

TOWARDS A CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT: Starting from the idea that democracy always binds together a practice of domination and a project of liberation, Tronti formulates the conditions for a critique of democracy that would permit a rebirth of political thought in the current conjuncture. Bringing the heterodox Marxist traditions of ‘workerism’ and the ‘autonomy of the political’ together with the feminist thinking of difference, Tronti underscores the identitarian tendencies of democracy and the difficulties of combining democracy with a genuine notion of freedom. For Tronti, democracy is increasingly synonymous with the pervasiveness of capitalism understood as ‘bourgeois society’, and the victory of ‘real democracy’ (as one might speak of ‘real socialism’) is the sociological victory of the bourgeoisie. The homo oeconomicus and the homo democraticus are fused into the dominant figure of democracy, the ‘mass bourgeois’. Against the depoliticizing consequences of ‘democratic Empire’, Tronti proposes a profound rethinking of our notion of politics, one which should not shy from reconsidering the elitist critiques of democracy.

KEYWORDS: Biopolitics; Bourgeoisie; Capitalism; Democracy; Difference; Elite; Freedom; Schmitt; Workerism

A word of warning: my argument will involve a deconstruction of the theme of democracy. I will seek to clear the field of the conceptual debris that has accumulated around the idea and practice of democracy, so that our discussion can then take up—in a more constructive and also more programmatic manner—the identification of further directions of inquiry, especially in what concerns that crucial passage represented by the construction of the subject.

I believe that the moment has really come to undertake a critique of democracy. These moments always come. They come when the objective conditions of the matter at hand meet with the subjective dispositions of the one who confronts and analyses it. A trajectory of thought has developed on this terrain, which I believe is today capable of grasping the crisis of an entire practical and conceptual apparatus. That is because when we say democracy we say this: *institution plus theory; constitution and doctrine*. A very

powerful bond was established among these terms, what we could even call a knot. This knot does not just bind together socio-political structure and strong traditions of thought (those of democracy are always robust intellectual traditions, even if the current drift in the practice of democracy suggests the presence of a weak terrain); it is internal to the practical structures and the traditions of thought themselves. That is because within democracy, within its history, we find knotted together a practice of domination and a project of liberation—they always present themselves together, they are co-present. In some periods (periods of crisis, states of exception) these two dimensions are in conflict. In others (such as in the contemporary situation, which is a state of normality, or at least that is the way I read it) they are integrated. And these two dimensions—practice of domination and project of liberation—are not two faces; they are the single face, a *Janus bifrons*, of democracy. Depending on the way that the balance of forces between the top and the bottom of society is established, articulated, and constituted, sometimes one is more visible than the other. I think that at this juncture the balance of forces is so weighed to one side—the side hostile to us—that we can only see a single face. This is the reason why democracy is no longer the best of the worst; it is the only thing there is. That is, there is nothing else outside it.

Now, if this is the knot, while in the past we attempted (or at least I attempted) to untie it, I think the moment has come to cut it. This requires a new configuration of the critique of democracy, which thereby assumes a very radical character. The determinate critique of democracy that I am advancing here has a father, *workerism*, and a mother, *the autonomy of the political*. And it is a female offspring because the thinking and practice of *difference* have anticipated this critique with the questioning of the universalism of the *demos*—which is the other face of the neutral character of the individual—and with that ‘don’t think you’ve got any rights’ which is no longer addressed to the single individual but to the people. There is in democracy an identitarian vocation hostile to the articulation of any difference whatever as well as to any order of difference. Both the *demos* and the *kratos* are unique and univocal, rather than dual, entities; they are not and cannot be split. Democracy, as is widely known, presupposes an identity between sovereign and people: sovereign people, popular sovereignty, so goes the doctrine. During a long phase of modernity, in the nineteenth and especially the twentieth century, this identity of sovereign and people has been answered by a kind of spirit of division stemming from a society split into classes. Obviously, this was a raw indication of the ideological falsity at the heart of such an identity. Or rather, it put the very conceptual structure underlying the identity into crisis. So it was that during this phase the very separation of powers—within an apparatus that attempted the great passage from liberalism to democracy, and then the conjugation of liberalism and democracy—revealed itself precisely as a mask, the mask of the unity of power in the hands of one class. I believe that it is from here that we must start again in order to follow, genealogically, the trajectory of the accomplishment of democracy, in the passage from thought to history. My perception is that from its origin, this practical concept, this theoretical-practical knot that is democracy, unravels towards the conclusion that we are living through in this phase;

so much so that the democracy of the moderns, considered both in its principles and its realizations, can now be judged by its results.

