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UNSOVEREIGN DEMOCRACY: WHY IMAGINATION MATTERS IN MODERN POLITICS (AND MAKES RELIGION STILL RELEVANT)

DEMOCRACIA NO SOBERANA: ¿POR QUÉ LA IMAGINACIÓN ES IMPORTANTE EN LA POLÍTICA MODERNA (Y HACE QUE LA RELIGIÓN SIGA SIENDO RELEVANTE)?

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ABSTRACT

The essay articulates the insight that the current crisis of liberal democracies is also a problem of cramped political imagination, which can benefit from the resources of religious imagination, particularly of Christian theological imaginary. If there is a truth emerging from the long history of democratic régimes is that a healthy democracy cannot survive for long without citizen empowerment. Put otherwise, precisely because democracy is a demanding form of self-government, democratic citizens must periodically be fortified in their belief that they have an influence on the direction of their lives. Famously, mass mobilization and protest are among the most effective ways in which this sense of citizen-empowerment is engrained in people's hearts and minds. This has led some thinkers to stress the role of contestatory politics in that "mise en forme de la société" (C. Lefort), which is ultimately what democracy is all about. Protest, however, needs political institutional channels and outlets in order not to lose its thrust. And it needs as well a coherent social imaginary capable of nourishing the subtle practices of self-government. What happens, then, when its advocates find their main source of motivation

and commitment in the rejection of politics or in the problematic allure of a sovereign self? What consequences has this distinctive double bind? And what does it tell us about the future of democracy? Precisely because figuring out an effective form of democratic self-government in modern hyperdiverse societies is hard and embarking in its actualization is a risky, almost utopian enterprise, it makes sense to ask whether there may be an overlap between democratic political imagination and religious imagination in this field. More specifically, the underlying question is whether Christian theological imaginary can bolster people's trust in human ethical growth and deep transformative potential beyond the model of contestatory democracy as an empowering egalitarian form of self-rule.

Keywords: Democracy; Self-Rule; Sovereignty; Empowerment; Religion.

RESUMEN

El ensayo articula la idea de que la crisis actual de las democracias liberales es también un problema de escasa imaginación política, que puede beneficiarse de los recursos de la imaginación religiosa, en particular del imaginario teológico cristiano. Si hay una verdad que emerge de la larga historia de los regímenes democráticos es que una democracia sana no puede sobrevivir mucho tiempo sin el empoderamiento de los ciudadanos. Dicho de otro modo, precisamente porque la democracia es una forma exigente de autogobierno, los ciudadanos democráticos deben ser fortalecidos periódicamente en su creencia de que tienen una influencia en la dirección de sus vidas. Famosamente, la movilización de masas y las protestas son algunas de las formas más eficaces de arraigar en el corazón y la mente de la gente este sentimiento de capacitación ciudadana. Esto ha llevado a algunos pensadores a subrayar el papel de la política contestataria en esa «mise en forme de la société» (C. Lefort), que es en definitiva de lo que trata la democracia. La protesta, sin embargo, necesita canales y salidas político-institucionales para no perder su empuje. Y necesita también un imaginario social coherente capaz de alimentar las prácticas sutiles del autogobierno. ¿Qué ocurre, entonces, cuando sus defensores encuentran su principal fuente de motivación y compromiso en el rechazo de la política o en el problemático encanto de un yo soberano? ¿Qué consecuencias tiene este doble vínculo tan característico? ¿Y qué nos dice sobre el futuro de la democracia? Precisamente porque descubrir una forma eficaz de autogobierno democrático en las sociedades modernas hiperdiversas es difícil y embarcarse en su actualización es una empresa arriesgada, casi utópica, tiene sentido preguntarse si puede haber un solapamiento entre la imaginación política democrática y la imaginación religiosa en este campo. Más concretamente, la cuestión subyacente es si el imaginario teológico cristiano puede reforzar la confianza de las personas en el crecimiento ético humano y en su profundo potencial transformador más allá del modelo de democracia contestataria como forma igualitaria y empoderadora de autogobierno.

