

CONFLICT, TOLERANCE AND POWER LEGITIMATION

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Abstract

This brief paper intends to investigate the dynamics lying at the basis of power legitimation within western society by examining the roles of violence and conflict. In particular, those of the *sovereign people* and the *good citizen* are analyzed through the ideological, narrative and symbolic mechanisms that determine their image and meanings within the body politic. Throughout history, different forms of power legitimation alternated, which we can ideally include within a linear pattern where they are arranged along an axis at whose extremes are placed the concepts of *immanence* and *transcendence*.

Keywords: Conflict, Tolerance, Power legitimation, *good citizen*, people.

Man, Aristotle said, is a political animal (*πολιτικὸν ζῷον* – *politikòn zōon*)¹ that, notwithstanding this, recalling Heraclitus's teaching², bases his existence on a conflicting heated and, at times, violent dialectic with himself and the others. Both in a properly individual dimension and in a collective sense regarding social and group dynamics, the human species is deeply rooted in a controversial horizon that characterizes it in a psychological³, political and identity-making sense. Though not necessarily violently from a material point of view, human beings engage themselves in a dialectic and polemic relationship with their parents, brothers and society since their birth. A

¹ See Aristotle, *Politics*, ed. by Richard F. Stalley, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York 1998, book I, 1253a.

² «The conflict is the father and king of all things, and has made some as gods and some as men, some slaves and some free» (DK B53).

³ For a detailed psychological analysis, see Erich Neumann, *The origin and history of consciousness*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2014.

classic example of this trend is the famous Oedipus complex, which is an evident manifestation of it in a psychological sense⁴. Another one, instead, concerns social recognition conditioned by group membership, which determines each one of us in the sense of identity, shaping the Ego by recognizing one's role (as with any job activity that ideally inscribes each individual within a certain social and economic class), which often triggers a real struggle to assert oneself. From a historical, political and cultural point of view, which more closely concerns the topic of this essay, it is easy to see how war represents the real driving force of history, which passes through all sorts of conflicts both at an empirical and symbolic and/or ideological level. The cold war⁵, for instance, was a classic conflict, in which the narrative level took on a paramount importance, significantly colonizing the global collective imaginary by polarizing two opposite⁶ blocs respectively led by the USA and the USSR. In this case, symbols, images, mythic and ideological narrations belonging to the two sides tended to counterpose unequivocally, projecting on the other side all sorts of negative or obscure contents characterized by intrinsic cruelty and perversion. In this sense, we witnessed a real mobilization of communication that, by taking advantage of the available mass media, directly involved the ruling classes and the citizens, reaching out to every level of human existence and involving everyone both in political, ethical and moral terms⁷. Also the mechanism of voting and the election of the representatives of the people, in modern liberal democracies, are a way to transfer conflict on a purely symbolic level, which has the effect of defusing any possible recourse

⁴ See Sigmund Freud, *The Sexual Life of Man* in *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. G. Stanley Hall, eBooks@Adelaide, Adelaide 2014, accessed November 18, 2015. <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/f/freud/sigmund/general-introduction-to-psychoanalysis/>

⁵ «Worldwide confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union that began after World War II. The expression was coined by the American journalist W. Lippmann (1889-1974) to describe a hostility that did not seem solvable through a frontal war between the two superpowers, given the threat to the survival of humanity represented by the possible use of nuclear weapons. This struggle for control of the world went through several phases, also characterized by severe tensions (the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962) and 'hot' wars, such as those in Korea (1950-53) and Vietnam (ended in 1975); anyway, there did not lack long periods of relative stability of the international framework that led, during the eighties, to détente in the relations between the two superpowers. Bipolarism, that is this system based on the contrast between the two blocks, western countries on the one hand and eastern countries ruled by communist regimes on the other, ended symbolically with the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the dissolution of the USSR (1991)» (*Guerra fredda* in *Dizionario di Storia*, Treccani, 2010 accessed November 18, 2015 http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/guerra-fredda_%28Dizionario-di-Storia%29/).

⁶ See Gilbert Durand, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire : Introduction à l'archétypologie générale*, Dunod, Paris 1993.

