

CUNY The Graduate Center – Center for Global Ethics and Politics

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On the Meaning of the ‘Crisis of Democracy’

March 12, 2015 @ 4:30 pm, room C202

(first draft, please do not cite without the author’s permission)

“Once the idea of being ruled by one’s peers is abolished, however, one is no longer shielded from the realization that the individual, insofar as he must obey the state order, is not free” (Hans Kelsen, 1929).

This paper is an exercise in the interpretation of ordinary political language on the status of democracy. It is motivated by the desire to test how our theories of democracy help us to make sense of what citizens think about their actual democracies.

The current issue of the *Journal of Democracy* seeks an answer to the following question: “Is Democracy in Decline?”¹ Drops in electoral participation and the low profile of democratic government’s performance in consolidated democracies lead the editors of this special issue to conclude that democracy is indeed facing a crisis. As a matter of fact, surveys, essays and talks on “the crisis of democracy” have boomed in the last years of deep economic crisis, particularly in Europe, which is the privileged context of this paper. The growth of poverty after several decades of expansion and consolidation of economic and social well-being, along with the plague of unemployment and the irreversible erosion of the welfare state, translate into a decline of citizens’ confidence in their elected leaders and in the effectiveness of democratic institutions

¹ Marc F. Plattner, “Is Democracy in Decline?,” *Journal of Democracy*, 26 (No.1, January) 2015:5-10.

in delivering fair or satisfactory decisions.² The disquieting and increasing success of nationalist rhetoric and anti-immigration sentiments redirect electors toward populist and anti-European movements, while a non-democratic Europe, whose decisions heavily reflect a disproportionate power of one of its member-states and the banks, add to the mounting feelings of political mistrust. Within this context, two currents of analysis have emerged in the last decades: one that connects the decline of efficiency of democracy with the decline of the efficacy of the nation-state in many substantial areas of human activity at the expense of regional and global agencies;³ and one that situates the decline of democracy in a causal relationship with the transformations of capitalism and the progressive erosion of economic and social equality.⁴ Both are essential analyses. They are interrelated and point to the growing power of non-political actors (market agencies and multinational corporations above all) within a global system of power relations that humiliates the institutions traditionally associated with the sovereign legal authority of the state.⁵ Claus Offe has derived the conclusion that both the social-democratic project and the liberal-pluralist project have become obsolete, as have the two paradigms they relied upon: one presuming the centrality of political identity (thus the asymmetry of power between the forum and the market so that the former is “*allowed*, in fact *intended*, to have an impact” on the latter), and the other presuming a symmetrical relation between market and politics which translates into the latter’s forbearance to intervene in the organization of the former. While the social-democratic project of blocking the translation of social inequality into political was stopped, the

² “The question ‘Can democracy be saved?’ became central in the recent political debate faced with a most serious financial crisis, as well as apparent institutional incapacity to address it,” Donatella della Porta, *Can Democracy Be Saved?*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, p. 1. See the pioneering researches and surveys of the perceptions and opinions of the citizens of a large number of democracies around the world inaugurated few years ago by Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino, ed., *Assessing the Quality of Democracy*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.

³ An early detection of the paradox of the expansion of democracy through the world and yet its depleting efficacy and power and the state-lever was the volume edited by Daniele Archibugi, David Held and Martin Köhler, *Re-imagining Political Community: Studies in Cosmopolitan Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998.

⁴ See the important work of Adam Przeworski and in particular his “Postscript” in *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; more recently Thomas Piketty,

⁵ See more recently, Jean L. Cohen, *Globalization and Sovereignty: Rethinking Legality, Legitimacy, and Constitutionalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, particularly chap. 1. Starting from the fact of globalization and the decline of efficacy of national institutions, Carol Gould has thus proposed we confront the problems of diminished democracy, pervasive economic inequality, and persistent global poverty by looking beyond traditional state-based politics and to the forms of solidarity interaction among groups and people around the world, *Interactive Democracy: The Social Roots of Global Justice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2014.

myth that bargaining political groups might play the game of re-equilibrating economic forces without state intervention failed.⁶ The result of both defeats manifests in a decline of moral legitimacy of the democratic order. This is the broad and complex context, political and theoretical, in which we have to situate the new wave of discourse on the crisis.

The exhaustion of the authority of the state upon which democracy developed in modern times, along with the decline of industrial capitalism based on Fordism and state borders, are heavily important factors. However, they are not, after all, the same as the crisis of democracy even if liberal democracy and social democracy were historically redefined after WW2 on the assumption of compatibility between, on one hand, nation-state sovereignty and democracy and on the other, capitalism and democracy.⁷ The crisis of democracy is a phenomenon in its own right that pertains to a political system, some specific procedures, institutions and rules, which are distinct from the economic organization of society although it is a historical fact that these two levels do not exist and cannot be understood a part from each other.

Yet when we try to circumscribe the discourse on the crisis to politics, some might object that this does not promise to be interesting since, from at least the eighteenth century onward, there has been a persistent refrain of discourses of crisis in both specialized and not specialized writings. Democracy's journey started along with the claim of its crisis, although it was only the turmoil of the 1920s that set the tone of the most dramatic discourse on the crisis. Crisis was then fatal to constitutional democracy. This is not what we experience today even though discourses on crisis are booming. Contemporary diagnoses of crisis pertain today to the sphere of consent, not to the constitutional order.

The transition to parliamentary constitutional democracy after WW2 seemed able to change the perception of the crisis. Hence Reinhart Koselleck chose to end his 1982 historical and analytical reconstruction of the meanings of the concept of *Krise* (*Crisis*) with the following

⁶ Claus Offe, "Democracy in crisis: two and a half theories about the operation of democratic capitalism," in *OpenDemocracy* 9 July 2012: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/clus-offe/democracy-in-crisis-two-and-half-theories-about-operation-of-democratic-capitalism> (visited on February 14, 2015).

