

DEMOCRACY AND BIOPOLITICS

The illness of the present democracy is a widely known fact on which we do not need to dwell further, being that we do well know its phenomenology. More interesting is the analysis of the different interpretations of such an illness. I'd say that in substance they could be linked with two different families of argumentation. The first one questions the democratic pathology, starting from the so called „unfulfilled promises“ – the ever-increasing difference from what it promised and the results that had taken place. The other prevalent interpretation, which has a more antique origin, doesn't look for a dark side of democracy in the bad application, or insufficient, of a model good in its own, but it individualises it in the same model, in a primal vice that from the very beginning threatens the idea of democracy, cursing it to counter itself. The deficit of democracy – following this tradition which can be traced in its genesis back to Plato and peaks in Hegel, but not a stranger, in other areas, to Tocqueville – would not regard its historical realisation, but its essence, its own conceptual status. **185**

Without further analysis of these two lines of interpretation, which are widely known in their assumptions and argumentations, I'd like to address a third hypothesis that doesn't connect the crisis of democracy to a simple series of inadequacies, and neither to an original vice, but to a historical passage that challenges the very existence of it. Surely, if we stick to the formal facts – the plurality of parties, mechanisms of representation, the periodical elections – in which we live, at least in the western side of the world, they are really

democratic regimes. But if we look further into the reality of these regimes, the connection with democracy, at least in the sense which is usually given to this category, starts to appear somewhat problematic. From this viewpoint, if we accept this interpretative model, it could be said that the modern democracy had its own duration, which can be traced from the second half of the 19th century to the 20ies and 30ies of the 20th, and that after this period the experiment drifted into a different form of politics, one of complex definition, but in several aspect different from democratic semantics. And this to the point – in order to still give meaning to the definition of democracy – of re-taking the idea, in itself not accurately defined, of totalitarianism in the sense of a vicious cycle that defines democracy as a turn-around of totalitarianism and totalitarianism as turn-around of democracy, without the proper explanation that in some cases in fact there was no continuous passage from one to the other. Looking from this angle, those countries that emerged victorious from the second world conflict haven't remained the classic democracies of the period before the war, but became regimes that – even though they maintained some democratic rituals – resulted in something wholly different.

For further inspection of such diversities, an inquiry has to be made into the mutation that transformed (in the recent decades) the present viewpoint in its root with consistent effects on the socio-cultural dynamics. I'm pointing at that connection, ever more direct, that for some time now holds together politics and human life in its biological dimension, following the modality that has been, at least starting from the research of Michel Foucault, defined as „biopolitics“. Because this is the horizon, the new regime of meaning, that mutated the shape of democracy itself, making its classic procedures more and more inadequate at solving questing that spring from its historical context and from its conceptual dictionary. Of course there is no need to accentuate things in a unilateral manner. When we speak of epochal modifications it is clear that the processes are slow; that some elements of the old regime stay alive and only later come to be superated and replaced by others. But something more than just a transfer of accents seems to be undeniable. As we all know, democracy is born from the modern political order following the passage from the absolute state to the constitutional one. And this in a historical-conceptual picture that is defined by the categories of sovereignty and rappresentation, of liberty and equality, on the basis of which the citizens with equal right express their positions about the actual government of the state with others programs of governing.

And now its precisely this picture – with its insitutional mediations and conceptual profiles – with the biopolitical twist that enters in crisis, radically

mutates its distinguishing marks in favor of another scene, another logic, another substance which is in fact that of the living body of individuals and populations, which are hardly understood as informed and free citizen, capable of assigning their own preferences. When did this passage, or better said, this changing of paradigm occur? Without sinking my teeth too deep – the origins of the biopolitical turn-around can be traced back into the end of the 18th century, but its whole affirmation springs about in the 20ies and 30ies of the 20th – I'll limit myself to recalling three emblematic events that sum up the meaning of this turn-around in just a few years. At the end of the 60ies the question of type became dominant, the question of generation and genetics, in a form that seems to replace the biopolitical semantics of *ghenos* and that of the democratic *nomos*. Like the question of sexual differences and that of the generation as a united whole of individuals defined by specific characteristics, not just of a chronological type, but socio-cultural, different and frequently alternative in respect to those of the previous generations. Furthermore, in the year '71 there is the first experiment in genetic modification on the sheep Dolly. This event was destined to refigure, at least on the level of possibility, the already tense connection between technology and life, and only today can we see the great impact it had on the traditional political categories. Thinking that the possibility of the genetical modification of human life doesn't reflect (and radically transform) on political semantics is a mistake we cannot allow ourselves. In the end, in the '72, the first world conference on ecology, which had taken place in Stockholm, makes the question of ecology a political one and of first importance. In this manner a complex mutation is determined, one whose effects were slowly marked: the life of men, the life of the species and the life of the world come strongly onto a political scene that is not able to understand them yet. Imagining that this real and proper revolution which has the question of *bios* in its core might leave the previous political dictionary alone is an illusion destined to be continually debunked.

