

21st-century liberal democracy and its contradictions

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Abstract

This brief paper intends to highlight the contradictions in which liberal democracy struggles within the process of globalisation, influenced as it is by the new connecting technologies. In particular, the difficult relationship between liberalism and democracy is analysed in light of the latest communitarist theories and new trends that interpret them socially.

Keywords

Democracy. Liberalism. Globalisation. People. Virtual.

1 Introduction

The emergence of a planetary, technological and globalised civilisation no doubt represents the beginning of a new phase in human history. Its origin, denomination and dating will probably be talked over in many and diverse academic discussions in the future. As is the case with all significant, pivotal transitions, its interpretation will give rise to conflicting stances. It is no coincidence that in the last twenty years an interesting debate has aroused on globalisation, which specifically characterizes this new worldwide civilisation. And also in this case there are contrasting opinions. Indeed, some date back the roots of this phenomenon to very remote times, such as those of ancient or Islamic empires, while others to more recent periods as the industrial era (or at least to modern age, which coincides with the great geographical discoveries) (OLSTEIN, 2006). It is easy to understand that, going deeper into the debate's nature, these diverse stances depend above all on the (implicit or non-implicit) premises, the historic time span and subjective point of view. This makes it sometimes difficult to orient oneself in this hermeneutic magma, where it is apparently hard to find out objective judgment criteria. The only possible one would seem that of internal coherence of the interpretative paradigms being used. Even if it is so, however, one cannot always decide which of the positions is right, since, as a matter of

principle, as non-Euclidian geometries show, it is possible to build systems that are in line with their hypotheses, but that are non-excluding the one with the other (LAFFI, [20--?]). Thus, setting about to debate on the relationship between democracy, globalisation and new technologies, we find ourselves in the thorny position of having to establish fixed points and justify them, though briefly. Now, as far as we are concerned, we intend to base our analyses on the assumption that historical phenomena become decisive in the course of events only when they are clearly recognised and can therefore be identified with a name and a definition attached to them. This hypothesis, however, is not justified by the fact that we believe, according to a too much superficially idealistic interpretation, that objects exist only because we conceive them and assign them a name. We think, instead, that the invention of new conceptual categories, new representations and neologisms spontaneously adopted by scholars, not only indicates that a given phenomenon or object is acquired as it is, but also that, since then, one can use it to interpret the past, engendering a projecting effect of the present on everything it precedes. This gnoseologic and epistemological disquisition could further be expanded, though we will drop it here, leaving to theoretical philosophers and epistemologists the last word on the topic¹.

We rather wish to highlight how the term globalisation, which is essential to understand and analyse global technological civilisation, was introduced in the socio-economic lexicon in 1962 by the prestigious magazine *The Economist*², and then spread rapidly in the 1990s (OLSTEIN, 2006), turning into a fundamental concept for any political interpretation on a worldwide level.

It is clear how this phenomenon undoubtedly dates back to more ancient times than the date when the word that identifies it first appeared. However, it had not yet been recognised and was not the subject of a scientific investigation or of consideration for the historical understanding of reality either. This means that, though already existing, globalisation was evidently not so crucial for the interpretation of the real before being introduced in the social, political and economic lexicon. However, it has become increasingly relevant since it was recognised as such. Therefore one can also affirm that this phenomenon became significant only in the second half of the 20th century. Before then, it was negligible, which means that it could be disregarded in the interpretation of the historical and socio-economic dynamics, since other elements prevailed. Social and cultural

¹ In the history of philosophical thought these positions have been largely debated opposing empiricists to rationalists, objectivists to subjectivists, spiritualists to materialists.

