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# **Monisms and Pluralisms in the History of Political and Social Models**

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## Chapter Twelve

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# DEMOCRATIC PLURALISM AND CAPITALIST MONISM

*Gianfranco Ragona*

Translation from the original Italian by Angelina I. Zontine

### 12.1 PLURALISM AND DEMOCRACY

For both common sense and specialist studies, pluralism is considered constituent of democratic systems, as it allows us to recognize the “multiplicity” and “variety of actors and opinions that contribute to public life” (Belligni 2010:363)<sup>1</sup> and legitimize the different structures of interest, such as the set of political parties, trade unions, associations, etc. that formulate civil society’s political demands, directing them to the decision-making sphere, the parliament in first instance. According to Noberto Bobbio’s eloquent definition, pluralism’s main aim is to construct “a society consisting of various groups of power, potentially even in conflict with one another, whose function is to limit, control, contrast and, to some extent, eliminate the central role of the dominant power that is historically identified with the State” (Bobbio 1990:789). As the Turinese philosopher noted, to this end the theory of pluralism becomes autonomous in relation to both classical liberal and democratic theories. The former seek to define the sphere of interference power exercises in the lives of citizens and, in particular by means of a vertical division of power, to limit the State’s tendency to colonize ever-increasing spaces of civil society. On the

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<sup>1</sup> Translations of sources not published in English are by the author.

other hand, democratic theories share the idea that power can be limited by the law and, above all, by citizens' participation in decision-making processes.

The emergence of the concept of pluralism, however, precedes the establishment of Western democracies: in fact, its origins can be found in the debates regarding "intermediate bodies", representative of the Modern Age, that put forward the idea that collective decisions could favourably count on the contribution of subjects other than the sovereign. Hence, the tie between democracy and pluralism appears somewhat problematic, so much so that it has been challenged over time, especially by pure democracy theorists such as Rousseau. It was precisely this renowned thinker who rejected the idea that intermediate bodies could benefit the formation of general will and public good, fearing the fragmentation of interests and opinions and, ultimately, judging pluralism not a resource but a pathology of communal living.

Later, the promoters of liberal democracy viewed pluralism with confidence, placing it as a protective shield between the social body and possible resurgences of despotism, abuse or tyranny, even of the majority as Tocqueville would say. Finally, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century academic political science purposefully raised pluralism to the status of democracy's core element, inaugurating the widely used term "polyarchy" to define pluralist democratic regimes.

The paradigm of 20<sup>th</sup> century democratic pluralism displays specific characteristics. Firstly, «in all pluralist democracies (or polyarchies) the allocation of political goods is the result of interactions between [...] private actors and governmental agencies» (Belligni 2010: 366); secondly, a pluralist democracy goes beyond the State, and the State's role is equal to that of any other actor involved. It has also been noted that «rarely has the State-government, in this metamorphosis of sovereignty, behaved as an organic body, tending ever more to fragmentation into apparatuses and powers that operate not as organic units of a hierarchy but as autonomous subjects, at times competing or conflicting, other times in *partnership*, according to an internal pluralism that is not only structural and functional but also decisional» (*ibid.*). Lastly and most importantly, democratic power is pluralist both when concerning leadership – legitimized by elections, through which the deception of the *government's* general will acts – and the agreement guaranteed by the system as a whole, that is, at the level of so-called *governance* where manifold protagonists act through negotiations and compromises (see Rosenau and Czempiel 1992; Arienzo 2013). In other words, electoral legitimacy is supplemented by the system's legitimacy, which basically distinguishes the notion of "democratic pluralism"; in any case, at present this notion seems to be undergoing a deep crisis:

*Many empirical studies have documented how the construction of the pluralist decision tends to generate new exclusions by privileging high demanders over disorganized citi-*

*zens, giving advantage to specific groups of interest over those of public interest, and, within them, to shareholders as opposed to stakeholders, or to the top-tier oligarchy as opposed to rank and file members (Belligni 2010:369-370).*

Given the contemporary democracy crises – an evident fact, as shown by the vast literature on the topic (Mastropaolo 2012) – and the different hypotheses of reform targeting democratic systems, pluralism in general remains an untouchable element, as if it were surrounded by a sacred aura; attempts to redefine its concepts and practices notwithstanding, as the work of French intellectual Pierre Rosanvallon demonstrates.