⁷ The bibliography on the doctrine and political history of the democratic (national) state is immense; a useful, rich and excellent critical overview has been recently proposed by Andreas Kalyvas, "Rethinking 'Modern Democracy': For a Democratic Critique of Political Modernity," in Peter Wagner and Gerard Rosich, ed., *The Trouble with Democracy: Political Modernity in the 21st Century*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (forthcoming 2015). As for the theory of a compatibility of democracy and capitalism we recall the peremptory statement "...modern democracy is a product of the capitalist process" by Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1942, 3rd ed. 1950, p. 297.

words: “‘Crisis’ remains a catchword, used rigorously in only a few scholarly or scientific contexts.”⁸ In the domain of politics, detection and proclamation of crisis lost rigor once democracy entrusted its legitimacy to a constitutional pact that sanctioned, organized, and limited the power of its institutions. Unless the constitutional order is subverted or violated, detecting crises seems hardly rigorous. Thus the question I propose is the following: What do we mean when we speak today about a “crisis of democracy”? Or, what kind of democracy do we refer to when we argue that democracy is in a crisis? In the hope of being able to offer a plausible although tentative answer to these questions, I will proceed as follows: first, I offer some introductory clarifications on the meanings of the concept of crisis and on the interpretations of democracy; then, within this comprehensive framework I list some of the main discourses about “crisis” in recent political theory literature; and finally, I propose an answer to the question of what we mean by crisis of democracy. To anticipate my main argument in a few words: what we witness is the crisis of parliamentary democracy (that is to say of the power of suffrage) and the expansion of the executive power (or the contraction of lawmaking) and consequently a transformation of the function, implementation, and meaning of representation.

1. Crisis as break, judgment, and catastrophe

In his contribution to the issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, Philippe Schmitter writes that we should talk not of decline of democracy but of crisis, thus presuming the latter is a clearer guide to interpreting the status of democracy.⁹ Yet the term “crisis” is far from clear and uncontested. The Oxford English Dictionary defines this word in contemporary general parlance by going back to late Middle English when “crisis” started being used in medical language to denote “the turning point of a disease.” This medical and Latin root was meant to indicate a change in the status of a sick person from better to worse or vice versa (although the former became more familiar). In the nineteenth century, Jacob Burckhardt adopted this meaning to question one-way interpretations (namely catastrophic developments) and to argue that “crisis may mean a permanent possibility in history.”¹⁰ Thus, Burckhardt suggested, there are phases of

⁸ Reinhart Koselleck, “Crisis” (1982 in Vol. 3 of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*), trans. Michaela W. Richter, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 67 (No.2) 2006: 397.

⁹ Philippe Schmitter, “Crisis and Transition, But Not Decline,” *Journal of Democracy*, 26 (No.1, January) 2015: 32-44.

¹⁰ Koselleck, “Crisis,” p. 387.

changes in the condition of a person or of a country which are only rarely critical to the point of turning revolutionary (death in the former case and regime change in the latter one).¹¹ Clearly, this presumes we know the state of health, or the normative or functional status of a body or a regime in relation to which we detect changes.

The OED mentions then a second set of meanings of the Greek word *krisis* as *decision* deriving from *krinein* ‘decide’ or cutting a knot, interrupting regularity or normality. Every time we have to decide we are in a condition of crisis since we have to interrupt a current doing with an act of the will that impresses a change (this was the sense used by Thucydides in relation to wars and by Carl Schmitt in relation to decisions as the expression of the state’s sovereignty). In this sense, crisis means breaking, divorce, fight and quarrel, all of which suggest a disjunction where our condition is *either* one thing *or* another.

From the Greek comes also another set of meanings, less radical in their implication and yet directly referable to politics (and democracy). These are meanings like “judgment” and “trial.” Aristotle used this sense when he talked about the juridical decisions made according to procedures or justice (δίκη τοῦ δικαίου κρίσις), and about the citizens as having the authority to make decisions (ἀρχή κριτική).¹² “Justice on the other hand is an element of the state; for judicial procedure, which means the decision of what is just (δικαίου κρίσις) is the regulation of the political partnership.”¹³ Critical mind and crisis – discussion and collective deliberation—go hand in hand with the status of political liberty and with the implication that “κρίσις (*krisis*) is most necessary for the community, representing what is at once just and salutary.”¹⁴

Finally, the idea of crisis as judgment, Koselleck tells us, transmigrated to Latin, and then to the Greek and the Latin translation of the Old and New Testament that restated the identification of crisis with judgment but in a wholly new rendering as the “last judgment.” “The court in this world is, in the Jewish tradition, linked to God, who is simultaneously both the ruler and judge of his people. Hence the act of judging also contains a promise of salvation. Beyond

¹¹ But not all changes of regime count as revolutionary according to Condorcet: “Thus, the word *revolutionary* applies only to those revolutions whose purpose is freedom” in “On revolution: On the meaning of the word ‘revolutionary’ (1793), in *Political Writings*, ed. Steven Lukes and Nadia Urbinati, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 190.

¹² Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a, 35; 1275b, 19.

¹³ Id., 1253a, 39-40

¹⁴ Koselleck, “Crisis,” p. 359

that, the concept gains central significance in the wake of apocalyptic expectations: the κρίσις (*krisis*) at the end of the world will for the first time reveal true justice.”¹⁵

In sum, the Greek meanings of the term “crisis” cohere with the medical meaning and suggests the following polysemy of the term crisis whose implication to politics is predictably very fecund, and which can mean: a) a radical break (either/or situations like war, dictatorial break, and revolution); b) a process of political and juridical judgments that partakes of the system of decision-making in a constitutional government and is engrained in political liberty; and c) a teleological judgment guided toward an end that it already presumed or a new epoch and a new order or a catastrophic fatal trend (hence Koselleck wrote that philosophy of history is the home of both utopia and apocalyptic scenarios).

In relation to democracy, it is possible to derive two inferences from the above taxonomy: in one sense, crisis is endogenous to this system since it denotes politics in its own right as an art by means of which free citizens judge on their deeds, make judgments in and for the public, propose their critical opinions, and devise decisions according to consented procedures; and in another sense, crisis denotes a radical break or a situation of exceptionality and/or emergency that can take on catastrophic characteristics (something that a constitutional democracy is not supposed to face). It is moreover possible to speculate about these meanings as samples of two broad conceptions of politics that the polysemy of crisis involves: one rhetorical or discursive and one technical or problem-solving – the former as an expression of subjective evaluation and judgment made endlessly by free citizens in a constitutional regime, and the latter as an objective and detectable condition of instability that asks for a functional and specific or extraordinary resolving by authority (the spectrum of possibilities goes from elections to the decisive intervention of the sovereign). We should keep in mind this rich constellation of meanings of crisis and politics when we approach the discourse about the sense of the crisis of democracy. Yet again, to what kind of democracy do we refer when we diagnose a crisis?