² See *Globalizzazione*, in *Dizionario di Storia* (TRECCANI, 2010).

phenomena, indeed, as opposed to those scientific, are not necessarily subject to binding laws and descriptions, which overlook the date when they were first introduced in a shared lexicon. For example, it is not possible to conceive a world, as far as remote, that was not regulated by the law of falling bodies formulated by Galileo only in the 17th century, or a universe that was not anyway determined by the relativity laws, before these were discovered by Einstein. It is instead possible to explain the past, in a historical and social sense, abstracting from the concepts and laws which regulate the present. Indeed what exists in the present did not necessarily exist also in the past, since the elements that qualify the social and political reality, often depending on precise inventions and human strategies, can even disappear from the historical scene and exclusively characterize only one specific era. For example, the theorist of politics or the historian would make a big mistake if, when dealing with the Greek polis or the Roman empire, wanted to apply the laws that regulate the organisation of the modern State. The latter, indeed, did not exist within that context, neither as an object, nor as a concept.

Given these methodological premises, we can thus more precisely enter in medias res, and examine democracy after the emergence of the new information technologies and the advent of globalisation.

It is no coincidence that the democratic theory became, between the 20th and the 21st centuries, the political formula of western civilization par excellence. This, which was exported also elsewhere in spite of its dubious achievements, was, and is still, deeply influenced within the planetary civilisation by the use of the media and by the global interactions between the various existing political conglomerates. In particular, thanks to the new technologies, a special form of interaction and reduplication of the real that is defined by means of the term virtual is emerging. It represents, along with globalisation, the most interesting philosophical aspect of the interaction between democracy and the new media.

To grasp its impact, it is first necessary to define what we intend with this term (virtual). It traditionally represents what is in potentiality and that, according to the Aristotelian dissertation, is determined by means of actuality. It is therefore a concept that refers to the idea of preformation and predetermination (LAWSON-TANCREDE, 1998). This type of definition in part characterizes also the most modern interpretations, which were introduced to clarify the real nature of the virtual and the sense of its interaction with empirical reality. The virtual, however, has recently acquired new and interesting meanings,

due to the incessant expansion of information technologies. As Levy affirms thereabout: “Le possible est déjà tout constitué, mais il se tient dans les limbes. Le possible se réalisera sans que rien ne change dans sa détermination ni dans sa nature. C’est un réel fantomatique, latent. Le possible est exactement comme le réel: il ne lui manque que l’existence. La réalisation d’un possible n’est pas une création, au sens plein de ce terme, car la création implique aussi la production innovante d’une idée ou d’une forme. La différence entre possible et réel est donc purement logique. Le virtuel, quant à lui, ne s’oppose pas au réel mais à l’actuel. Contrairement au possible, statique et déjà constitué, le virtuel est comme le complexe problématique, le nœud de tendances ou de forces qui accompagne une situation, un événement, un objet ou n’importe quelle entité et qui appelle un processus de résolution : l’actualisation”³, and again “Le réel ressemble au possible; en revanche, l’actuel ne ressemble en rien au virtuel : il lui répond”⁴. As is shown, Levy resumes the Aristotelian interpretation, completing it with a scheme made up of the terms real – possible and actual – virtual in mutual opposition. Thus, the virtual avoids opposing the real, where a too naive and hasty interpretation of the phenomenon normally relegates it. In fact, the virtual generally does not oppose the real; it rather expresses itself within a plan of existence irrelevant to empirical materiality and heaviness. This does not necessarily lead it into contradiction with reality, but it makes it complementary to it, as an active element that completes and shapes the material world. One can even infer, according to this interpretation, that man is the first virtual machine ever existed on the planet, in the sense that his mind has always produced images and representations of things, which do not limit themselves to a mere mimetic reproduction of the external world. On the contrary, any representation, even if only mental, of reality has the function not only to understand it and make it meaningful to manage to orient oneself within it, but also to factually express the capacity of human species to problematize any subject of experience. This, in turn, implicitly determines the possibility of transforming and using empirical beings through the creation of performative models that can potentially become actual. Rather than opposing the real, therefore, the actual completes it, interacting with it with the aim of producing various types

³ “The possible is already completely constituted, but it remains in the limbo. It will realise itself without changing anything of its determination and nature; it is an imaginary, latent real. The possible is exactly as the real: it only lacks of existence. The realisation of a possible is not a creation, in the full sense of the term, since creation also involves the innovative production of a form or an idea. The difference between possible and real is therefore purely logical. The virtual, in turn, does not oppose the real but the actual. Contrary to the possible, which is static and already constituted, the virtual is like the problematic complex, the tangle of tendencies and forces that come with a situation, an event, an object or any entity, and that require a process of transformation: actualization”. (LÉVY, 1995, p. 15).