## 12.2 ATTENDING TO DEMOCRACY, OR RATHER THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY

The achievement of universal suffrage in European political culture simultaneously transformed political parties into representative brokerage organs between state institutions and society, posing challenges to the political system – of which they are a part, however – organizing consensus and social life. The parties represented the organs of pluralism, and today's crisis in electoral participation seems to mirror their difficulties. The crisis can also be related to the fact that the object the parties represented has also become ambiguous: social classes, or the class sectors into which society was divided, not only citizens *sans phrase*. Today, the voting population's task is to select its governors; a minute after the elections, having removed the sovereign's robes, the population transforms itself into the cluster of the governed while the political focus dislocates to higher levels, giving rise to perverse effects in democratic life: disillusionment, disappointment, contempt, mistrust and silent protest. Some years ago, Colin Crouch observed that:

*Politicians in many countries are becoming alarmed at growing voter apathy and declining membership in parties. This is the interesting paradox of the political class. It wants as much as possible to exclude the mass citizens from becoming actively involved in probing its secrets, organizing oppositional activities, disturbing the tight control exercised by the politico-business ellipse. But it desperately wants us to offer passive support; it dreads the possibility that we might lose interest in activities, fail to vote for it, give no money to its parties, ignore it (Crouch 2004: 112).*

According to David Van Reybrouck, author of the provocative text *Against Elections*, «the Democratic Fatigue Syndrome that is now emerging everywhere is a perfectly understandable consequence of the beatification of the electoral-representative system» (Van Reybrouck, 2016: 105), which in reality is not a democratic instrument at all but exactly the opposite; following in the tracks of Bernard Manin's study (Manin 1997), Van Reybrouck argues that it endorses the divide between those who govern and those who obey.

Rosanvallon suggests with a realistic – or resigned – perspective that we not seek to bridge this divide in extremis but rather acknowledge the distance: «Rather than attempt to carry over the bond of identification from the electoral to the governmental sphere, it is better to recognize the functional necessity of distance in the latter and to give this new relationship its own specifically democratic form» (Rosanvallon 2011: 220). In this perspective he introduces the concept of «*democracy of appropriation*» in an attempt to rethink pluralism in an original way.

The democracy of appropriation is founded on certain pillars. Namely, on activism and society's engagement, thus the critiquing of power, its decisions and conduct and, lastly, on control, correction or pressure. This is what he has defined in a previous, highly-impactful text as «counter-democracy» (Rosanvallon 2006). Furthermore, the democracy of appropriation is based on the development of two other important elements of democratic life: *authorities* and courts of justice (constitutional, administrative, etc.). Generally, he speaks of non-elective institutions, which in his eyes may represent «a new democratic horizon» (Rosanvallon 2011: 221).

In this article I focus on the former, as in the author's perspective they seem to be able to grant protection to the polyphonic character of contemporary democracies. In effect, independent authorities reduce «the scope of administrative-executive power» (Rosanvallon 2011: 75), meaning that they circumscribe the powers of the governors by limiting and therefore recognizing it, leaving the field open to the rich and varied intervention of civil society. The aim is to stem or contrast both power abuses and the privatization of general interests that many blame on the parties even though such privatization is common practice within the institutions as well. These authorities give democracy a legitimacy of impartiality, that is, a systemic legitimacy based on independence from governmental power, on the autonomy from the electoral period, namely from the partisan clashes, and on the technical rationality of prominent figures when facing the plural and vital struggle of the people in its various expressions<sup>2</sup>.

Rosanvallon's argument is fuelled by from the consideration that there is no democracy without the shaping of a society in which everyone can fully find

<sup>2</sup> Concerning the controversial concept of “people”, see Pazè (2011); Badiou *et al.* (2013).

their place, without a collective identity and the writing of common history. The author asserts however that, within a pluralist society where «electoral legitimacy rests on popular recognition» (Rosanvallon 2011: 97), the concept of “the people” should be replaced by that of “generality”, a positive and active social dimension that includes all citizens. This terminological and conceptual adjustment is important given that the legitimacy of impartiality is based on the concept of “negative generality”, not in the sense that everybody has a role or that they all have rights, but that *nobody* should benefit from a privilege or advantage» (Rosanvallon 2011: 97). In fact, although in today’s democratic systems it is not possible for every individual to be positively included, or rather, it is not possible to unite and constitute a “general interest” with increasingly vague outlines, it is nonetheless important that nobody be excluded. In other words, if all particular interests do not constitute the general interest, at least a limit to the success of the particular must be set. This is the purpose of impartial institutions, to prevent the overbearing victory of particular interests – the cancer of democracies – and thereby safeguard pluralism