Without excessive radicalization of the discourse, it can be said that from that time, with successive bigger waves, the rupture between that which is biological and that which is political, is more and more the main attribute of our time, investing and mutating our whole experience, redefining in an unprecedented manner our reality and our imagination. From the new ethnic-religious conflicts to the growing wave of immigration, from the question of public health to that, ever more punctuated, of security, that which we were used calling politics, or 'the political', changes in a radical manner, it enriches itself and it gets more complicated, it dilutes and transforms. It is like the changing of

the whole conceptual apparatus that expressed the configuration of politics for nearly a century, but – in a sense for more than four centuries, from the beginning of the modern era. It is then – in a moment where birth and death, health and sexuality, the modification of our surrounding and the transformation of the body become public thematics of big importance – that the classical opposition between right and left begins to crumble, or at least need to be redefined on other levels, but the whole of the democratic vocabulary seems to be losing efficiency. Not only am I unable to bite the reality, I can't even interpret it.

188 How to use the democratic thesaurus of formal equality between abstract juridic subjects – pure logical atoms, periodically called upon to express a rational and voluntary option on the government of society – when there is the ever-increasing importance of the difference – be it ethnical, sexual, religious – between men that are essentially defined by their bodies, blood, age or their health? How to reconcile the sphere of the State, in which modern democracy was born, in the time of the *ius publicum europaeum*, with the horizon without boundaries of the globalisation that breaks from the beneath and the above, from the outside and the inside, the boundaries of the national State in a net of global and local? It's self-evident that those old european categories, that defined the semantic and interpretative picture of the 20th century, do not hold truth anymore. How to imagine an informed consensus – or a dissensus –, necessary for the democratic expression of vote, in a situation of the concentration of the media in few places and in a tight connection of complex matter, like for example, the one with the stem cells or sources of energy, the modification of the environment or the significance of the human life, on which neither the technical committees come to common decisions? To think that it is possible to finally solve this type of problems through the classical instrument of individual rights, or worse, in strikes of parlamentar majority is at the same time impossible and inadequate.

The principle of equality is not the only one to be revoked, but also a wide variety of distinctions and oppositions on which resides the modern conception of democracy – the ones between public and private, artificial and natural, right and biology, to name a few. Because in the moment when the body fills the abstract subject of the juridical person, it becomes difficult to differentiate between that which regards the public sphere and that which falls into the private, technology and nature, the right and theology. Because birth and death, but also the sexual and generational life, the body and ethnicity are exactly the places where the boundaries collapse. Naturally I do not wish to imply that this *per se* denotes the crumbling of democratic procedures – they stay formally in

place. But frequently turned upside-down in their sense or in their intention, like it happens when the same juridical institutes are collocated in a completely new horizon. It's like we were living in a nocturnal light of an ancient constellation – when one star turns off, but keeps to produce a light without any substance behind.

All of the three constitutive categories of democracy – the representation of electors, the identity between governors and governees and that of popular sovereignty – have already acquired a twisted significance in comparison to original ones. The representation has become more and more theatrical, televised, expressible. With the consequential transposition of the political concept of „public“, insofar as opposed to the private, into the „mediated public“, educated, or not, destined to the reduction of the critical capacities of the spectators. Without even mentioning the results of media research which is predefined by the posed questions. The identity between governors and governees has become the imagined identity between leaders and masses in the search of winning models evermore degraded on the level of quality – the whole with a dry lack of Symbolic or Real, made easy by the imagination and mimetic desire, that is oriented on the same things and the same styles of behaviour. In the end even the popular sovereignty has changed – is turned-around – in a populist one, based on the preventive politisation of what the idea of people used to mean inside the national ideology, that is undivided will of the people oriented to the elaboration of mutual values. In the society of the show, or in the show of society, which goes on air every day on our television programs, every dissensus becomes a consensus and every consensus is simply agreement, if not an applause regulated by the movie director.

The problem which is in front of us today it's not the limit, or the incompleteness, of democracy – it's „unfulfilled promises“. It's its paradoxical achievement in the inversion of its assumptions, in something which simultaneously derives and constitutes its opposite. It's when it happens that the democratic disposition moves from the modern horizon into another one. What is meant with this? That democracy is not possible today? That we need to fall down onto something which precedes it? This, evidently, wouldn't be possible or desirable. Urgent is the deep modification of what was up until now understood with this ancient but undeniable word. I'm not pointing towards a simple institutional reform, but neither in the direction of a more complex one. I'm addressing something deeper: at the transformation of the entire categorial asset of a concept, around which the whole of the modern political order has been turning, but that has lost all the grip on reality, like our, configured in

biopolitical terms. This means that we must, on the contrary, put it in the centre of the scene, work on its sense and its expectations, on the dilemmas that it opens and of the forces it evokes.

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Translated by Jan Hrvatin
