



Exploring the Crisis. Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Investigations

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Plebiscitarianism and Democratic Society. An Outline

NICO DE FEDERICIS

1.

Contemporary democracies are in all probability experiencing an altogether new trend in their history, whose character seems to be entirely unknown. One fact, however, emerges clearly from this particular phase in the development of modern democracy in western societies: the return of those plebiscitary features that characterized democracy at its origin, with all its charge of disruptive power.

The present chapter will centre on a discussion of the transformations of politics in contemporary society (and specifically in Europe), which is emphasized in Max Weber's classical theory of political society. Furthermore, I will discuss the function of the mass party in highly democratized contexts. My aim here will essentially be restricted to underlining some fundamental similarities between the nineteenth/early twentieth century's democratic plebiscitarianism and that of today. As anticipated, I will do this by emphasizing the relevance of the political party, especially with regard to the role played by such «political machines»- in the contemporary crisis of democracy.

My claim is that the present crisis of parties and of the party system actually reproduces the structural condition of a plebiscitary society, as was that which existed at the origins of the democratic age, when democracies (and even non-democratic regimes) were established on the primacy of the *ochlos* and the ochlocratic will. Today, a weakening of political participation and the lack of public legitimation of an increasingly powerful political bureaucracy have «set free» the demos.

What I shall mainly do in the following pages is to introduce some preliminary results of my research, which seeks to clarify the reason for the increasing relevance of plebiscitarianism in our late modern democratic regimes. I will do this by focusing on the very typical theoretical horizon within which this macro-

phenomenon of contemporary politics can effectively be thematized. I will concentrate mainly on the case of Europe, as it represents the macro region of our globalized world where the resurgence of populism and plebiscitarianism definitely appears as a crucial issue on the agenda of democratic leaders, even though I am convinced that the argument I will be defending here is not exclusively applicable to the European case, but rather constitutes an interpretative tool, by means of which a general trend in modern political rationalization itself may be identified.

2.

In analyzing the recent trend of European domestic politics, one specific feature leaps to the eye, that is the extraordinary increase in plebiscitary parties and the growth in demagoguery in political slogans throughout the continent. Plebiscitary politics are amply discussed in a recent research by Karsten Grabow and Florian Hartleb, published in 2013 by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung¹. From their results (see fig. 1) it appears clear that populism and populist parties will be holding centre stage in European politics in the near future.

What has happened in democratic politics over the last two decades? One of the central subjects in the debate on the resurgence of populism in Europe refers to the process of democratization in Europe, starting from its origins, when the «structuration» of our political society took place. The results depend closely on the analysis of the ongoing change in the character itself of democracy in post-ideological societies. This is a process of transformation, which according to its own political preconditions started in 1989, but progressively increased and suddenly exploded at the beginning of the last decade, when a relevant segment of consent moved away from its traditional alignment, which in Europe was essentially built on the socialists/Christian democrats (labour/conservative) diarchy, and realigned itself with post-ideological plebiscitary movements or with neo-ideological national right-wing parties.

Today's crisis of the organized political bureaucracy, acting at the level of society, rather than at that of the state, challenges the traditional force of the old membership-based political participation; the outcome is a sort of «loosening» of the demos, whose voice is increasingly transformed into the domain of

¹ K. Grabow, F. Hartleb (edited by), *Exposing the Demagogues. Right-Wing and National Populist Parties in Europe*, Kortrijk, Drukkerij Jo Vandenbulcke, 2013 (later New York, Springer, 2013), p. 14.

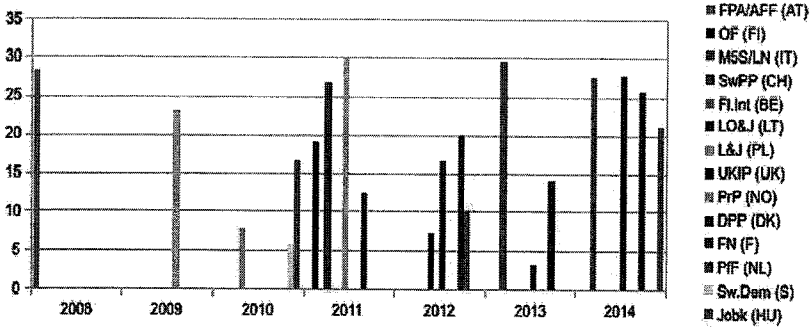


Fig. 1. Grabow, Karsten/Hartleb, Florian (eds): *Exposing the Demagogues. Right-Wing and National Populist Parties in Europe (K-A-S/CES, 2013)*; 2014 data are my addition.

