

POSTDEMOCRACY AND BIOPOLITICS

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“Postdemocracy” began to be talked about at the beginning of this century. Colin Crouch’s book of the same name came out in 2000, while an interview with Ralf Dahrendorf entitled “After Democracy” appeared a year later. The thesis advanced by both is that, although the formal institutions of democracy remain alive, its living substance has been depleted in favour of a different regime, which can no longer be called properly “democratic.” Both authors locate the causes of this transition in a threefold crisis – of representation, of legitimacy, and of sovereignty – dependent in its turn upon the dynamics of globalization. Over the last thirty years, these dynamics have undermined the foundations of the very locus of modern democracy, namely, the nation states in which democracy was born and developed. The result, on the one hand, is a shift of power toward supranational bodies of an economic and financial type, bodies that are non-elective and therefore democratically illegitimate. On the other hand, it has led to a vertical crisis of the intermediate bodies – parties, trade unions, and parliaments themselves – fuelling a growing personalization of politics, both cause and effects of the populist trend currently swelling in Europe and America, and now the scapegoat for the entire establishment and its media organs.

How convincing is this analysis? Does it represent the real extent of the current crisis? I’m not convinced at all. Not so much because the phenomenology in itself is wrong but because, for those of us who like to work on contemporary events in genealogical terms, interweaving synchrony and diachrony, it simplifies and flattens into a twenty-year period a history that is much longer and more complex. Of this deep history – which has led to the depletion of what has long been called “democracy” – I can only provide a brief overview in this article. I’ll examine a few key moments, all of which are traceable to a process of the governmentalisation of social life, a process defined by some with the, by now, overused term of “biopolitics.”

The first moment along this path – a naturally bumpy and contradictory one, as are all historical processes of long duration – can be situated at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when the life of the population ceased to be viewed by

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the sovereign as a resource to be consumed, as cannon fodder even, and became a valuable asset that required protection and development. It was then, with the progressive transformation of the sovereign regime into a governmental one, that the first *dispositifs* for controlling and disciplining collective life arose and were developed, initially activated by pastoral power and then by the so-called knowledge of policing, along with the establishment of public health and social services.

The second event, perhaps even more crucial in the relationship between power and knowledge, was the birth of biology as an independent discipline at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was then that the biological life of individuals and populations began to become a specialist and performative knowledge, best represented by the names of Bichat, Cuvier, Lamarck, and Darwin. What consequences did the birth and development of biological knowledge have for the forms of politics, when the aims of power now included the facilitated preservation of life, and the horizon of history became aligned with that of nature? It was then that the human being, beyond being an individual, began to be considered a member of the species, at the same time that the human species came into contact with other living species.

From then on a process of progressive desubjectification commenced – a crisis of political subjectivities – with disintegrative consequences on political action itself. The individual, always viewed by modern political philosophy as a subject guided by reason and will, now began to be perceived as a living being traversed and often determined by vital needs, but also by instincts and irrational forces rooted in a primal biological stratum that went beyond and often collided with the relational life. The very premise of modern political philosophy deriving from Hobbes, which makes the rise of the state of politics dependent on the negation of the state of nature, was put into question. Once this ground began to shift, it became impossible to abstract oneself from one's body or from the deep-seated mechanisms that govern it; the state of politics and the state of nature became inseparably intertwined. This had profound consequences on the way political action was understood and interpreted. If human passions are determined by impulses of which we are largely unaware, arising out of the depths of organic life, they can no longer be channelled into the geometries of the social contract; and the social contract between rational subjects can no longer be viewed as the solely foundation of community.

That solid kernel of reason and will attributed to the juridical person, who until then had been considered the constitutive essence of the political subject, now began to be challenged. The moment that the idea of political institutions entirely governed by rational motives began to weaken, the still young paradigm of democracy also entered into a zone of progressive erosion. Ever since then, it would seem as if the *kratos* (power) of democracy no longer referred to the *demos* (people), but rather to a *bios* (life), or even to a *ghenos* (race). To get a sense of this watershed – which emerged fully formed in the late nineteenth century, but whose contours have continued to sharpen over the last seventy or eighty years – I will recall three emblematic events that have radically altered

what was once our familiar landscape. At the end of the 1960s the issue of gender, generation, and genetics acquired greater and greater prominence, replacing the biopolitical semantics of *ghenos* with the democratic one of *nomos* (law). Gender, understood as sexual difference, and generation, understood as a set of alternative socio-cultural characteristics to those held by previous generations, acquired increasing importance. Just a few years later, the first experiments in genetic manipulation – starting from the one that produced Dolly the sheep – foreshadowed an even closer relationship between human life and technology, at least in the realm of possibilities. Lastly, in 1972, in Stockholm, the first conference on the environment was held. Since then, ecology too has become a political issue of primary importance.