Palabras clave: Democracia; Autogobierno; Soberanía; Empoderamiento; Religión.

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Hence, no serious challenge to the primacy of popular sovereignty is in view in modern politics. What lingers on is rather a widespread incumbent sense of its possible degeneration. Put otherwise, what we fear is the mutation of democracy into a pseudo-democracy or, as one often hears it said today, a "post-democracy" (Crouch 2004). As a result, disillusionment with democracy at the very moment of the triumph of democratic common sense is frequently viewed as the democratic *spirit* being hollowed out by unmet expectations, leaving in their wake a number of negative dispositions or emotions such as apathy, dissatisfaction, resentment, suspicion, even contempt (Krastev 2014).

III. SELF-RULE

Now, formulated in these terms, such a diagnosis may at a first glance look like a redundant psychological explanation that does not add anything of import to our understanding of the issue at hand. In contrast, political theory explanations of the current malaise of democracy generally aim at adding up complexity to the matter under scrutiny in order to refine and often play down our understanding of what exactly is at stake in such crisis. From this conceptual cleaning up ensues that democracy is a complex subject matter that requires qualification in order to be made sense of. For most students of democracy, it is pointless to speak of a democratic régime as such without distinguishing, for example, between ancient and modern democracy, or without adding qualifiers such as "liberal," "representative," "agonistic," "polyarchal," "plebiscitarian," "deliberative," etc., to the noun. Why "pointless"? For the simple reason that, for them, there is no such thing as democracy per se. Or, better put, no political régime can be fully captured by the unadorned claim that it is government *of* the people, *by* the people, *for* the people.

This does not mean, however, that anyone who has a genuine concern for the future of democracy can be exempted from answering the essentialist question about what renders a nominal democracy a true democracy in ultimate analysis. After all, on what ground can the triumph or the crisis of democratic ideals be diagnosed? My preliminary answer to this question would be deliberately blunt. In a nutshell, the concept of democracy, I claim, becomes unintelligible once the reference to self-rule is omitted (Canovan 1999; Rosanvallon 2011). Seen against a justificatory background where "legitimacy" matter more than tricky notions such as "virtue" (excellence) or "vice" (degeneration), democracy appears as the political régime enabling a population to self-determine its own destiny by acting together as the most inclusive collective agent imaginable. Democracy is government by the *people*: that is to

say, the form of government in which the binding political and administrative orders come from the people and, in ultimate analysis, must serve the people (Taylor, Calhoun, and Gaonkar 2022, chapter 1)[1].

The strength of this simple idea lies in its almost tautological character: if some kind of constraint of personal freedom is inescapable in people's living together in society, if someone has to be in charge, what could be better than being an active player and not merely a passive addressee of the ruling game? If you care about your own freedom, there does not seem to be a better alternative in sight. If I have to be ruled, let me at least be ruled by myself. This seems a truism worthy of Monsieur La Palisse.

In spite of, or better due to its simplicity, the idea, however, also discloses the weakness and instability of the democratic ideal. For how can this self-evident but undoubtedly nebulous insight be translated into practice? After all, even in the case of a single living organism is unclear what ruling oneself exactly means. I mean, it suffices that there be a plurality of coordinated but partially independent centers of action so that the issue of "who is to control who" immediately takes up an unexpected significance. Just think of Plato's tripartite view of the soul (as made up of rational, spirited and appetitive parts). Do we really *know* where the *true* self lies? And who is to decide whether sovereignty's unity rather than separation of powers should prevail? Is it better a maximum or a minimum of self-leadership? (On this, more later.)

