

**Notes for the conference:
Resetting Liberalism. An Inquiry into the Crisis of Open Societies**

We all know that we are very far from the late eighties and early nineties, when Francisco Fukuyama was explaining with success that there is no alternative to democracy. We know that democracy faces huge domestic and international challenges, that “illiberal democracy” is not a satisfying formula, and that many criticisms towards democracy call for an answer.

Let me start with a very simple and short but important remark: if we want to define democracy, I would propose to insist on two main points. First, democracy is the only regime that makes possible, at the same time, to defend a social body, a community as such, as a whole, with its unity, a State, a Nation for instance, on the one hand, and on the other hand to institutionalise the treatment of conflicts and diversity, i.e. to deal seriously with the plurality within the society.

And, second point, democracy today has to be good for the society, as a whole, but also must be good for everybody, for each individual, it must take into account the individual “capabilities”, to speak like Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, the subjectivity of each person.

Let me start now with a short evocation of five main contemporary challenges.

1. Five challenges

The first one is employment, and unemployment, and social inequalities. During some thirty years after World War II, this was not a key issue for western democracies, since they experimented full employment and growth. But not only this is no longer the case, but in some illiberal democracies, such as Poland, there is growth and full employment. And China demonstrates, as we all know, that it is possible to have both political authoritarianism and a successful economy.

The second challenge is coming from cultural and religious minorities. In some cases, this is a territorial challenge, and a minority wants their own state and territory, as we observe in Spain today with Catalonia. It is very difficult for a democracy to propose a democratic answer to such an issue, which means an amputation of the national territory. And as far as Spain is at stake, we should not forget the Basque terrorism, with ETA, so that has been active during almost half a century.

In other cases, the issue is recognition, as Charles Taylor said. Democracy cannot easily answer to cultural or religious demands coming from minorities that are not totally compatible with the values of the majority.

Multiculturalism, recognition of cultural rights are never totally satisfying, we all know how tensed are the debates in this field, where democracy tries to conciliate very contradictory perspectives.

A third challenge can be called: the crisis of political representation. There are always been strong criticisms towards political representation, including for instance Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ones. The problem today is both political and social in fact. Political representation can work if political parties are clearly able to represent social forces or demands. During the industrial era, the opposition between the working class movement and the masters of industry could receive a political treatment. But today, social and cultural differences do not enable political forces to clearly represent one side or the other in a well defined conflict. The classical political forces are not really related to social or cultural forces or demands. People expect new politics, don't trust classical politicians, and will more and more accept demagoguery or populism. Then, there is abstention, or extremism, and we may enter in the post-democracy that was described twenty years ago by Colin Crouch. Some will propose to give more importance to direct democracy –but let me recall the disaster this has made possible, with the referendum for the Brexit. Others will promote participative or deliberative democracy, but the results are limited, even with the use of new technologies and communicational tools, Internet, mobile phones, etc.

A fourth challenge can be called the dilemma of democracy: what can be done if a non-democratic political force gets access to power through democratic ways, i.e. elections? Hitler here is not a good example, since his access to power resulted from a combination of democratic process, this is true, and violence. The list of those extremist or ultra-reactionary or very conservative leaders that got access to power through elections is today impressive, Bolsonaro, Salvini, Erdogan, etc.

And a fifth challenge deals with the principle, as Montesquieu called it, of "séparation des pouvoirs": when a country faces important threats, whatever they are, real or imagined, such as terrorism, when the moral panic is strong, the executive power wants to be stronger, and will limit the other powers, the judicial and the legislative ones. This means less democracy. The Patriot Act is a good example of this issue.

2. Democracy, as both unity and pluralism

Democracy, as said previously, must make possible for all citizens to live in the same framework. This is why it is so frequently connected with a principle of unity, which can be given by the State, by the idea of Nation, or by the idea of citizenship. It may be also related to the idea of social ties. But how democracy can deal with conflicts? My point here is that democracy doesn't help to avoid conflicts, but to avoid violence, ruptures, refusal of

debate and negotiation. Democracy makes possible to transform crisis, political violence, civil war into debates and institutionalized conflicts. It is successful when it make simultaneously possible to have debates and institutionalized conflicts, on the one hand, and to share clearly the framework in which these debates and conflicts occur, so that all participants consider that they belong to the same unity. When there is only unity, it may lead to an authoritarian regime, and when there is only debates and conflicts, it may lead to chaos. This is why democracy needs institutions and laws.

3. Is it possible to improve democracy?

There are two main ways to deal with this issue. If one considers that there is a real autonomy in the political and institutional life, then, the current crisis should be solved with institutional and political solutions. For instance: reforming institutions, changing the modalities of vote, passing to a new Constitution. But if, like me, one considers that the current crisis is connected with a distance between political institutions and their actors, political parties mainly, and the society, one must take into account the society itself. If there is such a distance, this is maybe due to the political actors themselves, since they make politics like in the past for instance, or since they don't understand or listen to the real claims and demands coming from the society. It may be also connected with the fact that contemporary societies are fragmented, and that individualism is so strong that it makes it difficult for political parties to represent in a sustained way any social or cultural demands. The real issue is here: how connect, or reconnect civil society and the political sphere?

4. The expansion of democracy

The idea of a crisis is so strong that we generally don't realise how in fact democracy is expanding. If we admit that the more current level for democratic life is the State, democracy is expanding on the one hand at higher levels, and on the other hand at less high levels. Higher: we have today some international institutions that make possible a democratic life at the world and the regional level. Justice courts, for instance, even if they deserve radical criticisms, European institutions, NOGs and the whole space of their action, which includes international organizations such as the UN or UNESCO.

And at a less high level: there is more democracy today in many families, and in institutions, such as the school system or universities. Women vote is recent in any countries. Even the army are a more democratic institution. And if we take seriously into account the notion of time and temporality, we can also admit that democracy deals more than in the past with the future.

For instance, taking seriously into consideration the climate changes has something to do with the idea to give a voice to the next generations, to make their future possible.

5. Populism, fake news and paranoia

When democracy is in a crisis, illiberal democracy appears and expands. There are several dimensions in this, and I would like to insist on two points here.

The first one is the populist issue. There is no real satisfying concept for populism. If one considers the history of populism, one must first of all distinguish two phases. The classical one begins with the Narodniki in Russia, and the People's Party in the South of the USA, at the end of the 19th century and ends in the seventies, it includes the populist regimes in the 40, 50 and 60ies, for instance in Latin America; the second one, that I call neo-populism, appeared in the eighties. All these cases are different, and even neo-populisms are distinct, for instance we can distinguish leftist populisms, rightist ones, and, at the centre, popular or elitist populisms – Emmanuel Macron is not Beppe Grillo! The only important common features is that they function like a myth: all populisms are full of contradictions, and propose to solve these contradictions mythically, artificially, through imaginary discourses, while in real life they cannot concretely be solved. And once a populist movement gets access to power, or close to it, it becomes difficult for it to maintain its mythical discourse. This is why the more important is maybe not in populism, but in what comes after: extremism, pure nationalism for instance.

Second point: fake news, post-truth and paranoia. We must clearly distinguish these three dimensions. Fake news means the existence and spread of news that are not true, which has a lot to do with trust. Sociologically, this is connected with social and cultural fragmentation: people that belong to a fragment of a society don't trust those elites that seem not to belong to the same fragment. Post-truth is the historical era when fake news are possible. And paranoia, ideas of plots organizing societies is the way some people explain the world in which they live. It is not exactly the same.