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**Ernesto C. Sferrazza Papa** is currently Postdoctoral Fellow at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Instituto de Filosofía. He took a PhD in Philosophy at the Università di Torino, and after this he has been Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Rijeka and the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris. In February 2022 he will join the University of Turin as an assistant professor. His research interests include modern and contemporary political philosophy, critical theory, and legal philosophy. He published several scientific papers and two books: *Modernità infinita. Saggio sul rapporto tra spazio e potere* (Mimesis, 2019) and *Le pietre e il potere. Una critica filosofica dei muri* (Mimesis, 2020).

Contact: [ernesto.sferrazzapapa@unito.it](mailto:ernesto.sferrazzapapa@unito.it)

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# ACCLAIMING: NOTES FOR A POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF THE CHORAL VOICE<sup>1</sup>

Ernesto C. Sferrazza Papa

*Universidad Católica de Chile*

## Abstract

This paper investigates the role of the acclamation in the constitution of the public opinion. The main argument of the essay is that acclaiming means to express chorally dissent or consensus, and therefore it should be considered a political act. However, a few political problems concerning the autonomy of such a choral voice and its manipulative dimension emerge. The paper sketches a philosophical itinerary from ancient Greek to Habermas in order to show the conceptual nucleus of a political philosophy of the acclamation. In the final part, the paper investigates the relationship between acclamation and social networks, arguing that they constitute a new form of public opinion and a challenge for future democracy.

## Keywords

Acclamation, public opinion, Schmitt, Habermas, social networks.

## Resumen

Este trabajo investiga el papel de la aclamación en la constitución de la opinión pública. El argumento principal del ensayo es que aclamar significa expresar coralmente

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el disenso o el consenso, y por tanto debe considerarse un acto político. Sin embargo, surgen algunos problemas políticos relativos a la autonomía de dicha voz coral y a su dimensión manipuladora. El artículo esboza un itinerario filosófico desde la antigua Grecia hasta Habermas para mostrar el núcleo conceptual de una filosofía política de la aclamación. En la parte final, el artículo investiga la relación entre la aclamación y las redes sociales, argumentando que constituyen una nueva forma de opinión pública y un reto para la democracia futura.

### **Palabras clave**

Aclamación, opinión pública, Schmitt, Habermas, redes sociales.

## **Acclamation and The Public Sphere: A Philosophical Itinerary**

Using a metaphorical vocabulary, held dear by the political upheaval affecting Chile in 2019 (Fagioli, 2020), the ‘awakening’ of the squares marked the protests that, in recent years, have broken out all over the world, at least since the Arab Springs’ problematic nucleus of revolts. Such an awakening coincides with a renewed interest, on the part of political philosophy, for collective political expressions that are placed outside the perimeter of parliamentary democracy and its codified rituals (Butler, 2015). Square’s demands seem to exceed the normativity of parliamentary reason, which still strongly determines Western democracies. In this context, it is of utmost interest to mention what Donatella Di Cesare highlighted in a recent book, namely that one of the differences between the uprisings of the second half of the Twentieth century and the contemporary ones is precisely the transition from institutionalised places, such as factories and universities, to squares (Di Cesare, 2020, pp. 23-26).

The sectorised occupation of workplaces and of knowledge production institutions, seen as the dimension in which capitalism expressed itself through the extraction and exploitation of individual and collective labour, was replaced by a community aspiration to make the square the primary dimension for the expression of dissent. This shift in places implies a change in the expression of dissent and consent, which paradoxically

is linked to experiences constituting the prehistory of democratic processes. Since the dawn of Western civilization, people have gathered in assembly to elect or expel their leaders. Today though, the collective presence in squares implies an attempt to revitalise and reinvent with new forms – which sometimes are artistically creative and capable of tearing down the schematic domain of police bureaucratisation (Rancière, 1995) – the collective dimension of the voice with which the community expresses itself.

It is not in any way a question of giving the square a *tout court* acclaim, and a *caveat* on the necessary positivity of this collective presence is necessary. Indeed, in the contemporary debate, the power of the square has sometimes been interpreted, especially by thinkers belonging to the radical left galaxy, as the *per se* bearer of a radical democratic power, capable of breaking through the rigid cage of the State-centric Western parliamentary system (Hardt & Negri, 2017). This interpretation has the drawback of not being capable to logically make a distinction between the different contents and the dissimilar requests of the various squares, ending up placing them all on the same level. This entails an analytical flaw in the theory, which leans towards an ideological drift. And Judith Butler, a thinker who is certainly sympathetic to spontaneous street movements, spoke critically of the thrill running up leftists' spine, as a sort of unconditioned reflex, when they see a packed square. An evaluation that is also interested in the importance of the requests made by the assembly's collective voice, should always appropriately verify the content of that voice.

