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DEMOCRACY AND DISINTERMEDIATION

A Dangerous Relationship

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EDITED BY
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Polidemos (Centro per lo studio della democrazia e dei mutamenti politici) dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore promuove e svolge ricerche sui mutamenti nei sistemi democratici, sulle trasformazioni nelle concezioni della democrazia e sulla dimensione internazionale della democrazia. **Polidemos** promuove la discussione sulla democrazia operando a più livelli: al livello della ricerca accademica, mediante ricerche originali sul tema dei mutamenti democratici, considerato da differenti prospettive disciplinari e con un'ottica multi-interdisciplinare; al livello della discussione pubblica, mediante prodotti editoriali ed eventi pubblici; al livello della più ampia divulgazione, disseminando i risultati delle proprie ricerche mediante iniziative rivolte a organizzazioni della società civile, insegnanti e cittadini interessati.

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Introduction: A disintermediated world

ANTONIO CAMPATI AND DAMIANO PALANO

In 1976, John Brunner, one of the most original writers of British sci-fi, published *The Shockwave Rider,* one of his most visionary and (also stylistically) refined novels. More than the plot, what made the narrative truly remarkable was the scenario in which the story of Nick Haflinger, the brilliant information programmer and protagonist of the story, was placed. Brunner, in fact, imagined a United States in 2018, governed, following a disastrous earthquake, by a hyper-technological oligarchy. But, above all, he described a society entirely controlled by a large capillary computer network, capable of manipulating the behavior of individuals and controlling the activities of each citizen. "The nation was tightly webbed in a net of interlocking data-channels", wrote Brunner, "and a time-traveler from a century ago would have been horrified by the degree to which confidential information had been rendered accessible to total strangers capable of adding two plus two" (Brunner, 1979, p. 55). That "net of interlocking data-channels" had gradually crept into the lives of citizens. The massive use of computers had appeared as the most rational solution, one capable, at the same time, of guaranteeing the widest freedom of choice to citizens. The regime's persuasive propaganda had invited us to see the technological network as an instrument of liberation: "So don't dismiss the computer as a new type of fetter", "Think of it rationally, as the most liberating device ever invented, the

only tool capable of serving the multifarious needs of modern man" (Brunner, 1976, p. 84). "The muscles of the nation could be felt flexing with joyous new freedom", even though – as the novel's rebellious protagonist recognized – "liberated, the populace took off like so many hot-air balloons" (Brunner, 1976, p. 84).

When Brunner wrote the novel, the experimental Arpanet project – which can be considered the first computer network – connected just over twenty computers and the Internet was still just the vague idea that some scientists dared to imagine. Brunner had, moreover, written his novel – considered "prophetic" precisely because it prefigured a world entirely wrapped in the coils of a global technological network – after reading *Future Shock* by Alvin Toffler, a book that remains an authentic classic of "futurological" literature. It was precisely in that book, that the American analyst foreshadowed a rapid acceleration of technological change: an acceleration that would cause a shock in even those sectors of society unable to follow the rhythm of masonry. Toffler's perspective was in general much more optimistic than Brunner's because, in particular, the famous "futurologist" invited his readers to retract their usual criticisms of technological development and the mass media. Radical critics – such as the members of the "Frankfurt School" or, in the United States, Charles Wright Mills – had strongly blamed the cultural homologation produced by the "cultural industry", above all by television, and, more generally, had seen every automation process as a limitation of individual autonomy. Toffler, on the other hand, completely overturned that perspective and argued that the technology of the future would not standardize cultural production at all, but would rather allow products to be built in an increasingly "personalized" and decreasingly "standardized" way, even though this would have created unprecedent-

ed problems, completely different from those of the "first" mass society. As he wrote in an important passage of this book:

> It is obstinate nonsense to insist, in the face of all this, that the machines of tomorrow will turn us into robots, steal our individuality, eliminate cultural variety, etc., etc. Because primitive mass production imposed certain uniformities, does not mean that super-industrial machines will do the same. The fact is that the entire thrust of the future carries away from standardization – away from uniform goods, away from homogenized art, mass produced education and "mass" culture. We have reached a dialectical turning point in the technological development of society. And technology, far from restricting our individuality, will multiply our choices – and our freedom – exponentially. Whether man is prepared to cope with the increased choice of material and cultural wares available to him is, however, a totally different question. For there comes a time when choice, rather than freeing the individual, becomes so complex, difficult and costly, that it turns into its opposite. There comes a time, in short, when choice turns into overchoice and freedom into un-freedom (Brunner, 1971, p. 147).

The future foreshadowed by Toffler and Brunner half a century ago has long since become our world. A widespread information network covers the entire globe and, above all, it envelops our lives, tightening its links more and more, without us even realizing it. Within this immense network, technology really – as Toffler predicted – opens up myriad potential choices, possible consumer products, and cultural tastes. Each of us is inundated with an almost ungovernable news overload on a daily basis. Most of our questions can be answered almost immediately via a Google search. Our desire to hold a book, electronic gadget or new copy of our favorite

collection in our hands can be fulfilled within a few hours thanks to the services of Amazon. And even the most refined musical palates, always looking for 'niche' products, can find an inexhaustible menu in the Spotify archives. "Technology, far from restricting our individuality", has indeed multiplied "our choices – and our freedom – exponentially", at least if we are talking about freedom of consumption. It has, in the process, rendered obsolete the entire chain of mediations that provided – for the consumer, the user, and the citizen – the contact persons to turn to in order to obtain goods and services. As we have learned in recent years, this largely unlimited freedom of choice does not necessarily come to fruition. Faced with millions of information sources, many of us first decide to considerably reduce the window from which to look at the world, always (or almost always) turning to the same sources, interacting with like-minded people, cutting ties – at least the 'virtual ties – with those who do not share our ideas. And some of us – as research on fake news and the spread of so-called "post-truth" has shown us in recent years – even prefer to put our 'emotional' assessments of facts and people ahead of a "reality" that is supported by scientific data and the authority of experts.

The world that Toffler and Brunner foreshadowed is also *the world of disintermediation*, to which the chapters of this book are dedicated. But what is disintermediation? In wider terms, it indicates the absence of a median entity between two subjects. As is known, it was a term born in the economic-financial sector, which then spread to different areas of social life. This variety of uses has made it ambiguous, an ambiguity that can develop on two levels. The first is almost inevitable because it is the consequence of its varied use. By disintermediation we can mean, for example, the absence of mediators during an economic negotiation, the possibility of buying a

plane ticket without travel agency costs, or the dynamic that is created between society and institutions with the use of Internet in the political arena. From this point of view, the word is ambiguous because it is overly generic.

The second level of ambiguity relates to the relationship between disintermediation and democracy because, on the one hand, it allows us to accept the requests of citizens who want a more *direct* and *transparent* relationship with the political elites, and, on the other, it risks making some elements of representative government even more brittle, especially by undermining their legitimacy.

As the title suggests, this book explores this second level of disintermediation ambiguity, offering a series of contributions that, using different approaches, highlight also the more *dangerous* aspects that risk even undermining some keystones of liberal-representative democracy. The impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), the rule of Internet in a "post-public sphere", and the new forms of political participation are some of the aspects detailed in the following pages.

In the first chapter, Natascia Mattucci provides some possible ways of understanding the digital revolution in philosophical terms. In fact, especially on the relationship between human beings and the world, there are conspicuous political consequences of the immediacy or demedialization of the relationship between power and citizens. This scenario can be dangerous because it could even threaten the freedom of citizens. Damiano Palano focuses on this point by examining some of the political consequences of the disintermediation process, and the role those new technologies have in promoting street-level mobilization, especially in undemocratic regimes. In this sense, he examines the "dark side" of disintermediation, arguing that while the new technologies may

promote the mobilization of citizens "from below", they can also deliver powerful tools to authoritarian regimes for the monitoring of dissent and the repression of opponents.

But disintermediation is also an opportunity to rethink certain aspects of democracy. In this sense, the chapter by Alberto Bitonti is very interesting. He presents the ideal-typical model of *collaborative democracy* as a possible innovation of representative democracy in response to some of the changes affecting its health and functionality in the 21st century. In this ideal-typical model, policymaking processes are open and specifically designed to enable interest groups and citizens to collaborate with policymakers throughout the whole policy cycle, fulfilling the potential of the processes in terms of deliberative quality, collective intelligence and legitimacy.

One of the key points to understanding the disintermediation process, is the *size* of the political power. The horizontal and vertical dimensions of democracy also create a *distance*, which disintermediation seeks to cancel. From this point of view, Antonio Campati focuses on the influence on representative democracy by an *ideology of immediacy* that seeks to distort its functioning. His chapter aims to, firstly, analyze the reasons why representative democracy is structurally influenced by tendencies towards mediation and disintermediation and, secondly, highlight the importance of *democratic distance* as a theoretical element in rethinking the relationship between the elites and democracy.

This point is crucial also for the new types of representation and participation, especially in the juridical framework. In this regard, Andrea Michieli analyses the legal problem of social, political, and economic mediation representation through the legal doctrine underpinning the welfare state and the provisions of the Italian Constitution on social formations. He claims that a rethinking of democratic institu-

tions is necessary to promote the forms of intermediation with which participation takes place today. Finally, Cecilia Biancalana, through an introduction of the concept of disintermediation in party politics and an in-depth examination of the inner workings of two Italian parties (the Partito Democratico and the Movimento 5 Stelle), shows in her chapter both how these trends are connected and the ways in which the promise of unmediated intra-party relationships lead to the emergence of new forms of intermediation.

The chapters of this book should be considered as merely an initial discussion. As the world before us tends to change much more rapidly than our theoretical schemes and hypotheses, it will clearly be necessary to reflect on these issues further. On the other hand, the issue of disintermediation is not only an important discussion point for reflecting on the possible threats that undermine our societies and democracies. More significantly, we can say that disintermediation is *the* theme of our time, because it is a challenge that radically affects the way in which we have built our political, social and cultural institutions.

We cannot be as optimistic today as Toffler was fifty years ago, but neither can we take refuge in the dystopian imagination of which Brunner's novel was an early prefiguration, as the world of disintermediation is now the world we have become accustomed to and which we would probably be unable to do without. In short, it is a question of recognizing its pitfalls, but at the same time seeking its potential positive developments. And perhaps we can then make our own the maxim pronounced in Brunner's novel by Dean Inge: "There are two categories of fools. The first say: 'This is old, therefore it is good'. The latter affirm: 'This is new, therefore it is better'" (Brunner, 1979, p. 63).

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Contemplating the Digital Revolution

NATASCIA MATTUCCI[1]

Abstract. The technification of lives, which began in the twentieth century, today has the appearance of a full mediatization and imagification that crosses all aspects of human existence. In this chapter, I will try to provide some possible ways of understanding the digital revolution in philosophical terms. The aim of this chapter is not to choose one theory over another but to underline that diagnosing a complex and epochal phenomenon requires several analytical tools. A basic line between the considered philosophies and theories concerns the categories of space and time, at the subjective and even objective levels, and consequently the relationship between human beings and the world. This change inevitably has a conspicuous political consequence in terms of the immediacy or demedialization of the relationship between power and citizens.
Keywords: Digital Revolution; Immediacy; Meta-Medium; Demedialization; Political Power.

1. *Introduction*

In this chapter, I argue that while the current technological revolution may look like one of the periodic accelerations of history that occur with the introduction of new technology, in

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fact, it is more than that. The Internet has become a "meta-medium" where the constantly evolving digital language penetrates and colonizes traditional means of communication. What characterizes the contemporary technological paradigm is the fact that information is raw material with pervasive effects that can be perceived in every aspect of individual and collective existence. This change, made possible by the unstoppable development of information technology, is occurring in several phases, but the most significant aspect is certainly the global and widespread expansion of the Internet. This is opening up horizons of reflection that allow us to question the power of images; the relationship between facts and representations; the manipulation of news and the issue of post-truth; the link between emotions, knowledge and politics; and the languages of digital violence. The technification of lives, which began in the twentieth century, today has the appearance of a full mediatization and imagification that crosses all aspects of human existence. In this chapter, I will try to provide some possible ways of understanding the digital revolution in philosophical terms. The aim is not to choose one theory over another but to underline that diagnosing a complex and epochal phenomenon requires several analytical tools. A basic line between the considered philosophies and theories concerns the categories of space and time, at the subjective and even objective levels, and consequently the relationship between human beings and the world. This change inevitably has a conspicuous political consequence in terms of the immediacy or demedialization of the relationship between power and citizens.

2. *Understanding the digital revolution*

The word *revolution* was originally defined as a regular and immutable astral movement and its emergence in political language was as the restoration of a legitimate order. When, in the course of events, the protagonists discern the impossibility of restoring the previous state, because what is happening paradoxically escapes the hands of its initiators, that event assumes an interruptive meaning, typical of revolutions. "The fact that the word 'revolution' meant originally restoration, hence something which to us is its very opposite, is not a mere oddity of semantics", according to Hannah Arendt (1990, p. 42). Change often begins with the intention of restoring ancient freedoms. "When newness had reached the marketplace, it became the beginning of a new story, started – though unwittingly – by acting men, to be enacted further, to be augmented and spun out by their posterity" (Arendt, 1990, p. 47). However, in the term's passage from astronomy to political language, one connotation remained evident: irresistibility. This refers to the "fact that the revolving motion of the stars follows a preordained path and is removed from all influence of human power" (Arendt, 1990, p. 47). The irresistible process is often expressed by revolutionaries through different metaphors, such as the torrent or current, to indicate a force greater than human beings.

This reference to Arendt's concept of revolution is useful for underlining how its character of a new beginning, of real caesura in space and time, appears only during its development, in particular when the unexpected appears. Every revolution, whether political or gnoseological, fundamentally questions the relationship between human beings and the world. The change that has been affecting humanity in the last few decades appears to be a real revolution in communi-

cation in the widest sense. Experts in political theory know that the public sphere, the soul of representative democracies, relies on public communication. The digital revolution seems to hybridize the boundaries between public and private communication, making the use of the traditional concept of the public sphere antiquated, even if only in ideal terms.

The digital revolution represents a proper era despite the many underestimates by some spheres of knowledge, not least the political one. It is difficult to understand the metamorphosis of parties, leadership and electoral trends without focusing on the context in which such changes occur. Individuals are experiencing a profound change of perspective, an authentic cognitive, communicative, political and existential revolution, because it affects how they relate to the world in which they live, even if they are not fully aware of this crucial transition. Digital technology is a revolution that not only concerns a country or a group of people but is also global: its scenario is a globalized world that penetrates all aspects of human existence. To understand this change of scenery, an individual should be able to suspend time and space and imagine returning to the contemporary world after an absence of 10 or 15 years, as in the clever movie *Goodbye Lenin*, where a son's love for his mother leads him to stage an old, fading world to avoid the shock of the new one.

As such, a revolution constitutes a dividing line between a before and an after, when the masses adopt a change in perspective. It is not crucial to date the beginning of this metamorphosis but rather to show its effects when it penetrates everyone's life at a global level – in the tiny grain of individuality, as Michel Foucault would say, in the way people think, see and feel. Looking at the great historical periods and cognitive revolutions, certainly modernity with its anthropocentrism, marks a profound change in the cognitive observation

point, from Descartes to Kant. It is the human being – man, white, Christian, owner – who inscribes the world with its categories of thought and its space–time coordinates.

Who can say with certainty that the human being is still the centre of attention? What is the contemporary core of the cognitive process? I ask this because the digital revolution has penetrated the imagination, captured our biometric and sociometric data, captured desires and fears and created capital from archiving, transmitting, reproducing and monetizing. Consequently, it has induced new desires and fears, not always at a conscious level. South Korean philosopher, Byung-Chul Han (2017), speaks of "dataism" as a second, only apparent, Enlightenment in which data are at risk of being absolutized, thus becoming a new ideology. Dataism refers to the ongoing recording of data derived from individuals with their consent: all human activities are measurable and recordable, and each of us helps this extraction of information through a form of self-exploitation. Dataism is a technique of self-control and self-monitoring with connections to biopolitics understood as an increment of life in which the "I" is counted. Counting does not mean telling or narrating itself. Data, which is a precious resource for the companies that dominate it, has political relevance. "Big Data is a Big Deal", states Han (2017).

The marketing of self-accounting, amplified by the union between neoliberalism and digital, has as a counterpart a progressive immunization from others. The denial and expulsion of otherness is a recurrent theme in Han's (2018) most recent reflections. In this case, otherness indicates extraneousness; that is, whoever is deemed different stops or slows down the movement of information and capital (Han, 2018). For this reason, the greater the similarity between people, the greater the production. The logic of capitalism needs all individuals, including tourists, to be equal. Neoliberalism would

not work if people were different. Thus, the other as a secret, temptation and desire tends to disappear. The negativity of the other gives way to the positivity of the same. According to Han, this is a pathological aspect of contemporary communities: the proliferation of the same gradually makes any differences disappear. Rather than prohibitions or interdictions, it is over-communication and over-consumption that exclude otherness. The fact that interconnection and total communication are vehicles for experiencing each other is only an impression.

> The terror of the Same affects all areas of life today. One travels everything, yet does not *experience* anything. One catches sight of everything, yet reaches no *insight*. One accumulates information and data, yet does not attain *knowledge*. One lusts after adventures and stimulation, but always remains *the same*. One accumulates online 'friends' and 'followers', yet never encounters another person. Social media constitutes an absolute zero grade of social (Han, 2018, p. 3).

To recover the differences, Han provocatively suggests a return to the inner animal, which unfortunately does not consume and does not communicate, without being able to indicate concrete solutions. His reflection on the contemporary world focuses on a dark diagnosis of a radically conformist era that risks imploding because it is at the limit of its capabilities.

3. *The digital revolution from a philosophical perspective*

Although the current revolution – the consequence of the development of digital communication network systems – may seem like one of the "periodic accelerations in history" that occur following the introduction of a new technology, in fact, it is more than that. The Internet has become a *meta-medium*:

the ever-evolving digital language penetrates and colonizes traditional means of communication that tend to remain the same. In one of the most innovatory reflections on virtual, Pierre Lévy (1998) detaches himself from the opposing forces of real and virtual, where the former indicates the concrete presence of an object and the latter a deferred and illusory presence. Intended instead as a node of tendencies that are proper to an entity or a situation, the virtual, rather than the real, seems to call for actualization – that is, the form assumed by a dynamic configuration of forces and purposes. Virtualization, then, appears to be a different movement from actualization because it transforms the topicality of a particular case – a solution – into a problematic field. The dynamics of virtualization do not cancel space and time; they do not produce simple accelerations of processes already underway but create qualitatively new spaces and times. The boundaries of times and places are no longer obvious and clearly delimited.

