

THE CRISIS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY BETWEEN POPULISM AND TECHNOCRACY

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■ For two centuries, since it has first manifested itself in modern politics, with the presidency of Andrew Jackson, populism has taken specific forms of manifestation, adapting to local cultural conditions, but has always had general characteristics that make it recognizable. In fact, populism is a form of manifestation specific to forms of democracy, especially representative, although it can influence other political systems. On the other hand, populism has much older roots: perhaps since politics was politics populism has been a form of manifestation. “Ideological radicalism of the Right, with its mass roots in the menu people, as we have seen, is no new phenomenon. Over the centuries, it has taken such forms as the traditional alliance between king, church, and city mob” (Worsley 1969: 241). But it has always depended on a technological base, taken advantage of technological progress, it has been a reaction to established forms of political organization. In fact, current populism is not a new phenomenon, but only the new generations of researchers are once again acquainted with it, and trying to analyse it from the perspective of today’s society. As Jean Paul Gagnon, Emily Beausoleil, Kyong-Min Son, Cleve Arguelles, Pierrick Chalaye, Callum N. Johnston were explaining in their editorial from *Democratic Theory* from the winter of 2018: “This definitional difficulty is exacerbated by the Babelian confusion of voices on populism, where the term’s meaning differs within and between *global regions* (e.g. Latin America vs. Western Europe); *time periods* (e.g. 1930s vs. the present), and *classifications* (e.g. left/right,

authoritarian/libertarian, pluralist/antipluralist, as well as strains that muddy these distinctions such as homonationalism, xenophobic feminism and multicultural ne-onationalism)" (Gagnon, Beausoleil, Emily-Son, Kyong-Min-Arguelles, Cleve-Chalaye, Pierrick-Johnston, Callum N. 2018).

In their book from 1969, Ghiță Ionescu and Ernst Gellner already noticed that "Aspectre is haunting the world-populism. A decade ago, when the new nations were emerging into independence, the question that was asked was – how many will go Communist? Today, this question, so plausible then, sounds a little out of date. In as far as the rulers of new states embrace an ideology, it tends more often to have a populist character. And populism is not an outlook restricted to the new nations. In the Communist world, strong currents seem to move in a populist direction. And in the anxious or agonizing re-examination which has gripped several developed liberal societies of late, populist themes are prominent" (Ionescu-Gellner 1969). And already since then the question has been "whether populism was primarily an ideology (or ideologies) or a movement (or movements) or both".

For more than a decade populism has returned as the main political enemy of contemporary political societies: from Central Europe to Australia and from the United States to India the ghost of populism seems to haunt the world. But unlike in the 1960s, when the same ghost was only bothering political scientists, today populism seems more aggressive than half a century ago. Presidents and journalists, crowned heads and university professors, diplomats and generals deplore the assault of populism and the popular support it seems to enjoy in more and more states considered until recently democratic. In the European Union the problem of populism seems the most acute, as the increase in the voting intention (and in the effective vote) of more and more European societies can lead to the undermining and even dissolution of this political project which has maintained for over 70 years the peace on the continent.

The march of populism has started in the '80s of the last century but has increased after the events from 9/11 2001 as a social reaction in the West against political correctness and multiculturalism. Since then, parties such as *Pym Fortuyn List* (Netherlands) or *Vlaams Block* (Belgium), as well as the *Front National* (now the *Rassemblement National*, France) have 'denounced' the hypocrisy of political elites who used the new Muslim 'minority' as an electoral pool increasingly difficult to please, maybe only through financial bribes, and that also blackmails through rights and democracy.

But those parties, many of them gone today or completely changed, received a strong political and electoral boost once and then again, after the 2007 economic crisis. The economic crisis has quickly turned into a political and system crisis, as it has generated new models of social reflection on how the new political-economic order is built and how the economic system is built through the political structure. The economic crisis has collapsed the confidence in the old political parties of many European states as well as in the political elites of the United States generating a carousel of political and even ideological emotions and contradictions.

The left embraced globalist and right-wing programs, extremist currents went to the center (Jobbik) and others from the center targeted the extreme (Fidesz) and all of Europe decried the death of multiculturalism that was removed from public discourse. On this background, the liberal populist parties developed precisely because of the weakness and ideological fatigue of the mainstream parties.

Today the resilience degree of political institutions when faced with illiberalism in countries that seemed definitely anchored in liberal democracy is heavily being put to the test. Nor does it seem to be merely an accident of United Kingdom or American political life. In fact, these election events were the signal to start the great offensive against the 'liberal democracy' already announced by Viktor Orbán at the Tusnad summer camp in July 2016. Now, on behalf of the nation reborn from its own ashes, claimed as the only genuine political reality, the 'illiberal' of all obediences believe that democracy should be reduced to a simple electoral ritual of validating those in power. Hillary Clinton's failure in the US presidential election legitimized the simultaneous start of the offensive against human rights and citizens' freedoms. The concerted and multi-fronted attack against democracy, for the latter is ultimately targeted under the formula of 'liberal' democracy, had already begun few years ago, but seemed to be a kind of marginal phenomenon. In an editorial published in several American dailies in late 2016, Fareed Zakaria revised the deadline he had launched two decades earlier to explain the situation in marginal states such as Pakistan or Egypt¹ to see "the rise of illiberal democracy in the United States".² Immediately after his mandate inauguration, Donald Trump's presidency launched a controversy meant to delegitimize the 'liberal' press through the launching of the famous theory of 'alternative facts', the formula used by Kellyanne Conway, Donald Trump's adviser, to explain the source of the statement of the first White House spokesman, who was replaced later, in July 2017, according to whom the January 20 2017 inauguration festivities had the largest audience in history: "And they're giving – Sean Spicer, our press secretary – gave alternative facts."³