This contribution aims to trace some genealogical and philosophical coordinates so as to analyse, in a certainly partial way, such renewed interest in the choral voice and in its political dimension. A systemic work on this theme should be able to provide a theoretical framework that tries to hold together the issue of the community, of its voice, of its autonomy, as well as the issue regarding the most effective ways to express dissent or consent in a highly-digitalised democratic society.

Such a task is too onerous for a single essay. For this reason, here I intend to focus on the phenomenon of acclamation, which in recent years has aroused the significant interest of some authors at the centre of the contemporary philosophical debate.

The central thesis of this article is that acclamation – understood as a choral voice ready to express consent or dissent – should be considered neither as a pre-political phenomenon nor as a proto-political one. In fact, acclamation is a way like any other through which a community expresses itself publicly. In this sense, acclamation represents a part of what Adriana Cavarero called the 'peculiar phono-sphere of the political' (Cavarero, 2019, p. 89). From a philosophical point of view, exploring the means of

expression of the popular will entails investigating the very concept of people and the forms by which it is composed and established performatively. It should be highlighted straightaway that, like all political phenomena, it is not static, but changes according to the historical circumstances and the material possibilities of its realisation; as I am about to show, Carl Schmitt's verdict that "in some form or other, in every state the people acclaim" (Schmitt, 1927, p. 36) is an extremely interesting theoretical-political starting point.

Today forms of acclamation are present not only in the "physical" squares but also on the "virtual" squares via the internet, especially in the collective aggregators of opinion and participation in global political discourse such as social networks.

The essay is structured as follows: after briefly illustrating the founding moment of acclamation politics, I will review some philosophical positions I consider particularly significant. First of all, the philosophical recognition conferred by Carl Schmitt in terms of acclamation; secondly, some theological-political interpretations of acclamation; thirdly, starting from the genealogical-critical analysis proposed by Jürgen Habermas on the *Öffentlichkeit*, I consider the analogy between acclamation and public opinion from the point of view of the manipulative dimension; finally, I offer some suggestions on the relationship between acclamation as a choral voice and the internet as a new *agora*.

The purpose of this article is to offer a conceptual overview that may be useful in the analysis of the role of the choral voice, within contemporary dynamics, in the constitution of a public sphere.

## **Lycurgus: or, The Common Cry**

In one of his *Lives*, Plutarch narrates the legendary deeds of the Spartan king Lycurgus. Among the numerous changes in terms of education, property, and life in common, which made Sparta a *hapax* within the Greek world, Plutarch reports the introduction of an institution by Lycurgus, the *Gerousia*, made up of thirty elders who had distinguished themselves throughout their lives by virtue and honour.

The role of the *Gerontes* was decisive in the Spartan political economy structured by Lycurgus: they presided over the disputes, organised common familial education, and were the guardians of the right to life or death. Such office was so important that it lasted a lifetime.

Unlike other institutes in the Greek world, the Council of Elders was not elected by lot or by secret ballot. This latter practice was by no means alien to Spartan sensibility,

unlike what a *lectio facilior* would suggest. For instance, Plutarch tells of how Spartans used to vote *one by one* by dropping intact or flattened pieces of bread into a large basket, the *càddichos*, to decide who, amongst the boys, could attend the discussions taking place in the public mess during communal meals. To accept the candidate, the vote had to be unanimous: the presence of a single flattened crumb implied the refusal of the candidate, “because they wish[ed] all its members to be congenial” (*Lycurgus*, XII-10).

Given the fixed number of thirty members, the election as a Council member took the form of competitive selection. The right to replace the deceased *geront* had to be earned by being “better” than the other candidates. But the physical strength, objectively identifiable (wrestling competitions, running competitions) and which the vulgate has conveyed, not without reason, as a primary quality of Spartiate life, was not a commendable criterion.

Since the *geront* had the task of mastering the most important city affairs, he had to excel in other moral virtues such as temperance, prudence, and wisdom.

The criterion that Lycurgus identified to select the best one – and I now use an improper and modern vocabulary – was testing the reaction of public opinion. The assembly had to elect its own governors. How to measure the appeal of candidates?

