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FROM POST-DEMOCRACY TO POST-TRUTH POLITICS: THE CRISIS OF CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACY IN THREE ANALYTICAL MOVES

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Abstract

This essay is aimed at thematising the topic of post-truth in the 'post-democratic' constellation. From this perspective, it firstly illustrates contents and features of the broad concept of post-democracy, therefore analysing both the issue of the crisis of democracy and the impact of contemporary neoliberal platform capitalism on these process. Hence, it addresses the related topics of new technologies and changes in political communication, along with the unfolding of the neo-populist phenomenology. A number of concluding meta-theoretical reflections on the relationship between democracy, knowledge and political representation are also developed.

Keywords

Post-democracy, neo-populism, post-truth, public sphere.

Resumen

Este ensayo tiene como objetivo tematizar el tema de la posverdad en la constelación 'posdemocrática'. Desde esta perspectiva, en primer lugar, ilustra los contenidos y las características del amplio concepto de posdemocracia, luego analiza tanto el tema de

la crisis de la democracia como el impacto que el modelo de capitalismo neoliberal contemporáneo tiene sobre estos procesos. Por lo tanto, aborda los temas relacionados con las nuevas tecnologías y los cambios en la comunicación política, junto con el desarrollo de la fenomenología neopopulista. También se propondrán, como conclusión, una serie de reflexiones metateóricas sobre la relación entre democracia, conocimiento y representación política.

Palabras clave

Posdemocracia, neopululismo, posverdad, esfera pública.

Introduction

One of the most influential concepts developed within the political theory debate over the last two decades, has certainly been the term "post-democracy". Indeed, in 2003, the political sociologist Colin Crouch devised an interpretative category to read democracy changes which would soon become a 'paradigm'. He illustrated how, along a democratic trajectory, democracies first followed a developmental path during the XX century, then, since the 1990s, they have started to decline as regards the content and scope of citizenship rights and participatory practices, returning[1] to the XIX century starting point of democratisation development, characterised by an elitist society, weak on citizens' rights and expectations.

The philosopher Rancière also uses the same term for a similar diagnosis, namely that contemporary XXI century democracies have lost their rootedness in popular sovereignty, having reduced themselves to the ordinary 'technocratic' "administration of things", to quote the Sant-Simon dictum. Similarly, another influential scholar, Oakeshott, maintained that democracy is being fed by two kinds of politics, namely the politics of scepticism and the politics of faith. Whilst the former entails the development of democracy within institutions, the rule of law and the pragmatic governing of collective life, the latter entails mobilisation of popular enthusiasm, direct participation and a "quest for increased power to accomplish it, and confidence that such power can be safely entrusted to human beings" (Canovan, 1999, p. 8). The balance between the two is deemed to be the 'right way' for democracy to flourish and develop.

From this perspective, Margaret Canovan, one of the most influential scholars on the topic, renames these definitions of democracy as 'redemptive' and 'pragmatic' and maintains that democracy can be better defined as a double-face regime, considering not only that the redemptive and pragmatic faces are opposed but also that they are interdependent. It is within this spectrum that the crisis of democracy is unfolding today, since the 'neo-populist' wave seems to challenge the negative technocratic version of the 'pragmatic' face of democracy, whilst the balance between the two faces seems to move back and forth erratically. Indeed, the technological revolution has had a deep impact on the day-to-day functioning of democratic processes, understood as government by public opinion (Urbinati, 2014), in a contradictory way. Expected to increase the quantum of rationality and knowledge within the democratic process, it

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1 The historical comparison has been formulated not to envisage a strict similarity but in order to capture both the significance of the ongoing deep transformations and the democratic 'decline' in contemporary democracies.

ended up introducing emotional elements and irrationality within this very process, causing what is regarded as the post-truth syndrome or post-factual democracy, in terms that we shall clarify further (D'Ancona, 2017; Engesser,Ernst,Esser & Büchel 2017).

Here below, I will address the democratic crisis issue in three fundamental analytical steps. Firstly, we will thematise the main accounts of the 'crisis' developed within political theory and the most recent political sociological debate. Then, I will analyse the emergent features of the neo-populist wave, not only as far as the transformation of the political landscape is concerned – namely the map of contemporary political cleavages which have undergone deep changes – but also as regards the structural transformations of capitalism strictly connected with the spread of the new technologies, as well as its relationship with democracy and its 'regime of (post)-truth'. In this vein, I maintain that these changes, from the Fordist-Keynesian constellation to the bio-capitalist and digitalised economy, hugely influence both forms and substance of democracy. The third analytical element pertains to meta-theoretical reflections on these transformations, as far as the relationships between democracy, knowledge and political representation are concerned (Fumagalli, 2011).