In this ideological context dominated by illiberalism, the new media, as it has happened every time new information-transmitting tools have been introduced, had a significant impact on the quality and impartiality of the dissemination of information. In an article from 2015 Robert Epstein and Ronald Robertson⁴ noted, based on an experiment, the existence of a *manipulation effect of the research engine* (SEME – Search Engine Manipulation Effect). The research confirmed the hypothesis that the rankings made by search engines are biased and that they can change the voting preferences of undecided voters (research indicates a significant number of around 20% of undecided who have changed their voting preferences as a result of the information 'delivered' by the searching engines). On the other hand, Epstein and Robertson found that this proportion may be much higher for certain isolated demographic groups, but also that the effect of these classifications is not obvious, so that those affected by this information treatment do not realize the manipulation.

Internet searching engines, such as Google or Facebook, can have a significant impact on consumer's choices.⁵ The citizens who become (who are reduced to the role of) consumers feel that they receive neutral information when they automatically take for granted the results of searches ranked through sophisticated algorithms, but that's not the case. The hierarchies resulting from the searches are adapted to the profile of each individual: Epstein and Robertson do not think these hierarchies are neutral, but tailored to every consumer's preferences, in our case, the elector. And if the experiment conducted on three groups of subjects showed that search algorithms can easily change the voting preferences of undecided voters by up to 20% for open groups and by up to 80% in isolated demographic groups, political impact becomes essential. Moreover, in an interview he gave to *Politico* in August 2015, the same Epstein already noted that Donald Trump was in a very good position in the search engine hierarchy. Or these hierarchies were not generated by economic preferences, as many analysts of the political phenomenon are tempted to believe, but by the political predispositions of internet information consumers.

Even when the results of Epstein and Robertson's research are considered exaggerated, the manipulation effect of search engines is not however denied, being estimated at between 2–4% of voters,⁶ which in a highly politically inclusive society such as the North American one – but in general, the situation can be found in most states that use majority electoral systems – can be decisive.

But if we accept the old definition given by Cas Mudde for populism, the original populist movements even declared that they are 'besides the people (considered innocent) against the corrupt elites' who 'highjack the political life of society', 'taking prisoner the democracy through party bureaucracy' (Mud-Kaltwasser 2015: 42) and if populism has managed to take control through leaders like Donald Trump, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Matteo Salvini or Viktor Orbán, this means that the former political elite has failed to be attractive to the citizens that it is supposed to represent.

The social distance between elites and citizens is growing more and more and the citizens feel less and less represented by political parties, and yet the mainstream politicians still claim not to understand why the pressure of populist parties is increasing.

In Romania, a mobile phone company has introduced a robot as a telephone interface service with the customers, instead of the classic operators considered too expensive and sometimes rude or unfriendly. The Robot (friendly called *Andreea*, a girl name) says she is there to help customers solve their problems related to bills, subscriptions or any other problems they might have or, when is not possible for her to solve those problems, to put them in contact with a human operator. It's just that the algorithm that guides Andreea are so opaque that most customers can't solve their problem, nor do they get to the operator they want. The answers are preset and whatever you try to say to Andreea sends you directly to the main menu – over and over again and again. The reason why more and more customers

are turning to other mobile phone companies (even if some of them offer poorer services or have poor coverage) just because they can't get past Andreea and solve the problems they had with the respective company. Also because of Andreea's software, customers cannot get in touch with human operators, who seem to have little contact with customers and therefore from the point of view of management seem/become inefficient and therefore useless. The company is losing customers because they are looking for human operators that the company is firing because they don't get to talk to customers. And all of that because of the robot Andreea.

This example seems relevant for the way in which mainstream parties are becoming increasingly strongly contested and abandoned in favor of populist or illiberal parties. Mainstream political parties have been in an extremely precarious situation for a long time – because, in order to preserve their electorates, they have made large concessions to the populist message on the one hand and on the other they have disappointed the same electorate by making concessions to the great global and globalizing capital.