plebiscitarianism. According to the classical theory formulated by Max Weber in the last century, democracy appears as a double-faced phenomenon: if, on the one hand, it is connected to the idea of political equality and claims for political justice, on the other hand, it appears as consistently bound up with mass-politics, which is closely related to the classical Greek concept of *ochlokratia*. In this sense, the majority principle itself tends to be associated with mass-worship. Democracy, in other words, ought to abide by Weber's famous words in *Politics as a Vocation* and remember his severe warning that «the distasteful flavor of the word must not make us forget that not Cleon but Pericles was the first to bear the name of demagogue»². Can the contemporary return of plebiscitarianism be the proof of this particular legacy of modern politics?

Democratic society originates in the «love for equality», that is in the connection between democratic morals and the spirit of egalitarianism which was exhaustively explained by Tocqueville, one of the founding fathers of modern democratic theory. And yet, modern democracy has generally been established by following two significantly different concepts of equality. Indeed, democracy appears comprehensible both on the argument that stresses a «social» notion of equality, and on that which concentrates on a «political» notion, centred on rights and citizenship. Whereas the former identifies the idea of a clear-cut social egalitarianism, that is the «equality of conditions» emphasized by Tocqueville himself³, the latter basically deals with the normative idea of equal political rights,

² M. Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, in *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology*, edited by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, London, Routledge, 1948, p. 97.

³ A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, edited by H.C. Mansfield and D. Winthrop, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 3.

hence with democratic legitimacy, political autonomy and social security, which the people demanded in asking for universal suffrage and citizenship.

Democratic society implies egalitarianism, which reproduces the grounds for demagoguery and demagogic power, that according to Weber's own account remains the basic impulse behind every democratic regime. The original force of this social precondition for democracy, as it is discussed in Tocqueville's masterpiece with respect to the American politics of his own time, goes in the direction of a formidable centralization of political decisions. In this context the profile of the leader is identified with the figure of the democratic dictator, as it emerges from the American political system and from the presidential elections, whose role it is to legitimize it. Therefore, a democratic society presupposes egalitarianism, and is established on the force of the plebiscite; so within democratic regimes government is always related to the managing of demagoguery and of rhetorical power.

That at the origins of contemporary politics there is a significant element of plebiscitarianism is a fact which appeared entirely natural for classical theory of democracy. Authors such as Pareto, Weber himself, and Schumpeter critically interpreted this phenomenon, underlining the danger represented by democratic rhetoric for a liberal society. More recently, theory has tackled this danger, by reaffirming the roles played by political autonomy, the enlargement of citizenship and the claims for social justice⁴ as crucial for a liberal society. In sum, democracy has been normatively re-thought and justified, emphasizing its ideal values over the factuality of its political fallacies; thus, democratic virtues stand over egalitarianism and social democratization.

From this analysis of its recent trends and problems, contemporary democracy emerges as a dazzling old gentleman, who is now suffering from a mysterious illness. In order to produce an effective diagnosis a twofold assessment is needed.

Firstly, we need to thematize the very character of modern political rationalization, which requires a return to the classics of modern political theory. On the basis of Weber's political sociology, we will here take the party as the specific machine of democratized societies. Therefore, the crisis of contemporary politics and representative institutions presupposes the acknowledgement of the role played by western modern rationalization within the political sphere. Secondly, we need to focus on the basic relation between plebiscitarianism and the party, as the two opposite poles of modern politics. Indeed, this clearly means making a claim for the centrality of political charisma within the theoretical nucleus of modern democracy.

⁴ See e.g. J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996, but also R. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989.

3.

Another issue which we need to investigate in order to outline today's political crisis involves the relationship between mass parties and plebiscitarianism. This issue highlights in particular the «political» feature of this mechanism, by bringing to the fore a unique quality of the mass party, that is its «mimic» character. This character promoted the democratic role of the party system, and referred specifically to democratic accountability.

According to a general survey of its political principles, modern democracy appears as the synthesis between the rule of law, which implements the liberal tradition based on individual rights and pluralism, and the rule of the people, which establishes the political relevance of equality and national representation⁵. From the perspective of social theory, this couple naturally tends towards implementing a form of order which not only appears as weak and eclectic, but also as extremely conflictual. And yet, the history of modern democracy reveals a story of unexpected success. Despite a parenthesis of totalitarianism in continental Europe and in the eastern countries, as well as over a century of strong political conflicts in the body politics of the nations that have tried from the second half of the nineteenth century onward to implement democratic government, old Europe seems to have succeeded in this constitutional elaboration. In the end, democracy has prevailed over all other forms.

