

MYTH, IDEOLOGY AND PRAXIS IN DIRECT DEMOCRACY. AN EXPLORATORY ENQUIRY¹.

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Abstract

The origins of Direct democracy as a form of government can easily be traced back to the historical-political experience of ancient Athens in the V-IV centuries BC. Despite being included among the forms of government in ancient and medieval treatises, together with Monarchy (the government of one), Aristocracy (the government of a few) and their possible degenerations (cf. the Platonic-Aristotelian model)², Direct democracy was no longer practiced in later centuries, with the exception of some well-defined and limited circumstances, and it never became a dominant form in a systemic way. For a long time, it was essentially considered an experiment that was neither repeatable nor desirable.

After the French Revolution, which was anticipated, in many respects, by the First and Second English Revolutions (1642-1689) and by the American Revolution (1775-1783), the principle of popular sovereignty emerged in Europe and America; it gave rise to the first modern democracies, which, however, contrary to the Greek example, were representative democracies from the beginning.

Such a principle, however, had and still has a far-reaching symbolic and ideological value for direct democracy as well, since it transfers the legitimation of power from a theological and/or metaphysical dimension (coinciding with the divine will or with some abstract, self-subsisting idea as the Platonic good)³ to a purely human level, stating that power always stems from the people, who originally hold it⁴.

Keywords: Direct Democracy, Myth, Ideology, Collective Imaginary, Power.

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² Cf. Plato, *Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin, 2007) and Aristotle, *Politics* trans. Trevor J. Saunders (London: Penguin, 1981).

³ Cf. Rm, 13 and Plato, *Republic*.

⁴ Cf. Guglielmo Ferrero, *Potere. I Geni invisibili della città* (Lungro di Cosenza – Italia: Marco Editore, 2005).

Introduction

The origins of Direct democracy as a form of government can easily be traced back to the historical-political experience of ancient Athens in the V-IV centuries BC. Despite being included among the forms of government in ancient and medieval treatises, together with Monarchy (the government of one), Aristocracy (the government of a few) and their possible degenerations (cf. the Platonic-Aristotelian model)⁵, Direct democracy was no longer practised in later centuries, with the exception of some well-defined and limited circumstances, and it never became a dominant form in a systemic way. For a long time, it was essentially considered an experiment that was neither repeatable nor desirable.

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I

The recent and renewed interest in direct democracy and the mythical, symbolic and ideological flowering that derives from it can only be correctly understood as a function of the new representation of power typical of modernity, where the original relationship of command and obedience among human beings is now intended in a purely secularised sense. Such a relationship, then, takes on a meaning determined by a progressive autonomy of the political element with respect to the other spheres of existence, especially religion, which in previous ages was its elective form of legitimation.

⁵ Cf. Plato, *Republic*, trans. by Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013) and Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. by Carnes Lord (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁶ Cf. Rm, 13 and Plato, *Republic*.

⁷ Cf. G. Ferrero, *Potere. I Geni invisibili della città* (Lungro di Cosenza – Italy: Marco Editore, 2005).

As a matter of fact, before the modern age politics and religion presented themselves in an inseparable organic relationship, manifesting themselves as two sides of the same coin; in more recent times, such a relationship of mutual interpenetration ended on a symbolic and ideological level, giving way to greater autonomy for both. More in general, every area of human existence, as well as the knowledge that proliferates in it, after Galileo and Newton's scientific revolution, progressively tends to parcel out, with the corresponding fields that acquire substantial autonomy, configuring, as far as possible, the existence of their objects in a relatively independent way. The specifically political dimension is also fully inscribed in this historical-cultural dynamic, in particular as regards the representation of power, its origin and its most intimate essence.

Modernity thus reveals what was previously unthinkable and unspeakable, *id est* that power is a relationship which is inborn in the gregarious nature typical of the human species, like any relationship of command and obedience that inevitably pertains to it, and that it can only be traced back to purely historical, anthropological and cultural dynamics. In a way that is coherent with this modern lesson, we can therefore affirm that human beings, considered foremost as *political animals*⁸, find their necessary condition of existence, as a species, in the fact that they can survive in nature only within more or less complex communities, ranging from a simple primordial horde to technologically advanced societies. Every complex society or community, in turn, cannot subsist without some forms of asymmetrical relationship among its members, through which a political order, which expresses the original relationship of command and obedience, is generated. This relationship, well represented by the power parents exercise over their children, as a vital function that is essential to the survival of all new-borns, is also expressed among adult individuals and groups, which always tend to organise themselves in accordance with a precise social hierarchy. This hierarchical relationship can be of various types and is represented in a lot of ways, which include the most primitive parental relationships (patriarchal or matriarchal) as well as the paradigms that emerge from the modern recognition of the autonomy of the person-individual, with the set of rights and prerogatives that follow⁹.

