DAMIANO PALANO

TOWARDS A BUBBLE DEMOCRACY?

*Notes
for a Theoretical
Framework*

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EDUCatt

Milano 2022

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Abstract

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In the last few years, different hypotheses have been formulated to explain the success of populism, focused on socio-economic factors and on the 'cultural' components of the crisis of western liberalism. However, the discussion often turned to the unpredictable evolutions of "digital swarms", to their indifference towards rational arguments, to their inability to distinguish between truth and falsehood. Damiano Palano's book focuses precisely on the consequences that "digital swarms" can have on our democracies. The goal is, however, not to provide an explanation of the success of the 'new' populism, of fake news or of the so-called "post-truth". More simply, the aim is to update the theoretical vocabulary with which to interpret the change we are experiencing. This book – which must be read as a piece of a reflection in progress – focuses in fact on the implications that the new communication scenario has on contemporary democratic regimes. The thesis is that we are facing a new context, very different not only from the 'old' *party democracy*, but also from the *audience democracy*. In many ways, the spread of social media seems in fact to mark the decline of the "audience", at least if it is understood as an audience made basically homogeneous by the existence of 'generalist' communication channels. Rather than actually sanctioning mechanisms of dis-intermediation, the spread of new media triggers a fragmentation of the audience into a plurality of segments that tend to have no roots in a common sphere. And so, the public sphere is transformed into a myriad 'bubbles' that become largely self-referential and potentially polarized. Taking into account the transformations in the communicative scenario, as well as the implications on the relationship between

citizens, information and parties, this book proposes the ideal-typical image of a new *bubble democracy*.

Keywords: Democracy; Social Media; Media and Politics; Fake News; Post-Truth

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Introduction:
from the crowd to the swarm

"The age we are about to enter will in truth be the *era of crowds*" (Le Bon, 1896, p. xv). When in 1895, at the beginning of his most famous pamphlet, Gustave Le Bon announced the entry into the new "era of crowds", the nightmare of the days of the Commune was still alive in French society, perceived by many as the prelude to an imminent revolutionary cataclysm. Although potentially destructive to the social order, the rise of crowds on the public affairs stage was, however, an irreversible process in Le Bon's eyes, and it was therefore purely illusory to imagine being able to reverse the trend. To their undisputed dominion, however, there was an alternative, offered by the exploration of collective psychology. The discovery of the "laws" of the "psychological crowd", in his opinion, gave statesmen new 'scientific' tools, and he thought that, thanks to this new knowledge, political leaders could manage, direct and exploit politically collective passions. Furthermore, the eclectic French intellectual, in his famous book, illustrated precisely the most effective manipulation techniques. Since crowd conditions actually led individuals to regress to a primordial stage, the crowd psychology – Le Bon explained – could only be elementary, fickle, passionate, often violent. For this reason, it was naive to think of being able to govern multitudes with rational arguments, or by trying to convey com-

plex ideas to them. To the contrary, it was necessary to use strong images, elementary ideas and a small group of words able to unleash an inexhaustible power of suggestion. "The ideas suggested to the crowds", he wrote, "can become predominant only if they take on a very simple form, which moreover can be translated into images". Furthermore, "affirmation pure and simple, kept free of all reasoning and all proof", constitutes "one of the surest means of making an idea enter the mind of the crowds" (Le Bon, 1896, p. 126), and especially if it had been repeated over and over again, always in the same terms, it could "fix itself in the mind", to the point of being "accepted in the end as a demonstrated truth" (Le Bon, 1896, p. 127). Finally, the "contagion" mechanism spreads an idea to all social strata:

> When an affirmation has been sufficiently repeated and there is unanimity in this repetition – as has occurred in the case of certain famous financial undertakings, rich enough to purchase every assistance – what is called a current of opinion is formed and the powerful mechanism of contagion intervenes. Ideas, sentiments, emotions, and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as intense as that of microbes. [...] The opinions and beliefs of crowds are specially propagated by contagion, but never by reasoning. The conceptions at present rife among the working classes have been acquired at the public-house as the result of affirmation, repetition, and contagion, and indeed the mode of creation of the beliefs of crowds of every age has scarcely been different (Le Bon, 1896, p. 128, p. 131).

More than one hundred and twenty years later, the words with which in 1895 Le Bon announced the advent of the new "era of crowds" sound very familiar. In the contemporary discussion on the fortune of "populism", on the proliferation of fake news and on the seductive power of the "post-

truth", it is not difficult to recognize the echo of the words of the author of *Psychologie des Foules*, and in some cases even the reformulation of his ancient hypotheses. If in the past Le Bon was often considered as an inspirer of the totalitarian propaganda of the Twentieth century, recently Emilio Gentile has also glimpsed in the pages of the French intellectual the prefiguration of the contemporary "acting democracy": a theoretical anticipation of a strongly 'personalized' democracy, in which "politics becomes the art of government of the leader who in the name of the people turns citizens into an apathetic, Boeotian or servile crowd" (Gentile, 2016, p. XII). Even the Korean-born philosopher Byung-Chul Han saw more than a few analogies between the contemporary condition and the picture that Le Bon painted at the end of the nineteenth century: first of all, because today, in the midst of the digital revolution, we are in a phase of transition, bound to dissolve the old order without building a new one; secondly, above all, because the contemporary crowd is actually a digital swarm, which isn't able to make a "We", to build a real collective identity. The classical crowd, wrote Byung-Chul Han, "is not volatile but voluntative", "it consists of enduring *formations*": "with a single spirit, unified by an ideology, it *marches in one direction*" (Han, 2017, p. 12). "On the basis of will and resolve, it has capacity for *collective action* and takes standing relations of domination head on", and for this "*the mass is power*" (Han 2017, p. 12). In contrast to the classical crowd, the contemporary digital swarms "do not march", "because their fleeting nature, no political energy wells up" (Han, 2017, p. 12). In other words, as Han explains, despite some analogies, there is a radical difference between classical crowd and contemporary digital swarm:

> The digital swarm does not constitute a mass because no *soul* – no *spirit* – dwells within it. The soul gathers and unites. In contrast, the digital swarm comprises isolated individuals. The mass is structured along different lines: its features cannot be traced back to individuals. But now, individuals are melting into a new unit; its members no longer have a *profile of their own.* For a crowd to emerge, a chance gathering of human beings is not enough. It takes a soul, a common spirit, to fuse people into a crowd. The digital swarm lacks the soul or spirit of the masses. Individuals who come together as a swarm do not develop a *we.* No harmony prevails – which is what welds the crowd together into an active entity. Unlike the crowd, the swarm demonstrates no internal coherence. It does not speak with a *voice.* The shitstorm lacks a *voice,* too. Accordingly, it is perceived as *noise* (Han, 2017, p. 10)

The image of this "digital swarm" is obviously only an effective suggestion which – as opposed to the celebration of the power of the post-capitalist "multitude" (Hardt and Negri, 2004) – is inscribed within a broader discussion, aimed at capturing a specific tendency towards depoliticization in the "new way of the world" (Dardot and Laval, 2013), built by neoliberalism since the 1980s. But, as often happens in the texts of Byung-Chul Han, the suggestions risk remaining only impressionistic images. The outline of the swarm tends to appear so only a symbol of the nightmares of the "liquid society". On the other hand, also the crowd of Le Bon was only an effective (although not always realistic) image, in which all the nightmares of fin de siècle society merged. It is perhaps also for this reason that, just like the crowds in the pages of Le Bon (Barrows, 1981; Graumann and Moscovici, 1986; Mucchi Faina, 1983; Geiger, 1977; Nye, 1975; Palano, 2002; 2004; 2010; 2020f; 2020h; Van Ginneken, 1992), the digital swarms – overwhelmed by emotional contagion, victims of the manipulation

of skilled demagogues and unable to distinguish 'true' and 'false' – have become an almost ubiquitous element in the debate on the fragility of late democracies and on the turbulence that in recent years has affected many Western political systems. In the last two decades, there has been no shortage of diagnoses that have glimpsed in some aspects of Western political systems the signs of an "unease with democracy", of its substantial transformation, or even of a transition towards an unprecedented form of "post-democracy"[1]. Starting from 2016 – due to the double shock caused by the outcome of the Brexit referendum and by Donald Trump's electoral victory – the debate has experienced a significant turning point, because not a few observers have returned to take seriously the hypothesis that some processes are potentially capable of undermining the traits considered to be distinctive of a liberal-democratic order (Barberis, 2020; Bartlett, 2018; Lewitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Mounk, 2018; Runciman, 2018; Przeworski 2019). To explain the success of populist parties and the rise of tensions in many democratic political systems (especially when they manage to win their leadership), different hypotheses have been formulated, focused on socio-economic factors, and on the 'cultural' components of the crisis of western liberalism (Graziano 2018; Inglehart and Norris, 2019; Palano, 2018a; 2019b). Some have even begun to suspect that, as Edward Luce observed, for example, the "populist revolt" against the world economy is nothing more than the an-

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[1] See, for example, Agamben, 2010; Bovero, 2000, Brown, 2006; 2015; Crouch, 2003; Dalton, 2004; Galli, 2011; Macedo, 2005; Mastropaolo, 2011; Michelsen and Walter, 2013; Palano, 2015a; 2015b; 2015d; Parsi, 2012; Pharr and Putnam, 2000; Rosanvallon, 2014; Salvadori, 2009; 2016; Skocpol, 2003; Streeck, 2013; Tuccari, 2014; 2019; Urbinati, 2013; 2014; 2019.

nouncement of the "retreat of liberalism" and the advent of new "illiberal democracies" (Luce 2017). However, the discussion often turned precisely to the unpredictable evolutions of the "digital swarms", to their indifference towards rational arguments, to their inability to distinguish between truth and falsehood. In this context, the concept of "post-truth" – according to the definition of the Oxford English Dictionary, an adjective defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" – has become an overused reference of an increasing number of hypotheses and speeches on the impact of lies circulating on the web, on polarization processes, on the manipulation mechanisms of public opinion, as well as on the use of systematic disinformation by authoritarian regimes with the aim to destabilize Western democracies[2]. Precisely in this crowded debate, it's quite easy to recognize the same images of the mechanisms of manipulation and contagion that Le Bon proposed in the late nineteenth century, although they are often not consciously adopted by contemporary observers and scholars.

Putting at the center the relationship between *politics* and *truth*, the discussion on the so-called "post-truth" re-proposes arguments and themes that have been widely explored since the origins of Western political philosophy. But precisely because of the reference to *truth*, which the concept of "post-

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[2] See for example: Ball, 2017; Barberis, 2020; Brennan, 2016; da Empoli 2019; Dall'Osso and Conti, 2017; D'Ancona 2017; Davies, 2017; Di Gregorio, 2019; Ferraris, 2017; Giusti and Piras, 2021; Lorusso, 2018; Gardini, 2017; Maddalena and Gili, 2017; McIntyre, 2018; Nichols, 2017; Riva, 2018; Quattrociocchi and Vicini, 2017; Tonello, 2019; Veltri and Di Caterino, 2017.

truth" evokes, the discussion often risks moving towards a terrain in which – rather than different interpretations of contemporary political transformations – different conceptions of politics (and different conceptions of the relationship between politics and values) are opposed to each other. Also for this reason, in the following pages the theme of "post-truth" will be tackled from a 'minimalist' perspective: rather than trying to establish whether the contemporary citizen has a lesser critical relationship with the news flows than in the past, or whether public opinion is today more indifferent to the principles of 'correct' political communication than in the past, this book focuses in fact on the implications that the new communication scenario has on contemporary democratic regimes. The thesis at the center of the following pages is that the new context and in particular the spread of social media favor very different dynamics. That is, we are facing a new context, very different not only from the 'old' "party democracy", which was the protagonist of a part of the Twentieth century, but also from the "audience democracy", which was identified by Bernard Manin a quarter of a century ago (Manin, 1995). In many ways, the spread of social media seems in fact to mark the beginning of the decline of the "audience", at least if it is understood as an audience of individuals made basically homogeneous by the existence of 'generalist' communication channels. Rather than actually sanctioning mechanisms of 'disintermediation', the spread of new media triggers a fragmentation of the audience into a plurality of segments that tend to have no roots in a common sphere. And so, the public sphere is transformed into a myriad 'bubbles' that become largely self-referential and potentially polarized.

Taking into account the transformations in the communicative scenario, as well as the implications on the relationship

between citizens, information and parties, this working paper proposes an ideal-typical image, which is an alternative to both the image of *party democracy* and that of *audience democracy*. With this goal, it defines, provisionally, this image with the – vaguely provocative – expression *bubble democracy*. However, the aim of the following pages is not to argue that today we are already in the bubble democracy, or to suggest that Western political systems are 'necessarily' directed in this direction. More simply, the intent is to contribute to the construction of an ideal-type which – by emphasizing some real trends – may perhaps allow us to interpret the logic of contemporary change[3].

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[3] See also Palano, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2019a; 2019b; 2019c; 2020.

The end of the truth?

Scholars who, in recent years, have focused on the role of fake news, on post-truth and on new manipulation mechanisms, have provided rather different interpretations. In very general terms – and without any pretense of completeness – three distinct areas can perhaps be recognized in the recent discussion, each of which is aimed at grasping a specific thread of a tangled skein: a first line of the debate focused above all on sharp power of undemocratic powers, that is, on the use that some international actors make of new media, with the aim of politically destabilizing Western countries; a second line focused on the 'cultural' premises of post-truth, seeking the roots of indifference towards "truth" not so much in social processes, but in philosophical orientations that, in the last forty years, have laid the foundation of a 'relativism', politically capitalized by Trump and his "fake news"; finally, a further trend focused on the change in the communicative context and, therefore, on 'structural' transformations that facilitate, compared to the past, the circulation of fake news and which, more generally, modify the relationship between citizens and information (as well as between citizens and the political sphere).