However, a problem arises in view of the fact that we do not live in a laboratory and it is not possible to conduct experiments in neutral contexts. Democratic societies are also capitalist societies and, even if capitalism may originate from different models (see Burroni 2016 and Crouch 2013), it is not pluralist in its essence. Quite the opposite: accumulation, its operating principle, is monist, an absolute principle on which society’s welfare or crisis depends, resonating in the life of citizens and impacting their possibility to participate, control, decide and understand, reflecting the governors’ conduct, behaviour and integrity, and affecting the trustees of independent authorities.

### 12.3 CAPITALISM AND DEMOCRACY, OR RATHER: EITHER DEMOCRACY OR CAPITALISM

To try and make sense of the current crises of democratic systems, an original point of view is offered by the political scientist Wolfgang Streeck who sets out from the almost *naïve* but nonetheless accurate assertion that the fundamental structure of Western democracies is anchored to a capitalist economic order and that a thorough and articulated theory of capitalism is necessary to analyse this kind of society. This perspective *ipso facto* calls into question all the approaches that distinguish the political field from the economic one in a factitious manner, or that surreptitiously put forward ancient theories

regarding the autonomy of one or the other. Streeck writes: «Following what happened from 2008 onwards, it is not possible to understand politics and political institutions without considering their relation with the market and economic interests, as well as with class structures and the conflicts that have developed within them» (Streeck 2013: 17)<sup>3</sup>.

In this perspective, the present crises of neoliberal democracies mirror the crisis of “democratic capitalism” that emerged during the post-war interval and started its decline during the Seventies, following the period known as the “Glorious Thirty”: thus it is not just a “simple” financial crisis, nor a crisis of traditional democratic legitimacy, as Rosanvallon seems to believe, but a problem deriving directly from the fundamental tension between capitalism and democracy<sup>4</sup>. Then again, Streeck highlights, giving particular emphasis to historical processes, that «what is instructive for the social sciences is not the conditions themselves, but rather the processes, or the conditions in relation to the processes [...]. All that is social happens and develops over time, becoming ever more similar to itself in and with time. What stands in front of us can be understood only if we know how it was yesterday and identify what path it has followed in the meanwhile» (Streeck 2013: 12-13).

The roots of the crisis of civilization that we are currently witnessing are anchored in the contradiction between «a kind of economy governed by the capitalist imperatives of exploitation and growth» (Streeck 2013: 12) and democratic life. On one hand, then, the absolute of accumulation is evidently monist, on the other, democratic relativism is the principle of pluralism:

*Retrospectively, the history of the crises of late capitalism, starting from the Seventies, appears to be the development of the eternal and fundamental tension between capitalism and democracy, leading to the gradual dissolution of the marriage that was imposed on them during the aftermath of World War II (Streeck 2013: 25).*

Streeck’s argument unfolds in keeping with a clear and convincing framework, recalling the objections on the compatibility between capitalism and democracy raised by neo-Marxism between the Seventies and Eighties: think of Paul Sweezy and Paul Baran’s text, *Monopoly Capital* (Baran and Sweezy 1966), in which crisis represents not an exception but the normal state of the capitalist system or, for instance, Paul Mattick’s text, *Marx and Keynes* (Mattick 1969), which argues that mixed economy, characteristic of the “Glorious Thirties”, was destined for crisis due to the tendency of the rate of profit to fall; and lastly, the more recent insights of Alain Bihr (Bihr 1991), who cast a critical glance

<sup>3</sup> Translations of Streeck 2013 are by the author.

<sup>4</sup> For a wider discussion on the topic, refer to the monographic dossier of the journal «Teoria Politica», 2014.

on the end of the Keynesian social pact between capital and labour within the context of post-war liberal democracy. In effect, the growth of the golden age could not have been without end, and only its growth, that is, the negotiated division of productivity gains between socially and politically legitimate actors in a pluralistic context, acted as an instrument for guaranteeing civil peace.

Streeck believes that «the history of capitalism during the Seventies, including the continuous succession of economic crises in that period, is the history of the leak of capital from the social regulation in which it was constrained after 1945» (Streeck 2013: 39). However, the fundamental tension between capitalism and democracy manifested itself without directly precipitating towards its extreme consequences, and that occurred because of a strategy based on a wise use of money, that «was employed to defuse potentially destabilizing social conflicts, first thanks to inflation, and then through public debt and expansion of private credit markets, and eventually - today - with the purchase of State and bank debts on behalf of the central banks» (Streeck 2013:15-16).