Let us take Chancellor Angela Merkel as an example: in 2010 she declared that multiculturalism was dead (Multi Kulti ist Tot) while accepting the rescue of European banks through the European Central Bank (since the 2008 financial crisis broke out, more than €1.5 trillion in taxpayer money has been used to rescue ailing banks in Europe, according to the European Commission). After 2011, the same Mrs. Merkel banned German banks from accepting bank speculation if they still wanted support from the state, while starting a small crusade against the Cypriot bailout in 2013. This pendulum between perspectives has obviously upset German citizens and then European ones, generating increasing frustration. Moreover, after 2015, the German Chancellor asked for and obtained from the Bundestag the consent for Germany to open its borders to Syrian refugees stranded in the Balkans, Hungary or Austria. This divided the German society extremely and ultimately led to a long political blockage. And the migration-related cleavage in Germany spread rapidly across Europe, freeing and channeling various anti-German economic frustrations towards anti-Muslim and Euroskeptic movements.

It is worth noting that *Alterantive fur Deutschland* emerged as an anti-system party that initially opposed the euro area and Germany's economic model, while Germany was a member of the European Union. At this stage AfD was an eccentric party with a limited success to the public. Once the migration theme launched, and in particular through the phagocytizing of the PEGIDA movement – an anti-Muslim and highly nationalist movement, from the former DDR – AfD has become a successful party nowadays, with a score that places it as the second largest political party in Germany, while Angela Merkel is preparing to become history, being less and less present on the German and European political scene.

In the Netherlands, the populist Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party seem dethroned by the new and young Thierry Baudet, leader of the Forum for Democracy, who recently joined politics. The latter's party, declared euro-skeptic and

neo-conservative, won 38 seats in the Dutch Senate (which has a total of 75 seats) at the last final elections. Baudet, like Wilders, was a follower of Nexit (the Netherlands' exit from the EU) and its return to the Gulden. It's just that, unlike Wilders, his speech is becoming increasingly radical anti-Muslim and Euroskeptical, and is received and voted by more and more Dutch people. But unlike Wilders, the Forum for Democracy knows how to remain in the sphere of equal opportunities and freedom of conscience, that is, in a project of a political center rather than a far-right one. A situation which, as we will see in the case of the central and eastern European states, becomes rather the norm – illiberal populism tends to target the political center.

What is special about the new European populism when compared to the old one? First of all, Europe, as built by Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman onward. As explained at the beginning, populism is not innovative, but adaptive. Against the general background, that of virulent criticism of elites of all kinds (political, economic, scientific, etc.) different messages and movements are adapted accordingly to the characteristics of the environment. The chameleonic characteristic of populism uses social and economic frustration accentuated by various successive or simultaneous crises to promote itself. As the Covid-19 crisis has shown, even scientific elites are not immune from this populist offensive. And yet, with differences from one country to another, the majority of the population accepts authority and does not refuse the exercise of power. But minorities who flirt with populism can today use technology. So did the Bolsheviks and fascists at the beginning of the last century, when they used radio, cinema and microphone to successfully manipulate the crowds newly entered in politics and affected by the successive crises caused by the First World War and then by the Great Depression. Likewise, the impact of populism today is amplified by new media. And, as Marshall McLuhan anticipated, "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 2015: 102). The fact that information comes through social networks and not on official channels makes it credible. But didn't the same thing happen with rumors during the French revolution? *La Grande Peur* – didn't she leave any trace in the French collective imagination?

Becoming the most influential democracy in the 20th century due to its essential contribution to the victory of the Entente during the First World War, the US also played an important role in the emergence and dissemination of modern populism. On the one hand because Jacksonian democracy was a kind of illiberal democracy *avant la lettre*, on the other hand because the democratic model that will impress Tocqueville so much, America, will also export populism. But what does American populism look like? In the article dedicated to the North America in the book coordinated by Ionescu and Gellner, Richard Hofstadter noted that "the character of American populism derives in great part from the American tradition of entrepreneurial radicalism. Elsewhere, populism rested upon the role of the peasantry, but unless one identifies a peasantry simply with rural poverty, the United States has not had a peasant class; neither, despite the limited stratum of large landowners and slave owners in the South, has it had a class of rural grantees,

an aristocracy with clerical and military connections and conservative traditions” (Richard Hofstadter 1969: 9).

These religious traditions will always be looked upon with suspicion. In 1935 Sinclair Lewis, the first American to win a Nobel prize for literature, was publishing a dystopian novel, *It Can't Happen Here*, describing the fall of America under the nets of fascism after F. D. Roosevelt was defeated by a populist politician. And 69 years later Philip Roth imagined, in turn, in *The Plot Against America*, 2004, an alternative history where the fascist Charles Lindbergh defeated the same Roosevelt in the 1940 election and turned America into a totalitarian dictatorship allied with Nazism. Why should the two great writers – Lewis, the first American winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, and Roth, one of the most important writers of the end of the century and the beginning of the millennium – be obsessed with fascism? Or is the country of democracy perhaps at the same time the one where fascism has emerged and developed?

Since its beginning in the early 16th century, the opposition between puritanism and liberalism has forged a contradictory America that will be found in the founding cleavages of the United States. And puritanism defines not only a religious doctrine but also an institutional and socio-cultural system, in which authoritarianism, and sometimes social and political totalitarianism, require total control over civil society. Between this puritanism and freedom, especially in historical Puritan societies, in America and, to a lesser extent, in the UK the relationship was conflictual. And this conflict has lasted to this day.