⁴ “The real resembles the possible; the actual, instead, is not at all similar to the virtual: he replies”. Ibid, p. 15.

of performances in it. In the past, however, for cultural as well as technical reasons connected with the capacity of the means at one's disposal, man could effectively transform his surrounding environment only partially as compared to what happened after the industrial revolution (BELLINI, 2012). Besides, from the second half of the 20th century on, thanks to information technologies and automation, which has remarkably increased the power of the industrial apparatus, the production of virtual models has become the real centre of gravity of any significant human act, leading to new and interesting social and political, as well as scientific and technological, dynamics. The virtual, in other words, attracts the real with an intensity that was unknown before, globalising it by way of the media and changing its status. The empirical reality thus definitively drops unchangeability and repetitiveness, which were typically mythicized in ancient civilisation (ELIADE, 1954, 1962, 1963), in order to completely become a freely pliable matter, depending on the scientific competences and technological power of those who operate.

2 Liberal and virtual democracies

The cultural and historical change, which has concisely been described above, not only touches upon western society, but also the planet as a whole, and it influences every aspects of human life long since. Also politics is inevitably being affected. In particular, globalisation and the new technologies, especially as regards the virtualising pressures that are conditioning the global political horizon, are engendering a deep transformation of representative democracy and its logics. Thereabout it is thus necessary to analyse the process of legitimisation of power and of the changes that it is undergoing in this technological and social context.

Modern representative liberal-democracy has always based its *raison d'être* on the idea that the people precedes power and holds it as a constituent force (SIEYÈS, 1964). Its representatives and government, instead, represent constituted power, which ideally acts not only by virtue of the fact that it legitimises itself on people's will as a constituent element, but also because, in the democratic formula, this constituted power must be exercised to the benefit of the subject itself (the people), which constitutes it⁵. Allowing for this formulation, which links constituent power (people) to the constituted one (the

⁵ On the mythical character of these assumptions and on the subjectivity of this ideological construction, see also Bellini (BELLINI, 2006, 2011).

representatives), we cannot help noticing how the gradual virtualisation of liberal-democracy is highlighting all the contradictions thereof.

This phenomenon, indeed, gives rise, as regards the present political dynamics, to the overlapping of two elements: an external one, it might be called, which is connected with globalisation and with a planetary imposition of the liberal-democratic political formula as the only legitimate possible; and an internal one, which is conditioned by an increasing difficulty, on part of the constituted power, to represent the people as constituent power. Firstly, it is necessary to note that the globalisation of the liberal-democratic political formula depends on the capacity of building and effectively conveying its model of ideological reference, which is summarised by the narration according to which the people holds power and exercises it through its representatives. This model in turn becomes effective in producing consensus only when this is adequately represented (virtualised) in the media, so as to prove to be the only legitimate one, deploying a rational as well as emotional involvement on a planetary scale. After World War II, this operation undoubtedly succeeded in all the western countries allied of the US, allowing liberal-democracy to establish oneself in many States that had experienced different political formulae, such as Nazism (Germany) and Fascism (Italy). After 1989, moreover, the liberal-democratic system spread, though it was established more formally than substantially, also in the ex-soviet countries, where real socialism (Communism) was in force. Thus, each country has adjusted to the liberal-democratic formula, though re-interpreting it within its cultural frameworks, which have sometimes distorted its original sense, especially with regard to many of the liberal axioms, which are often not completely respected. Russia, just to name the most macroscopic example, appears to be rather behind in effectively guaranteeing some fundamental human rights (POLITKOVSKAJA, 2004). It should also be added thereto that liberal-democratic systems are almost completely unfeasible in most Islamic countries, where in the best case one witnesses that populist – dictatorial and/or directly conditioned by religious power – democracies are establishing. These examples let thus emerge the first and more macroscopic contradiction, which is connected with the global display of a model of virtualised liberal democracy, which does not find any real application in many cases, but is experienced as a merely mediatic and ideological subject, generally used to produce

consensus and to spread a sort of collective false consciousness⁶. This, for example, induces many governments to justify war in some lands as a fight to establish “democracy” (liberal-democracy), though being aware that this will not happen in any case.