Virtualization affects every area of coexistence and seems to be the essence of the digital revolution. Before taking a position of condemnation or fatalistic acceptance, Lévy (1998) investigates its core, identified in a "heterogenesis of the human" as a movement of becoming other. Below the fixed and immediate presence, the virtual allows for the uncovering of further meanings and also for a questioning of the classically understood identity with its determinations and exclusions. Virtualization, therefore, would consist neither in disincarnation nor in dematerialization but in a change of identity, passing from a specific solution to a general problem through delocalization and desynchronization (Lévy, 1998). In this sense, the adventure of human history presents traits of virtualization as a movement through which our species has created itself and continues to modify its characters.

Moreover, according to Lévy (1998), in addition to deterritorialization, virtualization is characterized by a reversal of the internal and external, by an externalization of private elements – evident in social communication – and by an individual introjection of public elements. The philosophy of the virtual conceptualizes this problematic essence, crossed by trends and forces that are often resolved in actualization, and traces its fertile cavity. Philosophical understanding is a way to humanize it without necessarily suffering it. The French philosopher sees the hidden risks in the metamorphosis initiated by the Internet era and invites a focus on artistic care in both political action and economic practice. The dynamics of virtualization are neither neutral nor peaceful. Closing oneself within threatened territories and identities is, according to Lévy, the fatal mistake to avoid in the face of deterritorialization and the virtual as the new home of the human.

In addition to reflections on virtual reality, an important theoretical contribution to thinking about the digital world comes from the writings of sociologist Manuel Castells. According to Castells (1996), what characterizes the contemporary technological paradigm is the fact that information is raw material with effects that pervade every aspect of individual and collective existence. The Internet is a communicative fabric that individuals not only use for a specific purpose and time but with which they live their relationships. The problem is not opposing the virtual to the real but grasping the implications of the culture of real virtuality – that is, a system in which reality itself, as the "symbolic material existence" of individuals, is entirely immersed and captured in a scenario of images in which appearances, beyond the screen used to communicate them, become experience (Castells, 1996). From this perspective, the meta-medium indicates how the digital world holds together, in a timeless hypertext, every cul-

tural expression – past, present or future – building a new symbolic environment that the sociologist compares to the visionary *Aleph* described by Jorge Luis Borges.

In addition to virtual philosophy and reflection on reticular information, the philosophy of technology offers a third possible interpretation for putting the digital revolution into perspective. The latter has a long tradition, which I will not discuss in this chapter. A less frequent declination of the philosophy of technology, but particularly topical, is the pioneering analysis of the media and the image as a paradigm of the twenty-first century that today occupies a central place in reflections on the digital revolution. Presented as the effect of technology's domination over the human condition, the media critique by German philosopher, Günther Anders, can offer an analytical key to exploring the relationship between communication and power from a philosophical perspective.

One of the most common objections to any criticism of media and technology is that the goodness, sociality and humanity of these tools depend on how individuals use them. However, for Anders (1956), this implies that individuals retain the ability to dispose of technology and that it is still possible to distinguish between means and goals. The core of Anders' criticism is precisely the structural inversion of means and goals, typical of technology and its expressions in the form of mass media. Technocracy is the era in which the principle of usability prevails. The compulsion to produce and use everything represents the imperative of a technical reason in the name of which what is not usable appears superfluous. In this vein, the German philosopher speaks of a passage from *homo faber* to *homo materia*: while *homo faber* represents the attempt to use technique as an instrument for modifying the environment for human survival, *homo materia* evokes the possibility of manipulating and exploiting human

nature itself, as happens with an energy deposit (Anders, 1956). Anders emphasizes that in several circumstances, the means are not only objects of a possible use but have their own structure and function, which determines both their use and the style of occupations and life – in short, human beings.

On television, the German philosopher observes how images of people and foreign things arrive in the domestic space in the form of intimate, pre-familiarized visitors and have an almost magical power that produces a significant metamorphosis in the relationship between human beings and the world (Anders, 1980). This deceptive confidence is the effect of a space–time credibility achieved through the suppression of the distance between the individual and the images. One of the most important consequences of the familiarization provoked by mass media is the reduction, almost to the point of disappearance, of that extraneousness between the individual and the world, which, in the form of distance and difference, measures the degree of human freedom, allowing the imagination to represent what is not visible to the eyes. Media work on the incessant production of images that reduce the universe to a large domestic environment in which to consume an iconic world through an individualized conditioning that separates millions of solitudes. The fact that reality, in the form of images and products, constitutes the main category of the individual testifies to the relevance of this epistemological paradigm for the political arena.

Anders (1980) measures the imagification of existence in terms of a progressive defrauding of capacities:

1) The overproduction of images that invade the sphere of existence compromises the ability to discriminate between reality and appearance. Moreover, the specta-

cle (television/digital) has a boomerang effect that makes reality a function of images.

2) The proliferation of explanations and information can obscure human faculties and compromise the ability to understand the links between events to put them into perspective. A sign of this risk is the progressive linguistic poverty of contemporary communications.
3) The most visible effect concerns the reduction of the sphere of individual freedom – a capacity that requires distance and extraneousness to things – which is exposed to training in the permanent consumption of images that impoverishes the imagination.

Denunciation of the mass media as the quintessence of technology and capitalism, responsible for the profound change in human–world relations, is currently a subject of debate in many fields of knowledge. However, the Andersian debate, developed in all its intransigence in the 1950s, when television was not yet widespread, seems to prepare the ground for the reflections of Jean Baudrillard, Guy Debord, Marshall McLuhan and Paul Virilio. Forty years after Anders, and with a specific look at the virtual world, Virilio refers to the Internet as an amplification of the optical thickness of real-world appearances that compensates for the time compression of instantaneous communications (every image has more value than a long speech). In his view, the technical revolution is a tragedy of knowledge – the Babelic confusion of individual and collective knowledge. Like Aesop's language, the Internet can be the worst and the best of things. The information revolution could lead to a systematic denunciation, ruining the deontological bases of "truth" and, therefore, of freedom of the press: doubts on the truthfulness of facts, manipulation of sources and, therefore, of public opinion itself, are premoni-

tory signs that the revolution of real information can be that of virtual disinformation (Virilio, 2005).

This apocalyptic vision, which is not too far from Andersian fears, seems to have political consequences in terms of the quality of democracy. Virilio (2005) warns against the vast "transmutation of opinion in peacetime", where the apparent renewal of representative democracy through direct elements would actually lead to an automatic democracy in which deliberation could be surrogated by polls. The result would be a surface democracy without collective reflection, strongly conditioned by a politics of gestures and promises, more concerned with showing than arguing, where past, present and future risk being old conceptions in the face of a continuous acceleration of reality ("dromocratic" revolution).

Anders and Virilio certainly share an apocalyptic vision. Anders claims it with pride, advancing a philosophy of the occasion which is impressionist, similar to some of Korean philosopher Han's statements about the image and digital. These interpretations have radical characteristics: after all, they are extreme diagnoses that must not lead to impotence or despair. Anders, a self-declared apocalyptic conservative, warns against technocratic imperatives to preserve the world. Han (2017), however, speaks of the radical change produced by the digital medium as a "drunkenness" that can generate "blindness".

4. *Politics and immediacy*

The society emerging from global digital communication networks, with deeply modified space–time coordinates, affects power. The rapid effects of the digital revolution on the public sphere, traditionally understood as a space of media-

tion between the institutional-administrative machinery and citizens, are occurring before the eyes. In recent years, we have seen a shift from mass media communication, widespread in the second half of the last century, to a form of mass self-communication, in which individuals generate forms of interactive communication that exploit the possibilities offered by information technologies.

Han (2017) writes about the transformation of the public dimension in relation to digital, underlining that digital communication favours a pornographic exposure of intimacy and private life. Digital communication reduces spatial distances but also mental distances, mixing public and private, and privatizing the communication itself. Respect between people presupposes a pathos induced by distance, a non-inquisitorial look from behind the scenes. Respect is distinguished from spectacle by this distant gaze. Therefore, the private sphere is the space where I am neither an image nor an object. The question is whether there is currently a space where not everyone is neither an image nor an object (Han, 2017). Respect is for a *who* – an individual who has a name and is, thus, not anonymous. In communication, states Arendt (1988, p. 12), we always show *who* we are. Digital communication allows anonymous communication that destroys the basis of respect and, with it, responsibility and promise (people's acts are nominal). When I write or communicate digitally, there is another temporality that envelops me and does not allow the evaporation of my excitement or affections, as would normally happen with letters.

Looking at some political transformations generated by the digital revolution, since the late 1990s, social movements have arisen internationally, with claims and participatory demands, which used the network as a tool for self-organization and dissemination of information and messages. Social

movements normally pursue political change through communication in a public, multimedia environment, transforming the feeling of indignation into insurgent politics (Castells, 2009). Global access to the Internet and the consequent creation of a networked society has opened up the possibility of massive self-communication through websites, blogs and social networks, which allow for the creation of alternative messages and content against mainstream information and vertical political power. In addition to these emerging global projects, it is possible to reflect on a digital media politics that addresses the power of images; the relationship between facts and representations; the manipulation of news and the issue of post-truth; and the link between emotions, knowledge and politics in the digital age.

Although they have a unifying force, the fact that waves of indignation actually create a public sphere is problematic, as they are unstable and contingent. According to Han (2017), for example, they lack the necessary distance to form a public or a political community. Anger does not always become narrative and action, especially when it is primarily a concern for oneself; it is a transitory affection without perspective or weight, which tends to result in spontaneous dissipation. The digital revolution does not seem to produce a new political subject in terms of a community but a (digital) swarm of isolated individuals (Han, 2017). These individuals, who unite in this swarm, do not constitute a people but a voice, producing mere background noise. Han (2017) speaks of *homo digitalis* as individuals who do not come together, who do not share a common spirit but who, singularized, stand in front of the screen. The digital individual is an anonymous person. Moreover, when these individuals meet (e.g. a flash mob), this possibility is a fugacity without political energy. The digital word refers to the finger, and the finger counts, but it does not tell

a story. It counts Facebook friends, actions, quotes, impulses and calories. What is not counted does not exist. However, if the human being exists solely as far as he is measurable, he stops being considered in terms of dignity. The concept of dignity, which is of Kantian origin, indicates the rejection of human reification and its non-reduction to a measurable object (dignity does not have a price). Humanity is probably witnessing a new change in its condition compared to what Anders observes: from *homo faber* to *homo materia* in the twentieth century and from *homo materia* to *homo digitalis* in the current century.

To analyse how profoundly the digital revolution is transforming the public sphere, it would be necessary to reconstruct the essential elements of this space, from Kant to Habermas, to understand how different the assumptions and functions of this revolution are. At first glance, it is mediation that seems weakened. Public communication, with the public sphere at its centre, is the space of mediation. If the gaze shifts to the political level, political parties perform this function of mediation. The digital revolution is leading to growing disintermediation and demediatization. Digital windows allow forms of self-communication and self-organization (insurgent politics). This communicative autarchy undermines the representation of official media as well as the authority of (progressively superfluous) intermediation experts. In politics, as in communication, time is the present and it puts representative democracy in crisis. This has quite significant effects on long-term strategic policies, which never seem to envision the future but are constantly concerned with embodying what the polls recommend. Transparency also imposes an accelerated time on politics that does not allow things to mature. A widened mentality and a broad long-term vision can atrophy in simplified communication without perspective as well as in a

negative and unstable atmosphere defined by the pursuit of instantaneous consensus and moods.

The accumulation of data permits the making of predictions about the future, at least in most cases, but these predictions reduce what, for Arendt (1988), is the specific trait of the human being: the capability of initiating political action as a native being, where one can do the unexpected and accomplish the infinitely improbable. Humanity is experiencing a revolution in which the most apocalyptic judgements, precisely because they do not describe but broaden the perspective, seem to show what the eyes do not see. Therefore, in a moment of such profound change, individuals need more than ever to perform exercises in political imagination to see what escapes the eye. This is an epochal change in which the loss of freedom does not go unnoticed because it is reduced to a choice among predetermined options, and this presumed freedom is in itself an object of exploitation.

5. *Conclusion*

The acceleration of reality in the current century calls into question any representation of the political scene of representative democracy. The coordinates to which modern political philosophy refers when contemplating the public sphere – reason and universality – seem to be progressively obscured, if not completely replaced, by emotions and particularism. In conclusion, we must remember the synthetic functions that representative democracy performs: to defend democracy itself from the impatience of citizens, to maintain a distance that allows democracy to separate itself from the power of the present and to act in the general interest. The perception of time, the vital space of democracies, is complicated by techno-

logical accelerations that seem to be leading to a breathless age and a lack of time in which pauses and passages, oxygen for the aesthetic dimension of politics, are compromised. This does not mean ignoring digital or the growing technicalities of reality. However, at a time when the predominant use of technology is no longer just instrumental, the challenge is, paradoxically, to make improper use of that device: bringing it back to a means to an end. However, this first requires the diagnosis of an eye defect, as José Ortega y Gasset (2017) states when discussing the political crisis in Spain in the 1920s. This defect causes an avoidance of seeing facts in perspective, conferring on the insignificant a grotesque importance, and consequently, not knowing the relevant facts. This distinctive and orienting look is, for the Spanish philosopher, a "synoptic talent" and rhymes with the Andersian thinking eye (Ortega y Gasset, 2017, p. 19). To see and feel in perspective and depth, when everything seems lost in detail in a shower of images and information, the individual must perform exercises of fantasy, imagination and sentimental hypertension. Art continues to be a way to expand the imagination and stimulate the prospective understanding of facts.

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The Square and the Palace. The dark side of disintermediation

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Abstract. This chapter examines some political consequences of the disintermediation process, with particular regard to the role that new technologies have in favoring the mobilization of the streets, especially in undemocratic regimes. It examines some hypotheses that argue that there is a relationship between disintermediation and the return to the scene of "street politics". Finally, it highlights how disintermediation can also, from this perspective, have a "dark side": while the new technologies may favor the mobilization of citizens "from below", they can also deliver powerful tools to authoritarian regimes for the monitoring of dissent and the repression of opponents. The effects of disintermediation on democracy are therefore ambivalent and, indeed, it cannot be excluded that disintermediation may further strengthen the process of weakening democratic institutions.
Keywords: Mobilization; Street Politics; Power; Political Participation; Bubble Democracy.

1. *The politics of the street*

In March 1895, a few months before his death, Friedrich Engels wrote a dense introduction to *The Class Struggles in France*, which Marx had written in the aftermath of 1848, reconstruct-

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ing the events that had led to the revolution, the birth of the republic and the rise of Louis Bonaparte. Returning to reread those pages, which had so influenced the way in which Marx's followers had imagined the start of the revolutionary process, Engels did not hesitate to recognize instead how the entire interpretation of the missing friend was vitiated by a series of perspective distortions. The analysis of the economic roots of the 1948 uprisings still remained valid, while the critical point was represented by the way in which Marx – implicitly adopting the French Revolution of 1789 as a model – had imagined the future seizure of political power by the working class. Faced with the failure of the June uprising, and the defeat of revolutionary movements throughout Europe, the authors of the Communist Manifesto thus limited themselves to postponing to the future, to the outbreak of a new crisis in the world economy, the detonation that would have triggered social transformation. "But history", Engels acknowledged many years later, "also proved us in the wrong, and revealed our opinion of that day as an illusion" (Engels, 1895).

The reason lay above all in the fact that the various crises of the capitalist economy had not caused a general "collapse" or the growing impoverishment of the working masses. But an equally important cause had to be found in the transformations that had radically changed the modalities of the political struggle. Putting the military history scholar's lens on, Engels recognized in fact that the street insurrection model – which was never really fruitful even in the past – had now become completely obsolete in the face of the equipment of the forces charged with supervising public order at the new urban structure of the great metropolises, to the ineffective armaments on which the insurgents could count. As he wrote:

Already in 1849, the chances of success were rather poor. [...] Since then, much more has been changed, all in favor of the military. If the cities have become larger, so have the armies. Paris and Berlin, since 1848, have quadrupled, but their garrisons have grown more than that. These garrisons, by means of the railroads, may be doubled inside of twenty-four hours, and in forty-eight hours may swell to gigantic armies. The armament of these enormously augmented troops has become incomparably more effective. In 1848 the smoothbore, muzzle-loaded percussion rifle, today the small-caliber, magazine breech loader, shooting four times as far, ten times as accurately and ten times as quickly as the former. At that time the solid projectiles and case shot of the artillery with relatively weak effect, today the percussion shell, one of which suffices to shatter the best barricade. Then the pickaxe of the pioneer to break through the fire walls, today the dynamite cartridge. On the side of the insurgents, however, all the conditions have become worse. An uprising wherewith all layers of the population sympathize will hardly come again; in the class struggle the middle layers will hardly ever group themselves around the proletariat so fully that the party of reaction, gathering around the bourgeoisie, will be almost eclipsed by comparison. The "people" will for that reason always appear divided, and thus a powerful lever, so effective in 1848, will be missing. Even if on the side of the insurrection there be more trained soldiers, it will become more difficult to arm them. The hunting and sporting rifles of the warehouses – even if the police has not rendered them useless by the removal of a part of the mechanism – are no match for the magazine rifle of the soldier even at close quarters. Up to 1848 one could make his own ammunition out of powder and lead, today the cartridge for each rifle model varies, being similar only in that all of them are the product of large industry and not to be extemporized, which renders most rifles useless unless one has the special ammunition made for them. And, finally, the

> newly-built quarters of the large cities, erected since 1848, have been laid out in long, straight and wide streets as though made to order for the effective use of the new cannon and rifles. The revolutionary, who would himself select the new working-class districts in the north and east of Berlin for a barricade battle, would have to be a lunatic (Engels, 1895).

The barricades that Marx had celebrated, therefore, no longer represented an example to look at. The direction was rather indicated by the history of Germany in the years that followed the granting of male suffrage. The Social Democratic party had in fact begun to participate in the elections, winning ever wider consensus. And all the socialist movements should have taken that path, with the aim of conquering peacefully the political power.