Where does this success stem from? The role of mass parties here remains crucial. Through a successful imitation of modern personal legitimacy, at the end of democratic development, political parties have promoted themselves as political actors, producing a powerful identification, which has reappraised charismatic individualism. Indeed, it was Antonio Gramsci, a non-democratic theorist, who identified the party (which remained in his mind the Communist party) with the «modern prince»⁶.

The positive role played by political machines has been twofold: 1. the political organization of the demos; 2. the important role assigned to ideological orientations. The former has meant that the mass party provided the people with both identity and specific ends; because of the latter, it has introduced an internal differentiation within the people themselves. Because of their own peculiar political ideologies, parties organized the demos pluralistically, though they continued to compete among themselves in the political arena. By implementing their form-giving role, which is based on both organization and ideology, parties allowed the people to work politically. However, the rational form of power, which all bureaucratic organizations detain, also survived in the

⁵ Cfr. B. Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, Cambridge-New York, C.U.P., 1997, pp. 94-5.

⁶ A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 2, edited by J.A. Buttigieg, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 152.

case of mass «machines». Bureaucracy has developed throughout modernity not only within the body politic thanks to the juridical personality of the state, but also within collective organizations, whose characteristic is the production of a process that presents a high level of abstraction regarding certain fundamental social ends; the result of this was to shift interest from individual personality to community itself. This process was fundamental in unifying the level of government with that of society, which has been institutionalized by the modern parliamentary state thanks to its representative institutions.

However, mass parties promoted an impressive radicalization of rational forms, which conferred uniformity to the entire process of political society. Although highly differentiated ideologically, at their origin they reproduced, in the way they functioned, a common rationality, as they were essentially based on the centralization of the decision making power, thereby repeating a pattern which is very similar to that which characterized the process of state-building⁷. Because of their character as bureaucratic organizations, at the level of political decisions party officers naturally tended to return to their leaders, who assumed the role of «decisive» subjects, especially in those cases where the charisma of the founders survived. Only later, as the original charismatic role faded away, the leadership of a mass party was generally reorganized pluralistically. Accordingly, this leadership took on the appearance of being submitted to procedural forms of decision making, which involved the whole body of the party and were concentrated within certain specific offices (such as the secretary, the central committee, etc.), sometimes implementing forms of co-governance between party leaders and the board. Indeed, this is entirely in line with Weber's own theory of bureaucratization.

Nevertheless, the crucial element which transformed the earlier conditions into the new democratic style was the integration of plebiscitarianism into the institutional framework of political society. This finally renewed the political structure of European countries, leading them towards a fully realized party democracy, following the more developed examples of Great Britain and the US. While on the one hand the crowd politicized the machine, on the other modern democratic societies internalized the plebiscitary moment, which incorporated the «intermediate» level of the party, between civil society and the state. What followed was the rather unsteady synthesis that characterized contemporary democratic life in the last century.

From the analysis of Weber's political sociology and its legacy in the theory of the modern party, the need to balance leadership and party machinery emerges as fundamental. This is a crucial issue for contemporary politics, as it clarifies how modern political institutions work. Indeed, personal leadership and party machinery

⁷ M. Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, cit., pp. 105 ss.

both interpret democratic politics by unifying power and consent, though they basically refer to very different form of legitimacy. Differentiating his own theory from Pareto's and Michels' elitism, Weber attempted a mediation between political charisma and rational legality. If individual leadership and bureaucratic management of modern society are reconcilable in the context of political action, a good governance of parliamentary politics is produced, which is potentially capable of guaranteeing a golden mean between liberty and political necessity. Accordingly, it would be possible to affirm the reconciliation between power, which remains grounded in the mechanisms of political obedience, and free consent, which originates from legitimacy, considered as mutual forms, through which political actuality is produced.

Properly speaking, power appears as a product of the social structure of modernity and its constrictive mechanism, whereas political freedom survives on the basis of charismatic legitimation and personal leadership, through which political democracy is established. The political party plays an essential role in this game, because it works as an enforcing institution, implementing the modern alliance between charismatic leadership and the rationalization of political agency, thanks to its own function as organizer of militancy. And yet, contemporary politics has reshaped this relation, producing a twofold intellectual «proletarianization», that applies first to the people, and secondly to the officers.