The Crisis of Democracy, Theories of the Crisis and the Post-democratic Account: Setting the Theoretical Landscape

The "democratic paradox" of recent decades, consisting of the contextual celebration of the global diffusion of democratic regimes along with the announcement of the crisis of democracy as both a 'technology of government' and a model of political constitution (Agamben, 2010), has defined the perimeter of both the theoretical and political debate on representative democracy (Bobbio, 1995; Zolo, 1992). It is worth trying first to unpackage the various accounts and interpretations of the concept of the crisis, considering how the "crisis of democracy" is deeply embroiled in the various 'narratives' which represent the crisis itself. From this perspective, the post-democratic diagnosis formulated by Colin Crouch allows us to observe a long-term process "whereby all the institutions of liberal democracy survived and functioned, but where the vital energy of the political system no longer rested within them, but had disappeared into small private circles of economic and political elites" (Crouch, 2019, p. 126). The author then specified that

for democracy to be flourishing […] movements emerging from the population at large, unprocessed by the elite's political managers, must from time to time to be able to give the system a shock, raising new questions that elite would sooner not discuss. I mentioned three movements that had been still capable of doing this in recent years: feminism, environmentalism and xenophobic populism. What I did not anticipate was that the lead would be taken by the last of these to a massive extent.

In other words, while there seems to be agreement among scholars about the diagnosis of post-democracy and the impact of the transformations of capitalism, namely the reduction of welfare policies, the crisis of political parties, along with deep changes in political representation mechanisms, doubts persist about the prognosis, namely about the possible reactions and remedies which could ensue. Whilst social movements, and feminist and environmental movements in particular, were expected to counteract the elitist, technocratic version of XXI century democratic regimes, as Crouch in particular maintains (and, similarly, as one of the main scholars in social movement studies such as Donatella della Porta has testified) (Della Porta, 2015), conversely it seems to be neo-populism gaining centre stage in opposing the "sceptic", technocratic, 'elitist' face of democracy. Certainly, the global recession bursting onto the scene in 2007-2008, and the unfolding of austerity measures and the social disease which followed, brought a broad wave of global protests – in 2011 – in various countries, but also a cultural backlash of xenophobic, conservative and neo-populist movements. Thus, two different waves of protest manifested themselves in the aftermath of the global recession, developing the neo-populist wave, wherein scholars distinguish two different strands (Diamanti & Lazar, 2018)[2], namely right-wing populism and its left-wing version (Anselmi, 2017; Moffit, 2016).

It is worth developing an overview of the main accounts formulated within the different 'narratives' about the crisis of democracy starting with some preliminary considerations. Regarded as a mass-political regime, representative democracy has been depicted alternatively as ineffective, incomplete, too demanding or not demanding enough on the normative ground, according to the different 'notions' of representative democracy, namely the liberal model of political representation, born in the age of

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2 For an account of leftist social movements and parties such as, for instance 15-M and Podemos in Spain or Corbyn in Great Britain, Sanders in the USA, and the movement Five Stars in Italy (whose political collocation within the leftist domains seems to be at least contending), see Diamanti & Lazar (2018).

modern revolutions, the elitist and neoclassical Schumpeterian democratic model, or the social-democratic Welfarist version, within which broader forms of political participation were achieved up to the 1970s (Held,1997; Lo Schiavo, 2014; Palano, 2012).

However, since the 1970s, two main accounts of the crisis of democracy, which became one of the main debate topics in that period, have been formulated by scholars. These are the "conservative" diagnosis elaborated by the Trilateral Commission (Crozier, Huntington, Watanucki) in 1975, and the "progressive" interpretation of the "systemic crisis" of the political rationality of the democratic state insofar as its functions of reproduction of capitalism were to be reconciled with "democratic" and Welfarist performance (Habermas, 1973). Thus, the conservative diagnosis (which functioned as a self-fulfilling prophecy) formulated by the Trilateral Commission, classified the social movement waves of protest since the end of the 1960s, as the manifestation of an overload of participatory democracy and as a radical challenge to the integration processes that democratic political systems as such were expected to perform (Mastropaolo, 2011).