In April of that same 1895 – when Engels had for a few weeks dismissed his own text, intended to be read as a sort of political testament – in the *Revue Scientifique* Gustave Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules* was published, destined very soon to become a book of extraordinary success. Quite singularly, Le Bon seemed to support a thesis almost opposite to that advanced by the elderly founder of "scientific socialism". In fact, the French intellectual announced the beginning of the "era of crowds", arguing that thinking of returning to the elite politics of the past was now an illusion. The entry of the popular classes into public life was now an irreversible fact. And only the scientific knowledge of the psychology of crowds – which Le Bon believed he had fully conquered – could offer a formidable tool to "the statesmen who wish not to govern them", "but at any rate not to be too much governed by them" (Le Bon, 1896, p. XXI). Although the "crowd" painted by the French writer in fact included all kinds of collective aggregates, Le Bon's reflection took as the main model the urban crowd's protagonists of the French Revolution and the

ephemeral Parisian insurrection of the spring of 1871. The examples he used were in fact almost without exceptions referring precisely to gatherings in the square and therefore to situations in which physical proximity – combined with other factors – allowed the formation of a "psychological crowd" and therefore the temporary transformation of the participants into suggestible individuals, devoid of reasoning, willing to heroic actions or violent that they would not have done in ordinary life.

In spite of Le Bon's prediction, the twentieth century was marked, much more than by emotional and disorganized crowds, by the role of those disciplined masses whose advent Engels had grasped. The barricades have not disappeared from the repertoire of protest movements, and sometimes have made a fleeting reappearance, as the iconography of May 1968 recalls. However, the real protagonists of the twentieth century were the "masses", sometimes organized into democratic parties, in other cases mobilized "from above" by authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. If the political centrality of the mass was at a certain point undermined, this did not happen because of the return to the scene of the *old* nineteenth-century crowds, but because of the advance of the "public" that Gabriel Tarde had set up in opposition to the crowd since the beginning of the twentieth century: an audience made up of newspaper readers and, later, spectators of the television show (Palano, 2002; 2004; 2020a; 2020c; 2020e; 2022).

In recent years, the politics of the street seems to have returned to the fore again. No longer monopolized by regime demonstrations or occupied by party flags, the squares have once again played a political role that is perhaps ephemeral, but far from residual. In many ways they have become the place to join the opposition to the "Palace". But often they

have become above all the place to exhibit a non-violent, peaceful protest, really far from the iconography of the nineteenth-century barricades, as well as from the manifestations of the "short century", destined to reflect at least on a symbolic level the warlike projection of the twentieth-century ideologies. In consolidated democracies, the squares have sometimes taken on the face of the Spanish Indignados, Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter, the indecipherable aspect of the twentieth-century in France, or the disturbing features of the assault on Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021 (Gerbaudo, 2017). The street has however become an important – albeit rarely successful – player in contemporary politics, especially in Eastern Europe, North Africa and Latin America. The "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine at the beginning of the new century, saw thousands of citizens take to the streets, almost always resorting only to peaceful protest, demanding fair elections and the resignations of leaders deemed corrupt. The victory obtained by the demonstrators – who in Georgia drove President Shavarnadze to resign and which led to the defeat of Yanukovych in Ukraine – contributed to spreading similar forms of protest to other surrounding countries by "contagion" (Diamond, 2008; Goldstein, 2007). More recently, prolonged mobilizations against the corruption of the political class have occurred in Moldova (2015), Macedonia (2016), Armenia (2018) and, during the pandemic, Belarus against Lukashenko, as well as in Russia, to protest against the regime's treatment of Alexei Navalny (Asmolov, 2020).

The results of the "color revolutions" have become rather ephemeral over time, because, even in cases of apparent success, there have been no substantial changes in the political regime's profile, in the guarantee of freedom and in the reduction of corruption. In particular, Ukraine and Georgia

have long remained "hybrid regimes", rendered unstable by international tensions and internal conflicts (Diamond, 2008; 2015). The results of the "street politics" were even less comforting in the case of the protests that, in 2011, gave rise to the so-called "Arab Spring". In both of the two main countries involved – Egypt and Tunisia – the ruling presidents (Mubarak and Ben Ali) were deposed following popular pressure, but, while Tunisia has since embarked on the path of democratization, a coup d'état in Egypt of July 2013 brought the military back to power. In Libya, Syria and Yemen, the protests almost immediately took on a violent profile, which opened a long season of conflict and instability throughout the area. Also recently in other North African and Middle Eastern countries – Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq – the square has returned to voice its protest against corruption and the effects of the crisis, obtaining some revelations and boasting a political result which, at the moment, does not seem able to significantly change the institutional arrangements (Palano, 2019a; Schenkkan and Repucci, 2019; V-Dem Institute, 2022).

A largely different dynamic concerned the Latin American squares, which in many ways anticipated the anti-establishment protests that emerged in Western Europe after the global crisis of 2008. The Argentine mobilization of *piqueteros*, which have become a mass phenomenon since the economic collapse of the country in December 2001, provided the first example of a mobilization against the ruling classes, shouting *Que se vayan todos*!. Latin American squares have often returned to mobilize against austerity policies, for example in 2019, in Argentina against President Macrì, in Ecuador against Moreno, in Peru against Vizcarra and in Chile against Pinera for the cuts in public spending and the increase in public transport fares. The mobilizations in Venezuela and

Bolivia were very different, both against their respective governments, accused of having manipulated the elections (as well as violating democratic guarantees), and in their defense, with the consequent resorting to violence by both sides (Gerbaudo, 2012; 2017; Selzman, 2016; Trottier, 2015).

The return of the squares sparked the enthusiasm of several observers, who recognized in the new crowds of the 21st century the manifestation of a request for direct participation in political life and a radical protest (Hardt and Negri, 2017). In the "assembly" that takes shape in street demonstrations, Judith Butler saw, for example, the expression of a mass demanding public space (Butler, 2015). In contemporary riots, Donatella Di Cesare – following in the footsteps of Walter Benjamin – instead recognizes the event that "upsets the agenda of power, stops the routine of stripping, disrupts history" (Di Cesare, 2020). The return of the streets was, however, considered as a consequence of the new communication technologies, of the "disintermediation", which made it much easier to mobilize individuals without the need for large organizations and expensive communication equipment (Taddio, 2012). It is precisely this belief that has ended up suggesting that the technological transformations we are experiencing have radically modified and rendered completely anachronistic the conditions that ignited the street riots accompanying the European revolutions. The power relations that, according to Engels, condemned the action of urban crowds to obsolescence have again been overturned, giving the square a new centrality. Certainly not because the new crowds are able to oppose the security apparatuses, but because the "Palaces" seem unable to ignore the symbolic power of protests, and above all peaceful protests.

The enthusiasm that has grown around the role of 'street politics' is probably excessive. And sometimes the celebration

of street power seems to rest on a romantic vision, which tends to see in the (more or less disorganized) crowds a 'genuine politics', one more authentic than 'corrupt' parties and institutions. The return of the squares could, however, be temporary, and the resources on which citizens have been able to rely in recent decades could prove to be very fragile, not only because "disintermediation" is unable to balance the power of the "Palace", but also because the "disintermediation" hides a dark side that could even strengthen the power of the "Palace".

2. *Do squares have power?*

Given that the squares have exhibited such different faces, it would be really complicated to draw up a balance of the results obtained from the mobilizations of the last twenty years. In some cases, the objective was indeed a real "revolution", i.e., a radical change in the basis of the political regime, while in other cases the aim was only to change the executive or simply to revoke some decisions adopted by government. Although many of the hopes kindled by some of the movements – including, especially, those in North Africa and the Middle East – were soon betrayed, it would be wrong to believe that the power of the squares has proved to be completely illusory, at least as regards the fate of undemocratic regimes. As the political scientist Nancy Bermeo has shown, *coups d'état* by the armed forces and blatant electoral fraud have long ceased to be the main ways in which democratic regimes are subverted. And the coup is not even the main way in which dictators are deposed (Bermeo, 2016). The main pitfall that autocrats must guard against seems to be represented precisely by street mobilizations and mass demonstrations organized by opponents.

Comparing the dynamics of 280 regime transitions that occurred between 1946 and 2010, Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright and Erica Frantz found that during the long season of the Cold War, coup was the most common way for autocrats to leave the scene (in 48.6% of cases). On the other hand, since 1989 traditional coups have become much less frequent (so much so that they fall to about 13% of the total number of regime changes). The most relevant threat to autocrats has, instead, become precisely the protest demonstrations of opponents, especially on the occasion of electoral consultations whose regularity is contested (Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2014).

Social scientists have questioned the reasons for the return of the streets and the variables able to explain the success or failure of the claims made by mobilizations. Some scholars have evoked the "contagion effect" which – starting above all with the (partial) success of the "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine – had prompted opponents of authoritarian regimes to resort to large, peaceful demonstrations. Reflecting specifically on Eastern Europe, Lucian Way instead argued that the most important factors to explain both the origins and the success of the mobilizations could be found above all in the weakness of the party in power, in the absence of State intervention in the economy, and in the limited capacity of the regime to control opposition groups (Way, 2008). Several observers also drew attention to the role played by new technologies, which, compared to the past, have made direct action by citizens much easier (Al-Jenaibi, 2016; Anderson, 2021; Chowdhury, 2008; Etling, Faris, Palfrey, 2010; Faris, 2013; Hamanaka, 2020; Rahaghi, 2012). But, although they capture an important point, the explanations that focus on the technological dimension, and therefore on the role played by social media in the mobilization of citizens, risk un-

derestimating the importance of the institutional and international context in which protests are born and develop.

There is very little doubt that the advent of the Internet has changed the dynamics of news distribution, lowering the costs of disseminating information and points of view. Social media has further reduced the barriers (allowing virtually anyone to take a stand on any issue) but also significantly reduced the costs – in terms of money, time and human resources – of mobilization. While even in the Eighties, the preparation of a protest usually required weeks of preparation, preparatory meetings between the organizing groups, the printing of leaflets and documents, as well as the commitment of militants who spread them in the places considered crucial, the appearance of the Internet has completely changed things, reducing economic costs, shortening timelines and greatly (though not entirely) reducing the need to consume the energies and time of activists. Of course, online participation has not totally replaced offline participation, but no organization – not even the most formalized, hierarchical and nostalgic ones – can today avoid resorting to the mobilization tools offered by the Internet and, therefore, to communicate through social media. The technological revolution in Western countries has contributed to the fermentation of anti-establishment sentiments, and according to some analysts something similar – but with very different implications – has also happened in authoritarian regimes. In these cases, social media has in fact proved to be a formidable tool for the delegitimization of autocracy, so much so that it was able to scratch – if not always demolish – the power bases of the regimes thanks to mass mobilizations, often with a non-violent profile. According to Yascha Mounk, for example, "disintermediation" erodes the technological advantage available to political elites even in undemocratic contexts, with the conse-

quence that outsiders gain opportunities unknown in the past:

> The truth about social media, I want to suggest, is not that it is necessarily good or bad for liberal democracy. Nor is it that social media inherently strengthens or undermines tolerance. On the contrary, it is that social media closes the technological gap between insiders and outsiders. Until a few decades ago, governments and big media companies enjoyed an oligopoly over the means of mass communication. As a result, they could set the standards of acceptable political discourse. In a well-functioning democracy, this might mean declining to publish racist content, conspiracy theories, or outright lies – and thus stabilizing liberal democracy. In an autocracy, this might mean censoring any criticism of the dictator – and thus keeping liberal democracy at bay. With the rise of social media, this technological advantage has all but evaporated. As a result, in authoritarian countries the democratic opposition now has many more tools to topple a long-entrenched dictator. But by the same token, the hucksters of hatred and the merchants of mendacity also have a much easier time undermining liberal democracies (Mounk, 2018, pp. 146-147).

The idea that the return of the squares is a product of the "disintermediation" triggered by new technologies, however, risks becoming the victim of a sort of optical distortion, and we have to be aware of this danger. In a well-known research published nearly ten years ago, Jan Pierskalla and Florian Hollenbach highlighted the effects of the spread of cell phones in some African regions where communications were previously very difficult (Pierskalla and Hollenbach, 2013). In addition to solving some problems related to the isolation of certain marginal regions, the use of mobile telephones, according to Pierskalla and Hollenbach, had caused an increase in political violence. Indeed, the advantage that government

forces could count on had been eroded as rebel groups could more effectively coordinate their actions. The consequence had then been a prolongation of conflicts and also an increase in the number of victims they caused. The results of the investigation by Pierskalla and Hollenbach – which do not strictly concern street politics, but more the structured and violent forms of political conflict – have been criticized with arguments that highlight certain limitations of their explanations emphasizing the role of the technological revolution. Nils B. Weidmann, for example, questioned the connection between the spread of cell phones and the increase in political violence, pointing out in particular that data on conflict episodes could be distorted by the same media coverage (Weidmann, 2016). In other words, rather than influencing the increase in violence, the spread of cell phones could simply be limited to promoting the dissemination of news relating to violent conflicts. Violence would always have been present, but the media coverage could have made it possible to communicate it, and therefore it could have suggested the impression that mobile phones induce greater use of weapons. Something similar could also happen with regard to street protests, which – rather than being favored by the spread of social media – they could simply be made more visible than those of the past precisely because of the greater media coverage that the massive use of smartphones allows. The data we have is not sufficient to provide a definitive answer to the question (Hollenbach and Pierskalla, 2017). Therefore, if it cannot be argued with certainty that the reduction in the costs of mobilization has made it easier and more frequent to resort to street protests, the visibility of the protests – an increased visibility instead thanks to the new communication technologies – probably has not played an irrelevant role.

In addition to being a consequence of the communication revolution and of "disintermediation", the political role of the streets must probably be considered also as a consequence of the end of the Cold War and of the "third wave" of democratization. In other words, one of the most relevant reasons that explain why non-violent mass rallies have become an instrument of pressure so used by oppositions is to be found in the process that, towards the end of the 1980s (and, therefore, well before mobilizations on the internet and social media could count), changed the international context. While the Soviet bloc crumbled, the residual international legitimacy on which some dictatorships could count, hitherto more or less explicitly supported by Western democracies in an anti-communist key, quickly began to weaken. Within a few years, the socialist regimes quickly found themselves deprived of the political, economic and military support offered up by Moscow, but even the dictatorships, which had presented themselves as a barrier to the Communist advance, saw their support quickly fade away. They faced increasingly and insistent pressures of a world overwhelmed by the impetuous "third wave" of democratization. Overestimating their popularity and their ability to control dissent, many dictators attempted to adjust to the new course by calling elections, also because they thought it would be easy to manipulate the results. Very often, however, things turned out to be more complicated, and just then – often in the wake of a denunciation of fraud perpetrated during the electoral consultations – the surprising power of the gathering of peaceful crowds began to emerge, calling for the "power of the people".

In the genealogy of the global return of the squares, we can indeed recognize in the mobilizations of Philippine society against President Ferdinand Marcos the first "velvet revolution", successfully fought thanks to peaceful mass demonstra-

tions. The regularity of the elections called by Marcos to confirm his popularity was contested by a composite front of internal opponents and by international observers. And the non-violent mobilization against the regime succeeded in obtaining the deposition of the dictator and the start of a peaceful transition to democracy. The Filipino case did not remain isolated, and the democratic transitions started in the following months in South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, but also in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Chile, Paraguay and Panama, as well as, of course, in Eastern European countries. In the wake of these events, thousands of Chinese students also flocked to Tiananmen Square to demand freedom of expression and democratic reforms, starting a mass hunger strike that spread to several cities across the country. As we know, things in China went very differently, and – after a negotiation that seemed to have opened some chinks – the regime crushed the protests with an inflexible military repression. If that decision seemed to show the fragility of the power of the square, in reality Beijing suffered the consequences of that repression for a long time, condemning the People's Republic to a decade of international isolation. Since then, the specter of Tiananmen has not ceased to hover over China. The leaders of the regime – even in the face of demonstrations by Hong Kong students in recent years – are now well aware of the enormous costs that resorting to a violent repression of internal dissent would entail. The same lesson was also learned by many undemocratic regimes, which – without being able to count on Beijing's economic and military resources, or on any geopolitical relevance – have in fact renounced resorting to weapons to suppress the voice of the streets, ending sometimes in the peaceful transition to democracy. This trend could however prove to be only temporary, because a series of political and

technological dynamics could reduce the power of the squares (Diamond, 2008).

3. *The square and the digital dictator*

Thirty-five years after the peaceful Philippine revolution, we can recognize that the streets have not always – or perhaps rarely – really managed to bring about lasting change. The results of the "color revolutions" have in fact often proved rather ephemeral, and even in cases of apparent success there have been no substantial changes in the profile of the political regime, in the guarantee of freedoms and in the reduction of corruption. Ukraine and Georgia, for example, have remained "hybrid regimes" – rarely managing to bring about lasting change, and in the last fifteen years being made increasingly unstable by international tensions and internal conflicts. The "Arab Spring" has in fact triggered a democratic transition only in Tunisia, while Egypt has returned to the hands of the military and the entire region is still marked by dramatic instability. But, more generally, the international conditions that favored the rise of the squares now seem increasingly distant. According to many political scientists, the propulsive thrust of the "third wave" has in fact been exhausted for a long time, and Larry Diamond has argued in particular that for about fifteen years there has been a real global "democratic recession" (that is, a constant reduction of the total number of democratic regimes) (Diamond, 2015). The main support for this reading is offered by the data collected by Freedom House, whose most recent report on freedom in the world recorded in 2021, for the sixteenth consecutive year, a decrease in "free countries" and a worsening of overall conditions, compared to 2020, in 60 countries (also due to

the pandemic). According to the report, in general terms, 38.4% of the world population lives in "Not Free Countries", 41.3% lives in "Partly Free Countries" and, finally, only 20.3 percent lives in "Free Countries" (Freedom House, 2022). Even if the Freedom House surveys are considered by some observers to be not entirely reliable, in recent years other research on the state of democracy have also reported a relative deterioration (such as, for example, the Democratic Index report of the Economist Intelligence Unit). Although tools by which the deterioration of democracies is measured must be viewed with caution, it is however quite evident that in the last ten years tensions have also affected democracies that were considered to be consolidated. But the new role played at the international level by autocratic powers (or in any case not attributable to the liberal democracies) is even more evident, not only for the increasingly marked importance of the Chinese giant, but also for the leading role of actors such as Russia and Turkey. Even if it is implausible that the new scenario could lead to something similar to a new Cold War, it is however likely that the dictators of the near future, in order to successfully face the protests in the streets, will find more support than in the recent past.