I speak of real democracy in the same sense that it has been possible to speak of real socialism. Real socialism did not indicate a particular realisation of socialism that left open the possibility of another socialism, the ideal one. For socialism incarnated itself in that realization to such an extent that at this point, in my view, 'socialism' is what took place there and then, and nothing else. There is no possible recuperation of the symbolic order that was evoked by this word; it is not possible to detach it from the reality that embodied it. The same I think can be said of contemporary democratic systems, which should not be read as a 'false' democracy in the face of which there is or should be a 'true' democracy, but as the coming-true of the ideal, or conceptual, form of democracy. In this case too, it is impossible to save this concept from its effective realization. And as I remarked above, contrary to what is commonly thought today, it is not in its past or in its theories but rather in this realisation that democracy has become a weak idea, to the point that 'democracy' is a noun in constant need of qualifying adjectives. When a noun needs adjectives in order to define itself, it is a sign of a lack of conceptual autonomy. Today in fact we say liberal democracy, socialist democracy, progressive democracy; some have even spoken of totalitarian democracy, and so on: all elements that point to a weakening of the concept.

At this point I must warn you that in this critique of democracy I am not retracing the gestures of what has been defined as the critique of totalitarian democracy. If anything, I am using the liberal critique of democracy—Locke versus Rousseau and so on—together with the important twentieth-century elaborations that follow in this tradition: Hayek's work is a salient example. The long, or rather not long but intense age of totalitarian or authoritarian solutions really made possible the definitive victory of democracy. Germany and Russia, in my view, bear the historical guilt of letting America win precisely through those solutions that served to reinvigorate the solution provided by American democracy.

Democracy has problems with freedom. If it is true that real democracy is configured as liberal-democracy and that in the end this has been the winning solution, it is precisely this conjunction, binding together freedom (or liberty) and democracy, that must be critically attacked. It is a matter of detaching and juxtaposing the two terms—freedom *versus* democracy—because democracy is identity to the same extent that freedom is difference. The problem of democracy must then be confronted on two sides: a deconstructive critique of democracy must be accompanied by a constructive theory, what I would call a foundational or re-foundational theory of freedom, of the concept and practice of freedom. As we elaborate the figure of the subject, we should keep in mind that the subject needs to retrace the form of freedom. Because it is precisely difference that is the foundational element of freedom and the dislocating element of democracy.

As you will be aware, I move within a framework that I ironically refer to as *neo-classical*, in the sense that I place myself in the twentieth century. I plant my feet in that

century and from there I look backwards and forwards. I have no intention of moving from there. So it is that the authors that I keep coming back to with regard to this theme are Kelsen and Schmitt, who strangely, in the same period (Kelsen in 1929 with *Democracy* and Schmitt in 1928 with *Constitutional Theory*), despite being divided in everything else, are fundamentally united in the critique of democracy, or rather in the unveiling of the democratic enigma. Kelsen says:

The discord between the will of the individual—the starting point of the demand of freedom—and the order of the state, which presents itself to the individual as an external will, is inevitable. The protest against the domination of someone who resembles us, leads in political consciousness to a displacement of the subject of domination which is also inevitable in the democratic regime, that is, it leads to the formation of the anonymous person of the state. The *imperium* derives from this anonymous person; not from the individual as such, but from the anonymous person of the state. The wills of the single personalities give free rein to a mysterious collective will and a collective person which could even be characterized as mystical.

Schmitt makes analogous considerations, when he says:

Democracy is a state-form that corresponds to the principle of identity; it is the identity of the dominated and the dominating, of the governing and the governed, of those who command and those who obey. And the word ‘identity’ is useful in the definition of democracy because it points to the complete identity of the homogeneous people, this people that exists within itself qua political unit without any further need for representation, precisely because it is self-representing.

It is with regard to this self-representation that democracy becomes an ideal concept, because it indicates, as Schmitt says, ‘everything that is ideal, everything that is beautiful, everything that inspires sympathy. Identified with liberalism, with socialism, with justice, humanity, peace, the reconciliation among peoples and within the people.’ ‘Democracy’—as Schmitt remarked in another fine sentence—‘is one of those dangerous complexes of ideas in which we can no longer make out concepts’. This then is the democratic enigma.

