

THE DISCONTENT OF DEMOCRACY

We are witnessing a discontent of democracy. It is not the discontent – the refusal, in reality – that feeds the rich current of thought “against” democracy developed throughout the history of Western civilization,¹ nor the discontent, overflowing into anguish, that may be perceived “in face of” democracy, like the one felt by Tocqueville, who compared democracy to the deluge; and nor is it the discontent “within” democracy, the dismay Ortega manifested inside democracy in the age of the revolt of the masses. It is precisely the discontent “of” democracy, that is to say the actual discontent induced by democracy (and by its political institutions and social reality), today, in that part of the world where democracy had been achieved a long time ago, and where now people are asking whether it is a thing of the past (and is therefore facing a discontent “after” democracy, a post-democratic discontent). **173**

The discontent of democracy is a two-sided coin: the first face is primarily subjective, involving that subject that we would call its ‘citizen’. It emerges as disaffection, an ordinary indifference towards democracy that equates to its passive and a-critical acceptance and the implicit refusal of its most complex and challenging presuppositions. The typical inhabitant of real democracies shows more and more often an attitude towards politics that threatens democracy itself: an enraged and resigned repugnance, generated by the embarrassment of a death that cannot be announced. This discontent is not

1 J. T. Roberts, *Athens on Trial. The antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1994.

“hatred”², since it does not grow from a particular oligarchic will to power that faces democratic masses with hostility, but rather rises from the bottom, from the fact that there is a kind of obscurely perceived separation between politics and society on the one hand and democracy on the other, despite the fact that, no matter what the facts seem to suggest, democracy continues to dominate our political lexicon, as if it were endowed with a kind of quasi-naturalness, regarded almost as a destiny. This generates apathy together with rebellious attitudes. It is this element of enraged protest, although passive, that qualifies this discontent as something more than simple “disenchantment”, or unhelpful mistrust of democracy.³

The other face of this discontent is objective, structural. It grows from the inability of democracy and its institutions to keep their promises, to keep up with their humanistic objective, to give everyone equal liberty, equal rights, and equal dignity. Democracy is swept by the transformations of the world. Even if new democratic waves are hitting the globe – after the third one that followed the end of the Cold War, a fourth one is crushing dictatorships in the Arab World, and we begin to make (doubtful) speculation about the next wave which may affect the world’s most populated nation, China, that should overthrow the surviving dictatorships in Burma, North Korea and other countries; even if democracy seems to progress in synergy with the *Zeitgeist*,⁴ not being obstructed by any explicitly antidemocratic thought; even if economic development – that does not coincide with democracy, even though they are often associated – is actually rooting itself in Asia, Africa and Latin America; “real democracy” is nevertheless facing a crisis, even though the idea of democracy has been triumphant in the latest democratic revolutions, exciting events, rich in *pathos* and hope.

In other words: without openly questioning the logical presuppositions or the set values of democracy, its rules and institutions are often criticized, which means that even if some of its prerequisites are met,⁵ it does get off the ground, and its performance is perceived as disappointing by an increasingly large number of people. Democracy is undoubtedly invoked where it is missing, and bravely pursued as an essential aspiration of peoples, but in the countries where it has been long established, its institutions are less and less vital, toiling hard to connect with real politics, that manifests itself – in its fluxes

2 J. Rancière, *Lodio per la democrazia* (2005), Cronopio, Napoli, 2007.

3 C. Crouch, *Postdemocrazia*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2003

4 P. Grilli di Cortona, *Come gli Stati diventano democratici*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2009.

5 R. A. Dahl, *Sulla democrazia* (1998), Laterza, Roma-Bari 2000.

of power – sharing far less with democratic mechanisms than with oligarchic dominion.