This first contradiction is, however, inevitable for any political formula⁷, since there could be no adhesion to authority⁸ (whatever it is) if this is not conditioned by a narration which yields by nature a gap between empirical reality and its collective representation. In other words, the legitimization of power and command cannot but be pretense-like, even when those who produce the narration or the founding myth of a certain political order act completely in good faith. This derives from the fact that there anyway exists a gap between representation and reality, especially in the historical and political fields, where any phenomenon is subject to a remarkable variety of possible interpretations. Historically, moreover, political power has been deduced from the holy field of the divine and of the non-human, as well as directly from the people. In both cases it is always extremely difficult to prove the validity of such reasoning showing objective and conclusive evidence. In the case of God, the issue is quite evident, since it is difficult to absolutely prove his existence, in spite of the numerous attempts by various philosophers and thinkers, all of which are capable of being contested in light of reason and of the possible empirical proofs put forward (ODIFREDDI, 1999). In the case of the people, instead, it is rather dubious that such an aggregate of individuals has ever existed before power and that, therefore, holds the latter as an attribute. Indeed, it is possible to provide evidence also for the opposite, that is that the people is a political subject, for whose existence and subsistence power contributes a lot⁹.

For the aims of this brief paper, the second contradiction proves to be more interesting; this is inside the dynamics of glamorization and virtualisation of constituted power, since it undermines, in the entire western world, the basis itself of the liberal-democratic system. In particular, on the part of some post-Marxism thinkers (HARDT;

⁶ The concept is derived from Engels, who describes it as follows: “Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, indeed, but with a false consciousness. The real motives impelling him remain unknown to him, otherwise it would not be an ideological process at all. Hence he imagines false or apparent motives”. (ENGELS, 1968). Here it is intended in a more general sense, as a distorted perception of the real, conveyed by the mass media through the exhibition of unfeasible models in certain historical-geographical contexts.

⁷ A term derived from G. Mosca, who indicates how those who hold power justify such condition of things. “[...] ruling classes do not justify their power exclusively by de facto possession of it, but try to find a moral and legal basis for it, representing it as the logical and necessary consequence of doctrines and beliefs that are generally recognized and accepted”. (MOSCA, 1939, p. 70).

⁸ Meant as a source of legitimization of power and political action, hence it is always necessary to justify in the eyes of the governed people the reason that a class, a group or an individual holds a real power and the possibility to exercise a coercive command.

⁹ See note 5.