⁸ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, I - 1253a.

⁹ Cf. A. Cesaro, "The concept of person between Christian tradition and post-modern society", *Philosophy and Public Issues*, no. 3 (2016): 95-114.

However, what modernity reveals must also be concealed, since on these premises no kind of power would appear legitimate. How would it be possible, indeed, to justify to the eyes of the modern subject – jealous guardian of individual autonomy, freedom of thought, critical and rational faculties – an existence which is necessarily inscribed within relationships of command and obedience, which in any case exist in practice? Since power obeys a logic typical of the human species which nobody can escape, it does not belong, as a matter of fact, to any of its members, it is a simple relationship among individuals and groups which exists *per se* and cannot be eliminated. In order to make it acceptable, it is therefore necessary to turn this relationship into an object and stabilise it through some symbolic-ideological narrative that allows people to identify an original, evident and indisputable source from which it arises, like any other empirically interpreted entity. Otherwise, no form of government that could be considered legitimate could exist, anyone would be virtually entitled to elude it at their own discretion. In other words, if power were correctly understood as a necessary relationship that simply exists, any form of government would always be legitimate and anyone could challenge the validity of the one actually practiced in the name, for example, of greater efficiency or of their own personal convictions on the matter.

The typically modern symbolic strategy is perfectly inscribed within this necessary logic of objectification and reification of power, through the establishment of a powerful myth, to which corresponds a very effective symbology: *The sovereign people*. Such a myth carries out a lot of tasks: first of all, it allows – by satisfying the desire of autonomy of the political sphere and of justification of power on a material basis – to identify an empirical subject, the people, upon which sovereignty can be founded, as well as every relationship of command and obedience. From this point of view, the people is effectively represented as the authentic holder of power, which can be ceded and/or temporarily transferred to those who exercise it by right in its name, as stated in the famous formulation by Lincoln at Gettysburg: “*of a government of the people, by the people, for the people*”¹⁰. Such a strategy also results in a radical stabilisation of power, since the myth of the sovereign people allows, in the first place, to identify a symbolic subject that refers to a multitude of empirically existing individuals, effectively replacing God and any other metaphysical or supernatural entity of any kind. Secondly, such a narrative tends to make any possible revolution

¹⁰ Cf. A. Lincoln, *The Gettysburg Address* (Vachendorf: Sheba Blake Publishing, 2017).

illegitimate, since, within the liberal-democratic political formula, every revolutionary act leads to fatal contradictions for the solidity of the system, symbolically and ideologically. Every violent rebellion always proves to be, from this point of view, illegitimate and contradictory. As a matter of fact, if the majority of the population were to trigger it, that would mean a revolt of the people against themselves, taking the form of a totally senseless act within a political formula in which it is possible to peacefully replace all representatives through the electoral mechanism. If, on the other hand, the minority were to rebel, this would immediately appear illegitimate in the eyes of the acquiescent majority, and such an action would take the form of an act whose ultimate goal would be to undermine popular sovereignty, in order to replace it with something different and, consequently, extraneous to the democratic paradigm. The myth of the sovereign people therefore works as a symbolic trap, blocking in the bud any possible revolt against the established order, unless the very same principle of the democratic order, *id est* the idea that the power belongs to the people, is put into question. Such a perspective, even though it is practicable in principle, and in spite of the fact it may have considerable appeal, is very difficult to put into practice, since it requires the identification of an empirically recognisable subject who would be able to replace the people themselves. Indeed, any other subject who claimed to rise and become holder of power cannot have, for the modern mentality, a metaphysical, magical and/or sacred nature. These areas cannot be predicated in terms of being false or true, or existing or non-existing, they always remain confined within the realm of pure individual opinion, exactly as it happens for the existence of God, upon which no-one can ever express a definitive opinion.

In summary, a careful observation of political phenomena, following the modern scientific method, inevitably leads to a stringent series of conclusions:

1. Power is not an object, but a relationship among individuals, groups and/or political systems;
2. Power is a *de facto* relationship which has always qualified the human species because of its gregarious nature;

3. Power is an ineluctable factor of human existence, since all the individuals who make up our species can survive in nature only within groups, forming more or less complex societies or communities¹¹.