In various contexts and in manifestations of different intensities, democracy is blurred; its survival is larval, even if it is not yet extinct. From the objective standpoint, the discontent of democracy consists in the fact that it does not seem to be fit to regulate and give contemporary politics a concrete form;⁶ and from the subjective perspective it consists in the feeling – spontaneous or induced: it must be investigated – that this fact is actually true. It is therefore a different discontent than the one theorized by Freud,⁷ which arose from the sacrifice of individual libido – erotic or aggressive – prescribed by civilization in order to preserve collective harmony. It was a partial sacrifice, a redirection: while Eros embodied the universal link among men, Thanatos, aggressiveness, turned into the Super-Ego, the sense of guilt that makes civilization possible by ethically influencing the Ego. This is the home proper [*propio*] to human beings precisely because they do not feel immediately at home (in their own [*propia*] home): discontent – *das Unbehagen*, lack of comfort or ease, disorientation – is the condition of civilization.

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The discontent of democracy, on the contrary, does not have the fatal and progressive quality of the one hypothesized by Freud; it is more similar to Charles Taylor's *Malaise*,⁸ rising out of a combination of individualism, technical disenchantment and loss of liberty, that constitutes the betrayal of the modern ideal of authenticity and of the individual's full freedom of expression. The discontent of democracy is not the uncertainty one may feel before a choice between two different options; it is the dissatisfaction for democracy together with the suspicion that there are no available alternatives to it; it is a disorientation that risks becoming chronic and insuperable, but never productive. It is a discomfort that is accompanied by a feeling of deception – a notion typical of the 20th Century, which has slipped its way into the 21st as well.

A critical and genealogical knowledge is therefore necessary in order to understand what we can know, what we should fear and what we should hope for. We can speak of the discontent of democracy, and of its paradoxes, only if we proceed to define and reconstruct the term-concept «democracy» and

6 C. Galli, «Politica e cultura nella grande mutazione», in *il Mulino*, 2003, n. 1, pp. 5-19; Id., «Di che cosa parliamo quando parliamo di politica?», in *il Mulino*, 2004, n. 2, pp. 201-10; Id., «Democrazia: grandezza, miserie, prospettive», in *il Mulino*, 2008, n. 3, pp. 490-98.

7 S. Freud, «Il disagio della civiltà» (1929), in Id., *Il disagio della civiltà e altri saggi*, Boringhieri, Torino 1971, pp. 197-280.

8 Ch. Taylor, *Il disagio della modernità* (1991), Laterza, Roma-Bari 1999.

its institutional reality. In other words, speaking about this discontent could help us understand exactly what “democracy” means, a polysemic term where different options and meanings are stratified; the complexity of democracy is, together with this discontent, the second theoretical and political focus of this research, whose basic assumption is that a partial and plausible remedy to that discontent could be the awareness and the selective revitalization of that complexity, where different possibilities have lived together. These must be analysed, in order to understand if it is democracy itself that failed to keep up with our expectations – that is if it did not keep its promises (and if this is the case, we should investigate who or what is at fault) –, or if those promises have actually been kept, and democracy has therefore simply exhausted its potential; to understand if we must sadly cohabit with an illusion, whose fire has already burnt out, leaving us with nothing but cold ashes, or if we can reasonably foresee a future for democracy; or if, at last, this is a crisis of democracy as a political system – as the expression of a particular civilization – or just a crisis of some of its aspects and factors.

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The features of contemporary democracy develop themselves along the two pathways of discontent and complexity.

The discontent towards democracy springs from an addiction to it, from the a-critical acceptance of the “real democracies” discourses about themselves, which take democracy for granted as something quite obvious and natural, as a home already built for men; and yet, today more than ever, it also grows from the actual experience of its contradictions and failures. To understand clearly this particular point we could picture a kind of *supermarket*⁹ of rights, where the merchandise (the rights) is not available, and instead has been substituted by a *slogan*¹⁰ announcing and proclaiming that the merchandise is already present; when in reality, rather than being satisfied by these rights, we face more and more difficulties, abuses, frustrations, marginalization.