To clarify that point it is possible to observe how, within the framework of the cold war order, the Liberal-Welfarist representative western democracies had institutionalized and widened social citizenship within "real" democratic regimes. A specific Welfarist economic constitution that contributed to the development of legitimacy and trust within western societies has been targeted by a profound process of reconfiguration of economic rationale, namely from the Keynesian regulation of economics to monetarist and neoliberal rules. Thus, spending cuts and surveillance of inflation rates, the reduction of tax revenues and the lowering of the redistributive effects of fiscal burdens, have been implemented within the framework of neoliberal policies (Lo Schiavo, 2014; Moini, 2016). [3]

A sort of "anti-egalitarian mutation" of representative democracies has taken place over the last three decades, reducing the substantial legitimacy of contemporary democracies (Urbinati, 2013). As far as the impact of the economic "crisis" is concerned, insofar as it has been considered a catalyst of the social problems caused by the neoliberal restructuring of economic regulation, what seems to be theoretically needed is to analyse the extent to which the crisis can be considered merely the result of casualties in financial market gambling or rather if it can be better grasped as the structural

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3 In other words, it is possible to say that the 'name' of the crisis of democracy is that of the hegemony of neoliberal 'ideologies', techniques of government, forms of knowledge – according to the analytical view of Foucault, who saw power as always deeply intertwined with knowledge and models of 'governing'; see Lo Schiavo (2014); Moini (2016).

effect of the profound process of 'neoliberalisation' of the market and social relations. In fact, the "principled belief" of market competition seems to have become a widespread normative assumption within globalized societies. In this vein, the long-lasting global economic recession of 2008 can be considered as both the triggering event of populist distrust toward democratic representative institutions or rather as one of the main causes of the populist syndrome in itself.

It is worth underlining here that the critical account of the post-democratic interpretation of the crisis of democracy seems to corroborate the latter hypothesis. It is also worth highlighting here that, in a recent highly influential contribution, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris have clarified in which terms we can interpret the relation between the economic crisis and a deep political cultural transformation of contemporary democracies along with the consequent unfolding of global neo-populism. According to them, we are witnessing "the silent revolution in reverse", that is a cultural backlash which has diverted western democracies from post-materialistic values (which put emphasis on freedom of expression, environmental protection, gender equality, and tolerance of gays, handicapped people, and foreigners) to a conservative, if not xenophobic, populist and authoritarian orientation. As the two authors specify,

> we may be witnessing a shift in political cleavage comparable to that of the 1930s, which saw the rise of Fascism, on one hand, and the emergence of the New Deal and its West European parallels on the other hand. The reaction against rapid cultural change and immigration has brought a surge of support for xenophobic populist parties among the less secure strata. But rising inequality as also produced an insurgency on the Left by politicians like Bernie Sanders […]. So far, emotionally-charged cultural issues cutting across economic lines have hindered the emergence of a new coalition. But both the rise of populist movements and the growing concern for inequality reflect widespread dissatisfaction with existing political alignments (Inglehart & Norris, p. 452).

The present wave of populism, renamed neo-populism, differently embodied in different countries, at least presents some recurrent elements that allow us to recognize a sort of minimum common denominator of the contemporary populist syndrome. Firstly, the paramount reference in political discourse to the "people" as the source of democracy, neglecting any form of intermediate organization between the people itself and the leader who is able to interpret and manifest the will of the people as a whole; the

verticalization of political space, which is no longer designed on a horizontal axis (that is on the contraposition between the Left and the Right), since it manifests the contrast between elites and the people, the powerful and the powerless. The refusal of cultural diversity and xenophobic manifestations against immigrants regarded as scapegoats in the face of the huge social problems, the manifestations of populism from above – according to some scholars who have identified as neo-populist the politics of some contemporary political leaders (from Trump to Macron, to Renzi, Salvini and the Five star movement, Cameroon, Orbàn even with some differences between them) – are part and parcel of this syndrome (Anselmi, 2017; Moffit, 2016). The crisis of the role of political parties within representative democracies on one hand, and the transformations of political communication in social media on the other, along with the 'structural' impact of the economic crisis, are deemed to have contributed to the unfolding of the current populistic wave (Mair,2016; Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018; Sustein, 2017).

Neo-populisms, Bio-hypermedia, Post-truth and the Public Sphere

This analytical account begins with an overview of the main characteristics of the current neo-populist waves, regarded as the main symptoms envisaged within the worst-case scenario of an irreversible crisis of representative democracy, or rather as the manifestation of deep transformations. The recurrent usage of the prefix 'neo' before the term populism in recent political debate testifies not only to a revamping of the old phenomenon of XX century populist parties, but also the emerging of new forms of populism in the XXI century.

Thus, although elements of continuity in the constitutive components of the populist syndrome have been recognized, new features of populism as a 'political style' have emerged, showing a sort of 'elective affinity' between this new wave and the impact of new media in political communication (Demata, 2016; Waisbord, 2018). In this sense, at least conceptually, an element of continuity is given by the composed, complex, contradictory and contested configuration of populism as a socio-political phenomenon, which has been pictured by scholars as a slippery concept, or rather a fuzzy concept, also recognizable as a 'constellation' or 'configuration' of elements in a Weber and Eisenstadt conceptual lexicon (Anselmi, 2017). Regarding changes, it is possible to identify a specific "populist communicative ideology", articulated in these

dimensions: an appeal to 'the people' as "a catch-all expression that politicians use, ir-respective of their political affiliation, to unite the electorate" (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018, p. 4). Other elements, such as "attacking the élite" since the concept of populism is built on anti-elitism and anti-establishment stances" (2018, p. 6), which also implies "ostracising the others", that is developing a narrative "based on the dangerous others concept that targets a common enemy within groups of population that are stigma-tised and excluded from 'the people'" (2018, p. 4).