As regards the discussion on sharp power, scholars have largely focused on the influence exerted by Russia on public opinion in Western countries, thanks to the skillful use of new means of communication (Sanovich, 2018; Van Herpen,

2015; Marchetti and Mulas, 2017; Ottaviani, 2022). More generally, the "sharp power" is conceived as a kind of power able to penetrate the arena of democratic countries. This formula has been coined on the mold of soft power, an expression that Joseph S. Nye Jr used to distinguish from the "hard power" (the military and economic power) that specific 'cultural' power with which the United States after 1945 had built the foundations of their global leadership (Nye 1990; 2009). Instead, the "sharp power", just like a sharp knife, today penetrates or pierces the media and political context (National Endowment for Democracy, 2017). Basically, countries such as Russia and China (but also Iran, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar), if in their territories severely limit freedom of expression and market freedom, abroad would exploit all the potential offered by globalization not so much (at least for now) to spread an alternative cultural model, as well as to weaken US soft power, to delegitimize the democratic regime, to trigger conflicts and polarizations (Nye, 2018). With these objectives, sharp power moves along three main lines: "investing money to export domestic media platforms, often subject to strict government control; buy companies or shareholdings without having to fear excessive market obstructions; conducting campaigns to de-legitimize democratic systems, even reaching the paradox of accusing them as illiberal regimes" (Messa, 2018, p. 34).

The discussion on sharp power is only just beginning, and threre are certainly in its definition a lot of critical aspects (relating for example to the difference from soft power). Attention to manipulation by undemocratic powers – more insidious than in the past, precisely because the potential of new technologies – has been rather closely linked to reflection on the "post-truth". In paradigmatic terms, historian Timothy Snyder blamed Vladimir Putin's Russia the main responsibil-

ity for the tensions that have engulfed Western democratic systems in the last decade on. In the evocative fresco painted in *The Road to Unfreedom*, Snyder argued that in the last two decades two opposing visions of the world and of history have confronted and clashed: on the one hand, the "politics of inevitability", that is the belief that the future it is only the continuation of the present, that the path of progress is traced and that no alternatives are possible; on the other, the "politics of eternity", which places a specific nation at the center of the story of a cyclical victimization. After 1989, the United States and the European Union unhesitatingly embraced the "politics of inevitability", persuading themselves that history was really over and that democracy and free markets were destined to extend to the whole world. Gradually reality showed that these were not an inevitable process, precisely because the "politics of eternity" would begin to gain space, finding in Putin's Russia the center of its expansion and imposing a new logic of systematic manipulation of reality (Snider, 2019).

In the second area of the discussion on "post-truth", the role of undemocratic powers is also not entirely neglected, but the emphasis is placed on the 'cultural' premises of 'disinterest' in the "truth", or more simply on the matrices that can explain the indifference to the agreement with the "facts". Without denying the role of Russian influences, the literary critic of the "New York Times" Michiko Kakutani, in a paradigmatic text such as *The Death of Truth*, for example, sought the roots of today's "decadence of truth" precisely in a mainly cultural process: i.e., in the attitudes matured in the West since the 1960s which have gradually consolidated the idea that it is not possible to distinguish an "objective" reality from "subjective" interpretations of the world. The spread of fake news, fake science, fake history is not attributable (at least in exclusive terms) to the distorted use of new technologies or to

the action of trolls controlled by the Kremlin: it can rather represent the outcome of an invasive relativism, that is tied hand in glove with narcissism and subjectivism. Just like relativism has made normal the "indifference to truth". More specifically, according to Kakutani, "deconstructionism" and "postmodernism" opened the way to "post-truth", when they entered American universities and consecrated the "principle of subjectivity", intended to be welded with the devaluation of objective truth: the celebration of opinion over knowledge, of feelings over facts, a development that has helped to favor the rise of Trump. The "devaluation of truth" has in fact ended up giving space also to minority political positions and to theses discredited by the scientific community (Kakutani, 2018).

The readings advanced by Snyder and Kakutani are just two examples among the thousands of interventions that, in the last years, have crowded around the topic of "post-truth". The debate is almost certainly destined to continue for a long time. Probably, fake news will not cease indeed to be shared on social networks by more or less aware users. These two interpretations are important because they exemplify, in almost paradigmatic terms, some of the risks that lurk in the debate on fake news and on "post-truth". On the one hand, by underlining the role of the disinformation strategies adopted by Putin's Russia over the last decade, Snyder undoubtedly captures a relevant factor in the new international scenario, both as regards the leading role of the Kremlin in various crisis areas, and as regards the use of the potential offered by new technologies to destabilize the internal politics of other States. Focusing exclusively on Russian influences, Snyder finds however himself underestimating the hypothesis that the modification of the communicative context in which all political subjects operate is 'structural' (and not linked only to the action of a particular actor): in the new context, Putin's

Russia quickly grasped possible margins of action, but the constraints of the new structure are destined to affect the political logic of all actors (at national and international level). The idea that the risks for Western democracies come only from the insidious penetration of an external enemy, as well as being rather simplistic, ends up replicating the same limitation of the 'victimist' view of history attributed by Snyder to Russia today.

On the other hand, Kakutani brings the question back to the role of the relationship between "truth" and "politics" (which, moreover, is one of the main reasons for the success of the term "post-truth"). When she establishes a close link between postmodernism's "devaluation of truth" and Trump's systematic recourse to lies, Kakutani cannot fail to implicitly evoke the idea of a past when the relationship between politics and truth did not appear at all problematic or conflictual, that is, a season in which lying remained a tool alien to the repertoire of political leaders, at least in democratic regimes. But such a past is obviously only imaginary. "No one has ever doubted that truth and politics are in rather bad relations with each other", observed Hannah Arendt half a century ago, also recalling that lies "have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools, not only of the politician's or demagogue's but also the statesman's trade" (Arendt, 1967, p. 49). On the other hand, in the Western experience the philosophical reflection on politics begins precisely with the registration of the usual contamination between politics and lies, and therefore with the ambition to conquer the "truth" by overcoming the distortions that mark political discussion and the deformations to which knowledge is bent for vested interests. Precisely for this reason, Kakutani's interpretation of the "decadence of truth" then risks reproducing a polarization between "truth" and "lie" which is far from immune from the

ideological vice that is attributed to the Manichean view of the populists. And he is unable to escape the drift reported by Martin Jay a few years ago, at the end of a work on the Virtues of the lie which represents a good antidote to the schematism accumulated in the debate on "post-truth":

> Still, however leaky its boundaries, within the realm of the political the search for perfect truthfulness is not only vain but also potentially dangerous. For ironically, the mirror image of the "big lie" may well be the ideal of "big truth," the absolute, univocal truth, which silences those who disagree with it and abruptly terminates discussion. Both are the enemy of the pluralism of opinions, the ongoing vigor of debate, and the bracing clash of values and interests. Both reduce politics, as Arendt would have it, to the monologic fabrication of man as *Homo faber*, rather than the give and take of men in their motley variety. Instead, it may be healthier to foster lots of little countervailing lies or at least half-truths, as well as the ability to test and see through them, rather than hold out hope for ending mendacity once and for all. It may well be wise to beware the pharisaical politician who loudly proclaims his own purity of intention and refusal ever to lie, the self-congratulating paragon of authenticity who damns all his opponents as opportunists or worse. It may be prudent to relax our outrage against hypocrisy under any circumstances, and concede that there are many necessary fictions at the heart of even the most transparent and accountable of political systems. For ironically, truth-telling can under certain circumstances be a weapon of the powerful, while lying is a tactic of the weak. And the politician who doggedly follows his moral convictions, embracing what Weber famously called a *Gesinnungsethik* (ethic of ultimate ends), may ultimately do more harm than one who practices a *Verantworthungsethik* (ethic of responsibility). Conviction, after all, is an ambivalent virtue when compromise and flexibility may better serve the com-

mon good. For it may be fueled more by the desire – dare we call it self-serving? – to save one's soul than to save the world. This is not a brief for cynicism or immorality, nor a justification of winning "by any means necessary," let alone an exhortation to give up entirely the desire to know what is the truth (at least to the extent politics includes that quest). It is just a sober recognition that politics, however we chose to define its essence and limit its contours, will never be an entirely fib-free zone of authenticity, sincerity, integrity, transparency, and righteousness. And maybe, I hope it will be clear by now, that's ultimately a good thing too (Jay, 2010, pp. 133-134).

While presenting connections with the previous two, the third area of discussion often tends to downsize the demanding reference to "truth" and rather focuses on the transformation in the relationship between citizen and information. In this sense, the spread of fake news is therefore mainly traced back to a structural modification of the environment in which individuals form their vision of reality (Shapiro, 1999; Margetts, 2016; Ceccarini, 2015; Riva, 2018). This trend also includes diagnoses, far from comforting, on the progressive simplification of political communication, on the use of spectacular rhetoric and on the frequent use of the opponent's delegitimization (Flinders, 2012; Thompson, 2016). In this field, some observers have drawn attention above all to the novelty of the context in which opinions and identities are built. In this direction, Alessandro Dal Lago proposes to identify the main explanation for the emergence of a new "digital populism" in the transition to "virtual" politics, during which traditional public opinion takes on the face of a digital opinion. To understand the novelty of contemporary populism (and to distinguish it from the 'old' populism), according to Dal Lago it's essential to recognize the change in the social environment:

It is not classical public opinion, as it could manifest in clubs or living rooms, in the editorial offices of newspapers or in meetings of landowners or notables at the center of many nineteenth-century novels. It is not the market square or any type of agora in a modern version, such as a party section, a neighborhood assembly or an occupied university classroom – all public dimensions of social existence that are in the process of disappearing or marginalizing. Obviously, it should not be sought in the institutional headquarters of political life, today the target of universal execration. Instead, it is in that radically new dimension in which the social actors are not face to face, but are in instant contact, they are isolated, but at the same time in relationship, they can have their say, but without declaring who they are... [...] The global affirmation of the internet makes superfluous the fundamental distinction between public and private life. Whoever acts online, such as blogger, commentator, buyer, simple flâneur or [...] potential political actor, finds himself in a private situation, because he is at home or in any case isolated, and at the same time public, because he communicates with other subjects in his own condition. However, the sociality that is thus realized is completely disembodied: it is to material sociality like pornography to sexuality. [...] the user will tend to consider the computer screen as the only gateway to reality. Indeed, as the dominant, if not the only, framework for defining reality. A passage to the virtual that begins to deeply modify the relationship of social subjects with reality (Dal Lago, 2017, pp. 52-53).

Beyond the implications about "new populisms", the attention of Dal Lago to the change in the social environment represents a crucial starting point for overcoming the ambiguities of the discussion around "post-truth". In this case, the center of the analysis lies precisely in the change in the context in which individuals form the "images" of the external world and

in which their political orientations mature. In other words, the novelty would not lie in the citizens' vulnerability to manipulation, and therefore the most significant element should be found not in the greater seductive power that "post-truth" would be today able to exercise than in the past, but in the network information in which each individual finds himself today constructing his own vision of the world and cultivating his own political "truth". An aspect of the contemporary communicative environment consists in the 'personalization' (or rather, in the 'profiling') of the communicative flow to which the single subject is exposed: this 'personalization' ends up determining the dissolution of that common sphere in which the "public" was located. Also, for this reason, the "image" of the surrounding reality that each individual builds even seems to become (at least basically) the result of an almost only 'personal' experience, although it has the appearance of being common to others. Although these transformations only indicate trends, even today these transformations can suggest that the era of the public has probably ended, and that the turbulence experienced by mature democracies is also linked to this transition.

Rise and decline
of "audience democracy"

In spite of what Le Bon had predicted, the twentieth century was only to a marginal extent the "era of crowds". More than the emotional and unstable aggregate described in *The Crowd*, the main actor of political life was in fact for a long time (probably up to the 1960s) the "mass": the disciplined and compact mass that the old ideological parties framed with their organizational networks or that the authoritarian regimes mobilized in "oceanic" gatherings. Even if Le Bon had generically referred to the "crowd" to indicate a plurality of forms of aggregation (including "organized crowds"), the collective psychology of the late nineteenth century had (at least originally) referred to the gatherings in the square, that is to say, to those dynamics that were triggered when large numbers of individuals were physically gathered in the same place. Gradually, many of the psychological traits recognized in the "crowd" began to be extended to the organized "mass" as well, that is, to groups of individuals permanently organized within parties, armies, churches and even States (Palano, 2002; 2004; 2010; 2020f). In this passage, beyond the numerous theoretical implications, above all a substantial modification was evident, with respect to Le Bon's discourse: if for the latter the "age of crowds" was a season in which ancient beliefs were dissolved, without the crowds were able to identify new ones, the

"masses" of the twentieth century were characterized by their firm adherence to an unshakable faith and by their absolute dedication to flags, ideologies and leaders. On the other hand, many scholars identified the most solid basis of totalitarian regimes precisely in the compact "mass", which was disciplined and manipulated by the leader. In his famous *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, Wilhelm Reich sought, for example, to delineate the psychology of a static "mass", which substantially coincided with the population of a country: in this case, the explanation of mass behavior lay in the prevailing psychological structure, in a certain context, that was determined in turn by the family structure. Before the face of the "mass" was linked with the specter of totalitarianism, Robert Michels, in *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie*, recognized the consequences that the psychological physiognomy of the mass, disciplined within the great machines political, entailed for democratic and socialist ideals:

A realistic view of the mental condition of the masses shows beyond question that even if we admit the possibility of moral improvement in mankind, the human materials with whose use politicians and philosophers cannot dispense in their plans of social reconstruction are not of a character to justify excessive optimism. Within the limits of time for which human provision is possible, optimism will remain the exclusive privilege of Utopian thinkers. [...] The objective immaturity of the mass is not a mere transitory phenomenon which will disappear with the progress of democratization *au lendemain du socialisme*. On the contrary, it derives from the very nature of the mass as mass, for this, even when organized, suffers from an incurable incompetence for the solution of the diverse problems which present themselves for solution – because the mass *per se* is amorphous, and therefore needs division of labor, specialization, and guidance. [...] Man as indi-

vidual is by nature predestined to be guided, and to be guided all the more in proportion as the functions of life undergo division and subdivision. To an enormously greater degree is guidance necessary for the social group (Michels, 2001, pp. 242-243).