Following the end of WW II, political parties became strongly involved in a progressively ideologized context, so that the role of the popular participation was decidedly reappraised. Today's crisis, on the other hand, is rekindling the charismatic potential which coloured European democratic politics in the period of its rise. The early decade of the twenty-first century has revealed a very different scenario from that of the second half of the twentieth, when mass politics was characterised by violent ideological struggles (first and foremost, between liberalism, socialism and totalitarianism). Accordingly, in the past, political ideologies were effective substitutes for charismatic faith in personal leadership, even though a party itself was sometimes identified with its «new prince». Our age, which is experiencing the end of ideology, is facing a very similar form of crisis to that of over a hundred years ago. The plebiscitarian character of European democracy, which was a feature of this period, seems to be making its return.

4.

If we try to analyse democracy in Europe – but the same seems to be true for the US, even though we must make some different assumptions – the present decade has revealed the return of the plebiscitary model. Why has this happened? What is the reason for such a transformation in western politics? What, furthermore, does it

imply for political theory? If we examine the democratic polity of our time, political institutions appear as legitimacy-lacking constructions: the important compromise between freedom and authority, that western societies, and in particular Europe, made after the second world war, is presently suffering. Everywhere citizens are rebelling against delegitimized political machines. European society especially is producing a political trend, that is widely asserting itself in many countries of the Union, and which is focused on: 1) the rise of new parties and/or unconventional forms of political partisanship (for example the Piraten Party in Germany, the Five Star Movement in Italy, the Independent Party (UKIP) in Great Britain, Podemos in Spain, and other similar movements and formations throughout Europe, but especially in Northern Europe); 2) the resurgence of an ultra-right wing, such as the Front National in France as well as the fascist and quasi-fascist parties which internalize populism (such as the Golden Dawn in Greece, the Freedom Party in Austria, and right-wing populisms in the Netherlands, Hungary, and Italy, thanks to the realignment of the Northern League that has embraced an ultra-right programme.

Political analysts have generally described this phenomenon under the rubric of «Euro-skepticism», a by-word that has certainly been reinforced by the economic crisis and the Euro policy upheld by the European Commission and the world monetary institutions. Although many other explanations could be put forwards, I am inclined to consider relevant non only the populist revival in itself, which could depend on a form of realignment of the political cycle, but also the substantial transformation of some of the fundamentals of democracy. Demagoguery in political discourse as well as the progressively incremental role played by audience democracy in the construction of public opinion are definitely changing our picture of western democracy, which is moving towards a return of the charismatic element and the power of the crowd against a party-based model of representation.

The lesson we can learn from this new trend in European politics in an age of crisis is the following: to the extent to which it remains a mass phenomenon, democracy seems to be fundamentally related to its earlier plebiscitary traits⁸. Analytically, this could help us to clarify why western countries and Europe in particular are living this plebiscitary revival. Despite the continuity of reference to its own theoretical grounds, democratic theory suffers exceedingly, as the crisis severely jeopardizes our political life, dismantling the big compromise between individual liberty and popular sovereignty that distinguished the contemporary shape of democracy.

⁸ According to N. Urbinati, plebiscitarianism, which constitutes a form of democracy's «disfigurement», does not entail any effective relation with democracy. See N. Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured. Opinion, Truth and the People*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2014, pp. 171 ss.

A final prevision on this topic is extremely difficult to make: what will follow the crisis? Will it produce an “end of politics”, in terms of conventional democratic participation and of electoral competition between the traditional left and right wings, as we are used to seeing it in the history of modern democracy? Will the political sphere become the undifferentiated domain of plebiscitary will? Or will there be new forms of participation and citizenship, which will reshape the concept itself of the «political», independently transforming the traditional concept of authority? These remain open questions; nonetheless, a correct interpretation of the interactions between democracy and its «audience» may not only serve to improve our political knowledge, but may be extremely useful in preventing a complete return of demagoguery⁹.

Finally, in order to conclude this outline of the main character of the present crisis of democracy, we need to explore some practical aspects of the crisis itself. This will be relevant to the discussion of a possible political agenda. Are political actors actually able to do something to promote a renewal of democracy? Here the first thing that must be emphasized is the question of good policies. A good governance of plebiscitarianism today appears as one of the central themes of any successful future politics. Even in classical theory, the symbiotic relation that democracy established with demagoguery and its own plebiscitary results did not imply the impossibility of governing democratic phenomena. Indeed, the very difference between good and bad politics, as well as the wise or unwise exercise of political leadership definitely rests on this.