An assembly of the people having been convened, chosen men were shut up in a room nearby so that they could neither see nor be seen, but only hear the shouts of the assembly. For as in others matters, so here, the cries of the assembly decided between the competitors. These did not appear in a body, but each one was introduced separately, as the lot fell, and passed silently through the assembly. Then the secluded judges, who had writing-tablets with them, recorded in each case the loudness of the shouting, not knowing for whom it was given, but only that he was introduced first, second, or third, and so on. Whoever was greeted with the most and loudest shouting, him they declared elected. (*Lycurgus*, XXVI, 3-5)

The election is not the result of vote counting, a method introduced shortly thereafter, but it is a collective deliberation measured on the commotion (Schwartzberg, 2010, p. 453). From this elective method by acclamation, in which one’s virtue is measured by the screams of others, certain elements emerge that are not only limited to the pre-history of democracy but that question our present time. I refer here to the issue of public opinion – here obviously present in an *ante litteram* guise – that is resolved in the more or less intense consent addressed *ad personam*; to the heteronomy of the assembly,

which acclaims without questioning and discussing, or whose debate takes place in a separate sphere (but where?); to the theme of united people, who decide on their future dominion as if they were a single voice. This primitive “clapometer” (Girard, 2010, p. 16) elaborated by Lycurgus brings out complex issues that grip the current democracies, particularly as regards the organisation of consent that the charismatic leader needs in order to materially access the government.

It should be emphasised, though, that Plutarch offers no justification for choosing this method for the election of the Council members. Given the importance of the election, it was presumably conceived *eo ipso* – due to the qualities it carried with it – as the most efficient one in deciding upon an issue so crucial as that of the dominion of man over man.

However, even in ancient thought, the acclamation method had already been the subject of fierce criticism. Over time, the immediacy of the Spartan choral cry, which was the expression of an apparently spontaneous consensus but which actually verified the entire life of each individual, was challenged by the reasoned mediation of classical Athens (or at least its self-representation): the acclaiming assembly versus the *agora*, a place where everyone speaks one at a time.

According to Aristotle, it was precisely this ability that made the citizen be acknowledged as an individual “defined by nothing else so much as by the right to participate in judicial functions and in office” (*Pol.*, III, 1, 1275b).

Aristotle himself, again in the *Politics*, had downgraded the Spartan method of acclamation to “childish” (*Pol.*, II, 9, 1270 b), but this verdict of political infantilism was not followed by a justification, as if the righteousness of the firm judgment was almost self-evident. The Aristotelian judgment seems rather the prologue of a much severe criticism of the institution of *Gerousia* as such.

First of all, Aristotle deems that both the method of election and the method of selecting the *parterre* of candidates are childish, since “it is wrong that one who is to be the holder of this honourable office should canvass for it” (*Pol.*, II, 9, 1271 a). Secondly, life tenures are harmful. If it is true that “there is old age of mind as well as of body” (*Pol.*, II, 9, 1270 b), then it is extremely dangerous that the elders decide on the capital issues of the city. In itself, old age is not a sign of wisdom, actually it is quite the opposite. However, the Stagirite does not consider it necessary to explain further on acclamation as such. The Aristotelian verdict remains the main argument of political philosophy against acclamatory methods, at least up to Rousseau. In fact, in the *Contrat social*, Rousseau gives a renewed license to Lycurgus’s intuition, at the same time giving way to

a cyclone of consequences for political philosophy and for the reflection on democracy having acclamation as its focus.

Starting from this episode in Greek political history, a philosophical history unfolds that reaches up to the present day. It is the story of the common cry, of applause, or of the whistles of the people. Acclamation can be compared to a knot that tightens a multiplicity of fundamental issues for Western philosophical-political reflection.

Seeing in the forms of acclamation – both strictly speaking (as an immediate exclamation of approval or rejection by the people) and broadly speaking (as a non-institutionalised construction of consensus around the leader’s charisma) – nothing more than a thing of the past, a waste material of ancient history and politics, is an error, in that it prevents us from seeing that this particular form of relationship between voice and politics still reverberates in our time.

As I am going to show, the complex articulation of modern democratic practices (not to mention the authoritarian regimes still holding power in various countries) does not eliminate acclamation once and for all. Rather, it reconfigures acclamation in light of a secular evolution of both the public sphere and the places where the public sphere – which is the analogue of the assembly gathered by Lycurgus – meets to debate and discuss.

The new means of communication and the emergence of virtual platforms, where the community gathers to discuss in forms that are more or less oriented by the use of *raison* more or less rational ways, further complicate the picture, subtracting the acclamation from its original physical place to reproduce it in a virtual elsewhere.