The "democratic recession" can also be interpreted as a response to the power held by the streets. Precisely to prevent the emergence of those protests that have become so risky, many autocrats have indeed progressively narrowed the boundaries of freedom of expression and organization. Often a break has been identified in the "color revolutions" of Georgia and Ukraine, because from that moment, many undemocratic regimes, to avoid having to face similar demonstrations, further tightened the restrictions, in such a way as to make it even more difficult for the citizens to mobilize peacefully. And indeed, even from this point of view, the findings of

Freedom House show how in the last twenty years the limitations on freedom of expression have steadily grown. If these trends seem to change the international framework and, therefore, the framework of constraints and opportunities within which autocrats find themselves operating, the power of the streets risks being neutralized above all by a new technological revolution. Several researchers have, in fact, shown how in recent years the fear of the square has increased the use of digital repression tools by authoritarian regimes, with the aim of reducing the likelihood that protests will emerge and that similar waves of protest can take shape to those of the "Arab Spring" and the mobilization of the Thai "red shirts" of 2010 (Freedom House, 2021). The model is, of course, represented by the People's Republic of China, which has built up a sophisticated surveillance system in recent years, further strengthened during the pandemic emergency. Beijing's technological repression, in addition to resorting to censorship of information circulating on the web, is above all based on the integrated use of big data relating to the activities of individuals and companies, on facial recognition technologies, on social media monitoring and, in general, on the use of Artificial Intelligence with control functions (Diamond, 2019; Xiao Quiang, 2019). Compared to the more traditional tools of repression of opponents, new technologies are not only cheaper for autocrats, but also politically much more advantageous, because they free them from the need to grant shares of power to the armed forces and sectors previously essential for the maintenance of internal order. The use of artificial intelligence and control technologies can help prevent the formation of protest movements. By reconstructing and monitoring activist networks, these technologies first of all make it possible to identify and possibly imprison opposition leaders and potential followers while also making it possible

to stem protests long before they can take on worrying dimensions. (For example, the Chinese platform, WeChat, shows in real time the formation of crowds and pedestrian traffic in specific areas.) And this naturally does not exclude the use of physical repression, nor the use of even more sophisticated disinformation and deep fakes techniques than those we have come to know in recent years (Feldstein, 2019).

In addition to using the new tools to control its own population, China has long begun to supply technologies to other undemocratic regimes in Asia and Africa. And the pandemic, as reported by the Freedom House report on the freedom of the Internet in 2021, has further strengthened the monitoring and use of tracing equipment (www.freedomhouse.org). But the spread of new surveillance techniques cannot be considered a risk from which democracies are immune. Big data, profiling techniques and algorithms have indeed become hallmarks of contemporary "surveillance capitalism" (Deibert, 2019). We know well how these transformations have triggered enormous consequences also from a political point of view, favoring the neo-populist explosion in the second decade of the 21st century. We should however begin to recognize that technology can become a tool for controlling dissent, not only in authoritarian regimes, but also in democracies, and especially in less consolidated ones. "New technologies", it was noted recently, "are particularly dangerous for weak democracies because many of these digital tools have a dual use: technology can enhance government efficiency and provide the ability to address challenges such as crime and terrorism; but no matter the intentions with which governments initially acquire such technology, they can also use these means to muzzle and restrict the activities of their opponents" (Kendall-Taylor, Frantz and Wright, 2020, p. 113).

The use of big data, profiling techniques and algorithms have become distinctive features of the contemporary "surveillance capitalism", for which it is increasingly important to be able to intercept the attention of consumers and reconstruct their preferences with the objective of encouraging purchases. We know well that these transformations have had enormous consequences also from a political point of view, especially from the moment in which smartphones entered our lives. If they have initiated a process of "disintermediation", they have in fact triggered the fragmentation of the "public" into a plurality of segments that tend to have no roots in a common communicative sphere, and thus our democracies have begun to resemble the outline of a "bubble democracy", in which public opinion breaks down into a myriad largely self-referential and potentially polarized "bubbles" (Palano, 2019b, 2020a, 2020d, 2022). All these transformations favored the neo-populist explosion, which in many ways showed how protest against the establishment, in established democracies, can destabilize institutions as much as elsewhere it can crack the power base of autocratic regimes. We should, therefore, begin to recognize how technology can become a tool to control dissent, not only in authoritarian regimes, but also in democracies, and especially in less consolidated democracies (Giacomini, 2022).

Perhaps the time has not yet come to recognize – as Engels did when reflecting on the political failures of the nineteenth-century uprisings – that the era of the squares, which began at the end of the 1980s and was a key protagonist of the "third wave", is over. But we should at least be aware that the disintermediation process has an insidious dark side, because the "technological shell" that has covered our lives, and which we can no longer give up, risks turning into a formidable tool of power, to be turned not only against the squares, but against

democracy itself. And, above all, it risks becoming a tool that, in the not-too-distant future, could be used to undermine our freedoms, perhaps even more deeply than many dark dystopian narratives have so far imagined.

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The Potential of Collaborative Democracy

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Abstract. The chapter discusses the concept of collaborative democracy, intended as a possible innovation of modern representative democracy in response to some of the changes affecting its health and functionality in the 21st century. Such changes include the conditions of political and interest representation, the growing fragmentation of society, the crisis within the traditional players of mass democracy, and the growing distrust towards political institutions, among other factors. Within this framework, assuming neo-institutionalist and neo-pluralist premises, collaborative democracy is presented as an ideal-typical model of democracy in which policymaking processes are open and specifically designed to enable interest groups and citizens to collaborate with policymakers along the whole policy cycle, fulfilling the potential of the processes in terms of deliberative quality, collective intelligence and legitimacy.
Keywords: Deliberative Quality; Collective Intelligence; Legitimacy; Open Government; Interest Groups.

1. *On the "crisis" of representative democracy, between fragmentation and distrust*

For a long time, manifold scholars and political analysts have been debating over the "crisis" of modern representative de-

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mocracy. However, just as the theoretical conceptions of democracy differ significantly between political theorists (Schumpeter, 1942; Dahl, 1956; Sartori, 1987; Morlino, 2020), so do the diagnoses (and therapies) of such a (supposed) crisis. While a "democratic recession" (Diamond, 2015) may be evident on the world stage, with several countries falling into a grey zone between liberal and authoritarian regimes (Zakaria, 1997; Carothers, 2002), many different factors and trends affect the way even consolidated liberal democracies work, stressing their health and functionality.

Some authors focus on the alleged decline in political participation (shown by the decreasing electoral turnouts and dropping party memberships) and on the changes affecting the traditional players of political representation such as political parties and unions (Katz, 1990; Van Biezen and Poguntke, 2014). Others focus on political polarization and on the rise of populism and anti-establishment movements (Baggini, 2015; Brennan, 2016; Mariotti, 2022), or on the changes produced by "fast politics" (Stoker et al., 2016; Di Gregorio, 2019). Still others focus on globalization, economic inequalities and migrations (Bauman, 2011; Kim, 2016; Milanovic, 2016), on the disruptive effects of technological developments and new media landscapes (Castells, 2007; Keane, 2013; De Blasio and Sorice, 2018), on the role of experts and technocracies (Turner, 2003; Crouch, 2004), or on allegedly poor public policy performances.

While all of the above factors play a role in transforming the context and dynamics of modern democracy, we might recognize overall how representation itself (as a crucial component of modern democracy) is subject to meaningful

changes[2]. Two overarching key trends may be specifically highlighted in this regard: fragmentation and distrust.

By fragmentation, I refer to the growing articulation (or dis-articulation) of the social and political arenas into a multitude of fluid interests, opinions, passions, and various demands of representation, no longer easily framed by old categories (such as social classes) or channeled through the traditional players of collective action (political parties, unions, business associations, professional categories). This affects both the social dynamics of collective identities and the actual capabilities of political representation in general (Castiglione and Pollak, 2018).

It may be easier to identify the changes affecting the social and political systems if we put things in historical context and look at the passage from mass modern democracy to post-modern democracy that occurred, broadly speaking, at the end of the 20th century. During the phase of mass democracy, political parties, and additionally trade unions and business associations, were the main characters of the political scene and the main reference for anyone wishing to influence public decisions and participate in political life (especially in parliamentary democracies). A number of factors contributed to

[2] "As the tasks of the state have become more complex and the size of polities larger and more heterogeneous, the institutional forms of liberal democracy developed in the nineteenth century – representative democracy plus techno-bureaucratic administration – seem increasingly ill suited to the novel problems we face in the twenty-first century [...] increasingly, this mechanism of political representation seems ineffective in accomplishing the central ideals of democratic politics: facilitating active political involvement of the citizenry, forging political consensus through dialogue, devising and implementing public policies that ground a productive economy and healthy society" (Fung and Wright, 2001, p. 5).

the changes that then occurred: the end of the Cold War; the emergence of supranational organizations such as the EU; the spread of the Internet and the digital revolution; a major liberalization of many economic sectors and privatization of previously State-owned companies; the crisis of old parties; the rise of NGOs and other private actors in the public arena (such as think tanks and a multiplicity of interest groups); the increasing importance of political marketing and communication; the personalization of politics; and the growing concentration of power in executive branches rather than legislative assemblies. This evolution led to the development of a more complex, multi-level and multi-dimensional political environment, strongly reflecting a wide societal and political fragmentation, where in the end almost no one is fully able to represent anyone else, at least not like in the past. It is interesting to recall Pildes' definition of political fragmentation as "the external diffusion of political power away from political parties as a whole and the internal diffusion of power away from the party leadership to individual party members and officeholders" (Pildes, 2014, p. 809), highlighting how power and representational capacity gradually dissipates from big organizations and drifts towards single leaders and individuals. Indeed, political parties and traditional labor and business organizations, despite retaining a predominant role in many countries (especially those with a neo-corporatist tradition), do not fulfil the need for political representation as effectively as before. Rather, numerous new subjects (single corporations, small and medium enterprises, NGOs, professional associations, etc.) have been allowed to individually emerge on the public scene and attempt to influence the governmental process – even without the backing of a political party – in a general framework of disintermediation (Ma-

honey, 2008; Capano et al., 2014; Bitonti and Harris, 2017; Pizzimenti et al., 2020).

A second key factor, partly correlated to fragmentation, also lies behind the alleged "crisis" of representative democracy: a growing distrust of democratic institutions and political players (but not just them). Trust is a fundamental element of politics, needed to preserve both social capital (Putnam, 2002) and confidence in democratic governance itself[3]. As all the most important indicators of trust point to its decline in consolidated democracies (Hetherington, 2005; Fox, 2010; Mettler, 2018; Wood, 2022), this growing distrust appears to be a crucial factor in gauging the health of post-modern democracy.

It is worth highlighting that this growing distrust may not necessarily be a consequence of a loss of "faith" in the idea of democracy, but rather a result of growing expectations of it; this produces a paradoxical effect where distrust is fueled where democracies are actually stronger or when more opportunities of communication between citizens and policymakers are available. After all, "the rise of democracy has always represented both a promise and a problem: a promise insofar as democracy reflected the needs of societies founded on the dual imperative of equality and autonomy; and a problem, insofar as these noble ideals were a long way from being realized. Wherever democracy was tried, it remained incomplete" (Rosanvallon, 2008, p. 2).

[3] A famous quote attributed to Confucius remarks how rulers need three resources: weapons, food, and trust. If a ruler can't hold onto all three, he should give up the weapons first and the food next but should hold on to trust to the end, as without trust no ruler can stand. Similar remarks may be added referring to Guglielmo Ferrero's theory of legitimacy (Ferrero, 1942).

That is why, within that incompleteness and the restoration of trust, potential answers to some of the crisis points mentioned above can be found. While there appears to be no going back from the fragmentation that has occurred to a hypothetical golden age of "simpler", less fragmented societies, trust (and social capital) can be cultivated, built, and revived. To address the issue of distrust and the problematic gap between democratic promises and reality, different authors have imagined various solutions. Some have focused on the expansion of civil and social rights or on the realization of specific policies, while others have stressed the importance of reforming the policymaking process itself. I will not be considering the former option as it falls outside the scope of this contribution; I shall rather be joining the latter group of authors in their reflections on democracy and on how it may be possible to innovate the democratic process.

Among these authors, different paths have been sought. Some digital enthusiasts have imagined forms of a digital direct democracy enabled by technological tools (Toffler, 1980; Hilbert, 2009). Others have focused on improving deliberation within the traditional framework of representative democracy (Manin, 1987; Steenbergen et al., 2003; Hendriks and Kay, 2019). A third group of authors have tried, instead, to conceive a "third way", represented by various forms of deliberative democracy (Bohman and Rehg, 1997; Gutmann and Thompson, 2004; Elstub, 2010; Landemore, 2020).

Taking a position between the second and third groups, this contribution aims at proposing and briefly exploring an ideal/typical model of democracy that attempts to insert elements of deliberative democracy into traditional representative democracy, so bridging the two separate strands. We can label this ideal model "collaborative democracy", conceived as a form of representative democracy (and policymaking) fo-

cused particularly on collaborative opportunities between policymakers and "external" players, and fostered to utilise their collective intelligence to raise the deliberative quality of policymaking itself. In what follows, I outline a definition of collaborative democracy and illustrate its main elements. I also discuss in what sense the decisions made in a collaborative democracy are better, focusing on the ideas of deliberative quality, collective intelligence, and legitimacy.

2. *The ideal model of collaborative democracy*

Assuming the coordinates of a neo-institutionalist approach (March and Olsen, 1984), it is possible to imagine a model of collaboration between policymakers on one side, and interest groups and citizens on the other, aimed at substantially improving the traditional decision-making processes of representative democracy through a significant "participatory makeover" (Hendriks and Kay, 2019). *Collaborative democracy* is thus meant to be *a model of democracy in which policymaking processes are open and specifically designed to fulfil their potential of deliberative quality and collective intelligence, enabling interest groups and citizens to collaborate with policymakers along the whole policy cycle.*

This definition encompasses different elements that need to be properly illustrated.

Firstly, the focus is on the design of policymaking processes, because, as assumed by neo-institutionalist approaches, such design can deeply affect and shape (to a certain degree) the behavior of all the actors involved (Scharpf, 1997).

Secondly, the open character of such processes is a direct reference to the open government philosophy, promoting ideas such as open access to government information and da-

ta in general, transparency of policymaking, accountability of public officers, and, indeed, participation and collaboration in policymaking (Lathrop and Ruma, 2010; Open Government Partnership, 2017). These ideas are evidently not new (Harrington, 1656; Bentham, 1843; Popper, 1945), but, thanks to digital innovation, they can be envisioned in new revolutionary ways, enabling channels and potentialities hardly imaginable before (Noveck, 2009; Baack, 2015).

Thirdly, the substantial goal of collaborative democracy is the fulfillment of its potential in terms of deliberative quality, collective intelligence, and legitimacy, through the involvement of interest groups and citizens. While I will better illustrate the concepts of deliberative quality and collective intelligence in the next section, it is important to immediately stress a few aspects concerning the subjects of such a framework, and their respective roles in a collaborative democracy.

1. In every democracy, policymakers respond to a democratic rationale that allows them to epistemically surpass (or, at the very least, match) the performance of experts or individuals in terms of collective intelligence (Landemore, 2013). In a collaborative democracy, interest groups and citizens can be profitably included in policymaking processes as collaborators of the policymakers, so widening the cognitive diversity on which the democratic rationale relies (Page, 2007).
2. In slight contrast to Noveck's theorization (Noveck, 2015), my idea of collaborative democracy sees citizens playing a secondary role to that of interest groups, as the latter (in their capacity as policy stakeholders) present a variety of advantages that individual citizens normally lack. In fact, however fragmented society and representation has become, intermediary groups such as interest groups still play a very important (albeit less

so than before) role in articulating and aggregating individual preferences, socializing members, providing collective identities, and organizing collective actions. That is why, as stakeholders of a single policy domain, interest groups can usually offer the most significant and relevant contributions to policymaking processes, both in terms of intelligence (information gathering, expertise, solutions) and legitimacy (representation of segments of society). Within this framework, citizens can be more effective as policymaker collaborators when they convey specific intelligence than when they express views or opinions as members of the public, because in this latter capacity, clear problems of legitimacy, system overload, and "fitness for purpose" emerge (Easton, 1965; Anderson, 2018).

3. In line with the already mentioned neo-institutionalist approach, the specific design of policymaking processes can substantially alleviate the biases of representation deriving from existing inequalities of power and influence among different players (for example, through consultation procedures and lobbying regulations); this results in more open and inclusive collaboration channels with diverse interest groups and citizens (Bunea, 2017; Bitonti and Hogan, 2021). In fact, in contrast to the corporatist or neo-corporatist approaches, collaborative democracy enables, and actively pursues, potential contributions from all relevant players in society, and not only from some of them. On the other hand, in contrast to simple pluralist approaches (and in line with a more sophisticated version of neo-pluralism), collaborative democracy does not see the role of policymakers as mere referees or recorders of power (im-)balances between different in-

terest groups and visions; instead, it invests the State and policymakers with the explicit task of including and stimulating the contribution of all relevant stakeholders to a single policy decision.

4. The collaboration sought by collaborative democracy aims to improve traditional representative democracy, not to replace it at any level. In collaborative democracy, the responsibility for all decisions lies in the hands of elected officials or democratically invested policymakers, and is in no way delegated to others, as would happen in other, more empowering models of participatory and deliberative democracy (Pateman, 1970; Landemore, 2020).

In the end, if we consider the policymaking processes as fora of interaction between policymakers, interest groups and citizens, the true players of collaborative democracy are the multiple issue networks created around policy areas (Thatcher, 1998), where the various actors play a different but equally crucial role. These include: policymakers (ministries, executive agencies, independent authorities, legislative committees, or even single politicians and public officers, competent in that specific policy area or affected somehow by a particular policy initiative); a variety of similarly affected interest groups/policy stakeholders; experts; and all those subjects (including individual citizens) who can reasonably and positively be part of a policy debate in a more or less collective way[4].