This concrete lack of real democracy in current democratic institutions gives birth to anomic behaviour: as if we are moving towards the transformation of our society into a jungle, therefore acting more and more like ‘free riders’¹¹ – capable, according to the particular case, of compromise or rebellion, and yet without stable hope for tomorrow (which is exactly how modern ra-

9 Translator’s Note: English in the original

10 Translator’s Note: English in the original

11 Translator’s Note: English in the original

tionalism portrayed the “state of nature”). The discontent of democracy is the impression of having ended up in a cul-de-sac, or a path which does not stop suddenly, but keeps de-grading [*digrada/degrada*] into a sort of trail, less and less visible in the jungle of our present. This discontent is compliance, angry or resigned, to a poor democracy, to its assumed necessity.

At first glance it appears as a passive discontent, something more than the one described by Freud, one which was indeed the sign of a lack [*mancanza*] – of the immediate satisfaction of the Eros and Thanatos drives –, and yet a necessary and intimately progressive lack. The discontent of democracy is the sign of a lack as well, an absence perhaps necessary, but surely not progressive: it is not the discontent towards the good functioning of civilization, but towards the bad functioning of democracy.

The most important issue that must be pointed out is that as long as it is faced from the standpoint of the individual consumer – the deceived consumer of democracy, or rather of its surrogate, or simulacrum – this discontent of democracy is part of the problem, and not of the solution. This will continue to be the case as long as this discontent remains nothing other than Narcissus’ broken mirror, or as long as it continues producing fantasmatic projections such as the People of populism.

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Let this be clear: if in the past the criticism of conformism was conducted from an aristocratic point of view (from Tocqueville to Nietzsche, with all their differences), today the criticism of consumerism and its frustration (discontent in a passive sense) must be carried out from a democratic one. It should be made clear to the individual that feels discontent towards [*della*] democracy that in his non-freedom – which, although contemporary democracy does not expressly deny individual happiness, it is not very «comfortable, smooth, reasonable» (and here lies the difference between our present and that of Marcuse)¹² –, this individual is taking seriously the promises but not the premises of democracy,¹³ and thus his/her concrete perception is not facing the real complexity of democracy. In other words, if this discontent consists in the belief that we have achieved real democracy once and for all, together with the definite feeling of having been deceived by its sad result, the next step – of knowledge and experience; of theory and practice – would consist in the awareness that democracy has in itself other possibilities, hidden into the many folds of its history. This way, the discontent of democracy can and must pass from the (frustrated) idea that takes democracy for granted

12 H. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, London; Routledge, 2002. p.3.

13 H. M. Enzensberger, *Il perdente radicale* (2006), Einaudi, Torino 2007.

(believing in the natural existence of an uncorrupted people with its sets of innate rights) to the awareness of its complexity and of its striving nature, of its being-for-the-future; departing from oversimplification, indifference, inertia, sterile protest, political apathy and entropy; this discontent can and should transform itself into active criticism, energy, action, conscious relation with mediation and complexity. Democracy as a natural necessity must be turned into democracy as decision, free invention of political forms, even if transitory and contingent.

Today, an active democratic life implies the recovery of the idea that democracy should not be just a mass regime, but also a regime with a human quality; that it should deal not only with the mere rearing of life, but also with the promotion of good life in a public space – according to the *telos* each subject may freely choose –; that it should not be just a power effect inscribed in the syntax of dominion, nor just the subaltern protest against it, but also a practice of counter-power.

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We must now introduce a methodological note. The Global Era is bringing some radical innovations to modernity and its main political categories: the people have been pulverized, sovereignty is obsolete, territory has no more boundaries and subjectivity is almost imperceptible. And yet it is true that the Western Global Era is surrounded by the ruins of modern politics: ruins that are filled with lessons we cannot forget, ideas we cannot just leave behind, and institutions that still hold symbolic, if not operative, significance. And therefore, if going beyond liberal democracy is indeed what is at stake, rather than trying to go against it, we should try to achieve, even if with different tools, its strategic objectives. And if it is necessary to acknowledge the lack of democracy in current democracies, it would be definitely naive to try to set a presumed uncorrupted and pure democracy free from the chains of the past, or to imagine a new and ultimately authentic one. Immediacy is either an enemy of democracy, or inadequate, or just deceptive.