Furthermore, the attention devoted by modern and contemporary philosophy to the role of acclamation in democratic and non-democratic contexts is not irrelevant, since it testifies to the central, albeit not yet sufficiently examined, role of this primitive form through which people ‘have their say’. I will now proceed to reconstruct a passage of such attention.

## **Carl Schmitt: Towards a “Science of Acclamation”**

Acclamation as an integrally political phenomenon receives a philosophical endorsement in the Twentieth century, in an era upset by totalitarian regimes and forms of monopolistic centralisation of power. It is Carl Schmitt, the infamous *Kronjurist*, who signs it. An important philosophical precedent is represented by Jean-Jacques

Rousseau's *Contrat social*, according to which the law, as an expression of the general will, must necessarily be unanimous and collectively expressed. In this sense, Rousseau outlines a philosophy of the choral voice as an expression of unanimous consent. But Schmitt integrates this perspective interpreting the value of acclamation, which is an expression of the political voice of the people, as a necessary component of the democratic phenomenon.

Schmitt engages in an accurate investigation of acclamation starting with an essay from 1927, *Volksentscheid und Volksbegehren*, in which he reconstructs what he considers is a “scientific discovery of acclamation” (Schmitt, 1927, p. 34). In this work, Schmitt's argument is consistent with his critique of liberalism and parliamentarism, which was at the centre of a fundamental essay from 1923: *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus*. Here Schmitt denounced the democratic and ideological fiction of parliamentarism: according to Schmitt, parliament empties politics of its *quid*, since it is the place dedicated to endless discussions that atrophy any political decision *strictu sensu*. The criticism of the fundamental instrument of parliamentary democracy, i.e., the secret vote, was added to this. In Schmitt's view, the act of voting confines politics to the private dimension, thus generating a contradiction, since politics is by definition a public affair. I stress here, *en passant*, that this theme has been re-proposed, albeit in different forms, also by the radical left – Sartre, for example, spoke provocatively of the elections as a trap for fools (Sartre 1977) – and, in other different ways, by the anarchists (Salvatore, 2020, p. 62). Within this quite ideologically oriented critique – which is ultimately aimed, in the wake of Rousseau, towards a rejection of representative democracy – Schmitt sings the praises of acclamation, seen as the sound matter of pure democracy. Acclamation is above all the vocal expression of united people, who “have a general will and express it in a different way than the people whose will is expressed without a gathering as a result of secret individual votes”. (Schmitt, 1927, p. 33). Whereas the voting booth is a private domain, the acclaiming assembly is the triumph of democracy, understood as the united people's public exercise of power. Acclamation, that is, “the cry of approval or rejection of the assembled mass” (Schmitt, 1927, p. 34) is thus configured as *das demokratische Urphänomen*, the emblem of authentic democracy. The quality of democracy is the sound matter of its people, who “shout ‘long live’ or ‘down with’, cheer or grumble, overthrow someone and proclaim someone else as a leader, consent to deliberate with any word or deny this acclamation with silence” (Schmitt, 1927, p. 34). Thus, Schmitt inaugurates a very particular and unprecedented political philosophy of the collective

voice, in which the substance of the state rests on acclamation, understood as the “eternal phenomenon of every political community” (Schmitt, 1927, p. 34).

As Schmitt himself admits, although acclamation may be exposed to manipulative procedures, it safeguards the immediacy of the popular will, which unites to oppose its own fragmentation operated by the individual secret ballot. In this way, it represents a particular form of immediacy of mediation, since it produces the unity people need to reach political existence. Through the fragmentation of the vote-based electoral system, individuals are reduced to “citizens” or, at most, they become “competent”, whereas the collective voice that acclaim and serves as a tribute to the leader restores the identity of the people. Schmitt’s obscure maxim, according to which “[there is] no state without a people, [and] no people without acclamation” (Schmitt, 1927, p. 34), should be interpreted in this sense.

Schmitt revisited the notion of *acclamatio* in his masterpiece *Verfassungslehre* published the following year. However, Schmitt introduces a significant shift here that updates the investigation into *acclamatio* in an extremely useful manner. If it holds true that acclamation is an eternal phenomenon, it is also true that it may change shape. Indeed: it is eternal precisely because it manages to adapt to the contingencies of history. “In modern, large states, the acclamation, which is a natural and necessary life expression of every people, has changed its external form. In these states, it expresses itself as ‘public opinion’” (Schmitt, 2008, p. 131). Although public opinion and its formation have a more complex and articulated structure than the gathered assembly, the crystallisation of the fundamental decision also rests on the fact that “the people can always say yes or no, consent or reject, and their yes or no becomes all the more simple and elementary, the more it is a matter of a fundamental decision on their own existence in its entirety” (Schmitt, 2008, pp. 131-132).