[4] In such issue networks, it is reasonable to assume that the hub function would be exerted by the policymakers in charge of the single policy processes, following the neo-institutionalist premise recalled above.

Finally, the last element of my definition of collaborative democracy refers to the policy cycle (Capano and Pritoni, 2020), mainly because every phase of the policy cycle has its own distinctive characteristics in terms of possible collaboration with policymakers.

3. *Enhancing the deliberative quality, collective intelligence and legitimacy behind decisions*

Collaborative democracy is purposely designed to foster better decisions by enhancing the deliberative quality, the collective intelligence, and the substantial legitimacy behind them. However, it is important to comment on how some decisions can be "better" and start by clarifying the meaning of the concept of deliberative quality.

The objective character of "better" decisions might be questioned by those who consider the word intrinsically evaluative, subjective, and largely based on ethical grounds. I agree with them (Bitonti, 2020). Here, though, I do not refer to the content of the decision, but to the procedural aspects that represent the premises of a decision. As variously theorized by the paradigms of Rational Choice, the Rational Analysis of Policies, and the various theories of deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1996; Gutmann and Thompson, 2004), better decisions can be facilitated by factors such as:

- the truthfulness and completeness of information on which the decision is based;
- proper comprehension of the stakes;
- the (best possible) knowledge of the likely consequences of the decision;

- an adequate consideration of all viable alternatives (also the so-called 'zero' option, or preservation of the status quo);
- the public justifiability (accountability) and clarity of everyone's positions;
- a respectful interaction of those supporting different views, mutually trying to understand each other's reasons.

These are all elements of what may be defined as deliberative quality, specifically referring to the actual conditions of a productive and efficient deliberation process, deemed in mostly procedural terms[5]. The idea of collaborative democracy is thus to insert such elements of deliberative quality into the traditional framework of representative democracy, attempting to recreate as much as possible the conditions of a rational public sphere and an inclusive deliberative process. This is, in some ways, similar to the critical rational approach imagined by Popper for the scientific method (Popper, 1934), where, for instance, the different stakeholders can "check" each other and provide information in a kind of productive conflict of interests, or where the voices of all players can be

[5] Evidently, these procedural aspects and conditions also imply huge normative assumptions, and are sometimes labeled as intrinsically positivistic; nonetheless, most of the objections raised against these assumptions are usually of a pragmatic – not ethical – nature, meaning that they put in doubt the concrete possibility to achieve these conditions and do not question the desirability of such ends. Examples include Herbert Simon's bounded rationality, the objections raised by the paradigm of policy enquiry, the distortions highlighted by public choice economists, or the irresolvable hiatus between information and intelligence on one side and political decisions on the other (Jervis, 2010; Van Der Voort et al., 2019).

heard according to the "evidence" or merit value they provide rather than the power they hold.

The concept of deliberative quality is partially related to that of collective intelligence. If, in general, intelligence has to do with one's knowledge and assessment of the world, collective intelligence refers to a "universally distributed intelligence, constantly enhanced, coordinated in real time, and resulting in the effective mobilization of skills" (Lévy, 1994, p. 29); in simpler terms, it refers to the composition or interaction of multiple individual contributions/preferences/inputs when faced with a particular problem, usually in one of the following ways:

- as a mere aggregation – as is the case with electoral results or with surveys and collections of data (big or "small");
- as a synthesis and transformative processing of single contributions in their mutual interaction – as happens in deliberative processes (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004) or in various types of crowdsourcing processes (Brabham, 2008; Noveck, 2015).

Collaborative democracy relies strongly on both of these types of collective intelligence, basically presenting a possible solution to the old epistemic problems of policymaking (Lindblom and Cohen, 1979; Estlund, 1997), approached now with the help of digital tools.

The epistemic problem of policymaking lies in the way some dispersed "goods" (information, knowledge, expertise, ideas, the possibilities to monitor a policy, etc.) can (or can't) be gathered by governmental authorities in order to make

decisions, in the proper stages of the policy cycle[6]. To cope with this problem, different authors have proposed either more market-oriented or State-oriented solutions, or have imagined answers of a more or less technocratic or democratic nature (Lindblom, 1990). Collaborative democracy addresses this problem in two complementary ways:

1. through a method: the collaboration between policymakers and interest groups and citizens as conveyers of collective intelligence.
2. through an enabling technology, such as crowdsourcing platforms and digital fora that reduce the cost of participation and that facilitate the gathering of information and intelligence, preserving the transparency (and accountability) of the process itself (Noveck, 2009).

By pursuing higher degrees of deliberative quality and collective intelligence, it is possible to provide additional legitimacy to the policymaking process itself (Manin, 1987; Young, 2000), intended not as formal legitimacy (which is guaranteed, in any case, by the sheer compliance of the process with the constitutional or administrative legal frameworks), but as substantial legitimacy, appertaining to the political role and the inclusion of a diverse set of actors representative of various segments of society. It is worth noting that, within this framework, the increased substantial legitimacy of the decision does not derive from the actual influence of specific

[6] The idea of dispersion is drawn from Hayek's theorem of the dispersion of knowledge, which is based on "the fact that knowledge of the circumstances we must use never exists in concentrated or integrated form, but solely as the dispersed bits of incomplete and frequently contradictory knowledge which all separate individuals possess" (Hayek, 1945, p. 519).

players on the final decision, but merely from the participation and inclusion of all relevant players, who may at least enter the deliberation process to be considered by policymakers (Open Government Partnership, 2017)[7].

We can thus imagine the practical reality of collaborative democracy as a system of deliberative fora, designed and managed by the formal policymakers of representative democracies, constantly working in all the different policy areas. They do not need to be physical fora (although live meetings can certainly help in some phases of the policy cycle); instead, they can be designed as digital spaces where the various voices of interest groups and participants in the single networks get heard, both proactively (when they want to deliver particular messages to the policymaker) and in response to policymakers' calls.

Indeed, it is worth noting that, in such a system, policymakers would not select the participants (as is usually the case for parliamentary hearings), as any organization (or even individual) who wanted to enter the forum could do so, provided that they passed through some sort of registration process that disclosed all their key information, their representational capacity, the nature of their stakes or role in the policy field, with such information being disclosed publicly.

On the other side, policymakers would lead the game, as they control the advancement of any policy cycle, launch "calls" to participants and function as hubs for the whole process, promoting any collaborative work, seeking the inclusion

[7] In fact, much frustration and discontent towards political institutions often derives from the perception of not being "heard" or considered by policymakers, with major consequences in terms of mistrust, declining social capital, and anti-political attitudes (Wood, 2022).

and actively stimulating the participation of relevant stakeholders who might be absent from the forum (similar to what Drutman and Mahoney imagined for their POST, MAP and ASK system: see Drutman and Mahoney, 2017).

This whole process should follow simple and clear rules of engagement, ensuring equal and transparent grounds of participation for everyone and, most importantly, requiring full accountability from both policymakers when they make a decision (in the sense of a public reasoned justification) and from participants when they offer their contribution to the process (such as providing data sources and explanations for their positions). This can be achieved through dedicated codes of conduct and ethical guidelines prescribing the expected behavior of both participants and policymakers (who, of course, have to "commit" to the system).

As mentioned, *such a system can be properly designed as a digital space but must be conceived above all as a method of policymaking*. The digital aspect may lower costs and provide participants with a huge number of possibilities, *but the core of the system is analogical*, representing a redesigned version of traditional democracy in its new collaborative form.

A few systems of this kind are being experimented partially in various institutions and parts of the world, with more and more examples of successes, failures, good practices, and criticisms to learn from. It is certainly worth continuing along this path of experimentation.

4. *Conclusion: democracy in the 21st century*

In this chapter, I have tried to explore an ideal model of collaborative democracy, presenting it as one of the possible answers to the crisis of trust affecting representative democracy.

The overarching strategy of collaborative democracy is to insert some of the elements of deliberative democracy into traditional representative democracy. By fostering the ideas of deliberative quality and collective intelligence, collaborative democracy aims to redesign policymaking processes, enabling effective collaboration between policymakers, interest groups, and citizens, and thereby helping to improve the quality and substantial legitimacy of public decisions.

The reflections on this topic are placed at the intersection of many different disciplines and strands of research, with useful insights coming from political theory, public administration and management studies, behavioral sciences, computer science and law; more specific areas of research – such as those on "better regulation" (Listorti et al., 2020) or the co-creation and co-production of public policies (Ferlie, 2021; Mcgann et al., 2021) – remain to be more fully integrated and explored.

For all those still believing in the idea of representative democracy, experimenting with democratic innovations and seeking to improve the way our democracy works would appear to be a necessity for the years ahead.

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Representative Democracy and the Ideology of Immediacy: the *distance* between elites and citizens

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Abstract. Representative democracy is influenced by an *ideology of immediacy* that aims to distort its functioning. In fact, the desire for disintermediation has a double declination: *temporal* (reducing decision times) and *spatial* (reducing the distance between representatives and represented). First, the aim of this article is to analyze the characteristics of the second declination of immediacy. Secondly, it focuses on the reasons why representative democracy is structurally influenced by tendencies towards mediation and disintermediation; thirdly, it explores the *logic of political representation* which is based on the balance between *proximity* and *distinction*; and, finally, it highlights the importance of *democratic distance* as a theoretical element to rethink the relationship between elites and democracy.
Keywords: Democratic Distance; Elites; Political Representation; Democracy; Participation.

1. *Introduction*

The claim of disintermediation seems to be the last unfulfilled promise of democracy. Coined several decades ago in

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the financial arena (Chadwick, 2007), today the word *disintermediation* denotes the absence of mediators in economic, political and social relations (Stringa, 2017). It is a fascinating and ambiguous term because it creates the prospect of being able to shorten times and distances, but, at the same time, it triggers a series of conceptual problems that even risk upsetting representative democracy. For Miguel Benasayag (2019, p. 35 and also Benasayag, 2020), the failure of utopias – not only social ones, but also those of complete scientific knowledge and absolute knowledge – has established a sort of *permanent immediacy* that thus it shapes the life of the citizens of the 21st century.

In the political sphere, the idea of disintermediation is mainly linked to the possibility of imagining a *temporal* immediacy and a *spatial* immediacy: on the one hand, speeding up the decision-making process, on the other, shortening the distance between rulers and ruled. However, these two hypotheses clash with some essential procedures for the functioning of representative democracy. It is true that thanks to technological innovations it is possible to make decisions more quickly than in the past, just as it is possible to establish a direct relationship between rulers and ruled (Han, 2015, p. 29), but all this has not led to the cancellation of mediations. Just think of the always active role of political parties, albeit "virtual" (Gerbaudo, 2019) or the influence that computer platforms exert on the decision-making processes of a significant number of countries in the world as new mediators of social and political life (Fukuyama, 2021).

It is no coincidence that the enthusiasm that has pervaded the supporters of a new *immediate democracy* (Campati, 2020) has faded in the face of the difficulties in being able to realize it and by now several studies focus on the characteristics of neo-intermediation (Barberis and Giacomini, 2020; Bian-

calana, ed., 2018; Giacomini, 2018). Indeed, it is really difficult to imagine a democracy without representative mediation, since pluralism necessarily imposes different levels of mediation (Pizzolato, 2019, p. 19; Preterossi, 2011, p. 90). However, the idea of a democracy without mediation is not an intellectual trend but has deep roots in the political theory of the last few centuries. It calls into question the foundations of political representation and, specifically, the relationship between elites and citizens.

The objectives of this article are: to analyze the features of the ideology of immediacy that has actually become part of the life of contemporary democracies; secondly, to underline the reasons why representative democracy is structurally influenced by tendencies towards mediation and disintermediation; then, thirdly, identify the logic of political representation that is based on the balance between *proximity* and *distinction*; and, finally, highlight the importance of *democratic distance* as a theoretical element to rethink the relationship between elites and democracy.

2. *The last ideology?*

As mentioned in the introduction, the search for immediacy has a temporal dimension that tends to emphasize the speed in making decisions. In fact, speed has become a key notion for understanding the contemporary processes of legitimizing political power, and beyond (Cuono, 2016). This trend has been found – at least since the 1980s – in the accentuation of the role of political leaders and in the presidentialization (Fabbrini, 2011; Poguntke and Webb, eds, 2007). This has led to the creation of a «leader's democracy» (Calise, 2016), where leaders are "the only actors capable of stimulating and

stabilizing collective identities, feeding citizens a sort of mediated intimacy" (Calise and Musella, 2019, p. IX). The tendency to speed up decisions does not only have effects on the leadership, but naturally also on the role of parliaments and political parties.

In this article, the focus will be mainly on the second dimension of immediacy, the spatial one, based on which it is possible to *reduce the distance* between rulers and ruled. In truth, it is not always easy to distinguish the two dimensions, especially since both are the result of what is perhaps the latest ideology of contemporary politics, which therefore holds them together by a strong and incisive bond. Daniel Innerarity (2020, p. 27) argues that there is still a utopia that resists in the context of *permanent immediacy* described by Benasayag and it is precisely that which is based on the idea of disintermediation: it is so influential as to forge the way of dominant thinking, according to which truth, justice and democracy are within our reach. In other words, our age is largely shaped by a real ideology of immediacy that "proposes returning to the people the power that is unjustly retained by their representatives. It is presumed that democratic representation must be a falsification, or at least a deformation, of the pure will of the people, the fragmentation of their original unity into the atomism of various interests" (Innerarity, 2019, p. 161).

Consequently, the main "victims" of this ideology are the intermediate bodies (Urbinati, 2015). Throughout history, they have been the object of fierce criticism – think of the Le Chapelier French Law (1791) – but also placed at the core of theories that consider them indispensable for the consolidation and strengthening of democracy. In recent decades, precisely because they are subjects that inevitably slow down the decision-making process and who operate in the intermediate area between rulers and ruled, the obstacle to be removed has

appeared. In reality, even in the era of disintermediation, they are destined to survive: for example, political parties have once again demonstrated their ability to resist radical transformations (Palano, 2015, pp. 97-98), as well as it is rather difficult to think that the representation of the numerous social interests can do without a mediation system, especially with respect to the executive and parliament.

In any case, the *ideology of immediacy* aims above all to shorten the distance between elites and people, to make direct contact between rulers and ruled possible. Indeed, the hypothesis offered by the Internet is tempting: faced with the chronic problems of political representation (Castiglione and Pollak, 2019), it is possible to hypothesize a new model of democracy that allows citizens to be present and in contact with the political decision-maker. But is it possible?

3. *Representative democracy and its variations*

As several authors argue, populism – the *rising ideology* of the twenty-first century – is based on a *principle of immediacy*, which causes not insignificant transformations on the main institutional mechanisms of democracy, especially on political representation (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 45). For Rosanvallon, there are five constitutive elements of populist culture: a specific conception of the people, a clear theory of democracy, a method of representation, a politics and a philosophy of economics, a regime of passions and emotions. In turn, the first of these elements, the theory of democracy, has three basic characteristics: it tends to prefer direct democracy; defends the project of a polarized democracy (denouncing the undemocratic character of the unelected authorities and of the

constitutional courts); and enhances an immediate and spontaneous conception of popular expression.

This last aspect is considered by the French scholar a real *point nodal* since it represents the constitutive element of a new model of democracy, which, along the lines of what has already happened several times in the past, is based on the removal of bodies intermediate: "une telle démocratie immédiate ne requiert donc pas que soient structurées des organisations politiques fonctionnant sur la base d'une démocratie interne; elle invite plutôt à una démarche d'adhésion à une offre politique déjà constituée» (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 44). On the other hand, Rosanvallon clarifies, populism is based on different assumptions than those of a party democracy:

> un movement ne peut à l'inverse que former un ensemble cohérent et soudé, à l'image du peuple-Un dont il se veut l'accoucheur et le révélateur. C'est pourquoi il est en phase avec le nouveau monde des réseaux sociaux dans lequel s'est imposée la catégorie des *followers* pour qualifier le type de lien entre des individus et un pôle d'initiatives (Rosanvallon, 2020, pp. 44-45).

Therefore, for Rosanvallon the expression immediate democracy indicates the populist tendency which considers as "structurally illegitimate" the claim of intermediate bodies to play a primary role in public life and in the elaboration of a common opinion: it outlines a model of democracy that cancels the distance in favor of immediacy and that prefers the direct relationship between rulers and ruled to the mediated one. This conclusion is linked to a more complex reflection: in fact – taking up Condorcet's thought (Rosanvallon, 2015, pp. 173-175) – Rosanvallon underlines the fact that representative democracy, in truth, always oscillates between two ideal types,

that of the *aristocracy elective* (an expression borrowed from Rousseau and then variously interpreted) and that of *direct-immediate democracy*. These two models differ mainly in the way in which they define the relationship between representative and represented: in the first case, it is characterized "par le fait d'une distinction, d'une différence, constitutive d'une forme de hiérarchie intellectuelle et morale (voir la référence sur les deux continents aux termes de "capacité", de "vertu", de "sagesse")", where, therefore, the representatives are considered as an elite, quite distinct from the electorate. In the second case, in the ideal type of direct-immediate democracy, the representative-represented relationship "est constitué par le fait d'une similarité, d'une proximité", which tends to concretize the ideal of a democracy directly grafted on the needs and sentiments of society and therefore by no means coinciding with the classic model of representative democracy (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 155). These two ideal types – specifies Rosanvallon – are supported by competing ideologies and represent two poles in tension, which reflect the observation that the voter aspires to be governed by people they believe can carry out their tasks and who, at the same time, know how to interpret his expectations and needs.

4. *A new time and a new space for democracy?*

One of the confirmations of the fact that representative democracy oscillates between the two ideal types described by Ronsavallon is provided by the coexistence within it of two logics, apparently conflicting, but, in tension with each other: the *logic of proximity* and the *logic of distance*. According to Innerarity (2019, p. 162), the first obliges politicians to keep in touch and listen to citizens, the second invites them, on the

contrary, to keep away from them. The tendencies towards disintermediation undoubtedly support the logic of proximity – often making the local dimension attractive – and determine a radical change compared to the past: in fact, presenting proximity as the solution to face the discredit of politics, to bridge the now very wide gap between elites and people and even to organize a new mode of production of political legitimacy, they sacrifice the idea that distance can figure as an indispensable element to guarantee the exercise of power, free from excessive pressures.