These deductions, as we have tried to show, although they allow researchers to recognise power in its most authentic dimension, are nonetheless useless for the purpose of legitimising it. As it appears quite evident, justifying the existence of hierarchical or at least asymmetrical relationships on the basis of the fact that command implies characteristics that belong only to certain individuals or groups is very problematic, as soon as it is discovered that it does not depend on a transfer through a symbolic mechanism but on a *de facto* ascertainment on which only subsequently an imaginary aimed at the legitimation of the *status quo* proliferates. In other words, in every historical period those who hold political power seek some symbolic-imaginative narrative in order to justify what they already possess.

This also applies to the typical mechanisms of democratic legitimation, where elections stage the fiction of transferring the power from the people to the elected. In reality, the class of the eligible does not arise spontaneously from the body of the citizens, but it springs from those organised minorities that, within modern political systems, actively promote and organise the consensus of the masses. If, however, this were not the case, if voters did not have the illusion of freely choosing the political class, if such a mechanism revealed its own, intimate, fictional essence, then the resulting political order would collapse on itself, generating a sort of generalised anarchy; a chaos from which a new ruling class would emerge anyway, capable of reorganising consensus on renewed symbolic bases¹². All this always and immutably happens because every relationship of command and

¹¹ Cf. E. Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984); M. Stoppino, *Potere e teoria politica*, (Milano: Giuffrè, 1995).

¹² «Among the constant facts and tendencies that are to be found in all political organisms, one is so obvious that it is apparent to the most casual eye. In all societies from societies that are very meagerly developed and have barely attained the dawning of civilization, down to the most advanced and powerful societies two classes of people appear a class that rules and a class that is ruled. The first class, always the less numerous, performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the advantages that power brings, whereas the second, the more numerous class, is directed and controlled by the first; in a manner that is now more or less legal, now more or less arbitrary and violent, and supplies the first, in appearance at least, with material means of subsistence and with the instrumentalities that are essential to the vitality of the political organism. ... ruling classes 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» [G. Mosca, *The ruling class*, trans. By H. D. Kahn, (McGraw-Hill: New York; London 1939), 50; 70].

obedience presupposes for its stability that those who are subject to it perceive it as legitimate, *id est* endowed with some justification. If we were to limit ourselves to saying, as it is indeed the case, that every hierarchical relationship depends on the fact that some individuals are destined to be in it for reasons linked to their personal skills, charisma, leadership abilities and/or their belonging to the ruling class, this would appear completely intolerable to those subjected to those very same power relationships. Human beings, indeed, when taken individually, always believe – even when they are poorly equipped, with no aptitude for command and low political intelligence – that they would be able to carry out the arduous task of managing power. That faint glimmer of intellect, combined with the ability to recognise themselves as individuals separated from the group – which everyone indistinctly possesses –, instils in each of them inevitable anti-social and anarchist tendencies, which are capable, if left free of control, of undermining any political and institutional structure.

II

Over the centuries, the liberal-democratic formula has found a stable balance in the representation of power, since, on one hand, it freed the person-individual from the ancient chains, giving them rights and prerogatives which were previously unknown, while on the other hand it was able to conceal the uncomfortable truth behind every relationship of command and obedience behind the concept of the sovereign people, hiding its true nature through the mechanism of representation. The people therefore stand as a constituent power, never as a constituted one¹³, because they are the symbolic holders of a sovereignty which they must always give away to their own representatives, who ensure the full exercise of it within the modern political systems. In this way, the constituted order is moulded through a symbolic transfer that allows the actual exercise of the political power itself, thanks to the periodic transfer of sovereignty that is renewed over time by virtue of the electoral mechanism.

This valuable and effective strategy of concealment, through which the Western democracies have been governed and supported for centuries, is currently facing the challenge of direct democracy. That political formula, which for a long time was impracticable, due to an objective technical difficulty to frequently and rapidly consult the will of the people, appears instead today, thanks to the new connecting technologies, easy to implement on a large scale. The strategy has provoked,

¹³ Cf. E. J. Sieyès, *What is the Third estate?* trans. by M. Blondel (New York: Praeger 1964).