If undoubtedly the shape of the tough "mass" – much more than that of the fickle nineteenth-century "crowd" – was able to grasp the political novelties of the "short century", already at the beginning of the twentieth century Gabriel Tarde proposed to consider the "public" as the subject destined to acquire a leading role. Departing from Le Bon's prediction, Tarde wrote that the season that was opening was actually the era of the "public", understood as a "purely spiritual collectivity, made up of individuals scattered everywhere who, physically separated, are united by only a mental cohesion". Unlike the crowd, which required the physical proximity of bodies, the "public" identified that specific condition that arose from the exposure of physically separated individuals to the same persuasive source. That is, the public was the form of collectivity made possible by the invention and diffusion of the press, which allowed the formation of "currents of opinion" very different from the forms of collective expression that took place in the city squares:

> It is not from the gatherings on the public street or on the public square that those particular social flows are born and spread, those great forces that now conquer the most steadfast hearts, the most reasonable minds and make laws and decrees emerge from parliaments or governments. Strangely, the men who are involved in this way, who influence each other or, better, transmit one to the other a suggestion that comes from above, are not in elbow contact, they do not see each other, nor do they hear each other: they read the same newspaper, each in his own home, scattered over a vast terri-

tory. So, what is the link that exists between them? The link, together with the simultaneity of their conviction or their passion, is represented by the awareness of each one that this idea or this will is shared in that same instant by a large number of other men. It is enough to know this and, even if you do not see them, you will be influenced by other men, considered en masse, and not only by the journalist, the common inspirer and, invisible and unknown, with a greater charm. [...] The formation of an audience presupposes [...] a much more advanced mental and social evolution than the formation of a crowd. The purely ideal suggestibility, the contactless contagion, underlying this totally abstract yet so real grouping, this spiritualized crowd, elevated, so to speak, to the second degree of power, could only be born after many centuries of cruder social life and elementary (Tarde, 2005, pp. 54-57).

With some simplification, it could be argued that the twentieth century – much more than the crowds, of which Le Bon had heralded the advent – was marked by the protagonism of the masses and the public: these two stylized subjects represented two alternative modalities of political organization. With a further schematization, one could also recognize during the twentieth century a progressive shift from the centrality of the masses to that of the public. Already in the 1960s, some keen observers actually began to grasp how communicative transformations, together with changes in society and the advent of economic well-being, were modifying the relations between citizens and politics, investing what, up to that moment, was the main organizer of the "masses": the political party, the "modern Prince", celebrated by Gramsci, the "machine to produce passions", as Simone Weil had defined it (in a far from benevolent way) (Palano, 2015c). This was pointed out, for example, by Otto Kirchheimer (1966), who saw in the

rapid transformation of German social democracy the announcement of the new catch-all party – less and less characterized in ideological terms, and more and more guided by a centripetal logic, aimed at potentially conquering the entire constituency – and Maurice Duverger, who glimpsed in De Gaulle's success a sign of the imminent "personalization" and even the advent of a "democracy without parties" (certainly far from positive in his eyes) (Duverger, 1967). Beyond the specific circumstances that fueled these reflections, the data on which such analyses were based was precisely the new political centrality of what Tarde had recognized to be the "public": i.e. an audience of individuals who, despite being physically separate, were exposed to the same flow of communication and the same "image" of the real world. From a strictly political point of view, much more than in a context dominated by print media, the new television medium allowed the aspiring leader to address the voters 'directly', without having to use their own communication equipment. The communication apparatuses that the mass parties had built thus began to become obsolete, precisely because they were unable to intercept the "public", but rather just a small enclave of members and sympathizers, and also because the "separate worlds" that had represented the reference of ideological and subcultural parties were showing signs of a disintegration not solely attributable to the change in communication.

The advance of the "public" was anything but rapid, because the resistance of the "mass" (or, better, the "masses") in the face of social, political and communicative transformations turned out to be anything but episodic. In any case, the rise of the "public" was a much slower process in Europe than it had been (at least apparently) in the United States, and only experienced a significant turning point between the 1980s and 1990s, when, in coinciding with the spread of

commercial television and the end of the Cold War, the political space seemed to actually 'thaw', freeing voters from party identifications that in the past had also been impervious to aggressive communication campaigns. In the mid-nineties, it was Bernard Manin in particular who established the logic of the transformation that was taking place and maintained that a new *audience democracy* was now replacing the old party democracy (Manin, 1997). As part of his reconstruction of the *Principles of Representative Government*, Manin began with a synthetic examination of the institutional solutions adopted in the democratic and republican governments of the ancient and medieval world, to point out how recourse to drawing lots was considered preferable to elections. Starting from the end of the eighteenth century, the draw instead disappeared from the scene, replaced by representative systems that made elections the criterion for selecting representatives. But at the end of his analysis, Manin also dwelt on the "metamorphosis" that representative government had undergone in just over a century. The starting point was precisely the loss of the relationship of identification that in the past linked citizens and parties. And, on the basis of such a novelty, Manin proposed three ideal-types, which identified the three stages touched by the metamorphosis of representative government at the end of the nineteenth century. In particular, in his book Manin emphasized some points, such as the type of trust relationship, the autonomy of representatives, the role of public opinion and the place of political debates (Manin, 1997, pp. 193-234).

In the first ideal-type identified by Manin – *parliamentarism* – the relationship of trust had a predominantly personal character, the elected deputy also enjoyed substantial autonomy in his own political conduct, public opinion manifested itself in channels that were structurally independent from

parties and institutions, while the public discussion among political parties took place mainly in the parliamentary theater. In *party democracy* – the second ideal-type identified by the French scholar – the mechanisms of representation were, on the other hand, significantly different. First of all, the choice of the individual citizen no longer took place by virtue of a bond of personal trust, but only as a result of the trust placed in a particular party, in the ideology or in the subcultural identity of which the party was the bearer; at the same time, the party organization selected the candidates, making its choices mainly within the internal bureaucracy. The autonomy of the elected representatives was severely limited by party leadership; the public opinion appeared to be structured in terms of a substantial parallelism with respect to the political framework (i.e. party system was able to 'encapsulate' the voices coming from society), while the public discussion took place mainly among parties (or within parties), however outside the representative assemblies. The distinctive trait of party democracy was, in any case, above all the stability of electoral choices, which appeared almost completely impermeable to short-term considerations:

In party democracy, the people vote for a party rather than for person. This is evidenced by the notable phenomenon of electoral stability. Out of a long succession of party candidates, voters continue to choose those of the same party. Not only do individuals tend to vote constantly for the same party, but party preferences are handed down from generation to generation: children vote as their parents did, and the inhabitants of a geographic area vote for the same party over decades. [...] Electoral stability, a major discovery of political science at the turn of the century, has been corroborated by countless studies up to the 1970s. However, electoral stability removes one of the bases of parliamentarianism: an election

is no longer the choice of a person whom the voters personally know and trust. [...] in party democracy the confidence of voters is not awarded principally because of the measures proposed, but flows instead from a feeling of belonging and a sense of identification. Platforms have another effect and serve another purpose: they help mobilize the enthusiasm and energy of activists and party bureaucrats who do know about them. In party democracy, as in parliamentarianism, election remains an expression of trust rather than a choice of specific political measures. It is only the object of that trust that is different: it is no longer a person, but an organization – the party (Manin, 1997, pp. 208-211).

In *audience democracy* – the third ideal-type proposed by Manin – electoral choices returned to being volatile, that is, they change from one election to another. Above all, trust returned to individuals, because people tend to vote for a person (and no longer for a party). According to the French scholar, the main reason for the transformation was due to the role of radio and television, which allowed for a 'direct' relationship between leaders and citizens, as well as the change in the economic and social context:

First, the channels of political communication affect the nature of the representative relationship: through radio and television, candidates can, once again communicate directly with their constituents without the mediation of a party network. The age of political activists and party men is over. Moreover, television confers particular salience and vividness to the individuality of the candidates. In a sense, it resurrects the face-to-face character of the representative link that marked the first form of representative government. Mass media, however, favor certain personal qualities: successful candidates are not local notables, but what we call "media figures/' persons who have a better command of the techniques of media communication than others. What we are

witnessing today is not a departure from the principles of representative government, but a change in the type of elites that are selected. Elections continue to elevate to office individuals who possess distinctive features; they retain the elitist character they have always had. However, a new elite of experts in communication has replaced the political activist and the party bureaucrat. Audience democracy is the rule of the *media expert*. Secondly, the growing role of personalities at the expense of platforms is a response to the new conditions under which elected officials exercise their power. [...] The nature and environment of modern governmental activity thus increasingly call for discretionary power, whose formal structure may be compared to the old notion of "prerogative" power (Manin, 1997, pp. 220-221).

In the new set-up, according to Manin, voters tend to resemble the audience of a show, which is only allowed to react with approval or dissent. For this reason, in the *audience democracy*, alternative leaderships face each other on the electoral stage by making proposals that aim to trigger reactions among the voters, just as happens in the theater, when the actors – with their more or less successful performances – aim to get the applause of an audience that nevertheless remains distant. In the new political phase, political identities tend to dissolve, and so "the electorate appears, above all, as an *audience* which responds to the terms that have been presented on the political stage" (Manin, 1997, p. 223). Since the parties no longer have any stable connection with society, the convergence with the audience is therefore configured as the result of a constant process of interaction:

Politicians may take the initiative in proposing one principle of division rather than another, but the election brings its own sanction to their autonomous initiatives. Candidates do not know in advance which principle of cleavage would be

most effective, but it is in their interest to seek it. In compari-
son to party democracy, the autonomy of the politicians in-
creases, but at the same time they have constantly to identify
the appropriate divisions to exploit. Since, however, the polit-
ically most effective cleavages are those which correspond to
the preoccupations of the electorate, the process tends to
bring about a *convergence* between the terms of electoral
choice and divisions in the public. [...] In audience democra-
cy, convergence establishes itself over time through a process
of trial and error: the candidate takes the initiative of propos-
ing a line of division either during an election campaign, or –
with less risk – on the basis of opinion polls. The audience
then responds to the proposed line of division, and finally the
politician corrects or maintains the initial proposition, de-
pending on the public's response (Manin, 1997, pp. 223-
224).

Manin did not give a positive assessment of the transition to
audience democracy, and indeed he wrote that, following the
shift of the electoral choice to the image of the candidate,
"representative government appears to have ceased its pro-
gress towards popular self-government" (Manin, 1997, p.
233). Nevertheless, the image of public democracy painted by
Manin, and in particular the idea according to which it would
trigger, through a "process of trial and error" (Manin, 1997,
224), a convergence between politicians and voters, were
marked by a non-negative evaluation of the overcoming of
party democracy. Unlike many other observers, Manin in fact
seemed to espouse (at least implicitly) a positive vision of the
audience: despite it was only a spectator of a show in which it
did not participate, the audience still had the possibility of
rewarding or censoring the proposals of aspiring leaders. Pre-
cisely in this sense, the audience was endowed with an auton-

omy that the strongly identified voters of party democracy did not have[1].

Beyond the implicit legitimization of personalization, Manin's reasoning was based on a rather fragile premise. In his scheme, the transition to public democracy was in fact triggered by the growing electoral volatility and the weakening of party identification. The crucial point was that Manin made the electoral stability of party democracy descend from the static nature of a social structure characterized by class division. "Electoral stability", he wrote, "results to a large extent from the determination of political preferences by socio-economic factors", and therefore "in party democracy electoral cleavages reflect *class divisions*" (Manin, 1997, p. 209). Although he referred to the idea of voting as an expression of identity, as well as to the concept of party identification itself, Manin based the ideal-type of party democracy precisely on the idea that the electoral choice was determined by socio-economic factors, that is, from the 'objective' position of the individual in the social structure, so much so that he could explicitly write that, in that historical phase, "representation

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[1] Also for this reason, Manin's proposal has contributed to giving support, at least indirectly, to the legitimacy of plebiscitary democracy, in which the favor of the "people" towards a leader is understood as a guarantee and at the same time as a distinctive trait of a full democracy. "In the wake of Manin, the supporters of audience democracy", observed Nadia Urbinati in this sense, "believe that with the transfer of the power of public judgment from words to vision, it is possible to make the 'court of opinion' effective and make the most of the democratic potential of the means of information and communication ", because precisely these tools are "able to give back to the people their most specific role, which is not that of acting without a leader, but that of watching, observing and judging" (Urbinati, 2013, p. 169).

becomes primarily a reflection of the social structure" (Manin, 1997, p. 210).