In *The Anatomy of Fascism*, published in 2004, Robert Paxton, one of the most important researchers of the phenomenon, saw fascism as a reaction to the development of liberal democracy. And when his analysis stopped on the origin of fascist movements, Paxton considered the hypothesis that America might be the country of origin of the proto-fascism: “Considering these precursors, a debate has arisen about which country spawned the earliest fascist movement. France is a frequent candidate. Russia has been proposed. Hardly anyone puts Germany first. It may be that the earliest phenomenon that can be functionally related to fascism is American: the Ku Klux Klan. Just after the Civil War, some former Confederate officers, fearing the vote given to African Americans in 1867 by the Radical Reconstructionists, set up a militia to restore an overturned social order. The Klan constituted an alternate civic authority, parallel to the legal state, which, in the eyes of the Klan’s founders, no longer defended their community’s legitimate interests. By adopting a uniform (white robe and hood), as well as by their techniques of intimidation and their conviction that violence was justified in the cause of their group’s destiny, the first version of the Klan in the defeated American South was arguably a remarkable preview of the way fascist movements were to function in interwar Europe. It should not be surprising, after all, that the most precocious democracies – the United States and France – should have generated precocious backlashes against democracy” (Paxton 2004: 49).

First emerging in the America of the third decade of the 19th century as an alternative to the liberal democracy of the Founders, under Andrew Jackson, the populism of Jacksonian democracy was the ideological foundation of the South's reaction against the 'march of equality' that Alexis de Tocqueville had already revealed in *Democracy in America* (1835). For Tocqueville, this march to equality opened the great road to 'democracy'. But far from being just a matter of institutional architecture, 'democracy' was for Tocqueville a state of mind that involved building a 'democratic society' to be founded on. A democratic and liberal society that runs counter to the totalitarian puritanism of the South. Frustrated by the North's victory, the Southerners have lasted eight generations by building an alternative world, alternative truths, founded on a specific political culture. And this world in which the Klan played a central role found in Donald Trump the belated opportunity for a historic revenge. This is how the flame of the Civil War was re-kindled, pushing America to the brink, as the January 2021 assault on the Capitol showed. And all this would not have been possible without the metamorphosis of American populism. "Jacksonian thought was divided between those who continued in the old hard-money, anti-bank ways, and those who were more interested in getting access to government funds and putting them to use in exploiting the great American bonanza. This cleavage in thought was paralleled by a cleavage in expressed values and in economic policy. As to values, Jacksonian democracy is marked by *two conspicuous themes* that seem quite at odds with each other: the first is the persistent clamor of new enterprisers for greater opportunities, the cry against monopoly and aristocracy; the demand to give the commoners better and more even access to the big prizes in business, politics, and the professions... The second theme is what Marvin Meyers has called restorationism (Meyers 1953: 4). It hearkens back to the simplicity, the civic dedication, the nobility, the limited material aspirations and high moral tone that were deemed to be characteristic of the old republic. In it the Cincinnatus-ideal, so integral in the public reputation of George Washington, is invoked once again" (Hofstadter 1969: 11). And this is the tradition that – six decades after – the American Populist Party will take over.

In Europe, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where illiberal democracy is promoted by leaders with autocratic tendencies who want to become permanent in government, the tradition of agrarian populism is still alive. Those social categories that are the following after those who adhered to agrarian populism a century ago are also addressed by Viktor Orbán in Hungary and by the new Romanian extremist party AUR (Alliance for the Unity of the Romanians).

On the other hand, current European examples presented above show us how important the decisions and the rhetoric of mainstream parties are in forming and building populist groups and parties anywhere in the world. Moreover, what the AfD reproaches to the mainstream parties is the same thing that most European populist parties reproach to the European establishment, democratic or bureaucratic alike. They consider that Europeanists are, first and foremost, representatives of international financial capitalism which, by valuing their influence at the level of

governments and the European Commission, save banks at risk of bankruptcy at the expense of taxpayers throughout the Union. What else do sovereign debt, the Treaty of Fiscal Stability or the austerity mean if not passing on to public budgets, i.e., to all European citizens, the losses of the banks that had made risky investments in Greece or who had engaged in fraudulent Bernard Madoff-type schemes? This is called capitalizing on benefits and socializing losses, and perhaps the most ironic aspect is that the operation is carried out by appealing to public authority. The state must therefore be minimal only as long as it is about preserving the interests of the business environment, but when banks or large enterprises need its support, all talk about the 'invisible hand' and the benefits of the unregulated market is quickly given up, and it is called to help that very state – until then, a minimal one!

Populists also believe that the European vocation belongs to them and to the multinationals, that benefit from the abolition of customs tariffs, that can relocate production capacities without any obstacle from the States of origin and that, in this way, access to cheap labor force and markets in Eastern Europe. In addition, as a result of relocations, trade union organizations are also dismantled, increasing the room for employers to maneuver in wage disputes in both the West and the East.