2. Three perspectives in interpreting democracy

Presumably, the kind of democracy citizens refer to in the ordinary political language is the one in which they live: a constitutional representative democracy. The institutions of this form of democracy were designed and implemented beginning with the eighteenth century in

¹⁵ Ibidem.

order to allow the citizens to resolve peacefully their disagreements and conflicts without making them ever disappear. Constitutions and procedures were constructed in view of allowing a crisis of consent (hence the break of unanimity and the adoption of the rule of majority) without shattering the system and without curtailing freedom of opinion and criticism either. Modern democracy's procedures and constitutions wanted to be guidelines for governing the crisis, which they assumed were congenial to democracy, not accidental.¹⁶ Freedom (civil and political) and majority rule are thus the essential conditions that characterize democracy so that, if one of the two declines, that would be the sign of a radical crisis that is not manageable with ordinary democratic procedures. This led scholars to argue that democratic regimes stand opposed to both permanent revolution and autocracy.¹⁷ "Let us not think that we can justify all extreme actions... 'On necessity, the excuse of tyrants'."¹⁸

Theorists of participatory democracy may not be satisfied with this rendering when they claim that democracy entails a substantive conception of politics and that electoral democracy is distant from it and even a betrayal of it.¹⁹ In this case, however, any discourse of crisis would be meaningless. Dualism between "ideal" and "real" makes all analysis of the existing democracies an unavoidable picture of crisis, with the implication that democracy is never in place anyway because, if in place, it would mean harmony (thus unanimity) as opposed to crisis.²⁰ A vision of democracy as perfect or total consensus on what is the general good of the city is what we get when we split the "ideal" and the "real". To paraphrase Jean-Jacques Rousseau, we might say

¹⁶ The first document describing this modern notion of the constitution is Condorcet's Plan of Constitution, written between September 1792 and February 1793, proposed to the National Assembly for approval at the end of February 1793, yet never discussed and substituted with the Jacobins' plan; see my *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy*, London and Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, chapter 6.

¹⁷ On why majority rule rather than unanimity maximizes the principle of equal political liberty see Hans Kelsen, *The Essence and Value of Democracy*, trans. Brian Graf, ed. Nadia Urbinati and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013, chap. 6; Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, New Haven; Yale University Press, 1989, pp. 89-91.

¹⁸ Jean-Antoine-Nicolas Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, "On Revolution: On the meaning of the word 'revolutionary'" (1793), in *Political Writings*, ed. Steven Lukes and Nadia Urbinati, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 194.

¹⁹ Most scholars have argued for instance that representation has been the most ingenious invention constitutional designers have created to neutralize political participation by making the people a legitimizing force at the instant they renounce their ruling power. "Pure" democracy would thus be only direct participation while representative democracy would be an oxymoron.

²⁰ "If a political association based on majority rule extends the freedom of self-determination more broadly than one on government by minority, ... in principle, then, unanimity would be the best principle of all;" Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, p. 90.

that the general will lays prior to our judgment or critical reflections as it is an act of discovery of what already exists in the normative reason of the citizen. The general will is not a searching process. Thus, any decision that passes a majority vote is, as it were, symptomatic of a crisis of substantive legitimacy. Apart from unanimity there is always a crisis.

To have a “substantive” conception of democracy means to hold democracy instrumental to some predefined goal, which is what gives value (indeed substance) to the empty shelf of democratic procedures and institutions. Thus, for instance, material equality or justice or competent and good decisions or the homogeneity of the people are some substantive goals whose attainment conditions democracy’s legitimacy or, conversely, its crisis. But unless the authoritative judges of these achievements are the citizens (or their representatives in parliament) the risk of democracy’s depreciation and even subversion that the appeal to “substantive” meanings involves, is high. Indeed, in the very moment we list some substantive issues to be attained we violate the principle of autonomy if we assume that there is someone else beside the citizens who is authorized to decree what the substantive problems are and whether they are solved or not. For democracy is predicated on the idea that coercive legal norms are only legitimate to the extent that those who are subjected to them have contributed (in direct and indirect ways) to making them, while all other political regimes are predicated on a principle of “authority”, which ultimately involves a measure of heteronomy.²¹

This does not mean, of course, that democratic governments are indifferent to issues of economic inequality, social injustices, incompetent decisions, and radical divisions within the people. It means that the judgment and denunciation of social inequalities, ineffective decisions and social disunions are only possible within a political and legal system that has political autonomy of the citizens (their will and opinion) at its core. Hence democracy is strong when and until its citizens can mobilize and have some chances to press the system for or against policies they judge in agreement or in contradiction with the democratic promises. In this sense, Hans Kelsen wrote in 1929 that “formal” and “substantive” democracies are “inseparable from one another.”²² This is what makes democracy a government of crisis. If we agree with this political procedural approach, we must also agree with Koselleck that use of the word “crisis”

²¹ Norberto Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy*, trans. Richard Bellamy, London: Polity Press, 1984, chap. 1.

²² Kelsen, *The Essence and Value of Democracy*, p. 97.

risks thoughtlessness when referred to democracy if, by politics, we mean the power of the citizens to develop their critical mind and make political judgments, as Aristotle held.

Yet a political procedural approach does not have a univocal rendering. It can be interpreted in two different ways, which I will call *monoarchic* and *diarchic* respectively. For the sake of brevity, we may say that the monoarchic approach identifies democracy with electoral selections and politics with decision-making within the institutions (to recall the closing of the previous section, it corresponds to the technical meaning of politics). Joseph A. Schumpeter was the main theorist of this rendering. According to Schumpeter, democracy “means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them,” and that their decision occurs through a method of “free competition among would-be leaders for the vote of the electorate.” Democracy as a theory of competitive leadership was Schumpeter’s strategy for nullifying all discourses about crisis.²³ In extending the logic of economic competition to politics, he contemplated a simple rationality that held for citizens and private individuals alike, both of whom reasoned in a manner identical to that of *homo oeconomicus*. The actor within an electoral democracy knows nothing beyond what his own economic interest dictates to him and assumes that the only constraint on his action is the solution that would optimize his preference-satisfaction. A mobilized civil society would thus signal that the institutional performance does not satisfy the requests coming from society: participation would be an indication of crisis while apathy would signal health. Thus Schumpeter concluded that “crisis” is an imprecise word guilty of thoughtlessness also because people’s opinions on what government should or should not do are terribly incompetent and sensitive to “non-logical influences.”²⁴ Until elections occur regularly, there is no such thing as a crisis, unless we rely upon our emotions and imprecise impressions.