This premise, which Manin placed at the basis of the image of party democracy, could not fail to appear as remarkably problematic, both from an empirical and a strictly theoretical profile. In the first place, it was in fact quite clearly in contrast with the main results of the research conducted on electoral behavior, on the role of political cleavages, and on the physiognomy of political-territorial subcultures. Although in fact the discussion on the determinants of voting behavior has seen a series of very different hypotheses confronting each other in the last seventy years, social determinism (more specifically, a determinism that associates socio-economic position with electoral choice, such as the one envisioned by Manin) was abandoned quite early, in favor of explanations centered rather on the role of psychological identification between citizens and parties, on the weight of political subcultures, and on the combination of psychological and cultural factors (including cognitive resources and interest in policy) (Campbell, 1960). In any case, empirical research – just think of those conducted on the Italian experience – have consistently denied the hypothesis of a significant correlation between social positioning and voting behavior (and, therefore, the idea that wage workers or factory workers only voted for 'class parties') (Bellucci and Segatti, 2010). Secondly, considering the representation at the time of the mass parties only as "a reflection of the social structure", Manin's reasoning ended up considering the "social structure" as a dimension capable of 'objectively' determining the position of each individual, his socio-political position, and his 'interests'. In rather singular terms for an essay aimed at reconstructing the history of the representative principle, Manin's book did not seem to grant any role to representation, that is, to the process of

building collective identities carried out by parties, to their ability to provide a (cultural and therefore 'subjective') representation of society, its divisions and the interests of the 'classes' (understood therefore not in their 'economic' guise, but as actors in the conflict) (Palano, 2015c; 2015d; 2015e; 2018). It was however precisely on the basis of this distortion that Manin was able to grasp the novelty of public democracy in the fact that politicians proposed political divisions (instead of registering those 'determined' by the class structure of society).

In addition to the theoretical limits that the typology constructed by Manin showed, even the main hypothesis – the hypothesis according to which Western political systems were progressively shifting towards audience democracy – ended up overestimating the extent of the erosion of party identification. On the contrary, party identification, although it appears weakened compared to the past, has not actually completely vanished, and in some cases it has been replaced by other forms of identification (for example with the leader)[2]. Also for this reason, Manin himself subsequently reduced the

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[2] In Italy, on the other hand, despite a marked personalization, the birth of the so-called "Second Republic" – in many ways comparable to audience democracy – clashed with new and stubborn forms of 'negative' identification, that is, nourished more by hostility (towards a leader or an alignment) than by fidelity to certain principles and positions. According to some hypotheses, the strength of political identifications would have actually made the share of voters – who, between one election and another, shifted their vote between the two coalitions competing for victory – rather small. Moreover, political orientations – instead of being influenced by media exposure – try to 'encapsulate' the media diet of individual citizens, i.e. the decision to expose themselves to some information channels and to discard others (Bellucci and Segatti, 2010).

weight of his diagnosis, recognizing that in the period following the publication of the volume, party democracy has not been completely abandoned and party identifications have not disappeared (Manin, 2010). Furthermore, Manin also seemed to underestimate the very persistence of parties. More than an actual dissolution of parties, what was taking shape at the time was, in fact, the slow metamorphosis of the mass integration party into a different model, which a vast debate has led back, for example, to the cartel party, to the professional-electoral party, to the medial party or to the personal party (Palano, 2015d; 2015e). And such a metamorphosis, far from sanctioning the decline of the party or the loss of its political salience, would rather mark a progressive shift from society to institutions, within which parties find the resources for their survival.

Despite all these limitations, the idea of audience democracy still allowed us to grasp an important aspect (which, perhaps, Manin underestimated). Indeed, that formula offered the possibility of explaining the centripetal trend that actually characterized the life of many democracies (especially European ones) between the 1980s and the first decade of the 21st century. In other words, the centrality of the audience did not only imply a consistent push towards "personalization", but also a convergence of the main political actors towards the center of political space. Although Manin did not emphasize this aspect, the convergence towards the center actually represented a possible consequence of the rise of generalist television as the main channel of communication between parties and citizens. Due to the affirmation of a large generalist media such as TV (which happened concurrently with the weakening of party identifications, as a result of which votes were 'freed' from ideological conditioning), the leaders of the large parties sought electoral victory at the "center"; in other

words, assuming that the battle was concentrated on the attempt to win the vote of the median voter, victory was placed in a "moderate" position between the two extremes of the left and the right. Precisely for this reason, as Otto Kirchheimer had already predicted, the large parties, unable to be satisfied with their own pool of faithful and militant voters, had to moderate their ideological appeals, mitigate the radical nature of the messages and discolor the intensity of the flags. From a historical perspective, it is almost obvious to recognize in Tony Blair's "third way" the paradigm of the centripetal logic induced by audience democracy: a logic in which the differences between right and left, in terms of both programs and values, became less clear-cut, and in which, instead, the winning cards became the personality and credibility of the leaders.

If audience democracy has not really materialized in all European political systems, the figure outlined by Manin now manages to grasp very little of the dynamics that Western democratic systems are experiencing today. The push towards personalization has obviously not ended, the crisis of confidence in the political class and parties has not stopped, and indeed the disaffection has even grown. However, all these factors combine with a new communicative logic, which produces quite different consequences.

Democracy in the bubble

If the image of audience democracy – despite all the limitations of this formula – managed to capture some of the novelties of a political season, today it is even obvious to recognize that that season has probably ended. Starting from 2008 – the year in which the financial crisis takes on a global dimension, in which Barack Obama was elected to the White House and in which social media began to change the political campaigns – the emergence of radical formations and leaders, usually defined as "populists", have united almost all Western political systems, in terms decidedly superior to the previous sixty years, while "polarization" – understood in its various expressions – emerged as constant element of political confrontation. To explain the failure (or the exhaustion) of the "third way", it is of course necessary to consider 'structural' dynamics, which concern geopolitical change, economic crisis, the structure of the EU, the demographic profile of western countries. It cannot however be excluded that some aspects have to do precisely with the decline of audience democracy, or rather with the change in conditions that, according to Manin, were leading to the affirmation of that model of interaction between citizens and politics. Probably, the season of audience democracy – if at some point it has really begun – has in fact definitively ended because, following the progressive affirmation of the web as an information channel for many citizens (and the contextual downsizing of the role of

television), it has begun to change the environment in which citizens form their opinions and express their identities. In many ways, the audience dissolves, to break down into a myriad of bubbles or into the ephemeral structure of the swarm.

All these transformations – which basically began only a few years ago – are still far from having radically changed the previous scenario, and therefore it would be naïve to believe that there is no longer any trace of party democracy and audience democracy. Therefore, if it is probably not yet the case to definitively abandon these interpretative categories, it is however necessary to elaborate formulas that take into account the elements of radical novelty that have emerged, at least to try to decipher the logic of the transformations or to evaluate the speed of a passage. It is precisely with this goal that is possible to try to define the physiognomy of an alternative structure both to party democracy and audience democracy: this ideal-type is provisionally defined *bubble democracy*, due to the importance of the "bubbles" in which the general audience is fragmented, and by virtue of the tendential self-referentiality that tends to mark the segments into which the "public" is divided.

In the following pages, I will therefore propose the basic elements of the ideal-type of bubble democracy. To avoid misunderstandings or misleading interpretations, it is important to emphasize that my goal is to define an ideal-type. As always happens in the construction of ideal-types, in line with the Weberian lesson, the features of bubble democracy are constructed by 'taking to extremes' some recognizable data in reality, with the aim of emphasizing a trend and grasping its implications. Therefore, the shape of bubble democracy must not be interpreted as a faithful description of what Western democracies 'are' today, nor in terms of a deterministic forecast on changes in voting behavior, on media con-

sumption choices, on the crisis of traditional media. or of generalist TV. The function of this image is rather aimed at understanding to what extent Western political systems are today close to the model of party democracy, audience democracy or bubble democracy.

In outlining the aspects of bubble democracy, a first point can only be represented by the *fragmentation of the audience*: a process that intervenes both as a result of structural change in the communication supply, and as a result of the individual strategies for managing the informative overload. From the first point of view, more than ten years ago some scholars highlighted how the decline of traditional media (in the first place, printed newspapers) and the decline of generalist television configured an unprecedented situation, very different from the scene of Western democracies in the previous forty years (Prior, 2017). With regard to the "third phase" of political communication, the signs that proceeded towards a growing fragmentation of the information supply had already been highlighted. The multiplication of television channels, in particular, implied a first significant fragmentation of the audience in a plurality of niches. To all this was added the internet, which was however still in the first season and which thus still played a marginal role in terms of information (Scaglioni, 2011; Scaglioni and Sfardini, 2017). The proliferation of information channels – observed, for example, Blumer and Kavanagh (1999) – implied a fiercer competition on the part of broadcasters to win over spectators, while the spectacularization and commercialization triggered the adoption by political information of traditional styles of entertainment. By updating this characterization of the third phase, Michael Gurevitch, Stephen Coleman and Jay G. Blumer recognized, in 2009, that old audience of generalist television was in decline and that the emergence of an interactive communica-

tion (such as that allowed by the internet) was further modifying the overall dynamics (Gurevitch, Coleman, Blumer, 2009). This picture was however destined to evolve further due to the massive diffusion of social media and, at the same time, due to the spread of smartphones: both of these processes, which accelerated at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, changed the previous picture very rapidly and gave a further powerful push to the 'pulverization' of the audience.

The fragmentation of the old audience into a 'plurality' of audiences was not considered in negative terms by many observers. For example, Sara Bentivegna, who focused in particular on the political uses of Twitter, interpreted the overcoming of audience democracy in terms of an enlargement of the public discussion. "Personalized consumption combined with the opportunity for citizens to produce content", she observed, is "made possible by the affirmation of the net, as a communication infrastructure used by many political actors" (Bentivegna, 2015, p. 31). This does not entail, in her view, only the fragmentation into a plurality of audience segments that Manin had referred to, but also an extension of the space for citizen participation. In fact, there is not only a question about the "plurality of audiences", but also about "a plurality of actors" able to activate or participate in public discussions, with the consequence of an expansion of the "space of discursive interaction between citizens and political subjects" (Bentivegna, 2015, p. 31).

Leaving aside the question of the effects triggered by the overcoming of audience democracy, the fragmentation process – in particular as a consequence of the adoption by platforms of predictive techniques (that allow the 'personalization' of commercial suggestions and news) – has taken on a profile quite different from that which, at the end of the third

phase of political communication, had been caused by the multiplication of television channels. It is precisely this new element that makes the metaphor of "bubbles" remarkably fitting for grasping the sense of a change not limited to the subdivision of the public into a plurality of small niches and which has many political implications.

In 2011, Eli Pariser drew attention to the implications of what was happening on the web, as a consequence of the personalization of user searches introduced by Google in 2009. From that moment the Page Rank search algorithm began to provide 'personalized' results: i.e., different results for each user, since the results were also selected on the basis of the previous choices of each navigator and therefore, at least theoretically, on the basis of his preferences and orientations. In his essay, Pariser did not consider so much the privacy risks, but emphasizes the formation of the "bubbles" that personalizing searches involved. The algorithms, he stressed, tend to create around each user a sort of "filter bubble": a bubble that filters all the information coming from the outside world, filtering only what is consistent with the previous choices of the user. For this reason, each of us tend to live inside a "bubble", from which he sees a 'personal' world, which is built – so to speak – in its own image and likeness, while everything that does not conform to its orientations (i.e., to its past choices) simply ends up disappearing from view, held back by the filter of our personal bubble.

Of course, the partiality of information is not a novelty introduced by 'personalization', and, to a certain extent, the decisions to expose oneself to certain information flows (and not to others) have always been influenced by individual perspectives, worldviews, prejudices. In addition, also the party newspapers aimed to propose a specific representation of reality, which – even if it presented itself as 'objective' or 'scien-

tific' – could only be 'partial'. Even a television or radio broadcaster, addressing a loyal audience, can promote a 'partial' representation of reality and propose a 'biased truth'. The novelty of the filter bubble, on which Pariser drew attention, were instead above all three:

> First, you're alone in it. A cable channel that caters to a narrow interest (say, golf) has other viewers with whom you share a frame of reference. But you're the only person in your bubble. In an age when shared information is the bedrock of shared experience, the filter bubble is a centrifugal force, pulling us apart. Second, the filter bubble is invisible. Most viewers of conservative or liberal news sources know that they're going to a station curated to serve a particular political viewpoint. But Google's agenda is opaque. Google doesn't tell you who it thinks you are or why it's showing you the results you're seeing. You don't know if its assumptions about you are right or wrong – and you might not even know it's making assumptions about you in the first place. [...] Because you haven't chosen the criteria by which sites filter information in and out, it's easy to imagine that the information that comes through a filter bubble is unbiased, objective, true. But it's not. In fact, from within the bubble, it's nearly impossible to see how biased it is. Finally, you don't choose to enter the bubble. When you turn on Fox News or read *The Nation*, you're making a decision about what kind of filter to use to make sense of the world. It's an active process, and like putting on a pair of tinted glasses, you can guess how the editors' leaning shapes your perception. You don't make the same kind of choice with personalized filters. They come to you – and because they drive up profits for the Web sites that use them, they'll become harder and harder to avoid (Pariser, 2011, p. 10-11).

In his militant denunciation of the effects produced by the filtering bubble, Pariser therefore highlighted first of all the

fact that algorithmic personalization does not simply imply the transition from a relatively homogeneous audience to a plurality of audiences, but rather the transition to a situation where each user is, in fact, alone: even without being aware of it, the world he sees is in fact (at least potentially) different from the world that any other user sees. Unlike other previous experiences of partisan use of information (such as reading a party newspaper or watching a thematic television channel via cable), in the "bubble" each user is in fact alone: the world they sees is built exclusively on his preferences (not on the preferences of a small niche but still much broader than that of an individual). In the scenario of the filter bubble, therefore, technically there is no "public". There is no sort of audience – real or virtual, large or limited – that attends a show, reads a text, or listens to a radio program: inside the bubble, every individual, may have the sensation of being part of a community, has before his eyes a 'personalized' show, a partial and limited representation of the world built 'to measure', on the basis of tastes and preferences established in the past. In addition, the 'personalization' of searches is carried out using criteria that individual users are not aware of and whose existence they are often not even aware of. Finally, the choice to enter the bubble – i.e., to adopt personalization criteria for selecting information – is largely involuntary. Unlike what happens when we buy a politically aligned newspaper, or when we decide to tune into a television network with a clear location, or when we turn to a website with a strong political-cultural matrix, in the case of personal filters, we do not decide whether to use them or not. In other words, we are almost never really aware (or fully aware) of 'living in a bubble', and this has implications that do not only concern the penetration of the great giants of the web into our privacy.