These events trace out a complex paradigm shift: the life of human beings, the life of the species, and the life of the world burst peremptorily onto a political scene that was unprepared to thoroughly understand its meaning. To believe that a series of changes of this kind, with the problem of *bios* and *ghenos* at its core, could leave the political scene unaltered was an illusion destined to be continuously shattered. Since then, it can be said that the character of our time has been defined more and more distinctly, through successive waves, by the breaking down of boundaries between the biological and the political. From then on, the issues of life and death, sexuality, public health, migration, and security have forced their way onto all political agendas and widely influenced them. As a result of this shift, the political horizon has also become wider and more complex; it has expanded and deformed. It is as if the entire modern lexicon that gave shape to politics for more than three centuries suddenly lost its meaning and fractured under the thrust of events that it is no longer able represent. Since then, certainly not just for the last twenty years, the semantics of democracy has encountered growing difficulties.

The consequences are easily imagined and are in everyone's full view today. How can the democratic lexicon of formal equality between autonomous political actors – understood as pure logical atoms, called upon periodically to express a rational, voluntary choice on the governing of society – be employed when what matters more and more are the ethnic, sexual, and religious difference of human groups, groups defined by the characteristics of their bodies, their age, and their sex? Since then it has become evident that the old European categories, which had provided the semantic and hermeneutic grid of the twentieth century, no longer work: they're starting to lose traction. This transformation affects not only democracy but also classic liberalism, which had formed an alliance with democracy that lasted a century, at least in Western Europe and North America. Liberalism, too, also built on the lexicon of the individual – understood as a subject dedicated to his or her personal interest in a market free of constraints – entered into a much closer relationship with the horizon of life. Neoliberalism grasped the direction of this anthropological and even cosmological turn and expressed both its potential and its contradictions.

The Austrian neoliberalism of Hayek and Mises melded market and material life into the same paradigm, designing, literally, a new “politics of life.” But

more than anything, it was German ordoliberalism, the group of intellectuals gathered around the magazine *Ordo*, that ventured close to biopolitical semantics, as Foucault was among the first to point out, recognizing the internal innovations and contradictions of that process – especially the paradox of producing freedom through its limitation. Because if we read books like Wilhelm Röpke's *Civitas humana* and Ludwig von Mises' *Human Action*, what comes out of them isn't solely a political economy but also an anthropological turn – one that has an intensely biopolitical government of life at its core and that is no different, for that matter, from what Gramsci analysed along other lines in *Americanism and Fordism*. Like politics, the economy impinges on the human body and on the psychology of workers.

Alexander Rüstow's essay on the bankruptcy of liberalism as religion anticipates going beyond traditional *laissez faire* in order to further a new social interventionism that penetrates deep into the fibres of society. The current German ideology, its obsession for organization, its phobia about the risk of indebtedness, social conflict, and collective chaos, arose in that ordoliberal culture during those years. What these thinkers imagine is a sort of oxymoron – a social market economy – different from both the Keynesian approach and that of deregulated markets. In this model, the market itself is posited as a generator of social order, while the state is tasked with stabilizing the power of capital through juridical means – but of course this is not the state as sovereignty, but as government: government of life, religion of work, idolatry of order – outside of which lies nothing but chaos. Compared to classic liberalism, what is new about both branches of neoliberalism – the Austro-American version of Mises and Hayek and that of the Freiburg School with Eiken, Rüstow, and Röpke – lies in the fact that they work explicitly on the potential of human nature in an anthropological dimension that is different from a simple challenge to state dirigisme. Its intention, rather, is to influence human nature, by optimising the natural and vital capacities of humankind.

The extent to which this project was in contradiction with its own premises of freeing the market from institutional constraints is testified to by the insoluble problems it has come up against from time to time, including during the recent economic downturn. Beyond the more ideological themes, Brexit stems from this divergence between the two liberalisms, the Anglo-American and the German, which does not detract from the fact that ultimately, they frame themselves within the same governmental regime. What unites them is the same biopolitical tendency to govern the state of nature, including human nature, rather than abandoning it in favour of a state of politics, as the Hobbesian paradigm dictates. In this respect it can be said that we have entered a post-Leviathan horizon.

This also explains the increasingly evident divergence between liberalism and democracy that characterizes contemporary Western societies. While democracy is still anchored to the political lexicon of sovereignty, representation, and the law, neoliberalism (albeit in contradiction with itself) appeals to the language of government, life, and rules. In this respect neoliberalism is more advanced than

democracy, precisely because for some time now neoliberalism has adopted the biopolitical horizon, something democracy has still hardly acknowledged. This anthropological and biopolitical shift has come at the expense of the democratic model. Democracy's inability to recognize the ground on which it operates ends up side-lining it from dynamics that get superficially grouped under the heading of populism. In reality, these dynamics are simply political repercussions stemming from the centrality that the dimension of biological life has acquired. This is what has radically transformed democratic procedures into a regime that can be referred to as postdemocracy.

This touches once again on the close connection between power and knowledge. How are we to imagine the informed consensus, for example, which is necessary for the democratic expression of voting rights, in a situation in which the media are in the hands of a few entrepreneurs whose aim is to protect their own interests? And how are we to navigate through democratic procedures when it comes to complex problems such as energy resources and the boundaries of human life, to which not even expert committees are capable of responding? To imagine solving problems of this kind through parliamentary majorities is both impossible and inadequate, insofar as the distinctions upon which the concept of democracy was established – those between private and public, nature and artifice, politics and economy – have collapsed. It becomes difficult to distinguish the concerns of the public sphere from those of the private sphere, technology from nature, the law from theology, when the new statute of the body explodes the abstract subjectivity of the juridical person. Birth and death, sexual life and generational life, health and disease become the fault lines along which the dams built by modern culture break up, giving rise to a radically new political phenomenology.