The focus is therefore democracy not as a form of *government* but as a form of *state*: that thing that took the name of *democratic state*, which evolved on the basis of the nineteenth-century coupling of the workers’ revolution and the great crisis, a decisive coupling for the subsequent history of capital and for the manner in which capital exists today at the global level. Through the social or welfare state we have witnessed a gradual process of extinction of the state, which obviously is not complete but which is quite advanced in this phase, and which has been accelerated by all the processes of globalisation. Moreover, the analysis of the network of global domination confirms this passage: the extinction of the state in democratic society; the recuperation of the function of the state within the social. It is here that we encounter an essential shift, because politics, in my view, comes to be accomplished not institutionally but sociologically. And it is democratic society that has resolved the contradiction in the terms harboured by the concept

and practice of the democratic state. Thus we have seen the passage of democracy from a form of government, in the democracy of the ancients, to a form of the state, in the democracy of the moderns, to a form of society, in the twentieth century.

I feel I can advocate the thesis that capitalism, as it develops, becomes ever more and ever more successfully *bourgeois society*. It is not correct to say that we have overcome the bourgeois character of society; we could even say that it has finally been achieved. Bourgeois society seems a dated, passé term, but in my view it is once again extremely timely. Precisely in the sense that society started as *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, that is, simultaneously as civil society and bourgeois society. The entire recent history of the twentieth century—after the 1970s of the movements and of feminism, and all the vicissitudes of the response to that moment—can be read as a recuperation of capitalist hegemony through the return of the figure of the bourgeois. So much so that the distinction-juxtaposition of *bourgeois* and *citoyen* is rescinded, as the latter comes to be recuperated by the former. We witness the epochal encounter between *homo oeconomicus* and *homo democraticus*. The subject of the spirits of capitalism is precisely the *animal democraticum*. The figure which has become dominant is the *mass bourgeois*, which is the real subject internal to the social relation. There will be no genuine and effective critique of democracy without a profound anthropological investigation, a social anthropology but also an individual anthropology, taking ‘individual’ here too in the sense of the thought-practice of difference.

Here we must give great importance to both the imaginary and the symbolic. Much hangs on this, as can be seen in the return of the myth—coming to us from the United States—of *the society of owners*. It comes precisely from the America of Bush and the neo-cons, from this interesting episode of conservative revolution that is taking place there and that we should keep under watch. After all, democracy is always ‘democracy in America’; and the United States has always exported democracy with war. We are stunned that they are doing so now, but they have always done so. They even brought it to Europe through the great wars. The allied armies did not liberate us: they democratized us. In fact, it is after the age of the European and world civil wars that democracy truly triumphed. And democracy was finally decisive for the victory of the West in the last war, the Cold War.

Contrary to what one often hears, especially from progressive quarters, I deny that in the current phase we are experiencing the centrality of war. It seems to me that this present emphasis on peace-war is entirely disproportionate. All the wars are taking place at the borders of empire—on its critical fault-lines, we could say—but the empire is internally living through its new peace, though I do not know if it too will last one hundred years. It is in this condition of internal peace and external war that democracy does not merely prevail, but experiences a resounding triumph. In order to understand its power we must define its mass base. Democracy today is not the power of the majority. It is, as we were trying to suggest through the categories of identity and of the homogeneous people, the power of all. It is the *kratos* of the *demos*, in the sense that it is the power of all on each and every one. That is because democracy is precisely the process of the homogenization, of the massification of thoughts, feelings, tastes, behaviours expressed

in that political power which is common sense. Common sense, when it becomes the property of a mass and meets with good sense, constructing this symbolic democratic order, verifies to some extent what Marx said when he argued that theory becomes a material force when it takes hold of the masses: common sense also becomes a material force when it takes on a mass dimension. It is important to note that this mass establishes and unifies itself not around goods as much as around values, and it is this form of mass that we must be able to define, so as to then understand how it can be undone. At least the body of the king was double, as the great interpreters taught us, because there was still a sacralization of power. Now instead, with the secularization of power, the body of the people is single, univocal. The processes of secularization have had a huge influence on these types of issues. A critique of secularization still stands before us as something we have yet to confront and carry out.

