to diminish our expectations of them, but on the contrary, so that we can keep them high. What social movements can give us is something more radical than what is provided by political parties, which cannot be replaced. As Michael Walzer says, political parties spend their time gathering votes and social movements in modifying the terms of this gathering (2012). Both things do not go together very well, but from that tension we can hope for a greater revitalization of our exhausted politics rather than that fatal mixture of magic formulas, populist proposals and clichés.

To compare Grillo with Thatcher is, in my opinion, neither rhetorical nor slanderous. It responds to an objective coincidence that I have always considered very suspicious among those who want to deregulate the political space from the digital left and those who, from the extreme right, push for the deregulation of the public sphere because they trust that by so doing certain social needs and policies regarding justice and the welfare state will wither away. The triple alliance between ineffectual political parties, a left with little sense of reality and a right that knows it all too well is an undeclared conspiracy that threatens our democratic life more than any other dysfunctionality. The combination of the two can weaken the values of a democratic and egalitarian society, which is what should concern us much more than the concrete future of our political organizations.

What is obsolete and what is not at a time when so often the demise of political parties is heralded? What is gone is the monopolistic control of the public space by political parties, but in absolute the need for mediation in which the political will and the antagonism which lies at the core of collective decisions are formed. One thing is that parties and trade unions must undergo a profound process of renewal, and another that social victories and those of civic participation can be assured without organizations such as political parties and trade unions. The criticisms that are directed toward them are partly just and partly a result of ignorance about their functions. While we criticize the fact that parties and unions set up a filter and a mediation that often falsifies social reality, in civil society there are power imbalances in the groups competing for centers of decision that could be even more unfavorable to the weak if we had a more deregulated political space. Institutions that establish mediations and regulate the political parties game, generate many inequalities, which are not corrected by leaving that political space without any mediation. For better or worse, a democratic practice seems unlikely without institutions that perform this type of filter function, selection and guarantee or, at the very least, any alternative destructuring of the political field would be much worse.

Parties are essential for clarifying the options available to voters; they serve the purpose of training political personnel, selecting candidates, managing the circulation of the political class throughout the institutions and making sure that those elected keep the promises they made to their voters. Thanks to political parties citizens can vote for a political program linked to an identifiable line of ideas. Confidence in candidates usually relies on an identification with the political ideas of the party they represent. Calling attention to these useful factors collides with a critical current established with few niceties, such as political correctness. One of the most frequent criticisms of political parties presents them to us as tools for reinforcing the power of politicians. The implication is that if the members of parliament were completely independent they could better represent their constituents, which is far from obvious. This was the famous argument of the late eighteenth-century conservative politician Edmund Burke, raised with a rather aristocratic conception of representation (1999: 156). The result of this would be to increase the confusion of citizens, lack of government leadership and increased fragility of the entire political system against populist and media pressures. Although it does not do so well on many occasions, political parties serve the purpose of keeping a tight rein on those elected. Without political parties the elected would be more of a caste than they are now and at any rate less controllable.

What has gone by the wayside is the container-party, but not the idea of a political organization that helps to make the world an intelligible place, orients the decisions of citizens, that can lay out pathways of political participation and keep a watchful eye over their representatives. It is clear that the political parties of the present are far from living up to these expectations; in the aftermath of the political party crisis we are at a crossroads of either creating better parties or entering into an amorphous space whose territory will be occupied by technocrats and populists, thus defining a new battlefield that would be worse than the one we have today.

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