Thus, an extremely interesting fact is European populists – declared right-wing and pro-free market – are becoming critics of globalization and of the great capital, as well as of the privileged relationship between the European Union (as well as the states that belong to it) and the supranational companies that fuel financial and technological globalization. It seems therefore that Ernesto Laclau was right to regard populism as a form of political emancipation of political and social marginals against the dominant political trends (Laclau 2005: 48). Only that Laclau's emancipated marginals today tend to become the new dominant political line themselves. What is reproached to populist and illiberal movements is precisely the inability to produce public policies unifying society, as they rather produce scissions and cleavages within the societies in which they come to power. And this criticism turns out to be based on reality because we see how in Hungary, Poland, Italy or Austria the principles of social solidarity assumed by the European Union are being blatantly violated in the name of national defense (Bozóki, A. 2015; Modrzejewski, A.–Potulski, K. 2014).

Thus, in Austria the right-wing government has blocked the access of Eastern European citizens to social assistance in its country, even if that meant it offered more money to citizens from other more socially developed European countries. Conservative Chancellor Sebastian Kurz explained that his aim is to "combat immigration into our social protection system", but also to provide incentives for Austrians to seek work, and even if this action faces an impeachment from the EU, the conservative government, supported by populist parties in Austria, does not want to withdraw the law. And last year, Matteo Salvini, the charismatic leader of the Northern League, declares to a rally, "The European elections next year will be a

referendum between the Europe of the elites, of banks, of finance, of immigration and precarious work; and the Europe of people and labor”.⁷

In an extremely important article, William Davies (Davies 2017: 26) points out that the image and credibility of elites (both political and epistemic) seems to have collapsed during the last decade, both because of technology and of political involvement in the economy. If, in a technological perspective, things seem to be simpler, because the answer to everything is just a click away and therefore the need for a leading knowledge has diminished in the perception of knowledge receiver, in the field of social sciences and especially in political sciences things are more complicated. Because the latter, almost since its founding, has distinguished between the masses and the elites – usually focusing on the latter.

For example, in the view of the followers of behaviorist theory from before 1960, many citizens were regarded as apathetic and politically ignorant, being followers of authoritarianism rather than democracy and hostile to civil liberties and racial and religious minorities. That’s why many behavioral theorists concluded that the health of democracy depends more on the elites than on the general (Berelson 1952; Lipset 1960). Starting from here almost all political science until the 1980s was no longer interested in the public and in the public opinion. For here is what one of the most prominent figures of 20th century political science, Robert Dahl, wrote: ...one of the central facts of political life is that politics – local, state, national, international – lies for most people at the outer periphery of attention, interest, concern and activity. At the focus of most men’s lives are primary activities involving food, sex, love, family, work, shelter, comfort, friendship, social esteem, and the like. Activities like these – not politics – are the primary concerns of most men and women. It would clear the air of a good deal of can’t if instead of assuming that politics is a normal and natural concern for human beings, one were to make the contrary assumption that whatever lip service citizens pay to conventional attitudes, politics is a remote, alien, and unrewarding activity (Dahl 1961: 1279).

Murray Edelman, decades later, in *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Edelman 1999: 78) accepted the same thing – that the mass public was ignorant and passive. Worse, ordinary citizens incorrectly believed that their votes controlled elites and influenced public policy. Edelman argued that ordinary citizens’ political dispositions and behaviors stem from the symbolic atmosphere created by elites and his focus was on the deleterious effects of elite’s *manipulation* of mass ignorance.

The idea that elites manipulate the masses has become a faith shared by theories belonging to both political sciences, political communication and social psychology, giving the impression that social sciences have already agreed that the masses do not exist, but are only social groups (Moscovici 1997: 54) that are somewhat mechanically subjected to elites – formal or informal ones. These theories have been embraced by both left and right ideologies that seem to share together the contempt for ‘masses’ and election campaigns have become manipulation shows, in which purpose and values no longer have any relevance but only the success of the manipulation experiment. The most direct example is the

campaign for Brexit, a campaign in which, as we saw almost immediately after the vote, no one knew exactly what they were voting for, everything being reduced to emotion – because entire social categories that voted *Leave*, they soon realized that they had voted against their own economic and social interest. Today, when Great Britain seems to have failed both on Brexit and in terms of remaining in the European Union, some are asking that political elites, as well as epistemic ones, explain themselves. Sometimes these elites, especially the latter, try to find new explanatory or ‘manipulating’ theories to explain their failure. But was it a failure? Wasn’t the result predictable? The instrumental role of the electoral system has long been known, and from this perspective the referendum is hardly a democratic method of consultation with the public. The so-called consultation mechanism itself was flawed on the one hand by the method, which nullifies any debate, and on the other hand by the result, whatever the result might have been, as long as it did not recognize the equality between participants in an electoral consultation. The referendum, through the caricatural simplicity of the matter on which the participants were invited to decide, distorts the perception of voters and attacks the foundation of democracy, the equality between citizens. For example, those who voted against Brexit – almost half of the voters – no longer matter: they are annihilated in their quality of citizens. Far from being democratic, the so-called transfer of the decision to the people is nothing more than a typical illiberal maneuver to delegitimize existing elites and legitimize anti-system currents. It should never be forgotten that the method of legitimization through electoral consultations – a true *reductio ad electionem* – is not only the privilege of today’s illiberals but was also successfully used by Mussolini and Hitler. Following the referendum from August 19 1934, Hitler was confirmed by a vote of 89,83% with a presence of almost 85% as the Führer of the Third Reich.