⁷ See Henry Kissinger, *World order*, Penguin Books, New York 2015.

to violence between the parties through electoral competition⁸. It is therefore clear that, based on the examples mentioned so far, there are different forms of conflict that always involve, with different shades and nuances, both the purely material dimension of existence and the imaginative and symbolic one, as well as the rational level of interpretation of reality. War, indeed, as Rensi correctly argued, is an issue with a supreme philosophical meaning⁹, as it unveils the arbitrariness of the world views, which, being always founded on indemonstrable premises, real postulates of an intuitive nature, cannot be solved through purely rational argumentations, as with mathematical disciplines that are capable of a universal consensus in theory. A typical case that well exemplifies what has been highlighted regards, for instance, the debate that has recently seen liberalism against Communism on the (non)admissibility of private property. Both positions, in fact, have met an impressive array of arguments of rational order on which, however, a shared opinion has never been reached. Only the implosion of the Soviet communist system at the end of the cold war, resulting in the substantial victory of capitalism globally, finally prompted a large majority of political systems to allow the admissibility of property itself or similar forms of its de facto legitimations, compelling a large portion of militant marxism to revise their ideas about it. Based on these considerations, one realizes that any ideological choice, as well as any worldview, must necessarily elaborate and foresee the possibility of entering into a collision course, even unsolvable, with other ideologies and points of view, unless we succeed in shaping society according to totalitarian logics, which do not allow any dissent by definition. Conflict, therefore, implies employing force and violence with various degrees and modalities, so that the possibility of their translation into material terms is anything but remote.

This requires every political system where power is manifested in completed forms (bureaucracy, military and police system, public administration, State powers, laws, etc.) to develop containment measures and controlled exercise of force and violence, which are related to the forms of

⁸ See Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart, Continuum, New York 1962, pp.188-190.

⁹ See Giuseppe Rensi, *La filosofia dell'autorità*, La vita felice, Milano 2013, p. 183. «This is because war evidently proves that there is not *one* spirit, but an irreconcilable multiplicity of spirits, and that reason is not only *one*, but is pulverized into small closed worlds of rationality that are contrasting with each other. War shows that there are separate rational worlds that are closed in themselves, each of which is based on its sphere of reason, which are irreducible to one another, and each of which, if one accepts its irrefutable and unprovable intuition of justice, which is incommensurable with any other, is true and right» (*Ibidem*, p.188).

legitimation of power itself¹⁰. These, in fact, allow for finding a way not to resort to mere authoritative actions meant as sheer coercion through the use of force since, though they determine countless social hierarchies and asymmetric relations between governors and governed¹¹, they justify the very existence of the political ruling class itself and the modalities by which it is selected. It is no coincidence that the States and all modern political systems, moulded after a Hobbesian model¹², express their sovereignty based on the (legitimate) monopoly of the use of force within a given territory¹³. This shows how any political system (Empire, Reign, Nation-State, Federation of States, etc.) lapses into decline due to two fundamental factors, both of which are connected with the use and management of these elements (i.e. violence and force): the loss of consensus and the inability to effectively control the erosive forces of the established order. In the first case, the system falters because it cannot rest only on violent coercion based on repression, but always requires a quite significant amount of consent by the individuals that are subjected to it. In the second case, instead, the established order crumbles under the pressure of external (invasions, climate change, epidemics, etc.) or endogenous (riots, revolutions, widespread disobedience, civic disengagement, etc.) factors that call into question authority and sovereignty or limit their effectiveness severely. The fall of the Roman Empire in the west is a classic example of the concomitant presence of these factors that all together caused its collapse¹⁴. Also the current crisis of the worldwide order in the Middle East appears as much an expression of a substantial loss of consensus by the political regimes of this geopolitical area, but as the emergence of new elements (like ISIS)¹⁵ that divert portions of territory from the control of the state apparatuses¹⁶.

Overall, therefore, we can state that power expressed by any political systems inevitably outlines the symbolic and material reference points through which the potentially antisocial and violent

¹⁰ See Alessandro Passerin D'Entrèves, *The notion of the state: an introduction to political theory*, Oxford University Press, London 1967.

¹¹ See Gaetano Mosca, *The ruling class*, trans. Hannah D. Khan, McGraw-Hill Company, New York, London 1939, pp. 50-70.

¹² See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by G.A.J. Rogers and Karl Schuhmann, Continuum, London, New York 2005.

¹³ See Nicola Matteucci, *Lo Stato moderno, Lessico e percorsi*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1997, pp.83-85.

¹⁴ See Santo Mazzarino, *L'Impero romano*, Laterza, Roma, Bari 2010, pp. 668 – 671.

¹⁵ *Islamic State in Iraq and Syria*.

¹⁶ See Henry Kissinger, *World order*, op. cit.

drives of those people that are subject to it can be limited. In addition, it builds systemic structures that are able to organize the apparatuses that are necessary to allow for a proper functioning of the institutions appointed to maintain, from a structural viewpoint, the system in balance. In this view, power legitimation is crucial to enable the proper functioning of the internal order and the resistance of the institutions and apparatuses. Only to the extent that there is a broad consensus on how to determine the ruling class and its relationship with its people, according to what Mosca defined as *political formula*¹⁷, you get a stable peace and the absence of violent conflict between the parties¹⁸. Indeed, without these assumptions, all political systems are doomed to an ephemeral and substantially unstable existence.