NEGRI, 2012) and, in Italy, also of the leaders of the new political 5 Star movement (CASALEGGIO & ASSOCIATI, 2007, 2008), disquieting rumours rise, which sing the praises of a substantial political transformation of representative democracy and of the suppression of private property rights. Following radically communitarist logics, theorists of politics like Hardt and Negri (2012) exhort to go beyond representative democracy for the benefit of forms of direct democracy, which would completely eliminate the gap between constituent power (the people) and constituted power (the representatives). To this it is to be added that, while the liberal theorists of representative democracy place natural right or a series of inalienable individual rights before the people and its constituent power, as an extreme bulwark against the power of majority, the most contemporary theories on direct democracy do not refer to natural law or to individual rights either. In this case the new technologies instead are, more or less explicitly, the miraculous means for a utopian project where, through the creation of tailor-made virtual environments, it is possible to realise forms of direct democracy on a large scale, which should incredibly eliminate any forms of injustice and inequality. Indeed, by eliminating time and physical barriers, which in the past obviously made this extreme form of democracy unfeasible for any great political and territorial units, the new information technologies allow contradiction, which was originally intrinsic in the relationship between democracy and liberalism, to reveal itself with all its bluntness. The appearance, also in the 21st century, of a sort of possible totalitarian democracy (TALMON, 1952), brought about by the incapacity of adequately protect individual rights with instances higher than the idea of the (absolute) sovereign people, along with the possibility of engendering forms of direct democracy at the mercy of every type of demagogues and tyrants, generates a potentially explosive mix for western civilization. What is definitely put into play is the double nature of liberal-democracy, which rests on the protection of privileges and individual rights within a logic where power is based on the myth of the sovereign people. Indeed, if on a virtual level this people – within a context where no holy, natural, metaphysical or cultural orders, which could be able to limit its will, are recognised anymore – should in a short time really exist as constituent and constituted power, de facto overlooking the necessity to elect its representatives, then there would not exist any constraints any longer and everything would be allowed. Therefore, the only possible lifeline for those who are still interested in defending individual liberties and the person's dignity would be that of revealing that also the myth of the sovereign people, such as jusnaturalism (a doctrine of natural law), does not lie at all on any absolute,

unchangeable and incontrovertible logic, but is itself a historical and cultural product. Indeed, it is easy to show that the people can never come before power or hold it in any way either, since its existence itself requires an identitary binding agent that only hierarchical and asymmetric relationships can effectively guarantee¹⁰. To sum up, with the complicity of the new technologies, as we attempted to show, globalised civilisation is hazardously surrendering to that form of tyranny feared by a great liberal thinker as Tocqueville.

I seek to trace the novel features under which despotism may appear in the world. The first thing that strikes the observation is an innumerable multitude of men all equal and alike, incessantly endeavoring to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives. Each of them, living apart, is as a stranger to the fate of all the rest – his children and his private friends constitute to him the whole of mankind; [...] Above this race of men stands an immense and tutelary power, which takes upon itself alone to secure their gratifications, and to watch over their fate. That power is absolute, minute, regular, provident, and mild. It would be like the authority of a parent, if, like that authority, its object was to prepare men for manhood; but it seeks on the contrary to keep them in perpetual childhood: [...] For their happiness such a government willingly labors, but it chooses to be the sole agent and the only arbiter of that happiness: it provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, regulates the descent of property, and subdivides their inheritances—what remains, but to spare them all the care of thinking and all the trouble of living? Thus it every day renders the exercise of the free agency of man less useful and less frequent; it circumscribes the will within a narrower range, and gradually robs a man of all the uses of himself. (TOCQUEVILLE, 1899, p. 332).

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¹⁰ If one wanted to answer the question about what the people is, it would not be possible not to evoke the concept of identity, which allows to distinguish, through language, imagination and shared values, a people from a mere aggregate of individuals gathered together in a place. The social contract – which instead postulates individuals that, before associating themselves, live isolated – does not have any empirical foundation, since the human species could not survive if everyone lived parted from his counterparts. The existence of identity in turn involves power as a relational element, which unites individuals according to precise relationships of command and obedience. These asymmetries between individuals naturally precede the concept and the existence itself of any other cultural superstructure, included the people and the state. Indeed, man, as a social and gregarious animal, bases his existence on the assignment of tasks to the members of the original reference group, which produces hierarchical structures where one can hand down the most basic survival techniques (e. g. hunting, vegetable harvest, agriculture, etc.).

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A democracia liberal do século 21 e suas contradições

Resumo

Este breve artigo destaca as contradições com as quais a democracia liberal luta dentro do processo de globalização, influenciada pelas novas tecnologias de conexão. Analisa-se principalmente a difícil relação entre liberalismo e democracia sob a luz das teorias comunitaristas mais recentes e de novas tendências que as interpretam socialmente.

Palavras-chave

Democracia. Liberalismo. Globalização. Pessoas. Virtual.

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