Based on these traits of "paradoxical opacity" of the promise of clarity and immediacy ensured by proximity, Innerarity then promotes a sort of praise of political distance, focusing on a central theme for the present and future of representative democracy contemporary, namely that of the distance between elites and people:

> the most serious objection in the face of the apotheosis of proximity is directed against the absolutization of the register of immediacy, which leads to many of our problems. Some of our problems are not caused by the distance of the elites but, in a manner of speaking, by their excessive closeness. We suffer from a way of configuring our political agendas that lacks direction and coherence, not because it is sequestered by conspirational elites but, quite the opposite, because it does not manage to separate itself from day-to-day turmoil. We may be confusing the general will with the daily press of a type of 'meteorological democracy', in which opinion polls of published opinions are like weather maps that allow us to decide whether we should go out with a coat, umbrella or short sleeves today. In other words, they tell us whether to make a decree, release a particular message or disappear from the scene (Innerarity, 2019, pp. 166-167).

Therefore, if, on the one hand, it is necessary to denounce a sort of remoteness of the elites from the citizens, on the other, it is also necessary to grasp the dangers of a possible "opportunist proximity", that is, one that claims to caress the worst instincts of public opinion so much from "intoxicating" the public space: in fact, "when politicians want to be as close as possible to their voters, they lose interest in their independence and become mere executors to the political desires of citizens, which may be changing, chaotic and poorly defined" (Innerarity, 2019, p. 167).

To reinforce this conclusion we must go back to some important pages written by Rosanvallon in relation to the «politics of presence», when he reminds us – in terms not too different from those just retraced – that the election of a representative refers to a "double logic of distinction and identification" since it is based on the idea that the best should be selected (in this way, the voter implicitly admits that the elected has abilities that he himself does not possess), but "voters also expect their representatives to be close to them, to be familiar with their problems and concerns, and to share their worries and aspirations": therefore, the election refers to "a principle of proximity, of identity" (Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 187).

Both Innerarity and Rosanvallon emphasize the logic that defines the distance between rulers and ruled in a democracy, underlining how the continuous demand for presence has now given representation a character of permanence, determining a "new democratic temporality". At this point, the temporal dimension and the spatial dimension are seen as indistinguishable dimensions from each other and define the contours of a matter of some importance since the "empathic power" is capable of profoundly modifying the features of representation politics, indeed the character that gives presence to political discourse even has the strength to define a

"new regime of representation in which the notion of mandate is no longer paramount": "establishing bonds of obligation between political leaders and the people they govern is no longer the goal. The point is rather to demonstrate that leaders understand how the people live and what they must endure" (Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 199). In other words, the continuous and pervasive insistence of political leaders to get in permanent contact with their constituents redefines their relations: "presence is thus becoming a true *political model*. It is reshaping the relationship between leaders and people and raising the question of the control of government by public opinion in a new 'postrepresentative' context" (Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 200).

As can be easily understood, the *democracy of presence*, according to Rosanvallon, however, puts problems such as to call into question the very nature of the politician. In fact, if on the one hand, it can even have a function of "social exorcism" because, for example, by pushing the rulers to pay homage to the pain expressed by citizens (often sharing it through social networks), it implicitly aims to make it more bearable, from other, however, by making the presence absolute, consequently risks cancelling politics. Therefore:

> The object of a politician's empathy can in a sense define a policy. Although the media may introduce a certain distortion in the telling, the politics of presence always begins with individual stories. Indeed, there may be a "competition" among different forms of presence, and this can even serve as a substitute for partisan competition. Note, too, that civil society actors can also manifest their presence as a means of political intervention: in other words, there exists what might be called a "militancy of presence." Presence may constitute a tactic for expanding the realm of political action by introducing new forms of representation. But if empathy is to be given

> real political weight, it has to be incorporated into a broader narrative and not limited to a series of isolated snapshots. It has to become part of an effort to define the terms of social justice (Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 201).

Anyway, presence is only one aspect of democratic politics:

> It can play a key role in bringing certain stories into the limelight, publicizing certain situations, and restoring dignity and hope to people otherwise deprived of these things, but it cannot resolve conflict between competing types of experience. But this is the essence of "the political": politics is a means of resolving conflicts of interest and establishing priorities. It requires a shared narrative and cannot be reduced to a series of edifying but ultimately unrelated vignettes. The politics of presence can be fully democratic only if it is incorporated into a durable strategy for achieving a more just society (Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 201).

To sum up, *the imperative of presence* can, by altering the way in which social life is perceived, "form the basis for a transformation of the art of government in a more fundamentally democratic direction, but it can also instigate a fatal decline" (Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 202). In fact, the creation of a *democracy of interaction*, to take up the words of Rosanvallon, defines a new conformation of the system of representation: certainly, rulers and ruled remain distinct, but proximity is not conceived as a reduction of distance, but rather likened to an opening, an ability to enter sincerely into the game of this mutual disclosure between power and society (Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 214). In the perspective that the French scholar outlines, an urgency of the present time is to better organize the relationship between power and society through new *institutions of interaction*. Thus, the fragmentation of social expression "had strained the electoral-representative system to the

breaking point. The advent of universal suffrage led to the formation of parties as mediators between society and the electoral system. The parties helped both to maintain equilibrium and to promote democratization. What we need today is an equivalent of the parties to help organize the new relationship between government and society, which is both more down-to-earth and more fragmented than the old" (Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 216).

Beyond the concrete proposals that are put forward by the French thinker in this regard, the data to be highlighted is a recovery of the concept of democratic distance: although, in fact, identification with a candidate is one of the natural reasons for the electoral choice, it is *the distance that functionally characterizes the respective situation of rulers and ruled* and, without the recognition of such an important distinction, *the presupposition of the permanence of a regime of identification necessarily produces frustration* (Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 220).

This occurs because the logic underlying the representative system radically changes: analyzing the rhetoric used in the most recent electoral campaigns, it is easy to see the tendency of each candidate to present himself as a "man-people", even knowing that the position of the rulers is "functionally more distant". In fact, the dynamic of identification refers to a rather simple and immediate social universe, while the reality of the facts leads us to recognize that the rulers find themselves forced to operate within a much more complex and conflictual world. Therefore, Rosanvallon's conclusion is to avoid prolonging the electoral link of identification between rulers and ruled and, on the contrary, to give democratic form to a distance recognized in its functional necessity:

> what emerges, then, is what might be called a realistic positive theory of democracy. Realistic, because it takes account of the

> actual behavior of elected officials and their distance from the people they govern. But positive, because it points the way toward an effective social reappropriation of power. This is the key to overcoming what has proved to be a recurring feature of the history of democracy: the alternation of moments of hope (generally associated with elections) and feelings of disillusionment and bitter disappointment. Or, to put it another way, the alternation of brief phases of commitment and involvement with long periods of withdrawal (Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 221).

Within this framework, the fascination for immediacy can be analyzed from a very different point of view than that which emphasizes the exclusive claim to accelerate decision-making dynamics within contemporary democracies, or the reduction of the distance between elites and people. The data to be fixed relates to the coexistence, within the representative government, of the two logics of proximity and distancing (in Innerarity's terms) or of distinction and identification (in Rosanvallon's terms), which define the space inside of which the mediation relationships are consummated. In it, there is no lack of tensions, and it is desirable that they remain alive because, by defining the relationships between forms of mediation and forms of immediacy, they ensure the protection of some fundamental democratic values: according to Innerarity, in fact, mediation ensures equality, while disintermediation ensures the voice of citizens (Innerarity, 2019b, p. 522).

5. *Recover the Distance*

According to Edoardo Greblo (2021, p. 110), the history of democracy is characterized by a succession of moments of mediation and moments of disintermediation. Today the latter presents itself as an attractive response to the crisis of po-

litical representation, but it is often linked to an extra-institutional dimension, which therefore raises a question of legitimacy since it is the task of the institutions to legitimize political decisions.

Undoubtedly, the charm of disintermediation has increased the desire of the democratic citizen to become a "direct ruler": this is supported by the fact that the Internet has also become a social and political form because it allows the creation of a series of communities and above all because it allows to express public opinion immediately (Rosanvallon, 2017, p. 69). This data is not irrelevant because it marks a novelty in the history of democratic representation: the idea that communication technologies can upset democratic practices by allowing the direct participation of citizens dates to the early 1980s (Fisichella, 1983, p. 39; Miglio, 2021); but it was immediately realized that democracy could not be limited to an immediate decision-making process. Therefore, in the following decade, the focus shifted to deliberation, that is, to the definition of innovative applications in the electoral-representative dimension. With the advent of the Internet, the scenario has changed once again because it spontaneously adapts to the functions of supervision, denunciation, and evaluation, that is, to the elements of counter-democracy (Rosanvallon, 2017, pp. 70-71).

However – as Nadia Urbinati (2013, p. 191) observes – the Internet has not eliminated indirectness, if anything it has made it more precious: from this point of view, it is therefore important to recover the meaning of distance because it allows you to slow down the pace communication and decision; if in the past it could represent an obstacle to participation, today it becomes essential to facilitate reflection and the autonomy of judgment. In short, distance is the space through which contemporary democracy is built (Urbinati, 2020, p.

90). On the other hand – as noted by David Runciman (2019, p. 141) – representative democracy is created to counteract cognitive prejudices and, therefore, to create obstacles to immediate gratification and to slow down the decision-making process. On the same line, Luciano Floridi (2020, pp. 208-209) argues that the structural separation between those who possess and legitimize political power (popular sovereignty) and those who exercise it legitimately (the representatives) is an essential property of democracy, not a limit to be overcome with representativeness.

Undoubtedly, the reflection on distance in relation to the concrete functioning of a democracy indicates a complex and articulated theoretical aspect. In fact, the desire to abolish mediation feeds on the democratic dream of free spontaneity, more transparent markets, and unlimited accessibility of information, on the other hand, can also give rise to a real nightmare, to a situation in which "a public space with no limits, procedures or representation. All three factors protect democracy from its possible irrationality because limits also guarantee our right, procedures challenge arbitrary responses and representation offsets populism" (Innerarity, 2019, p. 161). In other words, if we assume that transparency and proximity are fundamental political values, we cannot however forget that a discretionary power and a real impartiality are equally necessary in a democracy since – as the classical authors teach – in politics "any value without a counterweight becomes a potential threat".

Indeed, distance was traditionally considered as an element "necessary for a serene exercise of power, in order to protect the decision-makers from pressures and arbitrariness" (Innerarity, 2019. p. 164). On the contrary – within the horizon of public proximity action – it aims to transform the citizen into an individualized client, since "a durable and institu-

tionalized relationship is replaced by a specific relationship without origin or continuity, and its capacity to generate social connection is weaker". Thus a "consumerist" relationship with politics is consolidated, supported by a "logic of depoliticization" since the "contact democracy" is increasingly expressed with the language of interpersonal relations, rather than with strictly political categories.

6. *Conclusion*

From many points of view – as recalled at the beginning – the fascination for disintermediation can represent one of the most recent illusions of contemporary public discourse, although it has undoubtedly influenced the modalities of citizens' participation in democratic life, the selection of political elites and the functioning of the institutions. What we have tried to highlight with this article is the fact that the claim of the ideology of immediacy to reduce the distance between the rulers and the ruled undermines one of the cardinal principles of representative democracy, which structurally provides for the presence of a distance in which the mediations take place (of movements, parties, lobbies, etc.). But above all it should be remembered that this distance defines the space in which that principle of distinction is realized (Manin, 2010, p. 105), which is a typical element of representative government (Campati 2022b).

In conclusion, reaffirming the importance of democratic distance also represents a way to direct attention to the balance between the *democratic principle* and the *minority principle*: a balance that today shows signs of weakness (Campati, 2022a). Faced with the crisis of political representation and the ambiguous nature of the presence of elites within democ-

racy (Leboyer, 2016), it is increasingly necessary to find a new interpretation of the relationship between the power of the *few* and the power of the *many*.

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Representing Social Mediation. Notes on an ancient law-legal problem in a new social context

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Abstract. The contribution addresses the legal problem of the representation of social, political and economic mediations, analysing the legal doctrine at the origin of the welfare state and the provisions of the Italian Constitution on social formations. It analyses the current trend of the mediations of social, political and societal organisations: today, they seem to act mainly in the local dimension and struggle to find an institutional place. All this call for a rethinking of democratic institutions to favour the forms of intermediation where participation takes place today.
Keywords: Italian Constitution; Participation; Local Democracy; Advocacy; Social Group.

1. *Introduction*

When Alexis de Tocqueville, after experiencing first-hand the revolutionary events in late 18th century Paris, fled to America to learn more about the prison system overseas, he immediately grasped a distinguishing feature of the French and American states: a democracy founded on political, economic and social pluralism.

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The question of pluralism in relation to the State and the problem of the institutional mediation of intermediate bodies, which were analyzed in that time, have traversed the last two centuries and still today involve the reflections of jurists, economists and sociologists: in fact, the question continually emerges as to whether mediations between the individual and the State are necessary or not and what legal 'guise' they can assume. An example of the enduring topicality of this jurisdictional tension is the recent debate on the so-called 'disintermediation': the perception of the uselessness of any form of interest representation, in fact, has legitimized the political claim to systematically 'skip', by virtue of the electoral mandate, the mediation of interest organizations, guilty of chronic immobility (Zan, pp. 649 e ss.).

Disintermediation – read through the eyes of the jurist – merely re-proposes the 'modern' tension between the state, society, individuals and entities that have marked these relations; a tension that has spanned modernity and which has seen the state pitted against social mediations, in an unending dialectic between the monism of sovereignty (and the dispositive of political representation) and social pluralism.

During the 20th century, democratic constitutions performed an overall reassessment of society, emphasizing social, economic and political pluralism. This was due to the recognition that the State of law lives on assumptions that it is unable to guarantee independently (Bockenforde, 2006, p. 68). In other words, the liberal State – which is the modern and contemporary legal form that the political community has taken – protects freedom and promotes equality, but is constitutively unable, precisely in order to fulfil these aims, to nurture the assumptions on which it is founded. In this framework, sociality – or, using the triad of the French Revolution, fraternity (Michieli, 2021) – comes into play in all its multiple

forms, and silently builds the cohesive assumptions of a freedom that cannot be detached from the concrete lives of people.

The thesis that we would like to advance in this contribution is that, after the demise of the twentieth-century ideological system that nourished an organizationally structured social pluralism, we have entered a phase in which social organizations have a more dynamic structure and in which the new technologies allow for continuous aggregations and disaggregations based on individual demands. At the same time, however, these transformations do not diminish the decisive role of intermediate communities and, on the contrary, require constitutional science to elaborate new paradigms of mediation in the crisis of democratic-representative devices (Costa, 2015). In this sense, the conclusions will outline some proposals for intervention to enhance these new and emerging forms of mediation.

2. *Social mediation and political representation: a 'modern' problem*

The portrait of democracy in America painted by Tocqueville inaugurated, between the 19th and 20th centuries, a legal debate on the relationship between the state and society and, later, on the possible integration between them, destined to continue to the present day. It can be said that it was precisely the so-called 'intermediate bodies' that represented the fundamental theoretical problem in the transition from the liberal rule of law to the welfare state. As Joseph Heinrich Kaiser wrote in a well-known essay, it was the relationship between state authority and social formations that represented the problem of 20th century constitutionalism: "The weight of in-

terests seems to be the constitutional characteristic of our present [...]. The doctrine of the state and the constitution cannot close its eyes to it because interests, organized interests, are a political power and a constitutional reality" (Kaiser, 1993, p. 441).

The jurist, Santi Romano, had no doubts in pointing out precisely in this element what had most placed the State in crisis. In his famous 1909 lecture, he said: "The crisis of the current State can therefore be considered to be characterized by the convergence of these two phenomena, one of which necessarily aggravates the other: the progressive organization on the basis of particular interests of society, which is increasingly losing its atomistic character, and the deficiency of the legal and institutional tools that society itself possesses to make its structure reflect and assert itself within that of the State" (Romano, 1909, p. 28). In this famous reflection, the Sicilian jurist recognized the difficulty for legal science in devising instruments for the intermediation of organized interests, capable of resolving the problem of the dialectic between the monism of sovereignty and the pluralism of social realities, between State authority and organizational spontaneity, between the Leviathan as the sum of individual citizens and the corporations that constituted orders that could no longer be ignored.

With the Constitutions of the early 20th century, the problem emerged of how to reunite intermediate bodies with the nascent democratic institutions. With the advent of the working class, which was the protagonist of a demand for greater representation of the protection of rights in the workplace, 'new' social organizations were structured. Faced with this 'mass', more formalized and organized to demand representation, various theories of a possible connection between state and society arose.

It is not possible here to summarize all the currents of thought that have reflected on this tension – from organicism to neo-corporatism – which transversally involved all scholars of the state. More briefly, reference can be made to the cultural debate that preceded the drafting of the Italian Constitution. In this sense, it can be said that in the years immediately preceding the Constituent Assembly – in the tumultuous series of events that led to the end of fascism – an articulate debate developed on the position of social formations in the 'new' state.

A first hypothesis – not without conditionings related to the fascist regime, but with its own theoretical autonomy – was corporatism. Corporatist thought – which was widespread in Catholic culture at the beginning of the 20th century and which, internally, had numerous declinations – believed that the state should reconcile itself with social formations by giving them citizenship in a single representative system: the corporatist way aimed at permitting groups into the state through their involvement in choices of public relevance (Ornaghi, 1984).

The fascist idea of corporatism was only one of many that were developed then. It, contrary to what some corporatist thinkers had theorized, engulfed civil society in a monism functionalized towards the aims dictated by the regime, rather than attracting social pluralism.

The end of the war and the fall of the regime led to the refounding of the state. The alternative cultural worlds to fascism, especially from 1940 onwards, had, in the meantime, developed strategies to avoid falling back into the trap of incorporating social formations into the state structure.

Reference can be made – to cite only the reflections within the Catholic movement – to the elaborations of two intellectual 'cenacles': one that met at 'Casa Padovani' in Milan and

the other that drafted the Camaldoli Codex (Persico, 2014). The Code set out to rework the reflections of *Quadragesimo anno*; in this rereading of the encyclical, an attempt was made above all to define the relationship between state authority and society in light of the then new principle of subsidiarity.