Based on these considerations, here below we will first account for the main char-acteristics of populism and neo-populism, then we will try to ascertain the nature of the nexus between neo-populism and new media. In this framework, our observations will also draw on the literature that analyses the impact of platform capitalism, namely the structural dimensions of contemporary capitalism as it deeply affects the various social domains and 'lifeworld'. Indeed, 'bio-hypermedia' is one of the most influential neologisms diffused in the contemporary lexicon unfolding since the fourth industrial revolution has deeply transformed contemporary societies.

Bio-hypermedia is the conceptual term devised by assembling the concept of bio-politics (Foucault, 2005)[4] and hyper-media, the latter being considered as the epitome of the paramount influence of new technologies on societies. The hyper-connecting and 'wearable' technologies that then become parts of our own bodies, subjecting us to multisensory perceptions as real and virtual dimensions' merge, extend and amplify emotional stimuli and change the way we interact and communicate (Griziotti, 2018). According to Han, not only a biopolitical account of this new human condition pro-duced by the interfacing and intertwining of humans and machines, but also a more proper "psycho-political" (Han,2016) interpretation of this new 'reality' may clarify the revolutionary impact of these new technologies on everyday life. In this vein, techno-logical and capitalistic changes have to be read conjointly and conceptualized.

Platform capitalism is the new paradigm of XXI century capitalism, which is also regarded as the product of its financialization, that since the 1990s has become more in-fluential than production; new technologies have fostered these transformations, which in turn affect the organisation of labour (Fumagalli, 2018). In other words, post-modern capitalism, which is based on the information economy, is undermining the fordist model of work: the creation of value no longer depends on (or not so much) the exploitation of

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4 This conceptual term can be considered one of the most influential if not paradigmatic expressions within the contempo-rary social sciences lexicon. In fact, Foucault identified this term to pinpoint the nature of power and politics in modernity; see Foucault (2004a; 2004b).

traditional workers' subjectivity and its form (wage labour), whilst a new kind of worker is emerging, namely the 'knowledge worker'. Neoliberal post-modern capitalism has found the new oil for the capitalist accumulation of the XXI century: data mining, machine learning, the algorithm economy, big data; thus, platform capitalism constitutes the new capitalistic 'structure'.

The process of digitalization and datification has made the engineering of everyday life possible; today there is no area of our digitally-mediated existence that is not the result of an algorithmic calculation (2018)[5], from social networks on Facebook to recommended products on Amazon, from personalized advertisements to short-cuts to return home from work on Google maps. What matters more here is the political impact of these technologies and their "neo-populistic" effects on political communication and political lexicon. There are multiple effects to be taken into account. Firstly, it is worth considering what, according to the literature, are the main features of populism and of neo-populism. No simple account can be given, due to the complex, composed and contested 'nature' of populism itself.

To put it simply, it is possible to say that scholars recognize populism as made up mainly of: "a) the existence of two homogeneous units of analysis [namely] "the people" and "the elite"; b) the antagonistic relationship between people and elites; c) the idea of popular sovereignty; d) the positive appreciation of the people and the denigration of the elite" [(Stanley, 2008, p. 102)]. These have been recurrent elements of populism waves since the second half of the XIX century, namely in the United States and in Russia[6], whilst at least a part of the history of the democratization processes in the long run has been characterized by the quest of the people to be included in the public space. Thus populism, meant as "populist democracy" (Canovan, 1981) is part and parcel of the history of democracy. From this perspective, the historical experience of popular mobilisation with Peronism in Argentina, exemplifies this component of the populist phenomenology.

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5 By definition, by algorithm we mean a set of mathematical rules and procedures aimed at transforming a given input into a specific output; an actual assessment or decision process, performed according to a set of explicit rules. Each algorithm is the result of a human modelling of a problem to be solved and of the context in which it is situated; on this topic see Fumagalli (2018), *Per una teoria del valore-rete*, in Gambetta D. (a cura di), *Datacrazia*, cit., pp. 46-64.; Griziotti G. (2018), *Big emotional data*, in D. Gambetta (a cura di), *Datacrazia*, cit., pp. 70-91.
6 Populism first appeared in Russia in the XIX century. It was the political organisation *Zemlja Volija* (Land and Freedom) to connect the mobilisation of student movements, peasants, to oppose the tsarist regime. In the same period, that is during the second half of the XIX century, People's Parties were born in the USA as an expression of rural society opposing the industrial elites of the West Coast. It is possible to consider well beyond this brief account the analyses of Damiano Palano, (2016).