The diarchic approach holds instead that democratic proceduralism acquires justification as the norm of political liberty and gives a key role to equality in the distribution of the political power and voice on how institutions should perform, not merely to electoral selection (it

²³ Schumpeter reached this conclusion by stating a relation of causality between capitalism and democracy and moreover assuming a realist conception of capitalist economy (“we shall give any technical meaning to the term crisis but only to prosperity and depression”) that excluded a priori any moral evaluation on its outcomes (inequality and poverty). Hence, he criticized Karl Marx of wavering from a realistic analysis of capitalism to an emotional evaluation that placed emphasis on the growth of misery and exploitation and concluded that the capitalist logic was simply “essentially prosperityless and depressionless;” Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, p. 5, 40.

²⁴ *Id.*, p. 257.

reiterates the above mentioned rhetorical meaning of politics). Political freedom is the kernel of the normative character of democratic proceduralism, as both its method and its objective, because *while it defeats violence it makes decisions by majority rule legitimate and not a second best*.²⁵ In this sense, normative and functional components cannot be disjoined and democratic procedures are never merely formal, and the detection of crisis may have a sense.²⁶

This entails that democracy designates two levels of politics and of judgment on politics: as a form of government based on consent, it is exposed to cyclical crisis (consent by its citizens and temporary tenure of all political functions are related to and incubate contestations, in this sense crises) *and* as a political process it promises to govern disagreement without solving it once and for all (regulating succession in power holding and guaranteeing freedom of contestation to the people: as per Machiavelli, popular government is the only one that allows everybody “to freely speak ill” of the people and the government).²⁷ In a word, democracy is a government of crisis *par excellence* as its procedures presume a permanent occurrence of disagreement and dissent, which are not deemed a source of instability per se. This means that in representative democracy, good indicators of trust in democracy are to be found in the performance of the parliament, political parties, and in a vibrant public sphere of opinions which is the medium that keeps the inside and the outside of the institutions connected.²⁸ Within this approach, when we talk about “crisis” we point probably to the communication (the medium) between the process of contestation that free speech and freedom of association guarantee us and the process of deliberation and decision at the institutional level.

²⁵ The best argument in favor of majority rule as a condition for liberty has been devised by Kelsen, who opposed it to unanimity (in which *one* would have the power to determine the decision) and to qualified majority (in which *some* would have the power to determine the decision): “Under these circumstances, the fewer wills one’s own has to agree with in order to effect a change in the will of the state, the easier it is to achieve a concordance between the individual will and the will of the state. Here, then, an absolute majority does in fact constitute the upper limit. Anything less would mean that the will of the state could from its very inception conflict with more wills than it agrees with. Anything more would make it possible for a minority, rather than the majority, to determine the will of the state by preventing an alteration of that will;” Kelsen, *The Essence and Value of Democracy*, p. 31.

²⁶ For the articulation of normative and functional components of democracy, see Jon Elster, “The Market and the Forum: Three Varieties of Political Theory,” in *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, ed. James Bohman and William Rehg, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997, pp. 3-33.

²⁷ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses*, ed. Bernard Crick, trans. Leslie J. Walker, London: Penguin Books, 1970, 1:58;

²⁸ Maria Paula Saffon and Nadia Urbinati, “Procedural democracy: the Bulwark of Political Equality,” in *Political Theory* 41 (2013): 441-81.

The diarchic view of procedural democracy can orient us in interpreting how in today's literature the term crisis is used to denote a condition of dissatisfaction and distress in consolidated democracies (European in particular) when people's opinion seems not to be on the side of the ruling majority, not even when their political opinion (their voting) is ideologically the same as that of the ruling majority. The *distance* between institutional democracy and extra-institutional democracy is at the core of discourses about the crisis. Hence, clearly, the issue at stake here is representative democracy, or a diarchic political order that contemplates two sources of authority: that of procedures (the constitutionalized decision making system) and that of opinion (the broad domain of the public sphere within which people freely form and express and change their political judgment). *Crisis would in this case denote a problem of communication between these two levels.* This is the perspective I shall adopt and that in my view can help us to make sense of the growing discourse about the crisis of democracy while avoiding the risk of being guilty of thoughtlessness.

I have thus sketched three broad interpretations of democracy as reference points in relation to which we may evaluate today's discourse about the crisis: a *substantive* one (which ends in an "ideal"/"real" dualism regardless of what the content of the "substance" is); a *procedural monoarchic* one; and a *procedural diarchic* one. In what follows I will illustrate some of the most representative discourses of crisis, which are somehow pertinent to the three perspectives of democracy and the conceptions of crisis I sketched above.

3a. *Overload of participation as an "excess of democracy"*

After WW2, when the trajectory of democracy started its journey in Western countries within a party system based on universal suffrage, the first and most explicit declaration of a crisis of democracy came from scholars who shared a minimal conception of democracy and whom I would include in the monoarchic category. Michael Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, the members of the Trilateral Commission, released in 1975 the *Report on the Governability of Democracies* with the title, *The Crisis of Democracy*.²⁹ The Trilateral was made of "private citizens of Western Europe, Japan and North America" pressed to study the "crisis" provoked by the growth of social movements of contestation in almost all democratic

²⁹ Michael Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: On the Governability of Democracies: Report on the Governability of Democracies to The Trilateral Commission*, New York: New York University Press, 1975.

societies. These movements were for civil rights, against imperialism and militarism, for the vindication and expansion of social rights, for a more participatory democracy, for social-democratic programs, and even for a socialist transformation of political democracy. In relation to those diverse forms of contestation, the Trilateral detected a crisis of “governability”, or the incapacity of democratic institutions to resist the pressures from associated citizens without capitulating to their requests. The crisis of governability was exemplified by social policies. One may ask the members of the Trilateral how they could appeal to a minimal proceduralism and yet detect a crisis of democracy.

In the analysis of the Trilateral, civil movements in the 1960s and 1970s made Western democracies “overloaded with participants and demands” and caused them to become more bureaucratic. Social-democratic policies in Europe and the Great Society in the USA—both of which are politics of social equality of opportunities—made “government less powerful and more active” as they increased its functions while decreasing its authority. Positive liberty, which commanded state intervention, originated a vicious circle that it could not itself stop since, while prompting citizens’ demands, it was forced to become itself more demanding; on the one hand taxation increased and on the other society’s bargaining power against the state also increased. The “excess of democracy” could be stopped only by stopping social policies and deflating (or repressing?) social movements. Minimalist democracy gained a truly perfectionist role as an ideology to be opposed against a recalcitrant reality. The monoarchic theory gave birth to the following paradox: it narrowed democracy to electoral procedures yet could not make peace with the fact that those procedures would open the door to citizens’ participation and claimant movements. The paradox revealed a lack of understanding of representative government which entails both the right to vote and the right to formulate and express judgment on representatives and institutions alike. Electoral selection thus provokes demands and criticism from citizens and civil society: “excess of democracy” is part of the game, not its pathology.