Less well known – but more relevant in terms of their influence on the future order of the Republic – were the reflections developed at the Catholic University. In particular, the involvement of Giuseppe Dossetti was significant in the role of intermediate bodies. Already in his commentary on Pope Pius XII's 1942 Radiomessaggio, he published an essay dedicated to *The Family* in which he expounded a peculiar position on the relationship between the State and 'minor societies'. The Reggio Emilia jurist's thinking was fully understood within the framework of Thomist philosophy but with an original interpretation compared to the one widespread in the Athenaeum of Italian Catholics. In the relationship between the State and minor societies, the purpose of the State – which in 1951, in a report to Catholic jurists, he defined as the "bonum humanum simpliciter" (Dossetti, 2014) – was in fact not realized through the "pluralist organicism" (Perego, 1997, p. 163) proposed by Olgiati, nor through the corporative method that incorporated social realities within the State in order to influence their actions. In his contribution to the commentary on the Radiomessaggio and in a subsequent report to a number of professors at the Catholic University, he insisted on the recognition of the freedom of social realities (speech reproduced in part by: Bocci, 1999). The liberal and fascist states had failed precisely on these two fronts: they had not pursued the 'common good' and had disowned sociality. The "new order" to respect the "*primary reality*" of the individual had, instead, to be constructed by recognizing the "institutional anteriority" of minor societies; correspondingly, these

had to open up to the "*subsequent realities*", the State and the Church, which, in their respective fields, would pursue the "supreme demands of justice" and the "extreme possibilities of charity".

3. *The perspective of the Italian Constitution: free and democratic social groups*

These reflections animated the thinking that underlay the drafting of the Italian Constitution. Indeed, among other merits, our Charter should be credited with having provided a fundamental turning point regarding the institutional recognition of intermediate bodies (Satta, 2015).

As is well known, a fundamental influence on the work of the Constitution was had by the group linked to Giuseppe Dossetti (Pombeni, 1979), i.e. that group within the Christian Democratic Party that had, since the Resistance, advanced demands for social renewal open to dialogue with progressive forces.

Paradigmatic and well-known for the purposes of our discourse, was the order of the day of 9 September 1946 (Assemblea Costituente, 1951, p. 22). Dossetti's resolution was the outcome of a debate that not only concerned social formations but also touched on the foundations of the constitutional edifice. Contrary to the liberal and totalitarian views, it was intended to direct the Constitution toward a twofold recognition: of the "substantial precedence of the human person" and the "necessary sociality of all persons [...] through mutual economic and spiritual solidarity". On the relationship between the state and intermediate social communities, it should be noted that Dossetti already referred to a "natural gradualness" of recognition that implied neither a

spontaneist nor organicist vision of society. Having posited anteriority and sociality, Dossetti argued for the recognition of the fundamental rights of the person "prior to any concession by the State"; in fact, the Constitution was to affirm that "the person has rights prior to the State and that the State does not constitute these rights but simply declares them, recognizes them" (Assemblea Costituente, 1951, p. 28). As can be seen, this motion – which, moreover, was never formally approved by the Commission, but tacitly indulged during the constituent work – posited some fundamental points that directed the structure of our Constitution. First and foremost, in the face of the overpowering totalitarian regimes, an anteriority and intangibility of the human individual before the State was recognized; the same applied to the social formations in which the individual found his fulfillment. The image that best expresses this understanding is the one – widely known – presented by Aldo Moro in the debate of that day: the Republic was to be built as an "inverted pyramid" with, at its top and as its base, the individual opening up, in progressive degrees of sociality, toward social formations to reach the State.

This view, then, includes the recognition that the first part of the Constitution confers on the social formations included in Articles 29, 39 and 49: family, trade union and party. These social formations are anticipated by the "general clausula" of Article 2, which, with its specific identification of sociality's value in the development of the individual, aims to defend all intermediate bodies. This is not the place to investigate the cited constitutional provisions in an analytical way. Rather, it seems useful to define some of the characters that distinguish the groups explicitly recognized in the Constitution.

First, the purpose. Social formations are recognized insofar as within them "personality takes place" (Article 2). The

task of intermediate bodies – as framed in our constitutional system – is therefore to make man more human together with others.

Second, broad freedom is recognized for social formations: they are not imposed with a model to conform to or a means for incorporation into representative forms. Thus, the Constitution emphasizes the spontaneous establishment of social formations, that is, the fact that they are recognized as a vehicle for effective social self-government.

Then there is a requirement that the Constitution demands of all social formations if they are to play a role in determining the overall political direction: democratic nature. If we take the three provisions of social formations, all of them refer to the equality of relations and the need for each one's contribution to social institutions: the family ordered "on the moral and legal equality of spouses, with the limits established by law to guarantee family unity"; the trade union which has as a "condition for registration [...] an internal order on a democratic basis"; the party as a free association "to compete via the democratic method to determine national policy". Thus, the Constitution recognizes social formations only to the extent that they can genuinely advance human beings in their personalities and, therefore, are organized according to a method that can guarantee everyone effective participation in community life. The mediation of social formations, in the constituent design, is recognized and protected, but it is required to contribute positively to the development of the personality: therefore, intermediate bodies are required to have an organization that favors the participation of each individual person and instrument of effective self-government.

The limits and purposes placed on social organizations were consistent with the Constitution's broader aspiration of achieving a "substantive democracy": a democracy that should

not be limited to the political electoral dimension alone but extended to incorporate the social and economic dimensions. In order to ensure the transition from a merely formal to a substantive democracy, it was necessary to create the conditions for "real access of the people, and all the people, to power and all power, not only political power, but also economic and social" (Dossetti, 2017, p. 14). For this reason, the constituents accorded the people the widest recognition of participatory rights, concrete and articulated according to identified mediations (the family in the social field, the trade union in the economic field, and the parties in the political field).

Precisely by this logic, and seeking to rebuild democracy on the basis of free and equal mediations rather than on privileged memberships, constitutional democracy aimed to initiate – as Aldo Moro said – a "process of elevating workers and ensuring their fullest participation in the economic, political and social organization of the country" (Assemblea Costituente, 1951, p. 2042). The establishment of the National Economic and Labor Council (Art. 99) should be read in this light, as an institution for coordinating social forces and representing workers' demands through the power to initiate the legislative process.

4. *New forms of participation and old problems of representation: towards a substantial democracy*

The constitutional dispositions on intermediate bodies have been largely ignored. An a-textual implementation path has been favored, according to a model of *de facto* pluralism. Trade unions have avoided registration; parties have not adopted a law, indicated by the Charter, that would have im-

posed on them a statute marked by internal democracy. On family relations, in contrast, the Constitution has 'worked', through the slow but constant efforts of the Constitutional Court, on the Civil Code's text to align intra-family relations more with the principle of equality of spouses and the protection of minors.

The adoption of a democratic structure was the weak point that prevented intermediate bodies being 'opened up' to the effective participation of members. The internal democratic method, in fact, remains the only form of guarantee – albeit not without possible pitfalls – for social formations to be arranged and act in close connection with the people who adhere to them. If, conversely, the channels of participation are obstructed, the association risks becoming a place of self-preservation and disintermediation.

It is necessary to question today what remains of the substance of that pluralistic edifice that, as evoked, founds "state politicity on previous social and institutional articulations and not on the vacuum of inter-individual relations" (Pizzolato, 2018, p. 41). A question that is not irrelevant given that, from a constitutional point of view, the Republic and social formations are co-participants in the realization of the goal of the individual's development (cf. Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution).

In order to conduct an analysis of our historical moment and the difficulties of intermediate bodies, it seems useful to start from an analysis of the process that has been defined as 'disintermediation'.

First of all, as has been pointed out, today we find ourselves facing the opposite problem to that of a century ago: if, at that time, there was the question of how to channel the 'strength' of intermediate bodies into the representative structures of the state, today we are faced, rather, with the

fragility of social formations and a legal system that recognizes not only their possible existence, but also their fundamental role.

Disintermediation practices operate within this context, attempting to respond to two problems: the crisis of the mediator-representative, and the desire for immediacy of those represented. The two components intersect and merge in a spiral that increasingly challenges traditional social forces; it takes the form of what has been called 'counter-democracy' (Rosanvallon, 2009) in which citizens participate through opposition to the ruling class rather than through an attempt to integrate it.

On the crisis of the mediator, it can be noted that sociality in Italy has been consolidated through bodies with a long tradition and roots in the dawn of the 20th century that, except for the fascist interlude, have spanned the entire 'short century'. This composite galaxy of realities was built around the membership of parties and associations, local clubs, sections, and social and charitable activities. Today, these associations seem to be in crisis and are fragmenting into an increasingly specialized Third Sector. The causes of this change are many and varied – certainly beyond the writer's competence. Three of these, however, can be mentioned. Firstly, large organizations used to be the only vehicle of sociality: people used to join an association – as part of a cultural and social world – as young people and develop relationships, moments of confrontation and recreation. Today, this is no longer the case: the offer of services and places of encounter have considerably increased and diversified, opening up to a network capable of connecting events and ideas in a global and affordable manner. A second element of caesura from the beginning of the 19th century is the fall of the strong cultural worlds that had characterized the second half of the 20th century. This

quickly created an outgrowth of certain associative groups or led to their decisive rethinking. The associative world, which had understood its action as an extension of certain social actions of the mass parties, disappeared in favor of social movements claiming autonomy and freedom from the parties (for a sociological survey: Biorcio and Vitale, 2016). Finally, there is – regarding the factor we mentioned of the demand for greater 'immediacy' of social relations – a decisive turning point that we are experiencing (Campati, 2021): the implementation of the digital dimension, mobile technological devices, the Internet of Things and, finally, artificial intelligence is significantly influencing new forms of aggregation.

About the current state of health of intermediate bodies, we should recognize that, unlike in the post-war years, society is moving through a less organized and more pulviscular articulation, but no less wealthy. Traditional social groups fade away in favor of ideologically and socially transversal associations that set themselves specific goals. These groups are therefore more functional in the pursuit of concrete and feasible ideas. As it has been pointed out, in fact, there is an increasing spread of "a style of participation, animated by active citizens, that does not coagulate stable interests or lasting social formations, but rather values a focused commitment, often of individuals, around specific administrative projects. Nor is there necessarily an overarching political perspective that inspires and directs this widespread form of participation, but rather an often generous, but mostly punctual and concrete activation, which sticks to the plan of shared administration" (Pizzolato, 2018, p. 51).

It therefore does not seem correct to say that mediations are in crisis: they have taken on different forms from those they had a few decades ago. We are, in fact, faced with a social pluralism that is much more fragmented and united around

individual demands and aims, acting in the urban and local dimension. Within this dimension, it is easy to detect a vitality in the political social formations that administer cities and induce higher electoral participation. Thus, it does not seem possible to speak of a crisis of participation, but rather of its representative forms (Pizzolato, 2018, p. 47)

The elements set out above on the change of intermediate bodies seem to apply to all sectors of society, but – for the purposes of the argument we are conducting – they assume particular significance in the political field. To put it succinctly, we could, in fact, say that we have moved from a republic of parties (Scoppola, 2021) to a democracy without parties (Palano, 2015). We live in a democratic 'public' environment characterized by the decline of traditional political cultures, the retreat of the major parties and a threefold process of personalization, verticalization and mediazation (Manin, 2017). These very factors have accentuated the dynamics of political disintermediation. These dynamics imply and increase the conception of an investiture democracy, in which leaders – democratically legitimized – can decide without considering social mediations (Bassanini, 2019, pp. 172 e ss.): a very distant idea of 'formal' democracy compared to the constitutional idea of a 'substantial' democracy because it is the result of democratization processes in the political, but also in the economic and social spheres.

These processes undermine party mediation and repropose the instance of an 'immediate democracy' – according to Condorcet's old expression (Rosanvallon, 2015) – structured around institutions of direct democracy. The party becomes a 'platform' (even better if it is digital) to express, from time to time, demands that are not enclosed in a determined or determinable political framework.

We can therefore ask ourselves, in this context, what future social formations have and what juridical-representative structure can be given to the new mediations. To answer this question, it seems useful to return to meditating on Simone Weil's thought. The French philosopher, in various writings, emphasized the tension that accompanies the life of social formations: on the one hand, she advanced a tight critique of the "groupings" that make use of the individual and, at the same time, she emphasized the need for the individual to "take root" precisely through communities or, better, "environments".

This tension gives rise to the radical critique of political parties. They, in fact (according to Weil), foment collective passions and set themselves the sole goal of their own growth: for these reasons, every party is "totalitarian *in nuce* and in inspiration" (Weil, 2012, p. 28).

Weil's reflection points to the risk that, inside the same social formations, the desire may arise to eliminate other mediations, through the instrumentalization of adherents and within narratives of collective passions. Yet at the same time, vital "environments" are those through which the individual finds his roots: "Through his real, active and natural participation in the existence of a community that keeps alive certain treasures of the past and certain presentiments of the future, the human being has a root" (Weil, 1949, p. 36).

Without forcing a concept – such as Simone Weil's – that has remained unfinished, it can be said that social formations are both a source of conflict and hope, prison and liberation. For this reason, the problem of social, political and economic mediation and disintermediation is not destined to find a solution that is valid for all times. It calls on social formations to find an internal organization capable of providing effective space for the development of the personality of its adherents.

At the same time, it requires the democratic system as a whole to offer instruments that can emphasize what organizations of interests – in their newly emerging forms – can offer in order to achieve the aims of the constitutional order and – more broadly – those of the European Union. On this second aspect, we believe that a process of institutional renewal, capable of enhancing social mediations, can only pass through an enhancement – in every dimension – of self-government.

It is a matter of making room for self-government first and foremost on a political level, through a broader decentralization. In fact, "if territorial autonomies are structurally the political entity best placed to enhance social initiative (...), all the more reason why this conclusion is imposed in the face of the changed forms of civic activation" (Pizzolato, 2018, p. 55) which, as has been said, seem to be most vital precisely on a local level. In this sense, the municipality seems to be the only dimension capable of attempting to reconnect the lines of participation with those of representation.

On the other hand, as Giorgio Berti taught in his commentary on Article 5 of the Italian Constitution, "underlying the idea of autonomy is always a principle of social self-government, and it makes sense to introduce autonomy on an institutional level as long as it is certain that it serves to enliven social participation" (Berti, 1975, p. 288). Re-reading this reflection today, it can be said that it is necessary to ensure, precisely at the local level where participation seems more effective and structured, that institutions can exercise functions and competences that are truly suited to their level of government. In terms of institutional instruments, this autonomist perspective could be pursued by conferring more functions on local autonomies or by electoral systems for the election of national parliaments capable of enhancing the local aggregations that administer cities.

On the economic level, the decentralized forums of consultation, particularly those closest to the citizens, should be reactivated: Chambers of commerce or Regional Economic and Labor Councils could bring together interest organizations for a fruitful promotion of local economies (Michieli, 2018).

Conversely, forms of neo-centralism – towards which the institutional system seems to be heading again – risk undermining the relationship between citizens and institutions even more, accentuating the distance between representation and participation and frustrating political and social mediation relations. Think, just to give a recent example, of the Italian Recovery and Resilience Plan, which has a strong centralizing structure and lacks significant links with territorial autonomies and social realities (Lupo, 2022).

The future of associations does not seem destined to be that of large, stable mass organizations, as envisaged by the Italian Constituents; but this does not mean that they will not play a very important public role. Today's challenge for democratic institutions is to give themselves a form more in keeping with self-government, capable of providing space for organizations in which each citizen's contribution is actively included, starting from the places where they live and work.

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Political Parties and the Challenge of Disintermediation: The cases of the Partito Democratico and the Movimento 5 Stelle

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Abstract. How do parties adapt to an environment characterised by the rejection of intermediate bodies? They both offer members more opportunity for direct and online participation and strengthen their leadership. Through the introduction of the concept of disintermediation in the field of party politics, and through an in-depth examination of the inner workings of two Italian parties (the Partito Democratico and the Movimento 5 Stelle), this chapter shows both how these trends are connected and the ways in which the promise of unmediated intra-party relationships lead to the emergence of new forms of intermediation.
Keywords: Disintermediation; Political Parties; Intra-Party Democracy; Movimento 5 Stelle, Partito Democratico.

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1. *Introduction: what we talk about when we talk about disintermediation*

Political science scholars seem to agree that "the age of party democracy has passed" (Mair, 2013, p. 1). This diagnosis does not primarily concern party resources, the centrality of parties in the processes of representative democracy at the level of national legislatures and executives, since "representative government remains very much a partisan affair" (Scarrow and Webb, 2017, p. 3), or their role as institutionalisation agencies (Pizzimenti, 2020), but rather their legitimacy and connection with society (Ignazi, 2004; 2017). It is a thesis that has been recognised for decades (Katz and Mair, 1995) and has become almost common sense (Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein, 2017): following a number of cultural-societal changes, mainly linked to individualisation, parties have failed to perform their representative function of forming a link between citizens and the state.

More generally, some have envisaged a true "revolt" against intermediary bodies in our age (Urbinati, 2015): in politics, as in other fields, especially following the massive spread of the internet, people seem to want to do without intermediaries. This is also evidenced by the increasing success of the term, and concept, of *disintermediation*. According to the definition given by Chadwick (2007), disintermediation means removing intermediaries from a supply chain, a transaction, or, more broadly, any set of social, economic, or political relations. The term was first used in the financial and economic sector, and then became popular with the spread of the internet. Through the web, demand and supply can meet directly, rendering (at least potentially) intermediaries useless: "Internet communication networks reduce the need for those who have some traditional claim to expert knowledge

or market dominance" (*ibidem*, 232). But disintermediation seems not to be limited to commerce and business or to the effects of the internet. More generally, the elimination of intermediaries is an increasingly relevant phenomenon in contemporary societies: the success of Amazon and Twitter is only the tip of the iceberg.

What are political parties' responses and adaptations to this changing environment? The literature on the organisational changes in parties has highlighted two main trends in recent decades.

On the one hand, parties offer their members more opportunities for direct participation. Party members, and in some cases also supporters, have become more and more involved in the selection of party leaders (Pilet and Cross, 2014), candidate selection (Hazan and Rahat, 2010) and, in some cases, also in policy decisions (Gauja, 2015) through direct votes. It is the well-known trend of increased intra-party democracy (Cross and Katz, 2013) that has affected parties over the last few years.