Although information has always been partial, and although newspapers (even those without obvious political connotations) have always provided partial representations of the world, every single citizen retained, at least in pluralistic contexts, the possibility of choosing whether to buy or read one head or another. And even if TV had a pervasive capacity far greater than the print media, the viewer still had the right to choose whether or not to expose themselves to a certain information flow (at least in a context characterized by a plural offer). All this would instead largely fail in the context of the 'personalization': network users are almost never really able to understand if the information to which they are exposed, is selected on the basis of their preferences recorded by profiling techniques. In fact, we are often aware that advertisement storms are 'personalized', and that these proposals are the result of the invisible work of algorithms; but, when we look for news on the web, we tend to believe instead that the information is 'objective', 'neutral', or at least the same that all other users are seeing. Following Pariser's reasoning, this means not only that we fail to fully understand how thick the filter of the bubble we are in is, but also that we are often not aware that a filter exists.

If personalization is the almost inevitable outcome of a world marked by increasing information overload, a not insignificant drawback – which Pariser highlighted, followed by many critics of the network – consists in the reduction of the window from which we observe the world. Therefore, we must recognize the existence of a threat to pluralism and public discussion, as well as to individual freedom itself. "The algorithms have freed us from group travel, from the obligatory points of view and from the obligatory stops in front of souvenir views", writes for example Dominique Cardon, but, at the same time, they "contribute to subject the internet user to

that calculated, effective, automatic route, which adapts to our desires by regulating itself, in secret, on the traffic of others" (Cardon, 2016, p. 90). Following the path indicated by the algorithms, we lose sight of the landscape, the alternative roads, the little-frequented routes. In other words, living in the bubble, we are unknowingly imprisoned and we tend to eliminate from our view the alternative points of view and all other options that do not accord with the one we have adopted in the past. In this sense, the "distorting effect" remains one of the risks of 'personalization'. At the same time, precisely the reduction of the probability of finding ourselves in front of something unexpected could end up reducing the creativity of individuals and favoring the conformity of choices. But the main problem Pariser warned against was the political implications of filter bubbles, which could dry up the ground on which public discussion can grow and thus deprive democracy of a crucial resource:

> The most serious political problem posed by filter bubbles is that they make it increasingly difficult to have a public argument. As the number of different segments and messages increases, it becomes harder and harder for the campaigns to track who's saying what to whom. [...] Acting different with different political constituencies isn't new – in fact, it's probably about as old as politics itself. But the overlap – content that remains constant between all of those constituencies – is shrinking dramatically. You can stand for lots of different kinds of people or stand for something, but doing both is harder every day. Personalization is both a cause and an effect of the brand fragmentation process. The filter bubble wouldn't be so appealing if it didn't play to our postmaterial desire to maximize self-expression. But once we're in it, the process of matching who we are to content streams can lead to the erosion of common experience, and it can stretch po-

litical leadership to the breaking point. [...] The good news about postmaterial politics is that as countries become wealthier, they'll likely become more tolerant, and their citizens will be more self-expressive. But there's a dark side to it too. [...] In a postmaterial world where your highest task is to express yourself, the public infrastructure that supports this kind of expression falls out of the picture. But while we can lose sight of our shared problems, they don't lose sight of us. Ultimately, democracy works only if we citizens are capable of thinking beyond our narrow self-interest. But to do so, we need a shared view of the world we cohabit. We need to come into contact with other peoples' lives and needs and desires. The filter bubble pushes us in the opposite direction – it creates the impression that our narrow self-interest is all that exists. And while this is great for getting people to shop online, it's not great for getting people to make better decisions together (Pariser, 2011, pp. 88-90).

From the moment in which Pariser formulated his complaint against the risks to which the filter bubble exposed democratic societies, the mechanisms of personalization have changed and citizens are now more aware of the manipulation mechanisms that profiling entails, although probably a similar awareness remains rather marginal and does not significantly affect the display choices of the majority of social media users. The scandal of the Cambridge Analytica case also showed the potential of data accumulated daily by social networks on citizens' orientations for personalized campaigns, to direct public opinion and influence the outcome of electoral competitions (Kayser, 2018). Attention to the implicit risks that, for democratic coexistence itself, involves the use of big data, "dating", algorithmic predictions and micro-targeting have also been reported from multiple perspectives (Hindman, 2018; Thurow, 2012; Vaidhyanathan, 2011; 2018). For example,

Caty O'Neil, in an important book on the effects of "weapons of math destruction" (WMD) on daily life and on the social fabric, also dwelt on the consequences produced by the disappearance of the public and by the use of campaigns centered on personalized messages, whose contents are invisible to the public scene:

> The result of these subterranean campaigns is a dangerous imbalance. The political marketers maintain deep dossiers on us, feed us a trickle of information, and measure how we respond to it. But we're kept in the dark about what our neighbors are being fed. This resembles a common tactic used by business negotiators. They deal with different parties separately so that none of them knows what the other is hearing. This asymmetry of information prevents the various parties from joining forces – which is precisely the point of a democratic government. This growing science of microtargeting, with its profiles and predictions, fits all too neatly into our dark collection of WMDs. It is vast, opaque, and unaccountable. It provides cover to politicians, encouraging them to be many things to many people. The scoring of individual voters also undermines democracy, making a minority of voters important and the rest little more than a supporting cast. Indeed, looking at the models used in presidential elections, we seem to inhabit a shrunken country. [...] In any case, the entire political system – the money, the attention, the fawning – turns to targeted voters like a flower following the sun. The rest of us are virtually ignored (except for fund-raising come-ons). The programs have already predicted our voting behavior, and any attempt to change it is not worth the investment (O'Neil, 2016, p. 163).

Although O'Neil's alarm may appear excessive, and despite the fact that forecast and suggestion techniques are destined to change and become more refined over time, it is very likely that our future will always be sharply marked by 'personaliza-

tion' and that, therefore, filter bubbles are destined to pro-
pose a world that is always designed on the basis of our sym-
pathies, our tastes, our orientations. Pushing in this direction
are, in fact, a series of trends with respect to which a substan-
tial reversal or even a slowdown remains very unlikely. The
costs of producing and distributing media content is in fact
destined to further decline, with an increase in the infor-
mation overload to which each individual is already exposed
today. The use of a personalized process of selecting and ag-
gregating news, 'profiled' on our interests and orientations,
will therefore become even more essential than it is today,
making our relationship with technologies less and less con-
trollable. And our entry into the world of "augmented reality"
(AR), as observed Adam Greenfield, could further contribute
to the "fragmentation" of the common space (Greenfield,
2017).

Although the thesis of the pervasiveness of the filter bub-
ble undoubtedly grasps the sense of a transformation and
identifies risks that cannot be underestimated, it is however
complicated to prove empirically (Hannak, 2013; Dillhaut,
Brooks and Gelati, 2015; Haim, Graefe and Brosius, 2018;
Kraft, Gamer and Zweig, 2019). And, therefore, there is still a
lack of evidence that actually shows how it is the invisible fil-
tering mechanisms used by the platforms that lock us inside
the cocoon of our beliefs. To escape the difficulties that the
filter bubble thesis presents, some communication scholars
have developed a different (although not entirely alternative)
hypothesis, which focuses on the conscious choices of indi-
vidual users, and therefore not on the (invisible) constraints.
represented by profiling techniques. Basically, according to
this hypothesis, the algorithms don't 'close us' inside a bub-
ble, but we but we do it ourselves: in other words, we, with our
daily choices of media consumption, tend to reunite in a self-

referential cocoon. The algorithms are only able to reinforce mechanisms which are adopted spontaneously by social media users. The "bubble" could be built by each of us, because each individual – at least in his social media activities – tends to interact mainly (and more frequently) with those who have similar opinions, limiting exchanges with those who think differently. And just by addressing some sources closest to our opinions, or interacting with "friends" who share our same preferences, every day we close ourselves within an *echo chamber*, where the same passwords always sound (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012; Iyengar and Westwood, 2015; Reiljan, 2019). From this perspective, then, the proliferation of bubbles seems to take the form of a sort of "tribalization", not very different from what Marshall McLuhan, for example, predicted many years ago (Bartlett, 2018). In this sense, as an underground magazine that went so far as to glimpse the implications of communicative change many years ago (when social media was still far from being conceived), "retribalization" could really also involve a convergent movement of "de-memorization" and "re-mythicization" of the world:

> A second characteristic of the retribalization of the intellectual faculties is the re-mythicization of memory, with all the (often upsetting) effects that this can produce. Computerization, storage of knowledge and memory and their automation, tend to reduce and crystallize the living, individual memory of the past and experience. Memory tends to be less and less human memory, and more and more computer memory. This produces effects that today we can only begin to glimpse. The past is perceived as time without depth, as time not lived, as a mere optical configuration. The perception of experience and its plurality is replaced by the flatness of a completely contemporary perception, without dynamism and without diachrony. The end of critical reason is probably

inevitably inscribed in this de-memorization. But at the same time, the potential for reassembling the universe is still to be discovered (Berardi, 1981, pp. 82-83).

If 'tribalization' concerns food preferences, esotericism or conspiracy theories, it involves also political preferences. On the other hand, various researches have shown that the behavior of social media users tends to be, especially with regard to political information, largely homophilic: in other words, the vast majority of users tend to have friends who share the same political ideas and the same values, but above all they seem to be exposed almost exclusively to sources of information which confirm the initial views. A rather well-known research, published by Eytan Bakshy, Solomon Messing and Lada Adamic in 2015, for example, showed – based on a study conducted on 10 million Facebook accounts – that it is the users themselves who 'lock themselves' in an information bubble, because friends are chosen largely close to the same political spectrum: among the friends of "conservative" users, only about 20% were in fact made up of "liberals", while "liberal" users had no more than 18% of friends "conservatives". According to this survey, therefore, each user, rather than exploring the web to extend his own vision of the world, seeks confirmation of his own vision of the world and his own beliefs, excluding from the view everything that conflicts with his own narrative. Therefore, from the results of this area of investigation, the information transmission chains appear to a large extent, if not exclusively, homophilic and internal to the same echo chamber, and this trend would be more considerable precisely in those users who use the social network[1].

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[1] See Anagnostopoulos, 2015; Bakshy, Messing and Adamic, 2015; Bessi, 2015a; 2015b; Boulianne and Theocharis, 2020; Boulianne, Koc-Michalska

Although the actual trend towards the formation of information cocoons remains to be demonstrated, the analyzes dedicated to the filter bubble and echo chambers allow us to specify some important elements of bubble democracy, all of which are closely linked. The fragmentation of the public into a myriad of "bubbles" defines a new scenario, really different from audience democracy (and also from party democracy). In this scenario, it is possible to identify other elements, closely intertwined, such as the change in trust relationships, disaffection towards the political dimension and the tendency to polarization.

A second element that characterizes the shape of bubble democracy has strictly to do with the process often defined as "disintermediation": a process that obviously does not only concern the political dimension, but that has deeply affected relations between citizens and those organizations which – until recently – were considered the indispensable link to guarantee the 'mediation' between society and institutions (Campati, 2022; Cuono, 2015; Giacomini, 2018). The communicative transformation of the internet has contributed to further questioning the mediating role played by parties, already severely cracked by a crisis of legitimacy that emerged from the 1980s in almost all Western democracies. The digital revolution has however invested the role of mediation that generalist television played in the season of audience democracy. The digital revolution has in fact fueled the ambition to

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and Bimber, 2020; Boutlyne and Willer, 2017; Del Vicario, 2016; 2017; Dubois and Blank, 2018; Dutton *et al.* 2019; Flaxman, Goel and Rao, 2016; Quattrociocchi and Vicini, 2017; Vaccari and Valeriani, 2016; 2021; Vaccari and Chadwick and Loughlin, 2015; Vaccari *et al.* 2013; 2015; 2016; Valeriani and Vaccari, 2016; 2018; Veltri and Di Caterino, 2017; Vraga *et al.* 2019; Weeks, Lane and Hahn, 2021; Weeks *et al.* 2017).

build a large virtual agora, in which all citizens could have the same role and contribute to public discussion. Rather than becoming the arena for a democratic discussion on major political issues, the internet has actually proved to be a tool capable of fueling conflicts and a formidable channel for spreading fake news, to unleash shitstorm and hate campaigns. Despite the myth of "disintermediation" having been significantly cracked by the transformations of the web and, in the first place, by the hegemonic role that large platforms have assumed in shaping the internet. Although they allow access to all users, large platforms such as Google, Facebook and Twitter have become much more important internet nodes than others, not only because – in order to interact with others – users must access these platforms, but also because – thanks to the techniques of personalizing suggestions – they conduct fairly obvious content manipulation. The personalization systems of suggestions also tend to favor the concentration processes of digital companies, because algorithmic filters bring benefits especially to companies that have large catalogs, qualified personnel, better hardware and a greater amount of data (Hindman, 2018). Furthermore, new type of intermediaries, such as digital opinion leaders, influencers, hubs or connectors, implement a sort of "bottom-up re-intermediation", which sees them perform an agenda-setting function, i.e., the selection, organization and hierarchization of contents, from a certain point of view not substantially different from that carried out by the traditional media (Bentivegna, 2015; Giacomini, 2018).