The Trilateral Committee detected the crisis of democracy on two correlated fronts: that of the state (whose necessary antagonism with the Soviet Union brought it into a kind of competition on the terrain of social equality) and that of the citizens and civil society (as states’ social activism expanded people’s demands as well). That slippery-slope movement could be stopped only by containing participation from below and by interrupting the welfare state from above. Neo-liberal dismantling of social policies and a repressive state were the *long durée*

message of the Trilateral, the perfectionist project concealed under the detection of the crisis of democracy. In forty years, that vision of monoarchic democracy would become victorious: today's decline of political participation and of social policies makes many consolidated democracies the land of neo-liberal perfectionism.

3b. *Pathologies of the public sphere*

The second discourse on the “crisis” of democracy comes from the anti-minimalism alter of democratic proceduralism, namely deliberative democracy, a branch of critical theory and, for this very reason, naturally keen to make the concept of crisis a learning tool. “Crisis is at the basis of social and critical theory insofar as it signifies the dissonance between morality and progress, knowledge and interests, and the limits of intelligibility....Thus crisis serves the practice of unveiling latencies; it is a distinction that transcends oppositions and dichotomies.”³⁰ Yet once applied to the analysis of democracy, critical theory presents us with an ideal vision of the democratic society that metabolizes the crisis insofar as it effects a transition to a progressively more integrated society. Indeed, if democracy is defined, as in Jürgen Habermas’ language, as a rule of good reasons, whereby good reasons are contingent upon how the justification process is structured, and if this requires an institutionalized basic structure of justification in which reasons can be assessed amongst free and equal beings through the criteria of reciprocity and generality in light of a formal-pragmatic basis, then one may infer that democracy is permanently in a state of crisis or actualization of its ideal of a perfect integration of citizens as good reasoners, who are capable of and willing to transcend their partial views and correct their biases.

Whereas overloaded participation by the claimant citizens and the expansion of social programs by the state were the main concerns of the Trilateral, to Jürgen Habermas the concern is precisely the withdrawal of the citizens from reasoned deliberative participation and of the state from its commitment to take care of the social conditions of political deliberation. Factions, on the one hand, and particular interests on the other – in a word, partisanship and classist policies — are the main expressions of a crisis because they are the symptom of a very divided

³⁰ Janet Roitman, “Crisis” in *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/issue1/crisis/> consulted on February 7th, 2015.

and unequal society in which impartial deliberation becomes a utopia at best and elections remain the only formal expression of autonomy. A crisis of rationality as an integrating force of society is the diagnosis of a not-truly perfect democracy. Moreover, since according to Habermas, the communicative theory of society provides an account of collective learning processes within discourses and a corresponding theory of social evolution, the gaps in social coordination translates into a gap in social learning, and thus into a regressive development in all social structures, from economic to social to political.³¹ Crisis of democracy is, properly speaking, a crisis of social integration and rationalization of claims and interests that takes place in the domains in which social discourses occur. Social conflicts, forms of intolerance or, more simply, social tensions between classes are the signs of the crisis.

Of course, the decline of the welfare state (or what Offe designated as the asymmetry paradigm between forum and the market) is the most significant factor in this critical regression. This decline signifies indeed that the rationalized form of state action (through the legal and the bureaucratic system) is less and less capable of containing the expansion of inequality and the pressures of partial interests. Both at the level of the European Union and at the level of the member-states, with the end of 1970s democracies faced the growth of anti-generalist interests and large privatization of state programs while politics became slowly more in tune with a purely instrumental rationality that penalizes the weakest strata of the population and reveals a society less inclusive and more balkanized.

Habermas writes in his *Between Facts and Norms* that when actualized in the state of rights (the government of the law) legitimacy is conceived according to a discursive theory of the law that renounces a personification of popular sovereignty. Popular sovereignty drops out from the state and becomes an informal discourse in the communicative circuits represented by deliberative forms of participation, external to the legislative bodies.³² But partisan discourses, along with organized interests, prove that social and political groups take up the game of politics

³¹ On Habermas' theory of postmetaphysical rationality as "reflective competence" within and through the "formal condition of rationality in knowing, in reaching understanding through language, and in acting" see his *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume I Reason and The Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, Boston: Beacon Press, 1981, p. 2.

³² Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contribution to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996, Appendix 1. This is in Habermas' theory, the golden rule of deliberative democracy (which is similar to Claude Lefort's idea of constitutional representative democracy as a politics that renounces occupying the "empty space" of power).

in order to make their view win the state: block-parties correspond to a battlefield-like politics in which the counting of votes only gives legitimacy to the institutions. The success of the liberal-pluralism model looks like the picture of the failure of deliberative democracy.

As an overturned minimalism, Habermas' theory presents us with a hierarchy of two models: a superior one, which corresponds to deliberative democracy; and a second best one, which narrows legitimacy to the electoral method and the rule of majority.³³ His theory's normative assumption is that in a government based on consent, legitimacy must be identified with unanimity (because with rationality) in order not to succumb to the government of the majority: "For if the course of action which needs justification is collective in nature, the members of the collectivity must reach a *common* decision. ... Faced with a *pluralism of ultimate value orientations*, which seems to support the skeptic's position, the cognitivist has to try to demonstrate the existence of a bridging principle that makes consensus possible."³⁴ To be sure, Habermas clarified that unanimity as consensus does not need to refer to all single decisions but only to some basic principles and the procedural mode of justification and action. Yet the dualism between foundational consensus and ordinary pluralism shows itself at its best precisely when and if deliberative democracy is in decline, that is to say when the clash of interests seems now to define the form of public interactions among citizens who are more unequal and less capable of transcending their social conditions and partial interests. Although Habermas argued on several occasions against the dualism between "ideal" and "real" and claimed that the ideal is actually a norm operating in our public behavior when we act as citizens (pragmatic view, not dualistic), the discourse of the crisis that his theory of democracy suggests invites us to think that electoral and party democracy belongs to a non-ideal democracy, although it is a functional mechanism that sustains democratic institutions. The normative or ideal state of democracy is one of a well-integrated society in which justification of claims is a duty toward others to be

³³ On deliberative theory of democracy as an "anti-voting" theory see Anthoula Malkopoulou, "Does Voting Matter? The Devaluation of Elections in Contemporary Democratic Theory", in Kari Palonen, Jose Maria Rosales, and Tapani Turkka, ed., *The Politics of Dissensus: Parliament in Debate*, Santander: Cantabria University Press, 2014, pp. 81-99.

³⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christine Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1993, p. 71 and 76. A convincing criticism of this vision of deliberation as anchored on a notion of rationality that is abstract and univocal has been proposed by Bernard Manin, "On Legitimacy and Political Deliberation," *Political Theory* 15 (1987): 338-68.

performed according to impartiality of judgment, freedom from influence, or autonomy of will formation.

3c. *Crisis as Catastrophe*

The third discourse about crisis is external to proceduralism as such and presumes a “substantive” conception of the national community that sustains a democracy. It is thus catastrophic as it rests on an interpretation of democracy that has no procedure at its core (whether minimal or deliberative) but cultural identity of some kind instead, in relation to which procedures are essentially a technical method at most. Predictably, thus, a crisis of the core identity can hardly be remedied. To paraphrase Koselleck’s taxonomy, we may say that this rendering of the “crisis” corresponds to the monotheistic appropriation of the classical meaning of crisis as judgment, wherein judgment acquires moreover the meaning of the “final judgment” that projects history toward the eschatology of either salvation or damnation.³⁵ Samuel Huntington’s theory of a clash of civilizations is representative of this rhetoric, which is ideological and assumes democracy is rooted in the nation as a unitary set of values (cultural and religious) that give meaning and strength to the political community and its government. Neither class issues (as with the Trilateral), nor organized interests (as with Habermas) are responsible for the crisis, but rather the growth of tribalism and cultural divide of the national body is.

According to Huntington’s narrative, nations are still the protagonists of world politics, yet within a scenario that is no longer inhabited by nations operating according to the state grammar (army, laws, economic exchange, and so on) but by nations operating according to non-state grammar (religious fundamentalism).³⁶ This is primed to inaugurate a global scenario of catastrophe and apocalyptic ruins. The crisis of democracy is thus a chapter in the crisis of western civilization, which coincides with the end of the world order based on the state and comprised in the centuries between the Westphalia Treaty (1648) and the end of the Cold War (1989). The crisis of that international order is also a crisis of democracy, which has been the political form consistent with it and under threat in this new global scenario marked by strong anti-western forces.

³⁵ “The Apocalypse, so to speak, has been anticipated in one’s faith and hence is experienced as already present,” Koselleck, *Crisis*, p. 360.

³⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilization,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, n. 3, Summer 1993:22-49.

With the growth of Islamic fundamentalism, religion has become an internationalizing force that unifies large areas of the world into one civilization that is an alternative to the West's. The globe is the theater in which this clash occurs. Humanity is thus divided into two parts and the foreseeable scenario appears to be tragic and with no room for mediation. Catastrophe is the name of this diagnosis more than crisis. It reminds us of the literature on the decline of European civilization at the beginning of the twentieth century.³⁷ But whereas then the risk came from within Europe since Europe was the main theater of world politics and culture, today it comes from outside Europe and the West. (An overloaded level of immigration and the technological revolution of the means of communication has transported this risk fatally inside of the West and subjected it to changes it is no longer able to govern). The perverse effect of this movement beyond and against borders is the exporting of the clash of civilizations to the international domain, since religious fundamentalist ideologies and groups look for their representative peers wherever they are, that is outside of the West. The clash of civilization is fatal and primed to erode both domestic solidarity and state unity and international stability. The "crisis" of democracy is here the same thing as the crisis of a world order and cannot be dealt with since it pertains to the "substance" of democracy. It is a catastrophe.

The Trilateral, the Deliberative, and the Cultural discourses have this in common: they interpret the "crisis" as the failure of empirical democracies to adhere to, or match with, or impersonate an ideal model of perfect equilibrium or rationality or unity. None of them are content with accepting a conception of democracy as a government of crisis: the first, because its monoarchic proceduralism rests on a view of politics whose Archimedean point is within the institutions so that any movement from outside appears fatally as a hazard and an attack on stability and governability; the second, because it cultivates an innate mistrust in conflicts, basic disagreement, majority rule and also party politics, which are the structural conditions of representative democracy as diarchy, whose goal is to regulate yet preserve a kind of social integration that is non-consensual and not even based on the promise of sincerity that citizens make to each other (giving and taking reasons with no rhetorical intent of persuasion); and

³⁷ The twenty century started with Arthur Spengler's complain with the crisis of European civilization that democratization provoked, Ortega y Gasset's lament for the decline of heroism, Johan Huizinga's prediction that the crisis would open a better future, and Edmund Husserl's interpretation of the crisis of European sciences as symptomatic of the "crisis of European civilization;" see Koselleck, "Crisis," pp. 397-400.

finally, the third because it connects democracy with some strong substantive values and views of the political community, which nullify democratic proceduralism altogether and result in an ideological catastrophism with no way out.

4. *“Burn it down! Burn it down!” or the Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*

As I said at the beginning, today’s discourse on the crisis of democracy refers to a specific form of democratic polity, the one that took off in Europe after WW2 in reaction to the despotic and totalitarian mass regimes that destroyed domestic liberty and an international peaceful coexistence. It is a crisis of the parliamentary democracy built on elections and political parties.³⁸ Since the European continent was the home of parliamentary democracy, it is predictably the place in which the discourse about crisis is more intense: “Burn it down! Burn it down!” was the cry of Greek demonstrators on May 5th, 2010 against the state’s administrative mismanagement. Of course Greek citizens had good reason to voice their criticism against their elected politicians and doubt the power of voting.³⁹ As for our analysis, they confirm that when we talk about “crisis of democracy” we point to the citizens’ disaffection with the representative system. The implications of this criticism can be understood whenever we interpret democratic procedures from a diarchic perspective.

Since its inception in the eighteenth century, the parliamentary model was able to realize the promise of political autonomy. The crisis of democracy has been since then a crisis of this model: “The battle, which was waged against autocracy at the end of the eighteenth and at the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, was essentially a battle for parliamentarism.”⁴⁰ According to one of its early theorists, Hans Kelsen, this is a system of political liberty that rests on free mandate representation, which implies on the one hand, that collective decisions are to be taken by a specialized body of government whose components are chosen through free election by those to whom the decisions are supposed to apply; and on the other hand, that the majority

³⁸ This is a de facto crisis also in the sense that some European democracies are moving toward less pluralistic and more meggioritarianist forms, as for instance in the case of Hungary, whose new constitution looks like a burial of parliamentary democracy.