Throughout history, different forms of power legitimation alternated, which we can ideally include within a linear pattern where they are arranged along an axis at whose extremes are placed the concepts of *immanence* and *transcendence*. God, in the Byzantine theocracy¹⁹, represents for example the purely transcendent foundation of power, while the Greek and Roman archaic divinities, guarantors of the city's political order, evoke a dimension that is equally sacred but definitely geared to a view of an immanent concept of power as a key element of a political order

¹⁷ «As we have just seen, in fairly populous societies that have attained a certain level of civilization, ruling class do not justify their power exclusively by de facto possession of it, but try to find a moral and legal basis for it, representing it as the logical and necessary consequence of doctrines and beliefs that are generally recognized and accepted. So if a society is deeply imbued with the Christian spirit the political class will govern by the will of the sovereign, who, in turn, will reign because he is God's anointed. ...The powers of all lawmakers, magistrates and government officials in the United States emanate directly or indirectly from the vote of the voters, which is held to be expression of the sovereign will of the whole American people» (Gaetano Mosca, *The ruling class*, op. cit., p. 70).

¹⁸ This is the case with the renowned revolt of the Roman plebs against Senate in the V century BC, which was faced by Menenio Agrippa with the well-known parable: «In the days when man's members did not all agree amongst themselves, as is now the case, but had each its own ideas and a voice of its own, the other parts thought it unfair that they should have the worry and the trouble and the labour of providing everything for the belly, while the belly remained quietly in their midst with nothing to do but to enjoy the good things which they bestowed upon it; they therefore conspired together that the hands should carry no food to the mouth, nor the mouth accept anything that was given it, nor the teeth grind up what they received. While they sought in this angry spirit to starve the belly into submission, the members themselves and the whole body were reduced to the utmost weakness. Hence it had become clear that even the belly had no idle task to perform, and was no more nourished than it nourished the rest, by giving out to all parts of the body that by which we live and thrive, when it has been divided equally amongst the veins and is enriched with digested food—that is, the blood. Drawing a parallel from this to show how like was the internal dissension of the bodily members to the anger of the plebs against the Fathers, he prevailed upon the minds of his hearers» (Titus Livy, *The Founding of the City*, trans. B. Oliver Foster, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. 1919, Book 32, 9-12).

¹⁹ See Claudio Bonvecchio, *Imago imperii imago mundi. Sovranità simbolica e figura imperiale*, Cedam, Padova 1997; Steven Runciman, *The Byzantine theocracy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1977.

inscribed in a cosmos, where the natural and supernatural intimately merge and overlap²⁰.

In western liberal democracies the myth of the sovereign people and to the concept of representation are used to establish power. In this case, the people act as the immanent foundation of any political order, although their nature and characteristics are often extremely elusive²¹. The concept of people, indeed, is liable to very different definitions, which oscillate between two fundamental opposing tendencies: citizenship intended as a legal-political pact and the idea of *Volk*, which is typical of German romanticism, based on a supposed membership conceived either in a historical or cultural sense or in ethnic-racial terms²².

Moreover, the people, in all democratic systems (even if not necessarily liberal) are considered the ultimate holder of political power, which they transfer to their representatives or employ directly through exercising voting groups. This assumption has an eminently narrative and symbolic value, but not really justifiable from a historical and rational point of view, since power does not derive from the people, which constitute themselves as such through power²³. Leaving aside, however, such speculative issue, it can be stated that modernity, by triggering a substantial process of secularization of ‘what is political’, causes a reconsideration of power legitimation modalities, moving towards the establishment of the sovereign people as a founding myth of political order. However, even if this concept identifies a set that relates directly to the concreteness of empirical existence (immanence of the origin of power), this does not eliminate at all the desire for its sacralization which results, at times, in the constitution of an imaginary that is not devoid of a mystical symbolism. For example, the concept of race sadly evoked by National Socialism, the romantic idea of nation or more recently the people *in* or *on the web*, as well as every citizenship pact, founded on the adherence to common values, considered as universal and absolute, always allows the proliferation of an imagination that still tends to sanctify its subject. This, in turn,

²⁰ See Giulio M. Chiodi, *Propedeutica alla simbolica politica II*, (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2010), 31-57; 143-170.