Therefore, if the transformations of the web have left standing very little of the hopes of the 'techno-utopians' of the Eighties and Nineties, they have in any case substantially changed the conditions of access to the political market, which for a long time – both in the season of party democra-

cy, as in that of audience democracy – they hindered (even if they did not completely prevent) the emergence of new political challengers. In his study dedicated to democratic "deconsolidation", the German political scientist Yascha Mounk explained the turbulence affecting Western systems today, also focusing on this aspect (Mounk, 2018). Together with the stagnation of living standards, the demographic change of Western societies and the pressure of migratory flows, Mounk claims that a crucial role in triggering "deconsolidation" has been played by our changing communication. The advent of the internet has changed the dynamics of news distribution, lowering the costs of disseminating information and views, while social media has further reduced barriers, allowing virtually anyone to take a stand on any issue. Beyond some forcing, Mounk's thesis captures an important aspect. As a result of "disintermediation", the technological advantage available to political elites – both in pluralistic and competitive contexts and in authoritarian ones – has at least largely dissolved, and outsiders have thus gained possibilities unknown in the past, as much in African regions with problematic governments (Pierskalla and Hollenbach, 2012), as as in mature democracies where the institutions retain solid control of the territory:

> Once upon a recent time, would-be politicians needed access to vast resources and existing organizations to overcome key coordination and collective action problems. Now, they have the tools they need to reach potential collaborators, to motivate them to become politically active, and to coordinate their actions. The political elite's technological advantage has been drastically reduced in Michigan and South Dakota as well as in Kenya and Nigeria. From this perspective, we can make sense of both the Green Revolution in Iran and ISIS's use of social media, of both the Arab Spring and the election

of Donald Trump. What many observers took to be a paradox – that social media might have such positive effects in some contexts and such negative effects in other contexts – is a result of the same underlying dynamic: in empowering outsiders, digital technology destabilizes governing elites all over the world and speeds up the pace of change. The effects are likely to stay with us for a very long time (Mounk, 2018, pp. 148-149).

The aspect pointed out by Mounk is indeed significant and can also help explain the success of outsider parties and candidates recorded in recent years, but it converges with the weakening of the bonds that also in other fields – especially in the economic field – made it difficult for new outsiders to enter a market characterized by the presence of large oligopolists. With regard to this transformation, Venezuelan analyst Moisés Naím, director for about a decade of the magazine "Foreign Policy", argued that the image of a pervasive "power elite", capable of monopolizing economic, political and military resources, is even less realistic today than in the past (Naím, 2013). On the contrary, Naím identifies the contours of a transformation that is modifying the ways of exercising power at the root, proceeding in the direction of a progressive 'dispersion' of power, previously concentrated in the hands of large organizations. For about a century the weapons to win the battle for (political, economic, military) power had been large dimensions and bureaucratic organization. Today this cycle seems to have closed, because the various tools that allow access to the exercising of power (constraint, persuasion, material reward) are also available to the 'little ones', who are at least able to undermine the positions of the 'big ones', without of course being able to escape the snare represented by the new challengers. In other words, a reversal of the balance of power is underway to the advantage of those

"micro powers": despite these "micro powers" being unable to completely replace the "macro powers", they are nevertheless able to undermine their position, threatening safety or wearing down authority and reputation. Moreover, the triggering factor of such a trend is not to be found only in technological transformations, but also in demographic and cultural transformations. Unlike many observers, Naím does not believe that the rise of "micro-powers" is simply an effect of the development of new communication technologies. At the basis of the contemporary dispersion there are also more general processes, such as the *more* revolution, the *mobility* revolution and the *mentality* revolution. In essence, the demographic growth of the last few decades and the increase in mobility would have made people, territories and borders less controllable, but, above all, the significant improvement in average living conditions (especially outside the West) have triggered the growth of expectations in a substantial segment of the world population, which has thus become much more willing to mobilize. Of course, these processes have many positive effects, such as the global spread of liberal democracy, but the proliferation of "micro powers" – nationally and internationally – tends to make every political authority increasingly weak, so much so as to threaten political stability itself.

A further aspect that enriches the shape of bubble democracy – and which is closely connected with the crisis of the symbolic power of institutions and large organizations – concerns trust networks. In the discussion that has grown in recent years around "post-truth", it has often been underlined how the most sensational novelty produced by social media (and, in particular, by the reduction of production and distribution costs of opinions and news) was the crisis of scientific and political authority. In other words, unlike in the past, everyone feels authorized to offer not only their own vision of the

world, but, above all, a vision of the world that proposes itself as 'true' without any necessary 'institutional' legitimacy, that is, without the intervention of mediation by institutionalized "truth agencies". In this sense, the connection between "disintermediation" and "post-truth" is quite evident: disintermediation, made 'technically' possible by the multiplication of sources of information and by the reduction in the costs of producing and distributing opinions, enables a 'shortening' in the space between 'high' and 'low': as a consequence of this process, the opinions of experts and amateurs are placed on the same level, and therefore each individual can aspire to present himself as a "truth agency". It could be hypothesized that the reduction in the costs of producing and distributing information, in addition to the reduced gap between 'high' and 'low', has intensified the corrosive force of criticism against institutions, often reported in the literature as the "end of power" and the growth of a potential "counter-democracy" (Rosanvallon, 2014). If trust in institutions (and in established "truth agencies") weakens, this does not mean that trust really dissolves: rather, as in echo chambers, trust is 'horizontally' distributed, in the sense that a news item reported by a "friend" (or read on a site subjectively deemed "reliable") is considered 'more reliable' than that reported by an authoritative source (whose reliability is guaranteed by institutional mechanisms). This – truly crucial – point was, for example, pointed out by Anna Maria Lorusso, precisely in relation to the concept of "post-truth":

> The truth is always given in a "tacit understanding" [...] between the speakers. It is a question of believing in the truth of the speeches, much more than of recording, ascertaining, verifying the truth of the facts. The problem is therefore – once again – a problem of trust, of understanding, and consequently of the stability of the social bond. This aspect is very

evident in today's debates and alarmism about post-truth. What was missing? Why do truths multiply to the point that the category of truth now seems useless? In my opinion, what has been lacking is trust: in institutions, in ideologies that indicated the truth. The trust contact that linked citizens to politicians, citizens to the media, citizens to their own religious and national community, etc., entered a crisis. And other fiduciary agreements have multiplied on a more emotional and "familistic" basis (i.e., within restricted communities, in solidarity because among similar ones, as in echo chambers): I trust those who react as I react, who feel what I feel I. Indeed, I trust first of all my experience, my senses [...]. One of the strongest rhetorics of contemporaneity today is that of authenticity, which is precisely an experiential declination of the value of truth (Lorusso, 2018, pp. 106-107).

If the question of "post-truth" is really linked to the perception of the reliability of the sources (i.e. the information sources that people consider reliable), then a significant piece of bubble democracy seems to be the transition from a structure in which trust is placed in institutionalized agencies towards a context in which – in the face of the credibility crisis of the traditional "truth agencies" – fiduciary ties tend to become predominantly 'horizontal', or 'distributed' (even if not really 'disintermediated') (Origgi, 2016). Of course, the transition from institutionalized trust to distributed trust (on which platforms such as TripAdvisor, eBay, BlaBlaCar or Airbnb, for example, are based) does not necessarily involve the distorting effects often cited by critics of "post-truth". But it certainly defines a radical change, which cannot fail to have implications also on the strictly political side (Botsman, 2017).

A further trait of bubble democracy concerns the distrust in political class (and political institutions). This element

does not represent a clear discontinuity with respect to the image of audience democracy. In all Western democracies, many indicators return the picture of an increasingly weaker legitimacy towards parties and their political class. The rates of enrollment in organized political formations record a constant decline in almost all the countries of the Old Continent. The surveys of the climate of opinion also indicate a growing disaffection with politics, whose main victims are precisely political parties (Dalton and Sheldon, 2004; 2007; Foa and Mounk, 2016; 2017; Wike and Fetterolf, 2018). This mistrust can be interpreted in various ways, and undoubtedly it can also represent the logical presupposition of the "unfreezing" of identity belonging to evaluate without prejudice the proposals of the individual candidates. In reality, as noted, even in the golden age of audience democracy – that is, in the twenty years between the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the explosion of the global economic crisis, during which many Western systems really came close to the figure outlined by Manin – party identification has not completely dissolved: even if they had often changed their references, in various national systems – including, of course, the Italian "Second Republic" – parties had continued to constrain the space of electoral choice, as well as, in some cases, to 'encapsulate' the choices of exposure to information sources. If this very aspect represents an element of fragility in the hypothesis of a transition from party democracy to audience democracy, more recently several observers have reported the emergence – especially in the United States – of a singular convergence between electoral volatility and pronounced polarization (Pew Research Center, 2014; 2019; Campbell, 2018). The same 'populist explosion', which also saw the rise of radical parties and outsider candidates in Europe, testifies to how distrust of the political class and the establishment does not only translate into a

decrease in participation rates in electoral consultations, but also – much more than in the past – in moving voters.

By observing the long season that began in the 1950s from a historical perspective, and referring to the context of European democracies, Christian Blasberg has proposed a rather generic but effective schematization, which sees the logic of the voters gradually changing. If in the fifties and sixties the vote appears to have been influenced by the search for safety and protection, as well as by the search for the protection of one's socio-economic and cultural interests, starting from the seventies the component of habit took over: "therefore, one remains a faithful voter even if the political offer in some cases does not correspond to one's socio-economic and cultural interests" (Blasberg, 2019, p. 51). It is, however, particularly since the 1980s that mistrust began to increase, first translating into a gradual increase in abstention during electoral consultations, and then turning – in the 10s of the 21st century – to the emergence of radical parties, protagonists of the populist wave. In the first decade of the new century, in fact, "the elector no longer votes: he is now convinced that the entire political class indiscriminately acts only on the basis of its own interests and has lost contact with citizens", "he is discouraged and detaches himself from politics, but observes with interest the growth of a number of protest parties" (Blasberg, 2019, p. 52). In the 2010s, however, things changed quite significantly, since "the voter resumes voting and chooses a new party, radically different from all the others because its political offer responds to his most genuine socio-economic interests"; furthermore, "its leaders do not speak the language of politics but rather the 'language of the people' and, although they are nonconformist and eccentric figures, they seem more credible than the old ruling class" (Blasberg, 2019, p. 51).

Of course, it is far from easy to determine with certainty whether the new communicative context triggered the populist wave, and whether other causes of an economic, social and cultural nature did not affect it. On the other hand, providing an answer to such a question is not one of the ambitions of these pages. Beyond the causes that may have determined the transformation, the mosaic of bubble democracy cannot fail to record the change that has taken place in the ways in which the distrust of the voters is translated into terms of electoral behavior. And, therefore, it cannot avoid recognizing how disaffection tends to translate into 'anger', into a resentment that assumes as privileged targets the political class, 'traditional' parties, the establishment or even the elites, in the many configurations that they present (Manin, 2014). An aspect that clearly distinguishes the political dynamics of the phase that began in correspondence with the global economic crisis – and which can therefore be placed within the mosaic of bubble democracy – consists precisely in the fact that the dissolution of what remains of the old party identifications and subcultural belonging inherited from the past it does not simply translate into disillusionment, into greater apathy and therefore into an increase in abstention, but it increases the drive towards polarization. This also means that a disillusioned, apathetic, tendentially 'alienated' voter, who in an audience democracy was completely peripheral, now becomes politically crucial in the logic of a 'bubble democracy': microtargeting and data mining make it possible to mobilize them to vote by motivating them with radical and basically 'personalized' messages, without however – at least for now – triggering the structuring of new and stable identifications. On the other hand, it is precisely this logic that fuels the polarization of bubble democracy (Cepernich, 2017; Di Gregorio, 2019).

A crucial piece of the ideal-type of bubble democracy concerns precisely the tendency to polarization and, therefore, the presence of strong centrifugal forces. This represents a discontinuity with respect to audience democracy, in which, as we have seen, political leaders address a unitary "public" and an audience that tends to be made up of the entire electorate: with the aim of winning the electoral victory, in such an arrangement the leaders can only attenuate the more connotated messages in ideological and subcultural terms, because radical messages could alienate moderate voters. More precisely, they tend to turn to the voter who is at the center of the competitive spectrum and whose choices are likely to be influenced by the electoral campaign. On the contrary, in bubble democracy the public is fragmented into a series of distinct segments, each of which can become the object of a flow of information oriented in a 'partisan' sense. But the novelty is not so much represented by the return to the scene of a 'partisan' orientation, but by the fact that, thanks to the fragmentation of the public and the personalization of suggestions, political leaders can address a specific niche, with a message centered on one specific theme. The novelty that really characterizes the centrifugal trend of bubble democracy consists in fact precisely in the possibility for political forces to address distinct segments at the same time. In other words, given that the communication must not be addressed to a homogeneous public – that is, to all potential voters – but to an extremely limited portion of the audience, the goal becomes different: the purpose of an effective campaign is in fact no longer to convince "moderate" voters with equally "moderate" arguments, but to mobilize disenchanted and "alienated" voters, exploiting identity and tendentially radical themes, and it is precisely those themes that are able to power and enhance the specific polarization mechanisms of echo

chambers. Since "the idea of a public sphere in which we are all exposed to the same news almost no longer exists, as happened in the past with reading newspapers or watching the news" (da Empoli, 2019, p. 56), it is no longer essential to construct a common discourse, it is no longer necessary to build a "We" able to hold together the various instances in planning of a general nature. In the centrifugal logic of bubble democracy, "the way to win a majority is no longer to converge towards the center, but to add up the extremists" (da Empoli, 2019, p. 55).