Robust theoretical dissent on what democracy ultimately is about becomes then understandable. This is where imagination, the exploratory faculty *par excellence*, comes into play. If the concept of democracy is underdetermined, we need to enrich it by dipping it into experience. And we do so by supplementing it, as it were, with a mental map of the "praxeological" environment in which the idea's immediacy urges us to enter. A corollary of this statement is that there can be no genuine democracy without well-engineered institutions and a functioning imaginary, which put the democratic agent in a position to know their way about in puzzling circumstances. The transformation

1 Understood in this minimal sense, self-rule can be taken to be a universal human good, at least in the sophisticated sense in which Charles Taylor discusses the compatibility between a formal anthropology (a weakly transcendental best account of human nature) and the structural diversity of goods in human life (see Taylor 1998; 1999, and Rosa 1996, 57-65). By claiming this, I do not mean to deny that, in many civilizations, deep-seated impatience with and feelings of injustice toward the domination of other human beings has coexisted with an acute sense of the impossibility for ordinary people to govern themselves and an unbending skepticism about the practicability of revolution and that average humans can do without a "ruler." What La Boétie (2008) famously called "voluntary servitude" is not an unexplained accident of history as some Westerners tend to think.

of the straightforward logic of democratic legitimacy into a mediated practice of self-government and common agency is essentially contingent on both elements. In particular, one has to be able to imagine in a rough but credible manner how the practices, to which citizens are trained into in a democracy, may be the instantiation of the essence of self-rule. Or, put otherwise, how these actions connect, at least tangentially, with this majestic but fragile good. In particular, democratic citizens have to make sense of the constitutive connection between ideals and reality even (and especially) when the personal benefits of the democratic institutions and practices are difficult to make out from their angle.

Using a slightly different vocabulary, the question of democratic self-government may be framed in terms of self-empowerment. For, if you think about it, democracy revolves around a distinctive, yet enigmatic feature of human life, highlighted by Arendt (1958) in chapter 5 of *The Human Condition*. In this key section of the book, she tries to make theoretical sense of the collective empowerment that comes from entering a public realm, whereby a geometric expansion of the individual's agency power is made possible. Put more simply, Arendt thinks that enjoying a true public realm exponentially empowers individual capacities (with all the risks involved therein, *ça va sans dire*), even though, indeed precisely because, no one is able to produce or control the conditions of this irreducibly common power in solitude. This is, in essence, what makes democratic self-government not only an attractive ideal, but a desirable goal for purely pragmatic reasons – for a very prosaic "will to power," so to speak. Common agency and common focalization is, at the end of the day, what renders a democracy effective.

Thus, for those who treasure self-rule, the two main riddles to solve are, in short, (a) the making and preservation of a functioning democratic imaginary and (b) the identification of the (relatively) best institutional arrangements. In what follows, I will focus only on the former.

IV. DEMOCRATIC IMAGINATION

How does a democratic imaginary operate in real political life? To begin with, political imagination is never a matter of subjective unbridled fantasy (on imagination in politics, see Yaron 2012; Bottici and Challand 2011). As a rule, people do not fantasize about being members of a democracy. Rather, they *see* themselves *as* part of a self-governing pack, because what they do together on some relevant occasions makes globally sense to them in terms of a certain

pattern of common agency that they intuitively recognize and stick to. A special kind of imaginary is thereby a prerequisite for democratic practices and institutions. Accordingly, if independence is treasured as a good, popular self-rule appears to be an irreducibly *common* good premised on the preservation of a fragile immaterial reality that no one completely controls and nobody can produce at will, being as it is the object of a spontaneous common act of focusing. The first thing to underline, thus, is that a democratic imaginary does not settle into social life and does not reproduce itself independently of the practices where it is embedded as their point or pattern. In this sense, it is a fragile mercurial reality, which is especially sensitive to outer influences.

A democratic imaginary, then, is no inconsequential daydreaming. But it is no self-contained phenomenon either. In order to be effective and flourishing, it requires both *enabling* and *fostering* conditions. Only on their basis, the recourse to imagination turns out to be a way of beating the bounds of experience and not a utopian or even escapist flight from reality. Enabling conditions are fundamentally external (positive or negative) prerequisites; fostering conditions are what makes a difference in terms of a particular democracy's strengths and weaknesses. Among the former, conditions of relative peace and economic security are to be included as well as some kind of statehood and, consequently, a certain amount of intergenerational stability. Among the fostering conditions, to begin with, a not self-interpreting life-attitude as love for the world is worth mentioning – that is, the sense that worldly choices and actions matter, can make a difference in people's lives. Another relevant democratic asset is *trust*, which is contingent (a) on the existence of ongoing processes of mutual recognition, (b) on a good level of tolerance of differing views and dissent (what is generally called civility and self-restraint), and (c) on the perception of rank inequalities as not excessive and unjustifiable. To these, we can add a basic *sense of civic solidarity*, which usually is expressed through positive emotions like pride in one's own community or country, but the list could be much longer.