According to classical theory, democracy always has truck with demagoguery, but this matter does not overshadow the real difference between a good demagogue and a «mere demagogue». In politics, virtue derives from the human factor; therefore, a political agency is needed, that is able to implement statesmanship at a very high level. Accordingly, even in the democratic age we cannot abstract from either political education or political wisdom. The history of democracy has sufficiently taught us that to exert leadership and to be a statesman is something radically different from expressing mass membership. Indeed, this remains the elitist or «aristocratic» part of democratic theory.

A second argument, which refers to political institutions, must, however, be put forward. This is connected to another classical theme, the relevance of the «laws» in the life of a nation, which has not only been emphasized by republican theory from Plato to Montesquieu, but has also been developed as one of the basic issues in modern democratic theory. We should not forget that this very

⁹ Pierre Rosanvallon has recently pointed out the importance of social critique for a democratic renewal and its originary political values. Cfr. P. Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy. Politics in an Age of Distrust*, Cambridge-New York, C.U.P., 2008.

idea (though from a somewhat different perspective) was shared by Rousseau himself, who defended a substantive vision of democratic legitimacy centred on the sovereignty of the people, which is based on the general will. Accordingly, the contemporary challenge to liberal democracy that springs from post-crisis plebiscitarianism seems to have a greater chance of success in those countries where the resilience of political institutions is effectively low. A similar point was emphasized by Weber himself, who, in his political writings, underlined the strategic role of these institutions, perhaps more emphatically than he did in his well-known address to charismatic leadership.

Because they actualize political reason, legal institutions are able to organize the public sphere, by embodying public reason itself in juridical rules, moral norms and best practices. Simply stated, an effective system of well-ordered institutions significantly restrains the revolutionary potential of the plebiscite. In discussing the British constitution of the mid-nineteenth century, Weber particularly underscored the role played by Parliament and by the Westminster model itself in the containment of Gladstone's personal leadership. He also stressed the unique role of the work carried out in Parliamentary Commissions¹⁰, whose function appeared to him fundamental in balancing the disruptive power of the democratic principle, whenever it plays the role of «counter-democracy».

Finally, the last important outcome of the contemporary crisis of western democracy is the transformation of the public sphere, which has increasingly changed from the philosophical forum described by John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas into the arena of the «democracy of the audience». This remains a fundamental malaise, which all students of contemporary politics have necessary had to engage with, either rejecting or accepting the «plebiscite of the audience» thesis¹¹. The fall of party democracy and of its related ideologies, which largely characterized the experience of post-war democratic politics in Europe, together with the return to an unbounded demos, generate the risks that are potentially related to the present crisis, the first of which is that of overestimating the *doxa*, by which I mean the immediate element between the representative institutions and public opinion, underestimating the need to transform it into public issues through institutional procedures and political will.

In the measure in which mere demagoguery prevails over good or at least over fair demagoguery, political agency tends to override the principle of democracy itself, which takes firm care of the citizen's freedom, although it pretends to do so in the name of «we the people». Whenever democratic theory has been established on the people's terms, according to the principle of political autonomy, it appears

¹⁰ M. Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, cit., p. 107.

¹¹ A thesis recently formulated by N. Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured* cit., p. 8.

clear that mere demagoguery denies both the idea of self-determination and of non-domination, which are considered as the common ground for all models of modern democracy¹².

5.

In this concluding paragraph I would like to briefly address a final issue and emphasize a particular point to which political actors as well as citizens in general, as the ultimate decision makers in all forms of legitimate politics, should over the coming years turn their attention.

The present rebirth of plebiscitarianism illuminates, as it were, democracy in its originary moment. Today, social cleavages and political realignments prove how the main subjects of egalitarian society are back at work wielding their ancient power; thus demonstrating their will to govern society. Indeed, plebiscitary disfigurement may be seen as a normal side of the democratic character. Like in the story of Beauty and the Beast, while a disfigurement is indeed present, it actually represents a natural distortion of character.

What is happening to Europe and its civil society? Today democracy in Europe looks like a baby crying for the first time. Morally weakened by the economic and intellectual crisis, which have, at the start of the new millennium, both surprisingly affected our divided west, the people seem to call out for a renewal of their representative potential.

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¹² See Ph. Pettit, *On the People's Term. A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy*, Cambridge-New York, C.U.P., 2012, pp. 5-6, pp. 293 ss.

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