In outlining the ideal-type of a bubble democracy, it can already be recognized today that the increase in mistrust (towards parties, institutions and the political class) and the 'fragmentation' of the public is accompanied, almost as a consequential logic, by a clear tendency to political polarization and, more generally, to radicalization. Whether voluntary or involuntary, closure within bubbles seems destined to favor a process of increasing polarization. Indeed, several observers have underlined that the bubbles are not only self-referential, but also prone to expressing extreme positions, often even willing to neglect the truthfulness of information and the opportunity to verify that news has some basis in facts. Cass R. Sunstein, already several years before the social media spread, highlighted this aspect, focusing on the negative consequences that, for the public debate, the mechanism of the "polarization" of groups could have (Sunstein, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2007). Sunstein has in fact elaborated a sort of "law" relating to polarization, according to which, "after deliberation, people are likely to move towards a more extreme point in the direction to which the group's members were originally inclined" (Sunstein, 2017, p. 68). This means that, if the discussion takes place within a group of people with similar ideological positions, the result will be a growing radicalization of

each of the members of the group, and, therefore, a progressive distancing from the positions of other groups:

> if the group's members are already inclined in a certain direction, they will offer a disproportionately large number of arguments tending in that same direction, and a disproportionately small number of arguments tending the other way. The consequence of discussion will naturally be to move people further in the direction of their initial inclinations. Thus, for example, a group whose members lean in favor of the nation's current leader will, in discussion, provide a wide range of arguments in that leader's favor, and the arguments made in opposition to them will be both fewer and weaker. The group's members, to the degree that they shift, will shift toward a more extreme position in favor of the current leader. And the group as a whole, if a group decision is required, will move not to the median position but instead to a more extreme point (Sunstein, 2017, p. 72).

Although such a mechanism concerns every type of group (and therefore it is not a product of new technologies) (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook, 2001), it is strengthened precisely by the audience's tendency to fragment, by the formation of bubbles and by the logic of echo chambers. On the other hand, it is precisely the mechanisms of polarization and the tendency to homophilia, typical of echo chambers, that can explain the proliferation of fake news (Sunstein, 2017). According to Sunstein, "cybercascades" play an important role, favoring the spread of opinions based on established facts, as well as rumors and fake news. Secondly, the information cocoons built by social media and the filtering by algorithms reinforce the tendency to polarization that operates within homogeneous groups. Thirdly, in communicative exchanges we have recognized the role of the so-called "biased assimilation", a sort of prejudice that unknowingly leads to

the filtering of information based on original beliefs. In other words, an individual who reads posts, articles and books that support different theses on the same problem (for example, the usefulness and risks of vaccines or the causes of global warming), almost invariably 'filters' in just those arguments that confirm his original conviction: the consequence is that even the most argued, convincing and scientifically supported demonstration of the groundlessness of a fake news item turn out to be useless (Brotherton, 2015).

Mechanisms of this kind have obviously always character-ized the diffusion of opinions, and therefore it is not a novelty that concerns online communication in exclusive terms. Cer-tainly, the homophilia favored by social media tends however to facilitate cybercascades and therefore to accelerate the push to polarization. According to Sunstein, the effects of these dynamics are actually clearly visible on the American political scene of the last decade, in which there was an explo-sion of "partyism": "a kind of visceral, automatic dislike of people of the opposing political party" (Sunstein, 2017). Alongside "party politics", there are, however, two other prob-lems, which for Sunstein are even more relevant: on the one hand, echo chambers favor the spread of lies that are increas-ingly difficult to deny; on the other hand, a highly polarized opinion and a fragmented communication system favor polit-ical paralysis and endanger the democratic building. Basically, according to this argument, if freedom of speech is one of the pillars of American constitutional architecture, the environ-ment in which this freedom is exercised today could end up making the entire pluralistic order unstable: a fragmented public opinion, the polarization and extremism would make dialogue between political forces increasingly difficult, mak-ing it impossible to address many fundamental issues.

In the framework outlined by Sunstein it is not difficult to recognize a decisive hostility towards "partyism", which in many ways draws on the rich tradition of doctrinal polemics against the pernicious role of "factions" and partisan organizations (Palano, 2013). A not insignificant question of the interpretation proposed by Sunstein on the risks produced by the rise of social media also concerns the same term "polarization": a term that, on closer inspection, can be used to indicate quite different processes. In the first place, we can speak of "polarization" with regard to the tendency of individuals who participate in group discussions on a specific theme to aggregate around positions and arguments clearly distant from each other (as for example in the case of the contrasts between "no vax" vs. "pro-vax" or conspiracy theorists vs. scientists). Secondly, we can instead refer to the tendency of citizens to aggregate politically around two clearly hostile poles to each other and to position themselves on each single issue based on their own political position (for example, in the case of the classic division between "Republicans" and "Democrats", which directs opinions on issues such as global warming, racial discrimination, etc.). Finally, by "polarization" we can understand the increase in the ideological distance between the political forces participating in the electoral competition (for example, as it happened in the "polarized pluralism" of the Weimar Republic and of the Italy during the "First Republic", when there were radically distant bilateral oppositions with 'anti-systemic' ideologies) (Sartori, 1982). Distinguishing these three levels is not superfluous, because the polarization of public opinion does not automatically translate into a polarization of political forces, that is, in the increase in the ideological distance of the forces represented in the elective assemblies. In this direction, a role can in fact be played

by institutional structures or electoral systems, capable of hindering or favoring centrifugal tendencies.

A further problem raised by Sunstein's reading – as, on the other hand, by many interpretations dedicated to the proliferation of fake news – finally concerns the homophilic tendency that social media seem to favor. Although some research confirms the idea that the homophilic behavior of users tends to restrict the spaces of debate among individuals who share the same positions, opinions on this point are by no means unanimous, and there is no lack of scholars who dispute if the "ideological bubbles" really exist, or whether they have some role in guiding voting behavior (Itanes, 2018, pp. 71-72). Obviously, the discussion is destined to continue in the coming years, also because the importance of the filter bubble and echo chambers will probably increase, at least to the extent that – as many observers predict – the web will effectively become the predominant channel of access to information for the majority of citizens, while the centrality of generalist television will undergo a further downsizing. It is precisely these developments that will make it possible to evaluate in a more appropriate way the hypothesis according to which the disappearance of the audience gives a centrifugal tendency to political competition, and according to which – since the flows of communication and information tend to no longer pass (or mainly) from generalist media – for political actors it will become essential to enter the 'tribal' networks in which the bubbles aggregate and to exploit the wave of movement of "digital swarms".

From the transformation of the communicative (and social) environment and from the transition from audience democracy to bubble democracy, we can expect a transformation in parties, due to a sort of tendency towards isomorphism that pushes political organizations to imitate the organ-

izational methods widespread in the context in which they operate. In other words, with a logic similar to that which saw the mass integration parties take on the characteristics of catch-all-parties, we can expect that the *professional-electoral party* or the *cartel party* will modify their internal structure and will shift the focus of their action with the priority objective of intercepting the segments in which the electorate is divided. In fact, for some years already various observers have recognized the traces of a "media party", a "digital party", a "network party", or even a "platform party" with a radically innovative profile (Gibson and Ward, 2009; Gibson, 2015).

In this direction, Paolo Mancini argued, for example, that the "abundance of information", first allowed by the commercialization of the television system and later further multiplied by the advent of the web, contributed substantially to emptying political parties of crucial functions. According to this reading, the abundance of information has first of all weakened ideological affiliations, and then allows new structures of interaction to replace the old ones, since even organizations with little financial and human resources can today benefit from the possibilities offered by proliferation of low-cost communication. In addition, Mancini noted, citizens, activists and members of an organization "can communicate with each other regardless of the intervention and support of more or less representative organizations" (Mancini, 2016, p. 26). For this reason, the methods of collecting consent are naturally transformed, but there are also significant repercussions on the terrain of organizational logic. "With the advent of the network", he observed in this sense, "the traditional organization of the mass party becomes redundant not only in relation to its expressive functions, [...] but also, to a large extent, in its organizational aspects" (Mancini, 2016, p. 57). The organizational structure itself "becomes in turn redundant, or par-

tially redundant, when, thanks above all to the network, and more generally to the new information transmission technologies, post-bureaucratic organizations enter the political scene", which, "favored by an increased availability of information and their widespread distribution", are able to "completely reverse the situation of scarcity and the need for control that had made possible, indeed necessary, the advent of the organizational dimension of the mass party" (Mancini, 2016, pp. 57-58).

According to Marco Revelli, the transformation in organizational logic (connected, even if not coincident, with the communicative revolution) irreversibly concludes the parable of the twentieth-century party-form. The distrust in political parties, registered in all Western democracies, is not just a conjunctural fact for Revelli, but the sign of the conclusion of a long historical event that marked the twentieth century. Like factories, the twentieth-century parties also carry within them "an intrinsic tendency to gigantism (to incorporate large masses of men in a stable way, arranging them in solid and permanent, omnivorous and centripetal structures" (Revelli, 2013, p. 75). Both the factory and the party seem to be moved by a vocation to attract "as many functions as possible into its own organizational field, in order to submit them to the 'visible hand' of hierarchical levels and so guarantee their absolute predictability of behavior" (Revelli, 2013, p. 76). From the profile of the productive organization, this organizational model enters in crisis starting from the end of the seventies, with the passage from "Fordism" to "post-Fordism", the restructuring of large industrial complexes and the affirmation of the principle of flexibility. Albeit more slowly, the effects of the productive revolution of the 1980s are also felt on the political ground. In fact, according to Revelli, the old twentieth-century 'factory parties' are unable to

cope with a real change of paradigm: a change that is produced above all in the "electoral market", since the voters become fluctuating and not bound by stable affiliations. Increasingly devoid of stable connections with society, parties are then induced to turn towards their potential voters only by exploiting the channels of political communication (with the consequence also of an exponential increase in electoral spending). And, therefore, the space of the party's "sovereignty" seems to dissolve, enclosed within a "triangle of variable geometry", the vertices of which are represented by media power, economic-financial power and the magmatic and fluctuating set of movements (Revelli, 2013, p. 136).

Developing the idea of a tendency towards isomorphism between the party's organizational structure and social change, Paolo Gerbaudo – in particular in relation to M5S, Podemos and the German Piraten – identified the "platform party" as the emerging form, destined to become hegemonic in the near future. According to Gerbaudo, the transformation takes place on two levels: on the one hand, this new party uses the tools of "platform capitalism" (Srnicek, 2017), and therefore makes use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter to communicate with the outside world; on the other hand, they develop digital platforms aimed at encouraging the participation of adherents in democratic discussions, which replace the traditional organizational structure and local roots. In its configuration, the "platform party" represents, from an initial perspective, a filiation of the 'light party' from the season of public democracy, because it does not need a 'heavy' bureaucratic apparatus; from a second perspective, on the other hand, it has elements in common with the old mass party, because it is able to mobilize its adherents and sympathizers with aggressive and widespread communication. The platform party, according to the effective image proposed by

Gerbaudo, is then marked by being, at the same time, a cloud, a start-up and a forum

> The digital party is first and foremost a cloud party, whose digital assets, virtually accessible by any device, become a substitute for physical infrastructure such as offices, circles and sections that characterize the traditional parties. Hereby, political participation is invested with a tendency towards virtualization, where it loses its physical presence and gets rid of that heavy infrastructure that previously sustained its local articulation [...]. This placelessness of the party is the reflection of a digital placeless society in which the complexity and fragmentation of everyday life experience seem to impact pre-established spatial and temporal routines because of the presence of contrasting everyday life patterns and timetables. This tendency can, on the one hand, open up the party to various people who were previously barred from participating because of geographic remoteness, disabilities, family commitments or limited time. However, the participation offered by the cloud party can be much like real clouds, quite ethereal, and exclusionary towards those 'disconnected citizens who find themselves on the other side of the digital divide. Second, the digital party is a forum party, a party that, like social media platforms, which constitute the evolution of early internet forums, is a space of discussions, involving members, sympathizers and organizers. Although in previous parties these discussions mostly happened more discreetly within the party, and its manifold committees, debates are now supposed to be conducted openly, to abide by the principle of transparency derived from hacker culture, this is seen, for example, in political meetings being live-streamed, as is often done by the Five Star Movement in Italy. [...] Third, the digital party is a start-up party, a form of organization characterized by rapid growth and high scalability, but also high mortality. [...] Due to this 'lean management' structure the platform party is an osmotic and adaptive system, with porous

borders and organic rather than mechanical tendencies, which enables it to rapidly respond to stimuli coming from the surrounding environment. This adaptability is the key reason for the spectacular success they have achieved in a very short time. However, as we shall see, this is also the Achilles heel of the digital party, whose agility risks too often turning into fragility, with the risk of exacerbating political disillusionment (Gerbaudo, 2019, pp. 78-80).

Of course, it would be rather hasty to believe that the "platform party" outlined by Gerbaudo is already a definite reality, or even that most of the parties present on the scene of Western democracies are taking on the characteristics of this new organizational form. Without a doubt, however, the competitive pressure has prompted parties to update their mobilization techniques, and – at least since Barack Obama's victory in the presidential elections – the use of social media has become part of the communication armory of all political leaders. Furthermore, from the organizational point of view, the basic referents of such an arrangement tend to no longer be committees, sections, cells and militia – as in the classic Duverger typology – but "individuals, connected to each other and connected [...] to the individual leader in the new social web environment" (Calise and Musella, 2018, p. 112). This also implies that the relationship between the two faces of the platform party – on the one hand, the constant use of large platforms to address their sympathizers and, on the other, the implementation of specific platforms capable of allowing full participation of adherents to political decisions – seems much more problematic. The tendency towards personalization of leadership – a tendency that evidently runs through the entire twentieth century and becomes largely prevalent in audience democracy – cannot maintain a conflictual relationship with the promise of direct participation, disintermediation and di-

rect democracy, which in many ways marks the physiognomy of the platform party (Gerbaudo, 2018; 2019; Urbinati, 2019). As Mauro Calise and Fortunato Musella have rightly pointed out, we can recognize at the heart of the digital party the paradox of being both "interpersonal" and "hyperpersonal": a paradox which re-proposes on a different level the same pitfalls that the personal party had previously posed (Calise and Musella, 2018, pp. 112-113).