Recent accounts on neo-populist manifestations, appearing in the theoretical de-
bate, illustrate the xenophobic, authoritarian orientations of political parties, which
draw on the cultural backlash against post-materialist values, as Inglehart and Nor-
ris explain (2017). Conversely, there is also a 'leftist' interpretation of the quest for a
revamped popular sovereignty against supranational, intergovernmental, capitalistic,
elitist and neo-colonial power such as the South-American "pink wave" of leftist gov-
ernments (from Evo Morales to Lula, to Kirchner in Bolivia, Brazil and Argentine) or
Bernie Sanders in the USA and Corbyn in Great Britain. Being considered the epitome
of the neo-populist wave, two main events in recent years have marked the recent po-
litical history of (neo)-populism. The case studies of Trump's election in the USA and
the Brexit referendum in Great Britain have given rise to an astonishing number of
analyses in scholarly debate, both in political theory and sociology. What has mainly
been highlighted relates to the impact of social media and social networks in political
communication, in that they seem to embody the new post-truthful physiognomy of
the (former) Habermasian public sphere.

A series of concepts exemplify the conceptual nexus we are addressing: there seems
to be an elective affinity between post-truth and populism, which in turn derives from
the structural transformation of the public sphere produced by the impact of social
media and social networks. The latter shape a process of fragmentation and radicali-
sation of the "publics" participating in the political debate and forming public opinion
within the public sphere; a transformation that, in turn, can be brought back to the
impact of digitalized capitalism (Fumagalli, 2018). To clarify that point here, it is pos-
sible to see how "the current 'populist moment' brings up important questions within
the scholars' community. Populism calls into question the fundamental principles of
democratic communication, namely the need for fact-based, reasoned debate, tolerance
and solidarity – essential principles for viable public life in today's globalised and multi-
cultural societies" (Waisboard, 2018, p. 2). According to this interpretation, "the kind of
post-truth politics represented by populism thrives in the current conditions of public
communication" (2018). From this perspective:

> Post-truth captures new conditions for public communication that signal the
> impossibility of truth as shared assessments about reality. 'Post-truth' should
> not be confused with deliberate distortion, fake news, and alternative facts –
> that is, with the intentional production of falsehoods to deceive public […].
> Instead, 'post-truth' communication denotes the absence of conditions in the

public sphere for citizens to concur on objectives and processual norms to determine the truth as verifiable statements about reality. Recent developments have deepened the obstacles for truth-telling and revealed social and communicative rifts that foster post-truth politics. […]. Post-truth implies the levelling of opportunities for making any statements about reality that can potentially be deemed credible. The modernist notion that truth is determined by the convention of the scientific paradigm or by intersubjective agreement over norms clashes with the ample circulation of widespread fact-less beliefs popularly considered to be accurate representation of reality (2018, pp.3-4).

In other words, post-truth political communication pertains to a structural and functional transformation of the conditions of public debate within the public sphere. Since the Habermasian theory of communicative action has been established in political theory, the historical and theoretical analysis of the 'public sphere' emphasised the centrality of the 'cognitive' and moral premises of this cultural and societal space: the claims of validity, truth, correctness and sincerity are the building blocks of this 'moral' and 'cognitive' construction.

On the normative ground, solidarity between strangers, an attitude shared by private individuals who gather as a 'public' in order to care about public affairs, who still maintain different opinions while debating them, being able, at the end of a 'deliberative process', to achieve a common understanding, whenever the 'normative' force of the 'better argument' posed on a rational and 'moral' level, may prevail. In this sense, the normative conditions[7] of the public sphere in democratic regimes draw on the fact that "the prerequisite for any functional public sphere is that all citizens must be given equal access to it, and they must have freedom to express their opinions publicly and without restraint on matters of public interest" (Demata, 2016, p. 85). The characterising features of contemporary social media are so diversified that it is impossible to draw general conclusions on the nature of political discussion on the Internet. Therefore, it is worth noticing that "while the availability of technology is not in itself the cause of political discussion, it should be said that technology may facilitate (or impede) discussion and deliberation" (2016, p. 86).

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7 The concept of the 'ideal speech situation' in the Habermasian theory of action has been repeatedly contested in the theoretical debate and within critical theory. It is thus of particular interest the differing position of Foucault as far as the 'argumentation as a practice of critique'. In this sense, for Foucault it is possible to think of communication (and communicative action) as a possible strategy of criticism and struggle that may be privileged, but not utopistically substituted for other strategies, while 'power' is hardly divisible in different contexts by different regimes of 'truth' and knowledge; see Sorrentino (2008).