If there is no democratic garden of Eden to turn back to, nor a new one to head to, and if it is impossible to rescue democracy from its history, we can nevertheless try to engage in a selective re-interpretation of its historical complexity, having the courage to separate what could be brought to new life from what is ultimately deceased. An exercise that must be pursued in awareness of the fact that praxis cannot be deduced from theory – at least on this particular point modernity is definitely behind us –; theory can point out issues, spaces and horizons, but cannot describe nor prescribe concrete actions and new institutions; these can only grow and be justified through contingent action.

The first problem we must face is to determine the subjects of action for democracy. With the exception of ethnic ideologies, which are the problem and not the solution, it is nowadays impossible to hypothesize the existence of a people, whether conceived as a uniform substance, as constituent power, or as represented citizenship: whether in part or as a Whole. Moreover, a privileged subject, individual or collective, capable of embodying a trace of universality awaiting development is nowhere to be seen. But if neither the people, nor the nation; neither class nor the individual, have any significant political consistency left, if our current understanding of the universal – that is the infinite reality of fragmentation –, is the exact opposite of singular ‘parts’ immediately aware of themselves, it is because this is only a serial immediacy, that is to say, that the ‘immediately human’ is nowadays consumed, weakened and governed by extrinsic dreams and desires: in the best case scenario the political subject is reduced to being a spectator of his own misery [*miseria*]. To see humanity re-appropriate its virtues and work [*opera*] in order to regain control over its life is the objective, not the starting point.

And yet, in spite of everything, it is from this indistinct helplessness that we must start, and the first step must be the result of a free decision, a deliberate will for democracy; that is to say, we must think and speak about that helplessness, affirm its unnaturalness; revealing the contradictions and the internal differences of this universal suffering and giving a name to its main ‘parts’ even if they are not yet aware of themselves.

It is a start at once immediate (the decision, the will) and mediate (the discourse that articulates the accusation). The first step of this struggle for democracy consists in a critically and politically oriented social analysis, a conscious attempt to rebuild, if not a hegemony, at least the thread of a political *logos* not adherent to dominion, a discourse that, taking charge of itself, unveils what we have in front of us but we still don’t understand clearly: the contradictions of society (the ‘common’ is not conceivable without the contradictions that build it: the development of the sphere of symbolic and material production implies a growth of contradictions). For this reason, action for democracy must take place within society, where real politics is located – asymmetry, pluralism, conflict between *élites* and various groups bound by different interests and cultures –; and not within institutions, where politics is sublimated, stylized and, from time to time, mystified. Democracy in the Global Era will consist in the freedom of all singular parts, which could even be conceived as political parties or movements in reciprocal interaction, under the condition that they will be more spontaneous and adherent to the

partial interests of society than they are nowadays (which does not mean that they will be de-structured). Before thinking about a planetary democracy, Global Era democracy should start by recognizing the link between the bad quality of Western democracy and the lack of democracy in a great part of the world, the peripheries – although of increasingly central importance – where we unload the contradictions of capitalism, that ultimately bounce back into our cities; and should therefore grow aware of the fact that the struggle for democracy that is taking place in these parts of the world bears serious consequences for those who live in the developed world. In any case, we cannot think of the Western model of democracy as the only one, and should start pondering multiple democracies, grounded on the only political universalism that is conceivable: non-oppression, the zero-degree – and acme – of politics.