On the other hand, the potential offered by social media has been exploited by very different parties, despite a limited extent have really tried to fulfill the promises of greater participation. Although the aspiration to disintermediation has really represented a powerful weapon of delegitimization vis-à-vis the 'old' parties, it's probably hasty to believe that the digital party – or the party-form linked to the logic of bubble democracy – should necessarily be equipped with participatory platforms. Undoubtedly, experiences such as those of the M5S in Italy, Podemos in Spain and Piraten in Germany, but also the experience of Bernie Sanders in the US, presented a similar one. Other equally emblematic cases of start-ups such as those of Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron, capable of climbing the dominant positions within traditionally consolidated systems in a few weeks, seem to demonstrate how the personalization of leadership tends to favor centralization mechanisms in clear contrast to the aspiration of a greater participation of militants in decision-making processes. If the presence of such different cases leaves the hegemonic party-form of a bubble democracy with a rather indeterminate shape, it is however probable that the high mortality is really – as Gerbaudo suggests – a risk with which the political start-ups of the near future will find themselves struggling. This aspect should perhaps also lead us to consider the weight that another isomorphism (very different from that which obliges

parties to incorporate the organizational forms prevalent in society and in the economy in a given historical phase) can exert. Alongside this isomorphism, another aspect should in fact be recognized, which concerns the influence that the structures of political institutions have on the adoption and consolidation of the organizational forms of parties. The constraints and opportunities of institutions – from the electoral systems to the degree of political decentralization, from the mechanisms of public funding to the methods of remuneration of offices – have in fact significantly affected the internal organization of parties, the personalization of leadership, the role of the intermediate strata and local political class, and the relevance of members; on the other hand, the physiognomy of the cartel party and the tendency towards an increasingly "state-centric" party can also be interpreted as the result of the progressive adaptation of organizations to set up institutions. And it is therefore not excluded that even this factor could affect the physiognomy assumed in the various national contexts by the digital party.

Towards a Bubble Democracy?

The fortune of the dystopian narrative recorded in the first two decades of the 21st century is perhaps not so surprising, and not only because – well before Covid-19 broke into our daily lives – analysts and futurologists had long ago reported that the risk of a global pandemic wasn't just hypothetical (Snowden 2020). The fascination of dystopias is in fact perhaps also a consequence of the fact that, after the Cold War, the West never really ceased to live at the "end of history". In other words, its imagination has continued to portray liberal democracy, in the words of Francis Fukuyama, as "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution" and "the final form of human government" (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 2). Devoid of credible rivals, liberal democratic institutions and values now appeared to be so consolidated (and indisputable) that the end of democracy itself had become a politically "unthinkable" event. In the twenty years following the dissolution of "real socialism", the West could therefore only conceive the future in the two mirror modes of a perpetuation of existing institutional forms or of an environmental and social apocalypse. After 2008, however, things began to change, and especially after 2016 the hypothesis of a collapse of democratic institutions – even in the most consolidated democracies – returned to be at least partially credible, so much so as to deliver a new fortune to old dystopias, such as Jack London's *Iron Heel*, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or Ray Bradbury's

Fahrenheit 451. In a different way, those classic dystopias had in fact imagined despotic regimes of the future. The brutality of the Coronavirus pandemic has finally undermined the claim of advanced democracies to be sheltered from the great traumas and diseases that painfully marked the life of past civilizations. While the pandemic materialized before our eyes, reaching almost every corner of the globe, the shadows began to thicken again, even darker, on the liberal democracies themselves, making the dark scenarios of the dystopian tales at least partly credible (Brown, Brechenmacher and Carothers, 2020; Freedom House, 2021; 2022; Idea, 2021; Kundnani, 2020; Palano, 2020a; 2020c; 2020d; 2020e; Repucci and Slipowitz, 2022; Schenkkan and Repucci, 2019; The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022; V-Dem Institute, 2022).

However, the nightmare of the cataclysm manifested itself in a different form than we had assumed. The pandemic has undoubtedly emptied cities, squares, streets, making European and American metropolises resemble the sets of films such as *28 Days Later* and *I Am Legend*, or many of the productions of the so-called *zombie renaissance* (Hubner and Leaning 2004; Palano, 2017a). The pandemic did not, however, provoke an implosion of the social and political order, similar to what fictions had imagined and associated with the apocalyptic imagery of the new century. The response to the contagion was rather the "confinement" of the population within the home: a measure that – due to the way it was carried out and its extent – probably has no precedents or similar comparisons in history. Although this "state of emergency" is very different from what we had been anxiously awaiting, the lockdown and social distancing measures have entailed the suspension, or at least the limitation, of many of the rights and freedom that we used to consider as indispensable elements of a democratic coexistence. Many of these measures were obviously tempo-

rary. Nonetheless, it cannot be ruled out that the pandemic shock may have left profound traces on the structures of our institutions. We can even think that the scenario opened by the pandemic should lead us to review and update our way of conceiving the crisis and the possible collapse of democracy.

In *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt tried to find in the "lesson of history" some indication of the risks facing Western democracies (and not just the American one). Looking at the history of the twentieth century, they tried to understand what factors favored (or prevented) the 'electoral' collapse of democracy in the past. In all of the cases most relevant to them, some traces of the impending authoritarian twist were visible from the beginning: the rejection of the rules of the democratic game, the delegitimization of political opponents, the tolerance of violence, and the restriction of freedoms by law of opponents. For Levitsky and Ziblatt, some of these traces would be visible even in Donald Trump's America, mainly because polarization affects the "unwritten rules" which represent, in their opinion, a guard-rails for democracy: the "mutual tolerance" of opponents and "institutional forbearance" that induces people who occupy public offices to respect the 'spirit' (and not just the form) of institutional rules (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

Although Levitsky and Ziblatt's reading is evidently influenced by the tensions of American politics, their fears must not perhaps be dismissed too simplistically. Nonetheless, we should probably not expect the same threats from the future that our societies experienced in the past. In other words, if the great epidemics of the past can only be partially useful for grasping the trends of our near future, significant help cannot even come from the history of the twentieth century, and in particular from the collapse of representative institutions experienced in Europe in the period between the two world

wars; this is because there is very little in contemporary Western societies that would allow the end of democracy in the ways it was then. As David Runciman has had the opportunity to observe in this regard in a recent book, "our political imagination is stuck with outdated images of what democratic failure looks like" (Runciman, 2018, p. 2): it is stuck, that is, with a scenario shaped by the modalities in which the collapse of the liberal democratic institutions materialized in the years between the two world wars in Italy and Germany, or rather by the way in which the armed forces seized power in Latin America, Africa and Asia between the 1950s and the 1970s. Updating such an imaginary requires instead to 'relativize' the twentieth century experience, without of course forgetting history, but bearing in mind that today's societies have demographic, cultural, economic and technological characteristics, which are very different from those of Europe of a century ago. Furthermore, we should be aware that the responses to tensions are in all probability destined to take very different directions from those traveled between the two world wars. "Contemporary political science has little to say about the new ways that democracy might fail", and in any case, political scientists "tend to think of democratic failure in terms of what they call 'backsliding'" (Runciman, 2018, p. 3). Despite the importance of history, it is evident that, in this way, we risk not seeing those threats that, instead of coming from the past, are looming on the horizon. Our societies, observed moreover Runciman, are too rich, too old, too interconnected for changes such as those of the years between the two wars to repeat themselves, and therefore, looking at the past, we would risk not recognizing the new forms which could represent the end of democracy:

First, political violence is not what it was for earlier genera-
tions, either in scale or in character. Western democracies are
fundamentally peaceful societies, which means that our most
destructive impulses manifest themselves in other ways. There
is still violence, of course. But it stalks along the fringes of our
politics and the recesses of our imaginations, without arriving
center stage. It is the ghost in this story. Second, the threat of
catastrophe has changed. Where the prospect of disaster
once had a galvanizing effect, now it tends to be stultifying.
We freeze in the face of our fears. Third, the information
technology has completely altered the terms on which de-
mocracy must operate. We have become independent on
forms of communication and information-sharing that we
neither control nor fully understand. All of these features of
our democracy are consistent with it getting older (Runci-
man, 2018, pp. 6-7).

The image of a bubble democracy, painted in the previous
pages, must be considered an attempt to update our demo-
cratic imagery and also our imagery of the "collapse" of dem-
ocratic institutions. These considerations on the structure and
dynamics of the political systems of the so-called "late democ-
racy" (Ornaghi, 2013) must therefore be accepted as an initial
attempt to update the imaginary of the democratic crisis, able
to take into account both trends that are already easily recog-
nizable, and dynamics whose contours still remain uncertain,
but which nevertheless cannot be neglected.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to escape the feeling that the po-
larization that is affecting many Western democracies is not a
conjunctural phenomenon, and is instead destined to pro-
duce relevant consequences, not too different from those that
emerged in the Europe following the First World War. With-
out a doubt – it is almost superfluous to recall – the tensions
affecting Western democratic systems today are not only the

result of the change in communication, and it would be naïve to believe that the causes of contemporary turbulence do not have much deeper roots. From many perspectives, since the explosion of the global economic crisis, long-term processes, partly 'structural' and partly 'cultural', have re-emerged, including, above all, the 'fiscal crisis' of the state, the decline of US hegemony, the geo-political and economic transition to the East, the crisis of large ideological affiliations and the development of a 'critical' attitude among Western citizens. All these processes certainly did not suddenly emerge on the political scene after 2008, as the global economic crisis only brought to the surface a series of deep-rooted causes. More likely, those tensions had such a striking impact on the structure of Western political systems because they also encountered a new communicative scenario, capable of strengthening centrifugal tendencies and offering radical political forces new opportunities for mobilization.

In this working paper, no interpretation has been proposed of the "crisis" that seems to affect Western democracies, or of the roots of the "democratic recession" that has emerged globally for more than a decade. Faced with this scenario, in the previous pages an attempt was rather made to place the recent change within an unprecedented political and communicative scenario – different from the 'old' party democracy and audience democracy – which has been defined, somewhat provocatively, a *bubble democracy*. As we have seen, bubble democracy must not be understood as the photograph of reality, because it is simply an ideal-typical model constructed by taking some data that can be recognized in contemporary politics to the extreme, and it would be naive to pretend to recognize in reality an integral manifestation of the "pure" type: the usefulness of ideal-types – like, for example, concepts such as "feudalism" or "charismatic legitimacy"

– lies in their ability to offer tools for interpreting change. Therefore, rather than 'foreseeing' future change, the concept of a bubble democracy can perhaps help us to recognize a logic already triggered today by some 'structural' transformations that have occurred in the relations between citizens, information and the political system. It remains to be demonstrated, however, that our democracies are indeed getting closer to a bubble democracy. In relation to the hypothesis that sees us heading towards an unprecedented bubble democracy, we certainly cannot liquidate the radical (albeit in many ways taken for granted) objection that television still remains the main information channel for many citizens. In other words, according to this objection, we should recognize that the political spectacle still passes mainly through TV. According to this objection, the fragmentation of the audience into self-referential bubbles is therefore still a marginal phenomenon, limited only to small niches, mainly concentrated in young people. It is, in fact, a largely founded objection, which cannot be neglected and which warns against the determinism of rash predictions. Looking at what has happened in the last decade, both on the communication front and on the strictly political one, it is perhaps also rash to dismiss the forecasts that see our near future being increasingly populated by echo chambers and "digital swarms". For this very reason, too, although caution is indispensable, we cannot rule out the hypothesis that the audience – after having been the main protagonist of Western democracies for an important part of the history of the twentieth century – is not actually destined to dissolve into a myriad bubbles, and that the somewhat disturbing scenario of a bubble democracy may not soon become a reality.

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Volumi pubblicati

1. Damiano Palano (ed.), *State of Emergency. Italian Democracy in Times of Pandemic* (2022)

2. Damiano Palano, *Towards a Bubble Democracy? Notes for a Theoretical Framework* (2022)

3. Antonio Campati and Damiano Palano (eds.), *Democracy and Disintermediation. A Dangerous Relationship* (forthcoming)

In the last few years, different hypotheses have been formulated to explain the success of populism, focused on socio-economic factors and on the 'cultural' components of the crisis of western liberalism. However, the discussion often turned to the unpredictable evolutions of "digital swarms", to their indifference towards rational arguments, to their inability to distinguish between truth and falsehood. Damiano Palano's book focuses precisely on the consequences that "digital swarms" can have on our democracies. The goal is, however, not to provide an explanation of the success of the 'new' populism, of fake news or of the so-called "post-truth". More simply, the aim is to update the theoretical vocabulary with which to interpret the change we are experiencing. This book – which must be read as a piece of a reflection in progress – focuses in fact on the implications that the new communication scenario has on contemporary democratic regimes. The thesis is that we are facing a new context, very different not only from the 'old' *party democracy*, but also from the *audience democracy*. In many ways, the spread of social media seems in fact to mark the decline of the "audience", at least if it is understood as an audience made basically homogeneous by the existence of 'generalist' communication channels. Rather than actually sanctioning mechanisms of disintermediation, the spread of new media triggers a fragmentation of the audience into a plurality of segments that tend to have no roots in a common sphere. And so, the public sphere is transformed into a myriad 'bubbles' that become largely self-referential and potentially polarized. Taking into account the transformations in the communicative scenario, as well as the implications on the relationship between citizens, information and parties, this book proposes the ideal-typical image of a new *bubble democracy*.

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