The acclamation represents the possibility that the people are present “in the *public sphere*” (Schmitt, 2008, p. 272) the moment when they decide. Such presence is closely linked to the importance of the space of appearance, which will be fundamental in the work of a thinker who is in many ways the antipodes of Schmitt, namely Hannah Arendt (Arendt, 1958). Showing his taste for chiasmus, Schmitt states: “no people without public and no public without people” (Schmitt, 2008, p. 272). The entire democratic substance of the people lies in their being able to be exposed, but Schmitt’s point of view is neither irenic nor naive. As has been said, Schmitt is well aware of the manipulative dimension that passes through that modern form of acclamation that is public opinion. “The danger always exists – he writes – that invisible and irresponsible social powers

direct public opinion and the will of the people” (Schmitt, 2008, p. 275). However, in Schmittian political theory, this evident and unavoidable danger is marginal compared to the substantial democratic homogeneity that acclamation – as a vocal expression of the assembled people – also makes possible in the form of a public opinion.

Obviously, Schmitt’s stance is exposed to harsh criticism. First of all, he simplifies the democratic form’s legitimisation procedure to the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ shouted by the united assembly. In doing so, he places himself in the wake of that kind of essentialism that reduces the complexity of the democratic form to a single criterion of legitimation, thus obscuring its intrinsic complex articulation (Ruiz Soroa, 2010; Mancuso, forthcoming). And even where he identifies the modern form of acclamation with public opinion, he treats it as a pure means of expressing consent and dissent, thus relegating it to the radicality of affirmation or denial. Furthermore, as has already been noted (Azzariti, 2005), the analysis of *acclamatio*, as described by Schmitt, exposes itself to a decisive and irrefutable criticism. According to Schmitt, *acclamatio* is the vocal form by which the people autonomously establish their own political unity. However, *acclamatio* is always an answer to a question, it is consent or dissent with respect to another voice: the voice of the leader, the sovereign, the chief. In this sense, *acclamatio* is radically hetero-directed. It is always a response to something else. The acclamation does not express people’s vitality and dynamism but reduces the people to a mere instrument of confirmation or denial. Trying to found the democratic substance of the people, Schmitt relegated to them the instrumental role of the authority’s clapometer. In this sense, while trying to consecrate their proactive and decision-making side, in reality, he confines them to the most sterile passivity.

## The Political Theology of Acclamation

Schmitt’s analysis of acclamation cannot be completely separated from the theological-political perspective of which Schmitt himself was one of the leading theorists. Despite the different declinations, political theology can be defined as the study of exchanges and transfers of meaning from the theological to the political sphere, and *vice versa*. Acclamation is part of such a political theological field, as a passage within the “political archaeology of liturgy and protocol” (Agamben, 2011, p. 168), as defined by Agamben; or, using another expression by Agamben, as “an archaeology of glory” (Agamben, 2011, p. 197).

In the twentieth century, Erik Peterson and Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz were the authors who made the principal investigations of a theological and political nature on acclamation. The importance of Peterson's studies had already been recognized by Schmitt, who spoke of *Heis Theos* as a "fundamental research" (Schmitt, 1927, p. 34). Indeed, *Heis Theos*, published in 1926, still represents the most important research on acclamation in ancient times. The specificity of Peterson's research consists in having investigated the juridical and legal dimension of the *acclamatio*. In his reconstruction, the *vox populi* that acclaims or brings the sovereign and the emperor in triumph is not limited to the confirmation of previous power. On the contrary, it has the legal force to institute such a power, that is, it becomes a constituent power. The acclamation "*Heis Theos*", "One God", is placed where the spiritual dimension, related to the cult of the sovereign and the political-juridical dimension, related to the conditions of possibility of power overlap. It is possible that Christ is the emperor or that the emperor is wrapped in a spiritual cult only because the two dimensions are not completely separate, as the case of the *acclamatio* demonstrates.

Whereas Peterson's research aimed to show the purely legal significance of *acclamatio*, Kantorowicz's analysis isolates acclamation in the theological-political dimension. In Kantorowicz, the *acclamatio* belongs to the genre of *fictiones* that structure power as magic tricks and make it materially and symbolically possible: from the duplicity of the king's body, to which Kantorowicz dedicated a well-known essay (Kantorowicz 1957), to *defensa* through *invocatio nominis imperatoris*, which in medieval times transformed a private assault into a public attack on sovereignty (Kantorowicz 1955), up to the equivalence of Christ with the Revenue summarised in the expression *Christus-fiscus* by John Paston (Kantorowicz, 1948).