²¹ See Claudio Bonvecchio, *Potere, simbolo, democrazia*, in *L'immagine del politico. Saggi sul simbolo e il mito politico*, Cedam, Padova 1995.

²² See Paolo Bellini, *Identité européenne, pouvoir politique et globalisation*, *Metabasis.it*, May, 5. (www.metabasis.it); Philippe Raynaud et Stéphan Rials, *Nation*, in *Dictionnaire de Philosophie politique*, P. U. F, Paris 1996; Norberto Bobbio, Nicola Matteucci and Gianfranco Pasquino, *Nazione*, in *Dizionario di politica*, U.T. E.T., Torino 2004.

²³ See Paolo Bellini, *Cyberfilosofia del potere. Immaginari, ideologie e conflitti della civiltà tecnologica*, Mimesis, Milano – Udine 2007, pp. 139-146.

generates tension with outcomes that are potentially mystic which, if not properly controlled and left to themselves, flow into ideological fanaticism, political extremism or in the desire of saving the ethnic group. The ethnic-racial wars following the collapse of Soviet Communism²⁴ or the ideological conflict between the western culture and Islam²⁵ of the early twenty-first century are clear examples thereof. Western civilization for its part, in its liberal democratic form, despite the incipient risk of indulging in extreme forms of direct democracy with totalitarian outcomes²⁶, has nevertheless expressed, through the myth of the sovereign people, an order which is able to satisfactorily limit political violence within the social body, while at the same time guaranteeing much room for individual freedom. Indeed, the ideological narration, according to which the people give power to their representatives who govern in their name and organize the life of society, regularly subjecting themselves to the election practice at which they can be freely re-elected or replaced, *de jure* and *de facto* defuses every revolutionary or rebellious drive. The people, rebelling against power within such a paradigm, would get the paradoxical effect of rising against itself, asserting through violence a will that can, instead, always exercise through the electoral mechanism. Modernity has thus perfected over the centuries a refined mechanism of political and social control that is capable of stabilizing power at a systemic level. However, the people's will is never liable to a clear and unambiguous interpretation by an institution responsible for this purpose, because the people constantly express themselves in a contradictory manner. Both through the electoral system and in every experience of direct democracy, voters never have a unanimous position. They inevitably divide into groups, either voting for political parties or individual candidates competing with each other and with divergent programs or constituting a majority and minority on individual issues brought to their attention (as with the case of the referenda). In this sense, to prevent the use of violence with opposing sides in an ongoing civil war, it is necessary to shift the conflict onto a symbolic level, which we have previously mentioned. The effectiveness and proper functioning of this change largely depend on how power can shape the population's imaginary. From this point of view, it is of paramount importance the task assigned to the institutions and the media to form the

²⁴ Cf. H. Kissinger, *World order*.

²⁵ *Ibidem*

²⁶ See Jacob L. Talmon, *The origins of totalitarian democracy*, Praeger, New York 1960.

good citizen, creating an appropriate image of him and leading as many individuals as possible to conform to it. Thus, in any liberal democracy, the *good citizen* becomes the reference symbolic paradigm, whose circulation and metabolism at the social level guarantee the correct functioning of this political formula (liberal democracy). Within western civilization, when analyzing in more detail the symbolism that characterizes the *good citizen*, and apart from some specific cultural nuances, it can be said that he has certain characteristics that qualify him as such, that is patriotism, the desire for active participation in the management of public affairs, a respect for institutions, a tolerant attitude, honesty, dedication to work and a respect for the law. Clearly, very few are in fact the individuals within the body politic that can certainly boast of having these qualities in full, which, rather, are the symbolic elements that define their most extensively shared narration at the collective imaginary level²⁷. However, such narration is no doubt going through a deep crisis, which risks weakening the resistance of the liberal democratic formula significantly.

This crisis is caused by western civilization's pluralistic commitment, which on the one hand clashes with cultural models that are extremely different and on the other expiates a series of contradictions that are internal to power working principles and legitimation mechanisms. Firstly, it is necessary to note how the globalization process²⁸, which is probably reaching the peak in this century, necessarily imposes, both on the territorial and virtual levels²⁹, a complex, at times conflicting, dialectics between worldwide civilizations³⁰. In particular, within the western post-modern world, technology and the massive presence of numerous ethnic groups that are little westernized from the point of view of culture produces a constant conflict of values, which threatens to undermine the foundations of civil society within the liberal democratic political formula, which among its basic elements includes, as seen with regard to the *good citizen*,

²⁷ See Salvatore Natoli, *Le virtù della cittadinanza*, Grafo, Brescia 1998

²⁸ For a detailed analysis of globalization from an economic and political standpoint, see Manuel Castells, *The information age : economy, society and culture*, Cambridge, Blackwell, MA ; Oxford 2010); Paolo Bellini, *Cyberfilosofia del potere. Immaginari, ideologie e conflitti della civiltà tecnologica* op. cit. and *Mythopies techno-politiques : Etatisation, empire et globalisation*, trad. O. Weyer, Mimesis, Paris 2011

²⁹ For a definition of virtual, see Pierre Levy, *Becoming virtual : reality in the digital age*, trans. Robert Bononno, Plenum, New York ; London 1998.