Thus, social networks affect the public sphere in both its structure and functioning. The abstract public sphere, namely the more ample and inclusive dimension of the Habermasian construction (Habermas, 1992), along with its "organized" intermediate level are changing profoundly[8]. Algorithms and internet profiles of Web navigators and 'customers' are key in the construction of what we can call the individual preference-laden communication system. Within so-called "echo-chambers" a "community" of internet navigators share the same views, convey the same preferences, share and deem true the same stories, transforming a free and innumerable 'swarm' (namely free people on the web) into a broad beehive with 'individualised' closed cells. This framework then ends up reducing and/or excluding room for manoeuvre for the formation of an open, broad, multiple, even conflicting confrontation between 'different' opinions and views. The post-truth communication regime seems, therefore, to unfold between the proliferation of fake news, that is the case in point in this new communication style, on the one hand, and the erosion of the very same condition to maintain the pluralistic, contested, complex, contentious construction of public opinion, on the other (Demata, 2016; Ferraris, 2017).

Post-Truth at Issue: Definitions and Problems

The elective affinity between populism and post-truth, namely the radicalised and fragmented regime of truth within a mutated public sphere via the impact of new media, emerges since the political communication style of politicians has changed profoundly. According to Demata in particular,

> By using SNSs, politicians can plug into our lives and approach us directly: most of them have Facebook pages or Twitter accounts, communicate with us in often familiar language, and are keen to be seen doing domestic, everyday activities. […] The appearance of interacting with the people is more important than actual interaction, which is virtually non-existent […]. While the technology gives us the impression (and the possibility) of a two-way communication, the reality is that most politicians are not interested in opening a true dialogue and in listening

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8 Actually, in his theoretical and historical analysis of the public sphere Habermas had thematised the challenges that the market economy and the mediatization of public opinion had launched to the normative basis and functions of the public sphere within representative democracies.

to ideas from their constituents, but only in mobilizing them around some new
initiative or message (Demata, 2016, p. 85).

In this framework, (neo)-populism as a political style, or as a 'thin'[9] ideology, con-
sists of "an appeal to 'the people' versus the 'elite', 'bad manners' and the performance of
the crisis, breakdown or threat"(Moffit, 2016). In this vein, it can also be conceived as a
gradational concept, with different shades, a sort of 'grey area' wherein it is possible to
see how "the degree of populism that a given political actor employs may vary across
contexts and over time" (2016, p.46). According to scholars, it is possible to conceptual-
ise populism also with respect to the role of populist leaders as performers of this par-
ticular political style, whilst the relationship between populism and the media entails
different articulations. Thus,

> [the populist] appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite' […] plays into media log-
> ic's dramatization, polarisation and prioritisation of conflict; […] 'bad manners'
> line up with media logic's personalisation, stereotypisation and emotionalization,
> while [the] focus on crisis plays into media logic's tendency towards intensifica-
> tion and simplification. In this situation, populism can thus potentially be consid-
> ered the media-political form par excellence at this particular historical juncture.
> This might help explain why populism currently seems to be more widespread
> and successful across the globe than any other time in its history (2016, p.77).

Further considerations can be drawn concerning the structural conditions of po-
litical communication as they emerge within the new media environment. Scholars
consider the paradox according to which, whilst the new media revolution has hugely
increased the opportunity for expression of multiple voices, it is also creating the
conditions for post-truth. The access threshold to this sphere of communication has
been lowered, while at the same time conditions for misinformation campaigns and
the circulation of lies have been created as well (Waisbord, 2018). Thus, numerous
elements have to be considered: deception and manipulation of the public, the spread
of fake news, the construction of false profiles on Facebook, the cyber-troops of 'bots'
and 'chatbots', internet programs which simulate users, build filter bubbles, mecha-
nisms of control of users and data profiling. These new structural conditions also pose

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9 This is the topical definition of populism coined by one of the most influential scholars on the subject, namely Cas Mudde (2004).

the question of government manipulation and control, the influence of the market and the conditions that allow free expression and the commitment to form 'public opinion'. Scholars develop not only political but also epistemological considerations on what can be considered the new 'regime of truth' (D'Ancona, 2017). A regime in which "transparency" (Pinto, 2013) undermines responsibility, the extraction and/or the exhibition of private information weakens rational commitment in public discussions, whilst a new technological panopticon exercises new forms of control.