³⁹ Very telling the comment of the current Minister of administrative reform, Mr. Georgos Katraugalos, relatively to the subjection of Greek government to its European creditors: “If we cannot change economic policy through elections, then elections are irrelevant...Elections are irrelevant and it is useless to vote” cited in Jim Yardley, “Lawmakers (Just Not Greece’s) Approve a Bailout Extension,” *The New York Times*, February 28, 2015.

⁴⁰ Kelsen, *The Essence and Value of Democracy*, p. 47.

principle is a decision-making rule that this elected body must employ. This system is ingrained in a political sphere made of parties, wherein the political party is an association of citizens “which brings like-minded individuals together in order to secure them actual influence in shaping political affairs.”⁴¹ Any effort to discredit the parties or make them the power of few notables represents a resistance to the actualization of democracy. Thus, Colin Crouch has argued, in giving today’s crisis the name of “post-democracy,” that the changes we witness call into question the centrality of both the lawmaking power and of the party system.⁴² To Peter Mair, the transformation of political parties is actually the locus of the crisis since the latter have gradually changed from means of associations of citizens to notabiliate organizations that perfectly meet with the increasing power of the executive branch and an oligarchic turn in society.⁴³

According to Bernard Manin, however, the word “crisis” does not convey the sense of an impassive diagnosis since it presumes party democracy is a model of good democracy, which is unwarranted and idealistic. Manin thus prefers the term “metamorphosis” or a change in the representative system, a government that can bear several forms without changing its basic structure. Historically, starting with the eighteenth century, government based on elections passed from a “notabiliate” to a “party democracy” and also adopted universal suffrage. Focusing on parties as if their crisis were the cause of a decline of democracy thus makes no sense also because parties are, as Robert Michels and his followers argued, oligarchic in their own right. Today, Manin concludes, a metamorphosis of representative government is in action that is beyond party democracy yet not beyond being democratic: this is “audience democracy”.⁴⁴

The term metamorphosis refers to a body that changes its original form from within. The Greek root μεταμόρφωσις is composed of two words, μετα (change) and μορφή (form). The form is paramount in order to detect changes. Manin does not define the “form” of representative democracy, but proposes four principles that make it possible: a) those in charge of government are appointed by elections at regular intervals; b) the elected retain a degree of independence from the wishes of the electors; c) those who are governed are free to give expression if they

⁴¹ Id., p. 38.

⁴² Colin Crouch, *Coping with Post-Democracy*, London: The Fabian Society volume 598 of Fabian Ideas, 2000.

⁴³ Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, London: Verso, 2013.

⁴⁴ Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 221.

want to express their opinions and political wishes; and d) political decisions are public and undergo a trial of judgment and debate. As we can see, the first two principles pertain to the arrangements internal to state institutions, while the last two pertain to the political action of the citizens. The correlation of the two is what I call “diarchy”. Detecting a crisis of party democracy is not a platitude as it means that a change has occurred in the second set of principles that compose representative government, the broad system of opinion formation and expression that activates the communication between state institutions and the citizens. Parties no longer operate along this line, and although they are still in place as electoral machines, they no longer represent citizens’ judgment and claims as the surveys prove when they point to people’s overt disbelief and mistrust in the entire political system. This is the meaning of what I anticipated at the start of this essay as a crisis of consent and not of the constitutional order.

Manin’s diagnosis seeks to be merely descriptive. It argues that the decline of party democracy and the growth of the democracy of the public correspond to a political order in which trust in the leader and the acceptance of an increasing call for more power by the executive meet with a change in the organization of political elections from parties and militants to experts in communication. “Audience democracy is the rule of the *media expert*.”⁴⁵ To Jeffrey Green, who gives an evaluative twist to Manin’s diagnosis, this represents a celebration of the ocular power. While party-democracy elections were heavily based on the vocal and the volitional aspect of politics – participation was its central marker – appearance in public now defines the art of politics instead. Words, discussion, and conflicts between ideas and interests were central in the one case, while candor and transparency (public exposure of the leader and his government) are central in the other case, in which the organ of popular power is “the gaze rather than the decision, and the critical ideal of popular power [is] candor rather than autonomy.”⁴⁶ Audience democracy is a remarkable step toward a reactive participation whereby democratic politics is not so much associated with autonomy as with spectatorship. This corresponds to a detour from representation as advocacy to a representation that is, in Thomas Hobbes’s apt words, a form of authority creation divesting the authorizing citizens of all power.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Jeffrey Edward Green, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in the Age of Spectatorship*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 15.

⁴⁷ “It is the task of the popular representatives thus to coordinate and criticize. The necessary unity does not logically follow from the unity of the representer, as Hobbes would have it, but must be created and

Manin achieves an important score against all previous discourses about “crisis” that in one way or another proposed a dual scenario of “ideal” and “real”. He understands that democracy is a matter of process, which makes difficult any discourse of crisis that is not itself the indication of a desideratum. Somehow, he brings to the floor the dissatisfying nature of both the Trilateral and the Habermasian visions, which did not succeed in keeping their diagnosis within a purely procedural approach as we explained above. However, Manin achieves this result by means of a radical restyling of democracy that wants to be non-evaluative. He identifies it categorically with the procedures in action in ancient democracy: direct presence and, when selection was needed, rotation. But modern democracy uses only election, a mechanism of selection that, although based on equality, democracy employs not as mathematically equal probability to be chosen (as with lottery) but as equal weight of a political unit of measurement (voting) and the equal possibility citizens have to take part in the debating process.⁴⁸ Thus it is not on the side of procedures that representative government is democratic. What makes it democratic is not participation any way, but opinion and discussion on the proposals and the behavior of the lawmakers. If this is the case, how can we speak of a crisis of democracy if today’s changes translate into an increasing power of opinion over parties’ and parliaments’? Isn’t “audience democracy” a perfection of the democracy of the moderns?

However, democracy’s diarchic authority presumes that consent and discussion although essential to legitimacy are not self-standing marks of self-government. Consent and discussion acquire power thanks to political associations and groups. The latter contribute in making representation play a participatory function, not only an authorizing one. Parties are thus not optional. Indeed, voting for disassociated individuals (without party, program, and policy commitment) would undermine the purpose of electoral representation: “if election were truly a selection between and of single candidates – between and of individual names rather than political groups’ names—representation would vanish because each person would run for him or herself alone and would in fact become a party of his or her own interests.” The legislature would become an “aggregation of individual will,” rather than a place for deliberating about

constantly re-created through a political process of dynamic activity;” Carl J. Friedrich, *Constitutional Government and Democracy: Theory and Practice in Europe and America*, Fourth edition, Waltham, Mass.: Blaisdell, 1968, p. 273; see also, Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, *State, Society and Liberty: Studies in Political Theory and Constitutional Law*, Trans. J.A. Underwood. New York/Oxford: Berg, 1991, chaps. 6-7.