All three constitutive categories of democracy – the representation of voters by elected representatives, the identity between rulers and ruled, the sovereignty of the people – take on a very different meaning from the one they once had. If sovereignty becomes governmentality, representation [*rappresentanza*] mutates into performance [*rappresentazione*], understood in the theatrical, or better yet, televisual sense – which in turn transforms the concept of public, as the opposite of private, into the public of a perpetually transmitted media performance, whether broadcast through television networks or streamed online. The public we are talking about here is not only a given, but it is also constructed by surveys, polls, and referendums whose responses are already performed by the questions. In the society of the spectacle (or in the spectacle of society) in which we have been living for some time now, every dissent tends to become consent and every consent simple assent, if not applause remotely controlled by the TV format creators. The identity between the ruled and the rulers – as the limit point of direct democracy – has become an imaginary identification between leader and people, with a consequent loss of boundaries between the symbolic and the real, both of which are guided by a mimetic desire directed toward the same objects.

The problem we have before us – defined superficially in terms of “postdemocracy” or exorcised as populism – is not that of the limits or flaws of

democracy, but, on the contrary, that of its realization in the figure of its opposite. Does this mean that we must confine ourselves to witnessing the end of democracy or even to facilitating its demise? That we must cancel out this ancient word, charged with history and destiny? This is not what I mean to say. But we must be conscious of the fact that our horizon has been profoundly and irreversibly changed. A simple reform of democratic institutions is no longer in play; rather we are faced with a socio-cultural shift that runs deeper than our entire political language. Rather than fighting against the new importance that biological life has acquired, in the illusion of restoring our ancient modern vocabulary, we must be the first to place it at the centre of political action – by responding properly to the pressing demands put to use by biological life, to the dilemmas that it opens up, to the needs that it induces in increasingly large masses of women and men – within the confines of the West and those that push to gain entrance inside it.

It would not make sense in this article to try to draw up a list of prescriptions – what I personally called an affirmative biopolitics. But something can be said in general terms. Today the language of the left – at least of the European left – is absolutely bankrupt, as evidenced by the lightning disappearance of its historic parties. On this point we have to be both radical and rigorous – in the first place with ourselves. Something about our way of working, of expressing, and of thinking needs to change. We need a shift in our political lexicon that is adequate to the transformation we are undergoing. The deconstruction of the Western political lexicon was a necessity, whose urgency everyone felt and which everyone, in different ways, sought to carry out. This work has been accomplished now – by the reality of things more than by leftist intellectuals. Today the hegemonic language of the modern tradition, with all its errors and horrors, with all its imperialisms and colonialisms, is completely in pieces. Rather than continue to deconstruct what is already amply deconstructed, our task is to attempt to construct a new political language;

But this must be accomplished within the horizon that still surrounds us – the one defined by the irreversible centrality of individual and collective life. It is within this horizon that a new political subjectivity must be reconstructed and also a new principle of identity or sameness, one that is open and relational. For differences to stand out and be meaningful, they must be conceived in conjunction with identities, not as an alternative to them. Only identities, recognizable as such, can differ from each other. Of course, not all situations are alike. Not all regions have the same problems. What Latin America is experiencing in this period is quite different from Europe. The same goes for Africa and South East Asia. By now the world is divided into geographical areas and geopolitics whose plurality must be defended by a multipolar perspective. For this reason, specifically in order to define their difference, they have a vital need to construct their own identity.

Of course, a new balance needs to be created between such vast spaces, unlike the one imposed by a globalization that unifies by dividing up the drowned and the saved. This means that the West has to shift a huge amount of

vital resources – economic, medical, and ecological resources – toward the global south. This is the only way to talk about human rights that does not sound derogatory with regard to open wounds from old and new colonialisms and to unsustainable distances between obese and starving countries. Europe today must assume its historical responsibilities and play a decisive role – not only by properly welcoming war refugees, but also in support of development policies in countries most affected by war, hunger, and disease. But to do so Europe must first exist as a political subject – by acquiring a political subjectivity, which at the moment it entirely lacks. Its shortfall of political subjectivity is a problem not only for its own countries, but for the whole world. The battle over Europe has a global significance today. Europe has an urgent need to redefine itself in terms that are open, but politically realistic. The time for disintegration is now behind it. This is a tragedy that Europe experienced and is still familiar with, but certainly not a goal to set for itself, as an increasingly incoherent and vexing rhetoric of decline seeks to do. Our task is to rebuild a Europe that is more just, more balanced, more generous, thanks to greater self-awareness – of a past full of mistakes and violence but also of extraordinary riches. To get Europe moving again and to transform it at the same time, we must take its current, apparently fatal crisis as the final opportunity, and task that awaits us.