Both the enabling and the fostering conditions of the democratic imaginary are vulnerable to luck and subject to the influence of external contingent changes (invasions, famines, wars, political, cultural, religious or technological revolutions, etc.). This is especially relevant in modern times, i.e. in the age par excellence of sudden and recurring breakdowns and breakthroughs, of power politics and identity conflicts fueled by a growing cultural, political and religious pluralism.

Institutional means (which go hand in hand with the development of sophisticated theories that try to purify or disambiguate the concept of democracy – just think about the realist theories of modern "giants" such as Weber, Pareto or Schumpeter), as well as pragmatic solutions are available in order to cope with the periodic crises to which democratic imaginaries are exposed. From time to time, that is, new ways of practicing democracy emerge from below, which eventually reshape the democratic imagination, creating the conditions for new forms of collective empowerment. These openings generally arise and flourish outside of the state, often in conflict with it. The case of the rise of the modern public sphere is exemplary in this regard and has been much studied (Habermas 1992; Taylor 2004, chapter 6). But one can also think of the impact that trade unions campaigning for worker rights or women's struggle for universal suffrage have had on our understanding of what a genuinely inclusive *demos* actually is (Honneth 2024; on the resiliency of democracies, see Runciman 2013).

V. THE NEO-LIBERAL CHALLENGE TO THE DEMOCRATIC IMAGINARY

To wrap up what has been said so far, mutual self-empowerment, i.e., the internal good of democratic practices, is both a fragile and resilient good. It is fragile because it depends on external conditions over which no individual has absolute control. And it is resilient because it responds to a longstanding sense of what fair relations among people should look like. Political imagination is the faculty tasked with responding to the structural tension between what is factual and what is counterfactual (or ideal) in human society. Still, the successes and failures of political imagination are inherently contingent and context-dependent. It makes sense, therefore, to investigate the current state of democracy, which, according to a widespread opinion, reflects a deep crisis of trust in the democratic promise, meaning a loss of faith in the possibility of an authentic exercise of self-government (Costa 2025).

Indeed, many have the impression that something historically unprecedented is happening to the very idea and practice of democratic self-rule these days. As is always the case in critical and transitional periods, what is experienced is both interesting and troubling. Democratic ideals are migrating from their birthplaces to other geographical and cultural spaces and are accordingly interpreted and adapted to different enabling and fostering conditions. But the populist protest movements that have been spreading like wildfire in the last decades go beyond this momentous historical process of globalization of democratic institutions and imageries and have an impact also

on Western democracies. And this is happening at a time when these are often stressed by rapid and radical changes forced upon them by the "new spirit of capitalism," with the well-known changes in work life, communication forms, social life, etc., which in many respects seem far apart from the democratic *ethos* and even inhospitable to it (Brown 2019).

In the second half of my essay, I would like to sketch a plausible portrait of what I see as a significant change of political attitudes and values that has recently occurred in the West. The change in question is relevant because it represents, in my view, a dramatic challenge to the democratic political imagination in that it unduly narrows the understanding of what the "government" of ambitious democratic self-government consists of by reinterpreting it in light of the modern concept of sovereignty. I anticipate here in the form of a list of concatenated claims what I will maintain more discursively (and, I hope, more engagingly) in the rest of the paper.

(1) Something significant is happening to the political imagination of a large segment of citizens in contemporary Western democracies.

(2) This change can be pictured as demonstrating *in re* some structural defects of liberalism, seen as a philosophy of *civility*.

(3) I understand the unexpected revival of the idea and practice of national sovereignty as the emergence of a *political* response to the aforementioned crisis, more precisely as an attempt to repoliticize the sufferings inherent in modern social life.