⁴⁸ Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, pp. 39-41.

proposals that have a collective backing.⁴⁹ Moreover, political representation is not identical with representation as embodiment of the people or the making of the citizens as a total unity under the person of the leader. Elections make the representative carry on two functions at once: that of unifying a constituency and that of giving voice to or advocating its claims. The representative advances the opinions she shares with her constituency so that she does not simplistically rule instead of the citizens, but makes laws or decisions in a relationship of interdependence with them, thus activating a medium of communication with them, which includes contestation, control and finally dismissal if needed.⁵⁰ Elections do not designate delegation as transfer of power, though they do initiate a division of labor within the polity. Moreover, elections are not a plebiscite that crowns a leader under whose person the masses are unified and acquire an identity, although elections do produce a political class.⁵¹

If elections alone qualified representative democracy it would be hard to make sense of the discourse of crisis and Schumpeter would be right. Elections contribute to the formulation of the country's political direction in the sense that they initiate the representative process the citizens activate and sustain through time by means of multiple forms of political presence, neither just as electors nor through permanent mobilization.⁵² On this ground, it is correct to say that democratization and the representative process share in genealogy and destiny: they arise together and decline together.⁵³ This is, in short, the repercussion of the idea of democracy as

⁴⁹ Urbinati, *Representative Democracy*, p. 39. According to Muirhead, political parties play also an educational function since they motivate citizens to act in public and to acquire some cognitive competence; the "party spirit" is a participatory quality because it trains members and sympathizers in the difficult art of interacting with adversaries with civility and tolerance, and moreover setting the latitude of compromise and intransigence, thus acting prudently (on these bases, he distinguishes between party loyalty and blind loyalty, between party and faction); Russell Muirhead, *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014, chapters 3,4,5.

⁵⁰ Hence Ackerman has argued that: "All is lost if we are captured by this naïve synecdoche" (or the rhetorical figure of speech in which the part replaces the whole). "If we mistake Congress for People Assembled, and give it supreme power, it will act in a way that belies its populist rhetoric," that is, like an elective despot; Bruce Ackerman, *We The People: Foundations*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 81.

⁵¹ I analyze the difference between election and plebiscite in *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014, in particular chap. 4.

⁵² Morgan's study of pre-democratic England and America shows how elections were able to energize political life by involving people who were not included in the demos, such as women; Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America*, New York: Norton & Company, 1988, pp. 189-97.

⁵³ "It was the willingness of the elite to contend with each other that created the condition for the expansion of political participation" in the seventeenth century, "that made necessary both the party

diarchy. Its heuristic value consists in allowing us to employ the term “crisis” without making us guilty of thoughtlessness.

We can thus evaluate the transition from party democracy to an indistinct public or an audience democracy in terms of a decline of the sovereign power of the people because a disempowerment of the decision-making role of the citizens (the decline of politics as autonomy), though the constitutional order is still in place and the right to vote is not questioned. When citizens used to voting for parties with a platform they exercise their judgment on future politics; they do not make a plebiscite of leaders because their vote does not contain simply their trust in the person, as it used to happen in pre-democratic representative government in which the candidate-notable was the figure of representation. In party democracy, the image of the candidate does not substitute for the future expectation of the voters as in an audience democracy, which is essentially plebiscitarian as in its reference to programs and platforms is irrelevant in electoral campaigns. Rather, it is the voting power itself that changes its character when it becomes an investiture or plebiscite of a leader. One consequence of this is that accountability becomes truly meaningless since electors do not express claims that ask for retrospective verification and prospective policies; they simply confer trust.⁵⁴ This change proves to be so significant that even Manin, who resists all “evaluative” readings of democracy, judges the transition from debating-and-participating to attending-and-gazing as a sign of “malaise,” not a neutral mutation. Indeed, he concluded his 1997 book with discomfiting words: “representative government appears to have ceased its progress towards popular self-government.”⁵⁵

Manin’s evaluative judgment of the transition from party democracy to audience democracy can be read as an invitation to detect a change in the normative structure of democratic diarchy. Indeed what a consistent audience perspective propels is the overcoming of the “status of the vocal model,” of the idea of peoples’ participation as “an active, autonomous, decision-making force.”⁵⁶ The plebiscitarian project sweeps away all vestiges of deliberative

system” in the eighteenth century, and “the franchise reforms” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; Mark A. Kishlansky, *Parliamentary Selection: Social and Political Choice in Early Modern England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 21.

⁵⁴ This argument has been made by Jane J. Mansbridge, “Rethinking Representation,” in *American Political Science Review* 97 (2003): 515-28.

⁵⁵ Manin, *Principles of Representative Government*, p. 233.

⁵⁶ Green, *The Eyes of the People*, pp. 111-12.

procedural democracy, which holds plebiscitarian democracy a “profanity” as it celebrates a passive role of the people. Yet it also nullifies any interpretation of democracy that grounds procedures in political liberty. Proceduralism, no matter the form it takes, retains a normative perspective, either in the name of the universalizability of rational arguments or in the name of preference aggregation and the periodical change of the elected as the only pragmatic way to resolve the lack of rationality that the government by opinion contains. It conceives of democracy as a political order that is based on autonomy and voting, a view of political activity that is centered on decision and voice. This is what plebiscitary of the audience invalidates when it opposes the intermediation of judgment with visual reaction to images.

5. Concluding remarks

To bring these reflections to an end, I would say that analyzing the crisis of democracy is not a thoughtless exercise. Once read through the lenses of diarchy, the “crisis” points to a rearrangement of the relationship between democracy’s two authorities (active participation and participation in the form of opinion) and ultimately a decline of a particular type of democracy (parliamentary and party democracy). “Crisis” pertains to the form of citizenship participation itself thus as it becomes less propositional and vocal and more reactive and visual. It designates an exhaustion of citizens’ empowerment insofar as an audience democracy makes the reactive public more important than suffrage, the judgment of a de-structured audience more influential than the citizens’ as individual or associated actors. This change does not come without cost as it contributes in strengthening the voice of the delegated power (and in particular the executive) at the expense of representation and lawmaking. Thus, even though democracy goes unquestioned, the detection of a “crisis” is not unwarranted -- it points to a decline of citizens’ power in determining the agenda and shaping the public affairs of their country.