The role of the electoral systems in strengthening authoritarian regimes in power is already known. In 1924, Mussolini won a crushing majority (65%) which would then justify the dissolution of democracy in 1925. The Acerbo Law of 1923, which introduced the first majority, already distorted political representation and provided a fabricated majority to the National Fascist Party that facilitated the road to dictatorship. However, such electoral formulas facilitated both the repeated victory of Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz and Vladimir Putin’s United Russia in Russia. In general, the first past the post and plurality systems, as it is the case with the US, the UK and France, create such manufactured majorities that facilitate governance, but move the political conflict from parliament to the streets. The absence of forms of facilitating negotiation and real consensus, as it is the case with consensual democracies, leads – under the conditions of today’s society – to the increase of conflicts. And this is one of the causes of violent political actions such as the assault on the Capitol, Brexit or the movement of yellow vests. On the other hand, proportional electoral systems can also be perverted, especially if there is a lack of a democratic political culture to provide a real basis for liberal civil society that can bring a real counterweight to illiberal trends in contemporary societies. And

to counter this liberal civil society, we are witnessing the formation of an uncivil civil society, which takes over and develops the values of illiberal groups in order to create an illiberal ideological foundation for a post-democratic political system.

In fact, as Bobby Duffy explains (former Managing Director of Public Affairs for Ipsos MORI, and now professor to King College from London) in his book, *Perils of Perception: Why We're Wrong About Nearly*, people are wrong in almost every respect. And many phenomena that we talk about are the result of errors of perception and of stereotypes that affect the use of critical thinking. "It is hard to prove that misperceptions have been widespread for a long time, because measuring them requires representative surveys, and social scientists started conducting rigorous public opinion polls only relatively recently. In the middle of the twentieth century, surveys of people's perception of social realities were rare, limited primarily to simple political facts – for example, which party was in power, what their policies were and who the leaders were. But some of these early questions, first posed as far back as the forties, have been asked again in recent studies and, as we'll see, the responses suggest that nothing much has changed" (Duffy, 2018: 18). In fact, Duffy focuses his attention on the research of Daniel Kahneman (winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2002) and Amos Tversky on the two systems of thought – fast and intuitive thinking and slow, rational thinking – that together form human thinking. However, perceptions are related to the first form of thinking that we use with greater dexterity and which often misleads us. And this error is amplified by technological means. "That's not to say that our current, ideologically-driven discourse and the explosion of social technology have no effect on our perceptions of reality, or that we're not living in particularly dangerous times. In fact, those technological shifts are particularly terrifying in their effect on our accurate view of the world or key issues – because the quantum leap in our ability to choose and others to push 'individual realities' at us plays to some of our deepest biases, in preferring our existing world view and in avoiding conflicting information" (Duffy 2018: 19).

The yellow vest protest in France is an unprecedented phenomenon for the last half century, after the student movements from 1968. All possible accusations have been made against those who participated in this protest – and to a good extent all are entitled: fascists or anarchists, uneducated peasants or sophisticated haters, the instrument of local and foreign populists (in this case, Italians), etc. Those who have put their yellow vest (as the proletarian cap used to be in the past) come from all strata of the middle class and access almost all radical ideologies at the same time – they want the increase of wages and lower taxes, are for ethnic and racial plurality but against *les travailleurs détachés*, etc. This trans-ideological mix of left anti-Semites and of extreme right anticapitalism has only one target of their social hatred – the political elite. And France, due to the effects of the electoral system on the political system, was already the predilection of the strikers' movements. According to the Hans Bockler Foundation study in a selection of OSDE member states, France was the world's number one for the strike days between

2008 and 2018 with 114 strike days per year. However, the lack of institutionalized compromise mechanisms has already made possible that, in addition to the majority manufactured by the electoral system mentioned above, we also have the effect of constitutional reform of the reduction of the presidential mandate from seven years to five years which made cohabitation impossible – which reduced the potential for social conflict between 1980 and 2007. As parliamentary elections take place a month after the presidential elections, the president-elect ends up with a significant majority. In front of this majority the use of violence becomes the only form of negotiation. In fact, the violence of the yellow vest movement is the effect of the non-consensual French political system. That is why the President Emmanuel Macron, understanding in the end the cause, has tried to compensate the situation through a national consultation to relaunch the consensual mechanisms.

But these attempts to restore consensual mechanisms are not yet enough to relaunch social dialogue between different social categories whose isolation has been accentuated by the computer revolution. And on this basis populism can build on the old model of the elites divorcing ‘people’. In the last decade, the European lower classes seem to increasingly realize that ‘elites’ are less needed in the political process. And, if one looks at the overwhelming passive support to the yellow vests from the other classes in France, it seems that the will to change the political organization of European societies spreads. This development is to be welcomed in many aspects, most particularly as a claim for the renewal of current representative regimes that become increasingly irrelevant and do not qualify as legitimate democracies in the conscience of their citizens. This is not to say that citizens in general, and the yellow vests in particular, do not acknowledge the necessity of governance. Quite to the contrary, they sense that a new form of democracy is both possible and necessary in order to make governance efficient for those who are side-lined by the ‘system’ *and wish at the same time to count as individuals* (Steenvoorden–Wright 2018: 6).