Kantorowicz analyses the historical development of a single liturgy, the *Laude regia*, starting from its first appearances in the Carolingian period. The legionaries acclaimed the leader with the litany *Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat*, which reflected the glorious insignia of the warlords on the figure of Christ. This analogy between Christ and the concept of victory and triumph bears witness to the alliance between the spiritual and temporal dimensions. As Montserrat Herrero has effectively summarised, the acclamation analysed by Kantorowicz – *Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat* – represents "a particular case in which acclamations transferred to the liturgical realm of the Church from the pagan arena, configuring a theological-political mixture" (Herrero, 2019, p. 1049).

Both Peterson and Kantorowicz agree that acclamations represent neither a form of devotion nor a purely symbolic dimension of power, but are the place where the political dimension is indeterminately mixed with other dimensions. As shown, according to Peterson, the difference between the two is that the ancient acclamations had a juridical meaning and a legal value, that is, they were forms establishing the political power; according to Kantorowicz, on the other hand, the *laudes* merely represent a powerful system of political vocality. This means that the *laudes* confirm and strengthen the power of the sovereign even without instituting it performatively, thus giving life to a form of political liturgy that represents a decisive chapter of Western political theology.

This dimension of acknowledgment of power by the assembled people is obviously a topic of great interest for a political philosophy of the choral voice. Indeed, Kantorowicz's text is interesting not only because it reconstructs a piece of medieval political theology and, therefore, of Western political history. In the concluding part of the essay, Kantorowicz points out that *acclamatio*, in the form of the *laudes regiae*, disappeared throughout Europe starting from the Fourteenth century. Nonetheless, the *laudes regiae* experienced a renewed splendour in the twentieth-century totalitarian regimes: "the chant of the *laudes regiae* was doomed to disappear from the liturgic-political realm. The *laudes* reappeared when in Europe the modern dictators established a new ruler or "leader" cult and when the Church re-joined the cult by instituting the feast of 'Christ the King'" (Kantorowicz, 1958, p. 180). The Italian case is particularly significant: here, after the reconciliation between the Vatican and Mussolini's regime, "the *laudes* became an integral part of Fascist devotion" (Kantorowicz, 1958, p. 185), testifying how their function in the economy of political passions had not become permanently extinct.

The Italian case is paradigmatic but not unique: "political acclamations have been resuscitated systematically in the authoritarian countries" (Kantorowicz, 1958, p. 183). In the historical configurations where the figure of the leader emerges with significant vigour, the voices that support his consensus increasingly claim their indispensable political function. In short, "the modern revival of the *laudes* broaches the problem of acclamations, and their function, in modern dictatorial states in which they appear as an indispensable vehicle of political propaganda, pseudo-religious emotionalism, and public reacknowledgement of power" (Kantorowicz, 1958, pp. IX-X).

However, it is possible to witness a theological-political declination of acclamation even in democratic and non-dictatorial contexts. This is the thesis that Agamben proposed in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, thus actualising Peterson and Kantorowicz's

investigations. According to Agamben, the relevance of acclamations proves that the ritual dimension is not a marginal phenomenon of power but constitutes the intimate essence of it. From this point of view, acclamation cannot be interpreted as “a form of purely subjective adulation” (Agamben, 2011, p. 187), but as a constitutive part of political power. Therefore, the choreographic dimension of power is a fundamental and structural element. With one of his typical gestures, Agamben channels the reflection on the dynamics of antiquity in the contemporary world. Starting from Schmitt’s thesis of public opinion as a modern form of *acclamatio*, Agamben highlights that “what was confined to the spheres of liturgy and ceremonials has become concentrated in the media and, at the same time, through them it spreads and penetrates at each moment into every area of society, both public and private” (Agamben, 2011, p. 256). Unfortunately, Agamben is not interested in developing this interesting thesis further. To do this, it is necessary to leave his “archaeological” perspective and integrate it together with a reflection on how public opinion that incorporates the ancient acclamation procedures is formed today. Thus, the theological-political reflection on acclamation paves the way for an analysis of the relationship between mass media and public opinion. Undoubtedly, amongst the mass media that structures public opinion, social networks play an increasingly decisive role.