Basically, I see a kind of *mass biopolitics*, in which singularity is permitted for the private but denied to the public. The ‘common’ which is spoken of today is really that *in-common* which is already wholly taken over by this kind of self-dictatorship, this kind of tyranny over oneself which is the contemporary form of that brilliant modern idea: voluntary servitude. After the twilight of the glorious days of class struggle, we have not seen the victory either of the great bourgeois—the one *à la* Rathenau who we liked so much when we were young—nor the petty bourgeois who we always hated. The average bourgeois has won: this is the figure of democracy. Democracy is this: not the tyranny of the majority, but the tyranny of the average man. And this average man constitutes a mass within the Nietzschean category of the *last man*.

Of course, I am radicalizing these shifts, in part because that is how I am used to thinking—i.e. radicalizing problems—and also because I am trying to understand the astounding *silence of revolution* in these decades, in this phase. This is what I am trying to shed light upon, this darkness. Years ago, you could read the following Marxian lines under the masthead of *Classe Operaia*: ‘the revolution is still going through purgatory...’¹ Well, what effectively happened is that there was no passage to paradise, but rather, I would say, a descent into hell.

Democracy is antirevolutionary because it is antipolitical. There is a process of politicization and neutralization that pervades it, impels it, stabilizes it. And in my view this antipolitics of democracy is the point that I take as the offspring of that entire phase which I referred to as the autonomy of the political. What is more, I read this datum empirically in the conquest and management of consensus with which, when all is said and done, contemporary political systems are in practice identified. I don’t call them political systems any longer, but *apolitical systems*. Western society is no longer divided into

1. *Classe Operaia*, a ‘political monthly of workers in struggle’, was published, under Tronti’s editorship, between January 1964 and March 1967, when it broke up due to political differences in the editorial board. Its first editorial, ‘Lenin in England’ (later collected in Tronti’s *Operai e capitale*), formulated the fundamental workerist thesis, according to which the working class and its struggles came first, and capital and its development should only be considered as a consequence of and reaction to these struggles. Among the contributors to *Classe Operaia* were Antonio Negri, Romano Alquati, Sergio Bologna and Ferruccio Gambino. [Translator’s note.]

classes, in that antinomy of the past, but into two great aggregates of consensus, of equal quantitative consistency: in all Western countries this consensus, from the United States to Italy, when the votes are tallied up, ends up being 49 to 51, or 48 to 52. Consensus, thus, is divided in two. Why? Because on the one side we have reactionary bourgeois drives, and on the other progressive bourgeois drives. And I say drives, that is, emotive reflexes, symbolic imaginaries, all moved and governed by great mass communication. Reactionary and progressive drives which nonetheless share this average bourgeois character. On the one hand compassionate conservatism, on the other political correctness. These are the two great blocs. This is the governmental alternative offered by apolitical democratic systems.

In this condition there is no possibility either to be or to make a majority. We must remain in the condition of a strong and intelligent minority. For some time, without great success, I have argued for the necessity of revisiting the great theoretical moment of the *elitists*.² I get no further because the resistances—which here too are both emotional and intellectual in character—are strong. But the elitists were the only ones to have formulated a critique of democracy before the totalitarianisms. And if that critique of democracy had been kept in mind, perhaps a correction of the democratic systems would not have allowed the age of totalitarianisms. The elitists' critique of democracy was not made from the point of view of absolutism. On this point the lineage instead comes from workerism. Let me clarify this otherwise opaque affirmation. Mulling it over, I have come to the conviction that the working class was the last great historical form of social aristocracy. It was a minority in the midst of the people; its struggles changed capitalism but did not change the world, and the reason for this is precisely what still needs to be understood. But what can already be grasped is how the workers' party became the party of the whole people, and how workers' power, where it existed, became the popular management of socialism, thereby losing its destructive antagonistic character. And this was one, if not the only, element that made possible the workers' defeat.

Let me conclude. I do not know if the multitude can be understood as a mass aristocracy—if that were the case, then these arguments would in some sense converge and this deconstructive operation could allow us to leap to a higher level. But I also know that if the conditions that I have described remain, the subject is entangled in this web. If the multitude remains caught up in the web of really-existing democracy I do not think it will be able to definitively escape the very web of neo-imperial power. A contemporary feature of Empire is in fact that it is a *democratic Empire*. If these conditions are not put into crisis, the subject itself cannot manage any effective political manoeuvre in this situation, through an alternative network, for the sake of another possible historical break.

Translated by Alberto Toscano

2. Tronti is alluding to the sociological works of Vilfredo Pareto (*The Rise and Fall of Elites*), Gaetano Mosca (*The Ruling Class*) and Robert Michels (*Political Parties*), among others. [Translator's note.]

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