According to Oxford Dictionaries, post-truth is a concept that relates to or denotes "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Lorusso, 2018, p. 4). According to scholars, post-truth can be regarded as a semiotic dimension of public discourse, namely as the result of a set of practices for the 'social construction' of truth deeply transformed by the impact of social media. In history, within different 'epistemes', in the Foucauldian[10] sense, diverse combinations of 'power and knowledge' have built the cultural practices which establish the social dimensions of trust and truth. Different accounts of this new regime of truth, namely post-truth, vary in their scope and meaning. Some analytical reconstructions thematise the concept of post-truth and put it on the level of critical philosophical stances pertaining to epistemological, ontological, methodological configuration of the contemporary 'episteme'[11]. Thus, post-modernity[12], the demise of "meta-recits", according to the Lyotard dictum, along with the critique of the structural nexus between power and knowledge (according to which any account of reality cannot exist if not entangled with power), are all component parts of the critical reasoning on post-truth (Ferraris, 2017).

Other explanations, which do not merely draw on the new media impact on the regime of (post)-truth, find broader approaches to the analysis, confronting societal and epistemic transformations. In this sense, the contemporary post-truth condition is produced by a broader 'revolution' involving technology, society, culture. From this perspective, according in particular to Ferrarsis (2017), the concept of "documediality" identifies the new stage in the evolution of capitalism in that it determines the new conditions of the structural relations between knowledge and power within societies.

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10 See the bibliographic review on Foucauldian works on the topic of the nexus of power and knowledge in various historical periods, pertaining to the epistemological and ontological dimensions of social life, in Bernini (2008).
11 See note 52.
12 An illuminating reflection has been developed by Alessandro Ferrara who distinguished postmodernity as a shared hermeneutic and ontological horizon characterised by diversity, epistemological and cultural pluralism and postmodern philosophical doctrines, which nurture relativistic orientations; see A. Ferrara (2015).

Virality and interconnectivity, the de-temporalisation of facts and events in the 'world-wide web', mystification and manipulation of contents, the fragmentation of broadcasting and multimediality and their complex interactions, all shape the configuration of the new epistemic regime of post-truth.

In this context, the impact of new media in the construction of the public sphere, which is in modelling both perceptions and the processes of social construction of reality, within the fragmented communities of social networks, is an integral part of this new 'human condition'. The proliferation of fake news, the recursive dynamics of storytelling and echo chambers characterize what has been identified as a 'post-factual democracy' in which collective agreements on the construction of societal reality and its meaning, are profoundly challenged and contended.

Knowledge, Representative Democracy and Trust: Some Meta-Reflection

Whereas democratic theory in recent decades has focused on the critique of the rationalistic and elitist, technocratic and epistemic degeneration of contemporary representative democracies (Mouffe, 2005; Pellizzoni, 2005), actually a sort of emotional and irrational wave within the 'neo-populist storm' has been unfolding[13]. At the same time, the development of social networks and the 'digitalisation' of everyday life, paradoxically, have not injected a further amount of rationality in the political 'circuits' of representative democracy, having fostered instead new forms of political manipulation.

In particular, Nadia Urbinati (Urbinati, 2014) has analysed both the populist-demagogic and plebiscitarian challenges to political representation, along with the technocratic pitfalls of an epistemic view of representative democracies in complex societies. From this perspective, Urbinati defends the idea of procedural democracy and considers this kind of political regime as based on a diarchic structure constituted by both will and judgement, the former being expressed through elections, the latter unfolding within the flux of public opinion.

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13 It is worth noticing that recent strands of critical reflections in both political theory and sociology come to grips with the question of emotions in politics in order to overcome a strict separation if not contradiction between rationality and emotions, also considered as a negative legacy of modernity since it separated passions and rational orientation in politics; on this topic among others see J. Goodwin, J, M. Jasper and F. Polletta (eds) (2001) and Mouffe (2002), *Politics and Passions*, Centre for the Study of Democracy, pp. 1-16.

Accordingly, the populistic challenge threatens this diarchy trying to overcome any intermediation between will and judgement, between leaders and the people, whilst ple-biscitarianism tries also to control and manipulate the public sphere transforming active citizens into passive spectators. At the same time, the epistemic-technocratic challenge to the democratic regimes embodies a manifestation of the "guardian democracy" wherein experts' knowledge marginalises other forms of knowledge undervaluing the impact of public opinion on the decisional processes within the representative institutions. Thus, the diarchic nature of representative democracy, namely the balance between will and judgement, the moment of decision and the expression of public opinion and knowledge (since the 'truth' of representative democracy is its 'procedure'), is has been brought into question by both populism and plebiscitarianism. As Urbinati maintains,

> Democracy is a combination of decisions and judgement on decisions: devising proposals and deciding on them (or those who are going to carry them out) ac-cording to majority rule. The character of democracy is diarchic and its nature procedural. […]. To go a step further, we may say that democratic proceduralism is in the service of equal political liberty since it presumes and claims the equal right and opportunity citizens have to participate in the formation of the majority view with their individual votes and their opinion, it is what qualifies democracy as a form of government whose citizens obey the laws they contribute in making, directly or indirectly (2014, pp.2018-2019).[14]