³⁰ See Samuel Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*, Simon & Schuster, New York 1996.

tolerance³¹ and respect for institutions, where the religious and the political spheres are separate. However, while western culture developed a mentality based on freedom of expression and worship and practiced the separation of politics and religion during modern times, other civilizations did not evolve in a similar vein. Therefore, to the extent that the west asserts that political power has no right to interfere in religious matters, as well as the ministers of religion, as such, do not have the power to direct political choices or exercise force to bind people to a particular religious belief, it necessarily comes into conflict with those who do not accept this world view³². In particular, one can easily see how, on this ground, since the beginning of the modern era, there was and there is still a substantial conflicting opposition (in a symbolic and empirical sense) between western civilization and Islam³³, which unfolds in the management of both foreign affairs and internal ones. In Europe, for example, for historical and geopolitical reasons, this conflict is most intensely felt, so that many States with a colonial past, such as France or the United Kingdom, are increasingly undergoing a deep identity crisis that invests relations between citizens (or subjects) of different faiths. The presence of more or less organized Islamist groups on the western territory causes a political radicalization of the group values meant as ethnic, national, religious or simply cultural values, which, in turn, gives rise to a substantial weakening of the other symbolic components of the imaginary of the *good citizen*, including tolerance and respect for institutions and laws. It becomes, in other words, more and more difficult to shape society based on such a symbolic paradigm, whose resistance, however, is crucial for the proper functioning of the liberal democratic formula. Indeed, as it is easy to understand, the stability of any political form can only be based on its ability to spread within the body politic, producing behaviors consistent with its assumptions, so that, in fact, every ideological option, to be effective, must necessarily reverberate in a political

³¹ See Voltaire, *Tolerance* in *Philosophical dictionary*, ed. by Peter Gay, Basic books, New York 1967; Nicola Abbagnano, *Tolleranza*, in *Dizionario di Filosofia*, TEA, Milano 1993).

³² «The State is in fact a society of men determined only to preserve and promote civilian goods such as life, liberty, bodily integrity and well-being, possession of external goods, etc. Among its tasks, therefore, the care of souls and their eternal salvation are not included... On the other hand, the Church is a *free society of men, spontaneously gathered together to serve God in the public like in the way they judge it could be more acceptable for Him to achieve the health of their souls*. As a free and voluntary society it cannot bind anyone by force ...» (N. Abbagnano, *Tolleranza*, in *Dizionario di filosofia* op. cit).

³³ See Paolo Bellini, *Civiltà e conflitto come forme di rappresentazione della realtà*, in *Metabasis.it*, 18, 2014: accessed November, 9 2015, doi: 10.7413/18281567038

entity that can interpret it in everyday life. Otherwise, it turns into a mere object of study, more suitable to the manuals of history of politics than to the functioning of the institutions and practices of power legitimation. *The king is naked*, as the Emperor in Andersen's fairy tale³⁴, political power in the west reveals its fragility whenever it shows to be unable to forge the *good citizen*, weaving a liberal and democratic dress that struggles to get a proper recognition socially. This will necessarily compels the western political systems either to influence the collective imaginary of the body politic more effectively (by deploying in all their power the means of mass communication and mobilizing institutions to revive the typical values of modern culture) or to reformulate their narration about *civic virtues*, intercepting and assimilating the new identity-making and ideological drives that populate the social universe. In both cases it is not democracy, as a form of government and power legitimation, that is at stake, but liberalism itself with its political principles and the assertion of individual rights, which without values like tolerance and respect for the institutions risk dissolving into an empty rhetoric that asserts by law what it denies in effect. *Plus actum quam scriptum valet*.

³⁴ See Hans C. Andersen, *The emperor's new clothes*, Longman, Essex 1986. For an analysis of the fairy tale's political symbolism, see Claudio Bonvecchio, *I vestiti nuovi dell'imperatore: un racconto archetipico sul potere*, in *Simbolica politica del terzo*, ed. by Giulio M. Chiodi Giappichelli, Torino 1996).



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