On the other hand, parties have strengthened their leadership. This increased importance of party leaders is facilitated not only by the organisational changes in parties but also by long-term trends towards leadership personalisation (Blondel and Thiébault, 2010) and the presidentialisation of politics (Poguntke and Webb, 2005). As part of the growing relevance of individual political actors at the expense of parties and collective identities (Karvonen, 2010), leaders are increasingly resourceful within executives and parties, and in electoral processes (Calise, 2010).

My hypothesis is that these two trends are connected in the weakening of a party's intermediate structure and the attempt to create an unmediated connection between its leader and followers. I define these strategic responses and adaptations

of parties to this changing environment, and particularly the responses and adaptations in their organisation, as "disintermediation strategies".

Whether disintermediation does indeed provoke new forms of intermediation, or the permanence of previous ones, still needs to be verified. The distinction between disintermediation rhetoric and practice is obviously decisive in this matter: to what extent does disintermediation correspond to a real change in both the organisation and distribution of power within the party? To what extent should disintermediation be mostly considered a top-down process, which gives greater power to the leader in decision-making processes (or what we would label "disintermediation from above"), or a bottom-up movement, which allows the opening of decision-making processes to members and voters (what we would define as "disintermediation from below")?

To answer these questions, in this chapter I will examine how two Italian parties (a mainstream party, the Partito Democratico, and a new party, the Movimento 5 Stelle) have adapted to this changing context. The reasons for choosing Italy as a case study are many. If, indeed, Italian parties initially played an important and unique role, facilitating the democratic transition (Morlino, 2003), it was their very strength that heightened their tragic collapse in the nineties (Grilli di Cortona, 2007). At the same time, anti-political (Mastropaolo, 2000) and especially anti-party (Lupo, 2013) sentiments are deeply rooted in Italian society. Perhaps for these reasons, the Italian case befits the general trend in Western democracies towards an increasing role for leaders and a desire among citizens to have their voices heard directly (Sartori, 2006; Calise, 2010).

While the two parties can be seen as very different in many respects, both parties – albeit in two partially different inter-

pretations – have sought to bypass the internal party organisation and create an unmediated relationship between their leader and followers. As we will see in the conclusion, however, the result has been an increase in the leadership's power, the persistence of old forms of intermediation, or the creation of new ones.

2. *The Partito Democratico and the consequences of an "open party"*

The promise of an unmediated connection between leader and followers is a fundamental characteristic of the Partito Democratico, and has been present since the very beginning. Founded in 2007 from the merger of two existing parties, both with deep roots in Italian political party history, the party model of the Partito Democratico is based on opening the internal decision-making processes to *voters* and on the direct legitimisation, by the voters, of the party's leadership through direct election (Vassallo and Passarelli, 2016, Floridia, 2019). This is an almost unique innovation in Europe. Indeed, Italy is one of only two European countries that use open primaries for the selection of the party leader, the other being Greece, where Pasok uses such a selection method[2]. Through this sort of "personal mandate", the leader is supposed to be strengthened both outwardly towards the citizenry, and po-

[2] In terms of elective offices, it is worth remembering that, since 2012, the French Socialist Party has used open primaries for the selection of the candidate for President of the Republic (Lefebvre and Treille, 2016). This decision ignited a debate similar, in part, to the Italian one (for a comparison between Italy and France, see De Luca and Venturino, 2015; Giannetti and Lefebvre, 2015).

tentially also within the party, since the party's intermediate bodies are initially established through voters' voting.

The opening of decision-making processes to voters – and not just to members – is a very important novelty. Within the party statute, voters are given several rights, such as to elect the secretary, to vote in the primaries and to define the party's programme. In practice, the greatest decision-making power held by supporters lies in the selection of candidates through primaries, while the tools for policy determination (e.g. for defining the party's programme) have never been implemented.

We thus find the two dimensions of disintermediation in the Partito Democratico: on the one hand, the leader – strengthened by the direct and personal mandate from citizens – is expected to be stronger, both inside and outside the party. On the other, we see supporters (rather than members) appearing to increase their power. The leader is therefore stronger because he or she draws his consent directly from the outside, bypassing party members and the middle-level elite. The primary elections to elect the party secretary are central to this mechanism: indeed, they have been defined by Lorenzo Guerini, then chief of national organisation, as a "democratic interpretation of disintermediation" (Guerini, 2014).

Renzi's leadership (2013-2018) is often considered a rupture in the party's history, towards the creation of a "leaders' party" (Bordignon, 2014). However, we must note that there have been no significant changes in the party's organisation over time, at least according to the analysis of official party documents. We could say that Renzi was the party secretary who took full advantage of the opportunity provided by the open party model; however, his innovative style was, in the end, absorbed. In a context of accelerating technological

change and deep crisis of representation, Renzi exploited the opportunities already offered by the party model more than previous party leaders, increasing the personalisation of his leadership, creating a direct link with supporters and, thus, developing disintermediation strategies more than his predecessors had done (Cuono, 2015).

Which is the prevailing dimension of disintermediation within the Partito Democratico? We have seen that, in this party, voters hold great decision-making power, certainly greater than that of its members. We can talk about a blurring of organisational boundaries and a bypassing of members by voters, who thus are potentially empowered (disintermediation from below). However, it must also be noted that that the voters' power within the party is limited to their participation in primaries, i.e. it is mainly *symbolic* albeit relevant. Indeed, primaries have been used by party elite for their own interest, for instance to legitimate a natural candidate or to conduct internal challenges. Moreover, participation in open party primaries configures an individualised kind of participation, which lacks accountability mechanisms to the detriment of the organised party on the ground.

The PD, although it cannot be seen as a personal party (Bobba and Seddone, 2016) due to the presence of well-defined rules and procedures, has been built specifically to strengthen the party leadership (disintermediation from above). It is this latter dimension that, in the end, prevails in the party's practices: through voters' participation in primaries, the leader is supposed to be stronger both outside and inside the party, given that the intermediate bodies are representative of the voters' vote.

We can also question whether new forms of intermediation haven't emerged here. In the case of the PD, rather than the creation of new forms of intermediation, there has been a re-

tention of the old party structures, with intermediate bodies still playing an important role. The PD presents an innovative party model, to which open primaries provide the backbone. Nevertheless, the party has governing bodies and codified procedures that limit the decisional autonomy of the leader. Even the primaries, the most important organisational innovation of the party, appear to be a party affair, and are used consciously by party elites to pursue their own agenda. This includes: giving the impression that the process behind the party's foundation is not a solely elite affair; strengthening and legitimising a natural candidate; creating the image of a party that is open and that offers renewed participation practices; and conducting an internal challenge against the old party elites.

Primaries appear to be, thus, "an elitist instrument behind a plebiscitarian disguise" (Sandri, Seddone and Sozzi, 2020). And that is perhaps the reason why, in the end, the Partito Democratico failed to deliver on its promise of durable leadership. Except for Renzi's experience, which was initially seen as an "external body", and ended up being absorbed and normalised, we see that what the PD lacks is precisely strong leadership. The resignation of Zingaretti, the election of Letta as party secretary at the beginning of 2021, and the debates on a new congress after the 2022 elections, testify to this.

3. *The Movimento 5 Stelle: between disintermediation and new forms of intermediation*

From the very beginning, the M5S made use of disintermediation strategies. Founded in 2009 by the former comedian Beppe Grillo, an entrepreneur with no previous political experience, and Gianroberto Casaleggio, owner of the online

strategy company Casaleggio Associati, M5S has been the most significant Italian political innovation of the last decade (Ceri and Veltri, 2017). The desire to create an unmediated link between citizens and power was, according to the official rhetoric, the main aim of this political actor and has been mirrored in its organisation, which, at least initially, was made up of just the leader, members and elected representatives, all connected via the internet (Passarelli, Tronconi and Tuorto, 2013 and 2017; Caruso, 2015; Ceccarini and Bordignon, 2016; Biancalana and Piccio, 2017).

Disintermediation strategies can be defined as rhetoric or practices developed by parties in order to stage or create an unmediated relationship with citizens. In particular, we have said that organisational disintermediation in parties can involve the weakening of the party's intermediate organisation through greater powers given to the party leader (disintermediation from above) and/or party members (disintermediation from below).

In this respect, we can note that M5S's members have always had a lot of power regarding candidate selection: candidates at the local, regional, and national levels have always been decided by members, through online voting on the participatory platform *Rousseau*. In addition to that, online consultations have been used to define the party's policies, strategies and internal organisation, as well as to select party personnel (Mosca, 2020; Biancalana and Vittori, 2021). While this may represent one of the most advanced examples of internet use by a political party, there are also a number of weaknesses that should be outlined. The first relates to accountability and transparency issues. *Rousseau* was created by the private company Casaleggio Associati, and is managed through Associazione Rousseau by the son of one of the two founders, Davide Casaleggio. Associazione Rousseau is an as-

sociation separate from the M5S that acquired, through the provisions of the 2017 statute, the right to manage all of the party's online decision-making processes. However, members had no control over it, also because *Rousseau* did not employ open-source software (Deseriis, 2017)[3].

The second weakness lies in how the "rules of the game" are defined. These are always released in a top-down manner and cannot be negotiated by members. This applies not only, for instance, to the rules for becoming a candidate and to the right to vote in consultations, but also to who decides to hold a consultation, its timing, and what the available options are. Only the leader holds the power to call for a consultation, with members having no possibility to request any initiative. The way in which a consultation question is framed and the choices available to vote on are also noteworthy: all M5S consultations were held on predetermined options, and members could not add or propose new options. Finally, within *Rousseau* there was no space for members to discuss matters. On the M5S platform, participation was viewed as a tool for decision-making, with no room for discussion or deliberation. We can say, thus, that despite the greater decision-making power given to members, the prerogatives of the leadership remained relevant and substantially unchanged over time. Despite formal leadership changes from Grillo to Di Maio and, more recently, to Conte, the leadership has retained significant power and control over the organisation.

[3] The end of the collaboration between Associazione Rousseau and Movimento 5 Stelle, in early 2021, can be considered both a further step towards the party's institutionalisation and a dismissal of the most radical promises of online direct democracy.

Over the years, the Movement has undergone many important metamorphoses (see Tronconi, 2018). For instance, with the evolution of the organisation, we witnessed a growing presence of intermediate bodies within the party. In particular, with the passing of the Italian threshold of government, the M5S's organisation has become gradually more complex, both through an informal "coordination structure" (lacking formalisation in official documents) and with the codification of more formalised internal organs. With respect to its origins, the M5S now has an almost party-like structure. But, in terms of that structure's characteristics, it differs substantially from the more traditional one, as it was the political leader who had significant powers in appointing its members. It remains to be seen whether the formalisation of a new party structure in 2021, under the leadership of Giuseppe Conte, comprising territorial groups and a national council, will lead to a sort of return to the "old" forms of intermediation.

To sum up, while both bottom-up and top-down disintermediation strategies have been shown to coexist within M5S, until now top-down disintermediation has prevailed. On the one hand, this is not a "memberless party" (Mazzoleni and Voerman, 2017): via the internet, members have significant decision-making powers compared to those traditionally granted to party members. However, on the other hand, the structure within which members exercise their power is highly centralised. The M5S was not based on a structure like that of traditional parties: at least initially, the party comprised solely its leader, elected representatives and members, who were all connected via the internet. It was through the internet that an unmediated connection between citizens and power, but also between leader, elected representatives and members, was created. In the M5S, thus, we are not faced with a simple attempt to *weaken* the party's internal organisation. From the

analysis of party documents, we can see that this political player, at least initially, did not present an intermediate structure or a middle-level elite at all, these having been replaced by an internet-based organisation.

The request for collective leadership in 2020 – an outcome of the *Stati generali*, the M5S's very first "party congress" – could be seen as a sign of the weakening of the top-down disintermediation that had long been present in the party; this was not the result of bottom-up disintermediation, as promised by the party rhetoric, but rather the result of more intermediation. Future analyses of the new party documents presented by Giuseppe Conte will tell us if this is the case.

Even before this episode, however, new and old forms of intermediation were emerging. In the first place, while the internet can be seen as a tool of disintermediation, it can also represent intermediation of a different kind. Casaleggio Associati and Associazione Rousseau acted as powerful gatekeepers in the party's decision-making processes. In the second place, even within an organisation with a strong rhetoric of leaderlessness and opposition to personalisation and traditional party organisations, elements of formal and informal leadership and internal organisation have emerged over time. This is true not only of the intermediate bodies that gradually emerged, or of Grillo and Casaleggio who held recognised and codified leadership roles from the beginning. Over time, elected representatives started taking on coordinating roles and later acquiring important formal positions within the organisation, such as in the case of Luigi Di Maio or, more recently, Giuseppe Conte.

4. *Conclusions*

The two parties considered in this chapter differ substantially: the one can be defined as mainstream while the other is a new, anti-establishment party. Their responses to the changed context are, in turn, different; however, in both – albeit via partially different paths – we find the will to weaken the intermediate party structure and create a direct link between leader and supporters. Despite pushing a rhetoric of empowerment and direct participation for members and supporters, this has resulted in an increase in leadership power and/or the persistence of old forms of intermediation. Open primaries and the online participation platform are two different tools used by the two parties in a similar fashion to achieve this result.

In the case of the PD, open primaries are presented as a way to increase citizens' direct participation, but, in reality, they are used to keep tight control over elite recruitment and to increase the scope of the party leader's power and autonomy *vis-à-vis* party organisation. According to Sandri, Seddone and Sozzi (2020), they function "as a trojan horse fostering party organisational weakening", and represent an innovative tool used to carry out traditional political activities through the centralisation of power in the hands of the leader. In a similar vein, behind the façade of disintermediation, we also find the persistence of leadership in the case of the M5S.

Dealing with digital parties, a category in which the M5S would also fall, Gerbaudo (2019) defined the way in which – for these kinds of players – opening the party's lower levels through online participation is accompanied by an increasing concentration of power in the hands of the party leader: a form of "distributed centralisation". Within digital parties

there lies a contradiction between a narrative of radical disintermediation and leaderlessness, and a reality in which leadership and hierarchy remain very much present. Through the platform's software and the process of back-end management, power relations have simply become more concealed (*ibidem*, 184).

These dynamics seem to follow the same general logic, regardless of the type of party considered. On the one hand, we could expect mainstream parties to open up their decision-making processes in order to gain legitimation (Ignazi, 2020); however, it is their very conservative organisation that makes their changing or relinquishing power simply for the sake of change highly unlikely (Panebianco, 1988). On the other hand, new parties are frequently "intraparty democracy maximisers" (Harmel and Janda, 1994) with a goal to empower member participation. However, even new parties tend towards institutionalisation and centralisation (Poguntke, 2002; Frankland, Lucardie and Rihoux, 2008). Following the new functions that they have to enact with their internal complexification, they implement some organisational changes (Pedersen, 1982). Therefore, in both cases we can say that the different devices promoted to foster member empowerment, hide in reality plebiscitarian dynamics and the centralisation of power in the hands of the leadership.

Contrary to the rhetoric of bottom-up disintermediation, in practice it is top-down disintermediation that prevails. The leadership is strengthened while the intermediate organisation – be it party members or the middle-level elite – is weakened. Even though the last few years have seen parties trying to convince us otherwise, backed up by social and political trends such as the decline of deference and mistrust in politics (Hay, 2007; Tormey, 2015; Nevitte, 1996; 2014; Dalton

and Welzel, 2014), party members and supporters have not acquired much power.

Disintermediation strategies, when greater decision-making power is promised to those at the bottom, are thus primarily of a rhetorical or symbolic nature. However, symbolic does not mean meaningless. Writing about party reforms, Gauja (2017) acknowledged that the symbolism of change and the discourse surrounding it can be just as important as change in practice, having an impact on both citizens' perceptions and parties. Moreover, disintermediation strategies do not leave a vacuum. As we have seen, old and new intermediaries may regain weight, or find an important role. In this regard, Chadwick (2007, p. 232) states that:

> [...] it is by no means clear that intermediaries are being undermined by new information and communication technologies. The claim needs to be assessed alongside an appreciation of broader institutional concentrations of power. *Old intermediaries* have found their skills highly relevant to the internet age. They have at their disposal forms of knowledge, expertise, and wealth that are not distributed evenly throughout society. In some areas, *new intermediaries* are mushrooming (emphasis added).

Indeed, studies conducted in the field of commerce have confirmed how old intermediaries can re-establish their power in the face of disintermediation, and how new intermediaries can also appear (Chircu and Kauffmann, 1999). Disintermediation is thus a process that involves both the persistence of old forms of intermediation and the emergence of new ones. Accordingly, we can see that old and new forms of intermediation coexist in the two parties considered in this study.

On the one hand, it is true that the PD, although presenting major innovations in its party model, remained connected

with old party forms more so than the M5S. In the case of the M5S, disintermediation strategies led to the emergence of new forms of intermediation, mainly linked to the use of the internet. However, over time we also witnessed a strengthening of the role of elected representatives within the organisation, and the structuring of the organisation in a "party-like" form. The demand for collective leadership that emerged from the *Stati generali* at the end of 2020 testified to a clear need for intermediation among party members. It is also worth noting that in its new statute, released in 2019, the PD uses the word "congress", which was absent before. It would seem, therefore, that the era of intermediation is far from over.

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What is disintermediation? In wider terms, it indicates the absence of a median entity between two subjects. As is known, it was a term born in the economic-financial sector, which then spread to different areas of social life. This variety of uses has made it ambiguous, an ambiguity that can develop on two levels. The first is almost inevitable because it is the consequence of its varied use. By disintermediation we can mean, for example, the absence of mediators during an economic negotiation, the possibility of buying a plane ticket without travel agency costs, or the dynamic that is created between society and institutions with the use of Internet in the political arena. From this point of view, the word is ambiguous because it is overly generic. The second level of ambiguity relates to the relationship between disintermediation and democracy because, on the one hand, it allows us to accept the requests of citizens who want a more *direct* and *transparent* relationship with the political elites, and, on the other, it risks making some elements of representative government even more brittle, especially by undermining their legitimacy. As the title suggests, this book explores this second level of disintermediation ambiguity, offering a series of contributions that, using different approaches, highlight also the more *dangerous* aspects that risk even undermining some keystones of liberal-representative democracy.

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Democracy and Disintermediation

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