however, an inevitable and far-reaching political upheaval as far as representative democracy is concerned, since all of a sudden what could previously be considered unattainable, a pure theoretical game with which you could entertain yourself indefinitely, without never really questioning the legitimacy of the liberal-democratic formula, was possible. The game, however, has suddenly become something extremely serious, which could potentially be implemented, able to openly challenge the established order and the traditional processes of legitimation upon which the order itself stands. The purpose of direct democracy is, indeed, to radicalise, taking it to its extreme consequences, the typical mechanism of representative democracy, since it attacks the need and opportunity for the symbolic transfer of sovereignty from the people to its representatives. In this way, the process of power translation no longer looks necessary or legitimate, since the real holder of sovereignty, *id est* all citizens, can finally be the true protagonist of every significant political decision, given that its will can always be known quickly and effectively, through the new technologies of mass communication. We have already insisted elsewhere¹⁴ on the real danger behind this political formula, capable of quickly leading to new dictatorships with a marked totalitarian vocation, contemptuous of individual rights, potentially heralding violence and arbitrary acts of all sorts; here, we believe it necessary to highlight its undeniable narrative strength. Such strength is rooted in the communitarian idea of power of Rousseauian type¹⁵, which, in turn, presupposes the existence of a *general will*, by virtue of which the people assume the symbolic connotations of a great individual, capable of expressing themselves in a clear and unambiguous way. Such will can only exist by virtue of an imaginary (partly of a metaphysical and often unconscious nature) where the individuals can only be considered as simple cells of a complex organism that has a will of its own, knowable through the opinion of the majority, with which everyone must, willingly or not, comply¹⁶.

¹⁴ Cf. P. Bellini, "Direct democracy and representative democracy", *Philosophy and public issues* 9 No 1 (2019)

¹⁵ Cf. J.-J. Rousseau, *The social contract*, trans. by G. D. H. Cole (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd 1952).

¹⁶ «But it is asked how a man can be both free and forced to conform to wills that are not his own. How are the opponents at once free and subject to laws they have not agreed to? I retort that the question is wrongly put. The citizen gives his consent to all the laws, including those which are passed in spite of his opposition, and even those which punish him when he dares to break any of them. The constant will of all the members of the State is the general will; by virtue of it they are citizens and free. When in the popular assembly a law is proposed, what the people is asked is not exactly whether it approves or rejects the proposal, but whether it is in conformity with the general will, which is their will. Each man, in giving his vote, states his opinion on that point; and the general will is found by counting votes. When therefore the opinion that is contrary to my own prevails, this proves neither more nor less than that I was mistaken, and that what I

It is, in the end, a re-edition of the ancient symbolism of the hive, an organic unity where every particular will finds its meaning in the active participation in the dictates of the general will. In this case, however, the political organism generated by direct democracy identifies the queen bee not as a classic metaphor for the monarchy, but as a symbol of this general metaphysical will, which transcends all the individual wills, from which, however, draws its origin and its reason for being. The person-individual, in this way, is totally reabsorbed within the community of which he or she is part, a community which constitutes, for each person-individual, the only horizon of meaning concretely available. Direct democracy, whether we recognise it or not, always needs an ideological platform of organicistic type, since the will of the people always coincides with the will of the majority. The latter, in turn, must symbolically reabsorb within itself any dissenting will, which, if left free to operate, would make every decision problematic, since minorities and dissenting individuals would irreparably put into crisis the supposed uniqueness of the will of the people. It is, substantially, a work of camouflage, where a group of citizens composed of individuals who have different opinions on a lot of issues of major public interest is replaced, through direct democracy, with the monolithic will of an ever-changing majority. Since it is impossible to transfer every particular will to a symbolic representative stage, direct democracy, to avoid a substantial loss of legitimacy, is forced to silence all dissent, making the wishes of the majority coincide with the general will. Furthermore, this mechanism only works if such a purely abstract will is symbolically reified so that it disregards the individual subjects who bear it. On every issue, as a matter of fact, majorities and minorities, always made up of different individuals, will always and inevitably be formed, so that everyone will belong, at different times, to the former or the latter, as a component of what remains, in part, always and in any case, a composite and contradictory set of individual wills.

Conclusion

The totalitarian nature of such a mechanism is very clear. Direct democracy is always bound to contradict every political liberalism, so that any true defender of individual rights and freedoms can only look at it with extreme suspicion and distrust. It can impose an effective command on the entire population only under the condition of suppressing any dissent, so as to progressively turn everyone

thought to be the general will was not so. If my particular opinion had carried the day I should have achieved the opposite of what was my will; and it is in that case that I should not have been free» (*Ibidem*, 93-94).

into a blind servant of the general will, a thoughtless being who acts in total submission to the will of those who effectively manage the power and always wish a unanimous approval by subjects lacking the most elementary critical sense. The actual practice of direct democracy can therefore only exert a regressive function as far as freedoms and human dignity are concerned, because its ultimate destiny is to reabsorb the individual within the group. According to its very same hyper-communitarian logic, it necessarily triggers tyrannical-totalitarian leaderships that can easily manage to subjugate the masses by becoming interpreters of that general will they themselves forge, in a mirror game of infinite references between the charismatic leader and his or her followers.



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