During this phase, capitalism began to flood the economies with money, creating an illusion of success and trust in future well-being, buying time, neutralizing conflicts and thereby giving way to the conditions of a real “secession” from democracy. In Europe, the crisis of state budgets translated into the erosion of a peculiar and consolidated model of social State, the guarantee deriving from the “pact” that had operated for a period of around three decades to enable imperfect forms of democracy to coexist with a mode of production whose operating principle is obviously problematic:

*The three methods, adopted one after the other to create, thanks to money, the illusion of growth and well-being - inflation, public and private debt - all functioned for a limited amount of time. But once adopted, each method needed to be abandoned, as it interfered with the process of accumulation rather than sustaining it (Streeck 2013: 65).*

Naturally, a rational justification for this strategy is necessary; thus the debt crisis is traced from the dominant economic doctrine to democracy’s inefficiencies and excesses (see Crosiet *et al.* 1975) following an argumentative strategy based on the concept of “common resource” and “common good”, which are argued to be always and necessarily badly administered by the public and, by contrast, valorised by the market, i.e. the enterprise, recovering an old idea at the base of the original accumulation of capital that began with the appropriation of medieval collective property.

This is an ideological operation that allows us to set aside the decisive historical phenomenon represented by the eclipse of the compromise between capitalism and democracy, with the establishment of so-called neo-liberalism

and the simultaneous estrangement of the masses that reveals itself through increasing rates of electoral abstention. The consequent paradox is that the apathy of the democratic citizen always grants new strength to capitalism itself. In short:

*Today democracy is at an advanced phase, in that democracy, as we know it, is about to become sterile and altered into a redistributive mass democracy, in other words it is about to be reduced to a combination of state of law and mere public entertainment. This process of de-democratization of capitalism through the de-economization of democracy has further advanced [...] following the crisis in 2008 (Streeck 2013: 25).*

Along these lines, Streeck reconstructs how the breach of the social pact from the middle of the Seventies led to the transition from the fiscal State – the one that drew its resources from a generally progressive imposition during the Glorious Thirties, with capital agreeing to contribute to the social State – to the debtor State, which instead needs to borrow money to guarantee the same benefits and subsequently support the privatization of welfare and social security services:

*And so the substitution of the citizens' social rights won during the post-war period with the privatization and commodification ran parallel to the emergence of a new form of democracy that Crouch defines as "post-democracy" in which political participation is redefined as entertainment and unfastened from political, especially politico-economic, decision making (Streeck 2013: 95).*

Thus the action of the State is financed by debt, following the interest of those who own the financial wealth. Additionally, with all due respect to democratic, reformist and progressive utopia that attribute the State a neutral role in the conflict between those who own and those who do not, those who draw their income from capital:

*have all the interest that the State not only leaves the money available to them as owners, but that it takes it back as credit, preserves it on their behalf, paying the interest for what has been borrowed instead of confiscated, and lastly that gives them the possibility to hand it down to the next generation so as to keep it in the family, at which point estate taxes will have become insignificant. And so the State, as a debtor State, contributes persistently to the perpetuation of the social stratification and inequality that derives from it. At the same time it subordinates itself and its activity to the control of its creditors, represented in the form of "markets". This control is exercised alongside the democratic control of citizens, maybe overlapping or eliminating it as is happening at the moment (Streeck 2013: 99-100).*

The de-democratization of capitalism, or the triumph of capitalism over democracy, of a monist economic system over a pluralist and open one such as yesterday's mixed economy, translates into the freeing of capitalist accumulation from politics and the possible remedies that it might have introduced.

Here we get a glimpse of the Berlinian figure of the "hedgehog" (Berlin 1953), a metaphorical subject that traces everything back to one, universal principle capable of making sense and giving direction to life and history: for capital, this principle is the maximization of the profitability of investment. And if this principle collides with the democratic one of social justice – an object constantly debated and negotiated between different positions and interests, and thus in itself the fruit of a pluralistic process of definition and redefinition – then what needs to be reconfigured is democracy. This is true also in view of the fact that the rational alternative, «a democracy without capitalism, or without capitalism as we know it» (Streeck 2013: 200), has yet to be defined.

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