The authors’ explanation is that individuals have as an essential need a two-way social identity – are ‘we’ identities, identifications of an individual with a group or a category, as opposed to ‘me’ identities, which are identifications of the individual with social types, roles or characteristics (Brewer 2001). Or, the European identification seems to have failed dramatically in recent times, although its aim – largely successful – seems to have been to evacuate the national identification in favor of European identity. Thus, European citizens are less and less French, German, Romanian or Slovak, but they also feel not very much European. Thus, a massive identification arises, which is solved by increasing individual identification. Or new technologies help a lot in this through a process of social alienation and denationalization without generating European identification, thus depriving any social group of social solidarity that any social group entails. That is why the authors believe the yellow vests are a symptom of this European anomia – they are not representatives of an ideologically or socially homogenized group, but merely a mechanical assembly of unhappy individuals. And each individual dissatisfaction

is taken over by each other participant who joins the dissatisfaction of others (Lubbers–Scheepers 2007: 650).

Under these conditions, some researchers have turned to analyzing the relationship between populism and technocracy. Their thesis is that the reaction of European political elites to increased post-election delegitimization is the orientation towards expertise or professionalism. Politicians of the mainstream political elite are getting closer and closer to technocracy in an attempt to increase their legitimacy space. We do not want to develop here the thesis of the end of ideologies or the right-left cleavage but only to mention that there is a whole political literature that develops the perspective of the need to introduce clearer criteria in terms of the contemporary definition of political ideologies and their taxonomy, especially when most mainstream political parties consider themselves to be center parties (and develop catch-all policies). That is perhaps why the relationship between mainstream European families and the Commission's bureaucracy seems so good, which provokes the wrath of populist and Eurosceptic parties in Europe.

This closeness seems paradoxical and quite new, for as Aberath, Putnam and Rokman show us (*Bureaucrats and Politicians in Western Democracies*) the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats was not, until recently, a good one. On the contrary, bureaucracy – by being stable, and seemingly unideological – was viewed with mistrust by political parties that had the political legitimacy obtained by elections, but did not always have the institutional legitimacy to carry out the political projects they wanted. Hence the permanent political tension between the two forces of the rule of law. This tension was lower in the United States, primarily due to federalism and then to the small number of those who held public office. On the contrary, in European states the conflict has often been an open one and the tension, therefore, much stronger. Here the bureaucracy has always been much larger, more stable and more centralized. And during the long period when there was this tension between bureaucracy and political parties, political parties used their ideological dimension (and inherent cleavage) as a weapon against bureaucracy defined as a state.

On the contrary, at European level – especially at the level of the embryos that later constituted the European Union, such as the CCO and then the EEC, it was the European bureaucracy that constituted the political files and not the politicians. The politicians of the Europe of the 12 took the decisions at national level, and the European dimension was also discussed there, the European Parliament (established in 1978) whose decision-making powers have been gradually strengthened, the most important being decided by the Treaty of Lisbon and implemented in 2014, and it was the European Commission that dominated European policy on public policy-making after Maastricht (1992). But, after all, it is what is happening at the national level. But since the European Commission is not a genuine government – being not only duplicated, but also institutionally dominated by the Council with absolute political powers – it is only the one that initiates, not the one that decides on European policies. But this has not prevented some from

claiming that, unlike the national level in Europe and even the American model, bureaucracy has turned into a political superstructure that seems to be too little, or not at all, controllable. In this it was alleged that the Commission had become a technocratic superstructure. This is exactly what the populist, illiberal, Eurosceptic or sovereigntist parties of the European Union are reproaching, and this was one of the hard-working arguments of Brexit – the plethoric bureaucracy and political impunity of the European institutions.

During the last three decades we have witnessed two parallel phenomena, which are intimately related to each other: the increase in power of the institution of expertise, but lacking political legitimacy, especially in the context of European integration and the strengthening of the European institutions, and on the other hand, the development and growth in importance of extremist, Eurosceptic populist parties. As Peter Mair points out (Mair 2013: 126), there is an inextricable link between the development of the technocratic character of the EU institutions and the development of political theories justifying technocratic leadership as a deliberative one, which is a form of legitimization through parallel theories to democratic theories. The theory of deliberative democracy “is meant to provide an answer to the question how to best make collectively binding decisions that from an anticipated future standpoint we have no reason to regret. You may call this the concern for the epistemic dimension (or the epistemic properties and characteristics) of the process, rules and procedures of political decision-making and its modalities, a concern which feeds into another symptom of the malaise of democratic government and governance, i.e. technocratic rule [...] democracies should be regarded as self-scrutinizing and self-correcting political systems that can respond to internal deviations from its normative ideals. This is why they face notorious and ongoing controversial demands for their own revision, development, and improvement – the challenge here consists in “a tricky recursive logic” (Offe 2017: 14).