## Acclamation, Manipulation and Social Networks

At the end of his 1962 masterpiece *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Jürgen Habermas emphasised the manipulative dimension endured by the public sphere at the end of its history. This manipulative dimension of the principle of publicity, derived from the growing importance of obtaining consent by means of propaganda tools, effectively overturns the essence of public opinion and “does not seriously have much in common with the final unanimity wrought by a time-consuming process of mutual enlightenment” (Habermas, 1989, p. 195). According to Habermas, at the end of its history, publicity became a principle “aimed at rendering the broad population (and especially the sector of it that is the most indifferent as regards politics) infectiously ready for acclamation” (Habermas, 1989, p. 211).

The manipulative dimension, which concluded Habermas’ work, is a crucial and decisive notion. As shown, Schmitt (the author Habermas refers to in his work on public opinion) maintained that, in modern states, acclamation fades into the sphere of public

opinion. At the same time, with the spread of political marketing and the making of consensus, public opinion loses its principle of modernity:

in the manipulated public sphere, an acclamation-prone mood comes to predominate, an opinion climate instead of a public opinion. Especially manipulative are the social-psychologically calculated offers that appeal to unconscious inclinations and call forth predictable reactions without on the other hand placing any obligation whatever on the very persons who in this fashion secure plebiscitary agreement. (Habermas, 1989, p. 217)

Edward Bernays, the father of public relations, considered propaganda “an instrument [...] to bring order out of chaos” (Bernays, 1928, p. 159). But this perspective implies an anti-Enlightenment principle that is hardly acceptable. Indeed, scientifically organised propaganda tends to transform the mutual clarification, which derives from the use of the *raison*, into a total orientation of the will. As a result, the public sphere becomes the place for the construction of consensus.

According to Habermas, the predisposition to acclamation, organized through the fabrication of consent, does not in any way satisfy “the conditions for democratic opinion and consensus formation” (Habermas, 1989, pp. 218-219), since “for the offers made for the purposes of advertising psychology, no matter how much they may be objectively to the point, in such a case are not mediated by the will and consciousness but by the subconscious of the subjects” (Habermas, 1989, p. 219). Thus, the acclamation turns into the certification of the effectiveness of a previously organised propaganda, which is exercised on an easily manipulated human matter.

Such a genealogical-critical framework is useful for measuring the function of acclamation in today's digitalised society, as the extension of the public opinion's sphere embeds all the means through which the general public forms its opinion. Schmitt had prophesied the time of social networks: “It is fully conceivable that one day through ingenious discoveries, every single person without leaving his apartment, could continuously express his opinion on political questions through an apparatus and that all these opinions would be automatically registered by a central office, where one would only need to read them off” (Schmitt, 2008, p. 274). Nonetheless, in Schmitt's view, such a dimension would not generate an authentic public opinion in that it would not represent the general will (using Rousseauian terms), but only the sum of individuals' wills. However, this view on public opinion seems limited compared to the actual means

through which people can speak and make their voices heard in this day and age. It is true that the sum of individuals' opinions does not constitute the public opinion but, today, public opinion itself has changed shape and certainly has to deal with private views. Commenting on Schmitt's quote, Mitchell Dean noted that the unprecedented possibility of continuously expressing our view on the things of the world "has changed the nature of the public and public opinion and given rise to an imaginary in which the aggregate of all these opinions can be recorded and read off immediately, not only by a central governmental agency but also by large corporations, and shared among users" (Dean, 2017, p. 418).

Public opinion, as an expression of ideas, passions, consensus, and dissent, is today built by means of technology. Therefore, it is not possible to separate the issue of the "collective voice" from that of the expressive means that channel it and with which this voice makes itself heard. It cannot be denied that social networks contribute to the "formation or simulation of collective emotions" (Dean, 2017, p. 419) and that they have numerous points of contact with the political liturgy of acclamation, even if the source of this sort of acclamation 4.0 "is an aggregation of private expressions" (Dean, 2017, p. 429).

In any case, it is important to emphasize that the new splendour of squares and assemblies – whether they are "physical" or "virtual" – immediately recalls Arendt's intuition on politics as determined by the space of appearance (Arendt, 1958; Cavarero, 2019). According to Arendt, the *quid* of democratic politics, which had its origin in Athenian democracy and its place in the *agora*, is appearance. Social networks – understood as the dimension in which the individual can speak and have his say – seem to be the contemporary translation of the political right to appear. In this sense, social networks have been considered the final destination of the phenomenology of Western democracy both by philosophers and political movements that have used them as primary tools for debate and selection of the ruling class. From this point of view, the Italian *5 Star Movement* with its *Rousseau platform* is a paradigmatic case (Giacomini, 2020). And yet, the non-transparency of social platforms (Gorwa & Ash, 2020) and of the Internet is a stimulus to test both the positive quality of such forms of public debate and their negative and manipulative potential. Just as the ancient squares could be directed towards consent and dissent, in the same way, nowadays' virtual square can transform itself into a manipulative place pertaining to our current public dimension. The issues of Big Data (Van Dijck, 2014) and their accumulation – which are at the centre of the political and academic agenda – represent a decisive political question once the political

dimension of social networks has been ascertained. Indeed, the analysis of these issues opens up to “new forms of political use and manipulation” (Dean, 2017, p. 430).