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The free and intentional discursive and linguistic mediation of the immediateness and indeterminateness of dominion and suffering can turn these contradictions into conscious conflict. Free growth in equal dignity of differentiated parts in any given public space – which is the very essence of democracy – cannot elude (today more than ever) this dimension of conflict and struggle. But a strong democratic humanism [*umanesimo*] cannot limit itself only to conflict, insurgency and turmoil: democracy cannot be reduced to the schematic opposition between order and politics, dominion and conflict, institutions and emergencies, because conflict itself cannot be hypostatized (just as this was not the case for order either), and must be understood in their main determinateness, in their right and wrong. Not every conflict can be described as liberating – as should be evident, even though we tend to forget it –, and not all institutions imply dominion: contemporary antagonism against democracy pursues the destruction of democratic institutions by exploiting democratic rhetoric. Democracy in the Global Era must not renounce its own complexity, which means that liberty and equality, order and struggle, institution and protest must walk side by side; and, on the other hand, subjectivities cannot just be nomadic and transitory ripples in a flux of needs and drives, ‘differences’ that simply want to ‘be’ or ‘act’ in order to express themselves, and nor can they just riot or revolt, but must also bear the responsibility of producing a realistic common perspective of society – as contingent as it may be –, if not of the universal itself.

The effort to move the barycenter of democracy from institutions to society, and from State sovereignty to freedom, to the equal dignity of all singular parts, is a movement which is neither revoltist (whose immediacy would clash

ruinously with the power of dominion), nor neoliberal (which supports and promotes the survival of the fittest): it faces directly both the harshness of reality and the flight of the imagination.

The foundation of this complex political space must be based on the negotiation of a pact – even tacit, as long as operative; indeed contingent and always re-negotiated –: which is the refusal of violence in its absolute sense, as inhumanity; that is to say, the refusal of the modern political, both in its openly fatal dimension and in its sovereign ‘neutralization’, which freezes this fatality in the law, centered on the moment of decision. This does not imply a lack of realism, nor does it imply an adherence to the reassuring hypothesis that every conflict can be interpreted in terms of ‘recognition’, out of excessive fear and realism, in order to seek the complete neutralization of every conflict. It rather suggests not fetishizing conflict, confusing the (albeit correct) idea that real life is permeated by conflicts with the idea – still useful to describe the development of modern politics, and yet destined to fade away alongside it – of the perpetual and impending possibility of the friend-enemy relation.

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To say that the origin of that which follows after modern democracy must not be conceived in modern ‘political’ terms means that democracy will prescind from the centrality of sovereignty and its mechanisms, now more than ever fantasmatic: in the Two of the friend-enemy logic lies the implicit One of neutralising sovereignty, and it is this very unity – and not the Constitution *per se* – that must be weakened by the politics of tomorrow. To create an emancipatory image of democracy in the Global Age and not a sovereign representation means that it must embody the negotiation of a pact which is not sovereign, that leaves power and responsibility to the ‘parts’, at the same time committing these parts, at the very least, to banning extremes of suffering that arise out of conflict, movement and challenges.

This democratic universality will surely be dynamic (that is not static), but it will also be grounded on rules that exclude the possibility of inhuman domination (effective rules, requiring public political efforts, even institutionalised to a certain degree). And even the language of rights should be revisited, since as of right now it is entirely embedded in the modern form of State: we must preserve the intentions implicit in that language – defining democracy as the political tension between the full expression of individual and collective potential –, and yet we must overcome its purely juridical connotations; in the same way, the emphasis on the new grammar of democracy, ‘emergence’, viewed as people’s subjectivity in perpetual evolution, must be distinguished from the

state of exception of modern political theology.¹⁴ And lastly an issue of scale: the modern political space – the State – is completely inadequate as a political horizon and, nevertheless, we must also recognize in this case that democracy should have a hold on what remains of the public function of the State, even if opened and integrated into larger and more articulated spaces.¹⁵ Europe is the first of these spaces, although we must be aware that it is not and never will be a Great Space, a Fortress, and that globalization can perhaps be governed but surely not repelled at its borders.