The figure of representative democracy is then diarchic in the sense illustrated above; epistemic democracy, populism, plebiscitarian claims, all contest and contend to proceduralism its normative and institutional endowments. Thus, whilst "epistemic democracy" entails objective 'standards' to evaluate collective choices and decisions, regarded as more demanding criteria (since public opinion and popular judgement is considered as not safe enough from ignorance), symmetrically the populist 'assault' on public opinion is devoted to controlling and manipulating it, for the sake of leaders who appeal to – and manipulate – people as the preserve of democratic sovereignty. As Urbi-nati specifies, "populism is a call for concentration of voice and power, will and opinion, and to overcome diarchy by blurring the border that keeps the people and the state, the opinion and the will, separate although in communication" (2014, p.157).

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14 Ivi, pp. 18-19; regarding the real opportunities to participate in decisional processes, the problem of effectivity of citi-zens' rights has emerged in the theoretical debate, as Urbinati also maintains in Urbinati (2013).

In its turn, whilst populism "gives the People a political presence", plebiscitarian disfiguration of democracy gives it a passive role that mainly consists in watching leaders in the public sphere, where politics becomes a show, a public exhibition of private virtues instead of a public space where accountable political leaders are expected to respond to citizens' demands. Thus, while democratic proceduralism invokes participation, plebiscitarian democracy "wants transparency" (2014, p.172). In this sense, the plebiscitarian view seeks to substitute accountability and procedures with an aesthetic, theatrical, spectacularized configuration of the public sphere. That is exactly where the like-dislike mechanism, the overload of images and the 'exhibition' of leaders on the web, in social networks and their day-to-day functioning, moving to.

Thus, in attributing value and credibility to the configuration of democracy as a diarchic construction of will and judgement within procedures and institutions, what is needed is also to reflect on the transformations that new media are producing in political culture and the public sphere. Re-balancing the two components of representative democracy in this new context seems to be the greatest challenge we have to face in the years to come, in unpredictable ways that have not been experimented yet[15].

Concluding Remarks

These final reflections provide the opportunity to synthetize the different elements covered in this analytical overview. Thus, going back over them allows us to observe how the neo-populist waves in the age of post-democracy have revealed the breakdown of the 'constitutive pact' of representative democracy. The sovereignty of the people articulated within representative institutions has entered a period of deep crisis. In this sense, contemporary neo-populist waves can also be regarded as the expression of social diseases, a reaction to anti-popular economic policies and to an elitist, technocratic and (un)democratic drift, (Anselmi, 2017; D'Eramo, 2013; Revelli, 2017) but also as the manifestation of this void in representation.

New institutional settings are then to be found, since the political representation device that achieved the democratic balance between various social and political subjects

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15 However, in the 1960s, demands aimed at enlarging participation and citizens' rights, overcoming the limits of the representative formula, had been proposed, long before the watershed event of the neo-populist wave diverted the 'sense' of these claims; see D. Held (1997), *Modelli di democrazia*, cit.; and Hardt M., Negri A. (2004), *Moltitudine. Guerra e democrazia nel nuovo ordine imperiale*, Rizzoli, Milano.

constituting the sovereign people in the XX century Fordist-Keynesian democracies no longer works the same way.

Thus, whilst during the 1970s social movements were giving voice to 'progressive' anti-representative demands to promote direct and deeper participation in democratic decisional processes (Bazzicalupo, 2014; Held, 1995) nowadays manifestations of distrust, discontent, opposition are instrumentalised by 'populist' leaders, namely the XXI century demagogues who exploit new media to magnify the manipulative effects of new forms of communication, whilst the emergent 'progressive' and 'proactive' social movements appear to be in the minority, within the spectacularized public sphere.

Thus, new media contribute to 'disintermediating' politics, bringing into question the organizational dimension of politics, which had been considered the preserve of political consciousness and popular influence during the 'ideological' Nineteenth Century (Prospero, 2018). In this sense, neo-populist political style intersects the new ontology of our time, namely "documediality" consisting in new technologies and algorithms, which constitute the building blocks of contemporary capitalistic and epistemic 'structure' of societies. In this context, the question of post-truth has emerged, ranging from 'the critique of the scepticism of postmodern critique' (in a sort of counter-movement within the theoretical debate moving from modernity to post-modernity, and from the latter to reflexive modernity (Ferraris, 2017) and beyond), to political communication studies which highlight how social networks, bio-hypermedia, platform capitalism are exerting their influence on contemporary democracies (Gambetta, 2018; Waisbord, 2018). Within this complex and contradictory scenario, a new problematic page of the history of democracy is currently being written.

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