Buchstein and Jörke also criticize the theory of deliberative democracy as an inherently elitist one, and in a more recent contribution Jörke and Selk explain, as in the comments above, that the development of populism is a democratic reaction to the neoliberal and post-democratic order, an order in which the connection between the public and public policies is permanently lost. And it is more than obvious that, in essence, technocracy is elitism, and populism is characterized by deep anti-elitist sentiments (Mudde–Kaltwasser 2015). However, we have to introduce a nuance here, because populism opposes the elite considered corrupt only in order to (as we see in Poland, Hungary, Italy, etc.) takes its place, establishing illiberal political regimes that limit rights and discriminate against minorities.

In her work, Nadia Urbinati (2014: 192) identifies the two currents of technocracy and populism as forms of disfigurement of democracy that destroy the diarchy between will and opinion the procedural democracy depends on. Technocracy reduces democracy to the search for truth (assessment of opinions), while populism reduces the pluralism of opinions to the single and indisputable popular will. In both cases, the appeal to democracy is only an instrumental one – for some

the search for truth, for others only for the introduction of a single condition of the 'will of the people'. At the end of both processes, democracy is disfigured, no longer classical liberal democracy: "Populist and technocratic forms of discourse can be considered as two sides of the same coin, the coin being the critique of party democracy [...] the idea of contemporary political life being restructured around a new cleavage between populism and technocracy actually masks a *deeper* dimension of political opposition – between party democracy and its critics – in terms of which both populism and technocracy find themselves *on the same side*" (Bickerton–Accetti, 2017: 201).

Bickerton and Accetti point out that the common element between technocracy and populism is the denial of pluralism and mediation between political parties. Participatory democracy involves policies competing on the same issue, and parliamentary democracy assumes that these competing policies are mediated by political groups so as to reach policies whereby most benefit, and those who inherently lose from these policies hope at least for further compensation. On the contrary, populism and technocratism deny any form of negotiation in order to impose single visions based on either majority or competence.

Both [populism and technocracy] are examples of '*unmediated politics*' dispensing with intermediate structures such as parties and representative institutions between a *supposedly unitary and common interest of society* on the one hand and elites on the other [...] populism stressing the centrality of a putative will of the people in guiding political action and technocracy stressing the centrality of rational speculation in identifying both the goals of a society and the means to implement them" (Caramani 2017: 54).

In such a situation, the tendency of mainstream parties to glean political models either on one side or on the other – from populists and technocrats alike – on the principle of catch-all parties turns out to be a big mistake. Unable to propose anything other than their own idiosyncrasies, classical European parties try to reinvent themselves by copying the models that seem successful in their competing formulas – populism and technocracy. However, it is precisely this attempt that proves fatal to democracy, because it makes these clearly illiberal models to be acceptable to society and their radical forms – as we have seen in the Netherlands – to be no longer seen as exotic but as capable of political transformation. The return to classical representative democracy will have to be a new political model, even if by doing so the old political elite will have to leave the stage.

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Notes

¹ In the same article Zakaria explained: “From Peru to [...] the Philippines, we see the rise of a disturbing phenomenon in international life – illiberal democracy. It has been difficult to recognize this problem because for almost a century in the West, democracy has meant *liberal* democracy – a political system marked not only by free and fair elections, but also by the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property [...] what might be termed constitutional liberalism – the rule of law and the fundamental human rights.[...] Today the two strands of liberal democracy, interwoven in the Western politic fabric, are coming apart in the rest of the world. Democracy without constitutional liberalism is not simply inadequate, but dangerous, bringing with it the erosion of liberty, the abuse of power, ethnic divisions, and even war.”

² Published by *Washington Post* on December 29 2016, Zakaria’s article pointed out: “Two decades ago, I wrote an essay [...] that described an unusual and worrying trend: the rise of illiberal democracy. [...] But in many of the places where ballots were being counted, the rule of law, respect for minorities, freedom of the press and other such traditions were being ignored or abused. Today, I worry that we might be watching the rise of illiberal democracy in the United States [...].”

³ See Aaron Blake’s article from *Washington Post* from January 22 2017, “Kellyanne Conway says Donald Trump’s team has ‘alternative facts.’”

⁴ ‘The search engine manipulation effect (SEME) and its possible impact on the outcomes of elections’ published on the *American Institute for Behavioral Research and Technology’s* website.

⁵ On October 9 2017, New York Times published a Reuters news that released the results of Google’s research into the possible involvement of Russian influence groups in the 2016 US election campaign: „Google has discovered Russian operatives spent tens of thousands of dollars on ads on its YouTube, Gmail and Google Search products in an effort to meddle in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, a person briefed on the company’s probe told Reuters on Monday.”

⁶ See the working document *Watching the watchers: Epstein and Robertson’s “Search Engine Manipulation Effect”* published by Katharina Anna Zweig on the Algorithm Watch website: <https://algorithmwatch.org/en/watching-the-watchers-epstein-and-robertson>.

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/05/world/europe/italy-election-northern-league-populists-migrants.html>