In sum, 21st Century democracy will have a complex profile, at once *liberal* (for the strategic role accorded to the expression and flourishing of subjectivity), ‘federal’ (for the constant negotiation of a pact between always changeable parts); ‘conflictual’ (for the constant confrontation of these parts, even in the field of the relations of production) and ‘republican’ (the objective is the struggle against dominion); a profile of democratic complexity far from both the present non-democratic complexity and the presumed essentiality and simplicity of the conflict. This democracy will therefore result from a horizon of selective revitalization of democracy’s historical complexity (rather than seeing a case of democracy being somehow overcome), today burst open and uncoordinated. This is a horizon which can only anticipate a multilevel democracy, where the intersection of law and agonism is the usual; that is, a democracy that is both a practice of citizenship and the political space where struggles for equal inclusion take place, a struggle that must be achieved through confrontation with new regimes of subordination that will constantly emerge from within society.¹⁶ It is a horizon, a constellation where what is at stake is following through with the decline of sovereignty and representation, accepting the loss of the central role they played in modern democracy. The people’s sovereignty must be primarily imagined as an absence of dominion, as an exclusion from politics and society of disproportionate powers; the Parliament must be interpreted above all in symbolic terms, as the emblem of the agreement not to make absolute violence the cornerstone of politics. Democracy will consist in the revitalization of political dialectics within its territories and in the articulations of society and, although always a work in progress, this life won’t go wasted in conflicts, but will be directed towards the construction

14 B. Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law and Democracy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2009.

15 S. Sassen, *Territorio, autorità, diritti. Assemblaggi dal Medioevo all’età globale* (2006), Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2008.

16 E. I. Isin, *Being Political. Genealogies of Citizenship*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis (MN) 2002.

of effective forms of public policies; and last we must be aware that the ends of economic production – and this is the highest challenge, requiring the greatest energy in the effort to govern the economy through politics – must be social and humanistic, that is to say oriented towards building a non-illusory public happiness, the humanistic flourishing of the public into the private.

This set of indications represents an effort to escape the short circuit between dominion and discontent, an effort to turn passive discomfort into decisiveness for democracy, an active awareness that democracy is structurally incomplete, because it is the constant effort to open and develop a political space where humanity can live a non-causal or hetero-directional life, that is, a life lived according to the equal dignity of differences. In the awareness, that is to say, that democracy is not an already determined political form, but is rather the civic space that hosts constructive conflicts for equality, searching for the progress of humanity, which should not be a disparate or senseless movement *a priori*. This possibility, which is also an unexhausted must-be [*dover-essere*], carries in itself the many faces of politics: democracy is the existence of the Many, of the many parts, but is also the existence of the non-sovereign One (the exclusion of inhuman violence), and of the Two (the non-lethal conflict), and this general structure is made possible by the causal and, I stress, contingent intersection of various traditions and institutions that at the same criticize and exclude others; even those others which today still continue to call themselves democratic.

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If the discontent of democracy is the delusion over what democracy has become – melancholy before a landscape of ruins –, that discontent can change from necessity to freedom through decision: in fact, this discontent could be interpreted as the keeper of a humanistic signifier, that keeps shining even in the depth of the darkest night. That is, in this discontent there is an intuition that democracy essentially deals with the humanity of both men and women (otherwise there would not be any discontent in the absence of democracy), and that, as its primary objective is the humanity of these men and women, democracy cannot renounce from creatively recycling the humanist heritage of the past, even if it is in ruins (just as this was the case in the Renaissance). Let this be clear: it is not a case of searching for a lost Good Ethicality, nor about eluding the harsh reality of politics and its constitutive incompleteness and contingency; and yet, just like in figurative art, we do not need academism to be able to recognize the line that unites, throughout the forms of Western civilization, figurative expression with the non-figurative. In the same way, the effort to keep the image of humanity and of its City moulded throughout antiquity

and modernity alive – even if the democracy of current humanism and that of the humanism to come are both, in different ways, contradictory – might not be completely naïve. This holding-on-to in discontent [*custodire nel disagio*] means that if yesterday's and tomorrow's democracy may exist without a center, it could not survive without an end. All of which must consist – despite the multiple and conflicting shapes it will assume – in the humanistic flourishing of free personalities in any given public space. In other words it helps us to be aware, that it is exactly through the remembrance and the recognition of our own history – in order to criticise it, and overcome it –, that democracy could once again coincide with politics, as the free organization of hope.

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