## Conclusions

If found to be true, the research which this theoretical framework seems to be based upon is rather urgent since, as Emilio Gentile has argued, one of the main reasons for the current malaise of democracy consists in the “personalisation of politics in the figure of the leader, who establishes a direct relationship with the crowd” (Gentile, 2016, p. 203). This direct relationship is now often mediated by social networks, which thus become a full-fledged political space, a place where people express their opinion, albeit in a private form, as well as emotions, feelings, and political passions that have a public relevance. The “recitative” dimension of democracy (or post-democracy, according to the famous formula by Colin Crouch), as Gentile defines it, is one of the contemporary approaches towards the long relationship between the governed and the rulers. Acclamation as an aesthetic dramatisation of the political relationship is still a relevant aspect of such a relationship. Therefore, it should not be relegated to the prehistory of democratic phenomena, but should be analysed in its contemporary reconfiguration.

The personalisation of politics and the “public” relationship between the governed and the rulers is now irremediably intertwined with the virtual dimension, transforming the web into a new power for consent or dissent; in any case, in another theatrical stage of political power. The tangible risk of an acclaiming democracy is that the heteronomy implicit in the gesture of acclamation empties the substance of democracy completely, reducing the popular body to a simple clapometer of power. However, an even greater risk would be to confuse this consensus with autonomous approval. As Nero was well aware of (perhaps he was the first man of power to constantly surround himself with *claqueur*<sup>2</sup>), applause can always be manipulated and the acclaiming crowd can fall prey to very refined forms of political suggestion (Cavalletti, 2011). Similarly, as current researches on the so-called *fake news* show, the Internet can prove to be a space in which to exercise the manipulation of public opinion, fabricate consensus, and trans-

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2. Suetonius’ interpretation, which describes one of the first forms of heterodirect organization of consent, is very instructive on this regard: “And with no less enthusiasm he [Nero] selected some youths of the equestrian order and more than five thousand of the strongest young men of the common people from all over, who were divided into groups and taught different methods of applauding – they called them buzzers, hollow tiles and flat tiles – which they were to employ vigorously when he was singing” (*Nero*, XX).

form the current democratic form, with all its problems, into what Alberto Maria Banti has evocatively called “the democracy of followers” (Banti, 2020, p. 96). In the critical undertaking of the current forms of consensus fabrication and hetero-direction of the collective voice, we must heed the warning – in other ways anachronistic – by Gustave Le Bon, according to whom it is possible to govern crowds by knowing how to inspire the imagination.

In conclusion: a philosophical analysis of the collective voice, of the sound matter of a people, can say a lot both about the places where it is expressed or can express itself today, and also about the conflicting and contradictory dimensions characterising any desire for political unity. At the same time, a techno-political analysis of the current forms of communication – whether they are “physical” (occurring less and less) or “virtual” (occurring more and more) – used by leaders, could perhaps show how they increasingly tend to become “functions of their own publicity apparatus” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 196).

## Post-Scriptum

As the first draft of this essay was completed, some US citizens attacked Capitol Hill to protest the ratification of the presidential election. A few hours after these chaotic moments, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram blocked the social media accounts of outgoing President Donald Trump indefinitely, or in any case until the inauguration of the new president Joe Biden. This is perhaps a momentous time where the threshold between the “virtual” dimension and the “physical” dimension are intertwined and become indistinguishable. The virtual dimension of politics (i.e., related to social networks) and the political dimension of social networks are both phenomena that should not be overlooked. What happens on social media has disruptive effects on the material world, which is traditionally the place for politics. Nowadays, the construction of public opinion and the reconfiguration of the public sphere irremediably take place on social platforms. To continue Habermas’ fundamental work, a new critique of the *Öffentlichkeit* should not underestimate the decisive role of these means. In this desirable research program, a relevant part should be devoted to the political, legal, and moral legitimacy of private companies and providers to allow or block access to their platforms. This gesture, regardless of who is silenced or allowed to speak, is in all respects an unprecedented chapter in the monopoly for the construction of public opinion.

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