(4) I will then focus on democratic "sovereignism," which I read as a genuine attempt to reaffirm the idea that self-rule is a constitutive asset of any democratic regime worthy of the name.

(5) In the penultimate step of my argument, I will criticize the sovereignist understanding of democratic self-government as a too narrow and one-sided view: a case, as it were, of cramped political imagination.

(6) Finally, I will say something about the surplus of imagination, which is required today in order not to lose faith in the accessibility of a shared space of identity under conditions of deep diversity and mass individualism. Religious imagination, particularly the Christian theological imagination, I surmise, could prove to be instrumental for envisioning an inclusive participatory democracy as a non-sovereignist democratic response to the disturbing political crisis of the neo-liberal dispensation that we have been witnessing for some years now.

VI. THE HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF LIBERALISM

From its origins, liberalism has been not only a theory of government based on the protection of individual freedoms, but primarily a philosophy of *civility*[2]. In speaking of a "philosophy of civility," I am thinking of the invention and dissemination of an ideal of empowered subjectivity, which is matched, on the side of theory, by the systematic primacy of the individual over the community, a procedural view of reason, and a non-paternalistic (and ultimately non-dialectical) conception of the relationship between desires and knowledge. From a liberal standpoint, a thin and voluntarist understanding of personal identity is the condition for the establishment of the idea of self-affirmation as the legitimating principle of the social order and, tacitly, also as the placeholder of the only imaginable destination of humankind: freedom from external interference in a life plan chosen by the individual in full autonomy.

In early liberalism, with due exceptions (Hobbes and Mandeville, principally), the subjective empowerment retains a patina of nobility because the authentic freedom of the individual is realized not as a whim but as a reasonable project. That is, it presents itself under the seductive shape of spontaneous self-discipline, as if there were a predetermined harmony between human ends and instrumental rationality, between the desiring subject and the deliberating individual, between impulses and the most suitable means for their satisfaction. Indeed, the new disciplines of the body (for example, the manners studied by Norbert Elias 1994; see also Taylor 2007, chapter 4) constitute a form of subjectivation whose ideal horizon is the instinctive recognition of your most authentic self-interest and a form of cooperation based less on altruism than on a socially non-destructive form of selfishness.

It is precisely this pre-established social harmony that has been gradually eroded as the cooperating society of producers and workers has been gradually transformed into a community of consumers and self-entrepreneurs at the mercy of impersonal forces, which are de-responsabilized both on the side of the subject (the victim of a maze of increasingly compulsive desires) and on the side of the world (Max Weber's "iron cage"). The overall result has been an increasing disempowered subjectivity in a textbook case of heterogony of ends.

2 In my broad-brush painting of the trajectory of modern liberalism, I implicitly distance myself from all those thinkers who have made the case for a self-critical liberalism in the wake of John Rawls. See, for example, Ferrara 2014; Larmore 2020; Krastev and Holmes 2019; Laborde 2017. On the opposing front, see Brown 2015.

It is important to note *en passant* how this decline in the sense of mastery over one's destiny has proceeded in parallel with two seemingly independent processes: (1) the progressive depoliticization of affluent societies and (2) the declining appeal of ideal movers, of which the crisis of political utopias such as communism is only the most striking symptom (Mazzoni 2015). Viewed from the individuals' standpoint, these complex and enigmatic historical processes have both exogenous and endogenous causes. Among the external causes, a prominent role is played by the economic transformations that led to the globalization of capitalism and its model of dynamic stabilization based on a seemingly unstoppable form of creative destruction (Rosa 2015). Prominent among the internal causes are, on the one hand, the spread of an instrumentalist view of politics and an aggregative understanding of common goods (on this, see Taylor 1995). On the other hand, there is the loss of faith in the idea that personal success also depends on the ability to rise above oneself through access to an immaterial realm of ideal contents (objective truths, intersubjective norms, overarching goods, strong values such as higher beauty, etc.; on this see Sloterdijk 2013; Costa 2021). With the thinning out of these counterweights, modern subjectivity melts into the air, as it were, leaving in its wake a ghostly self-simulacrum, that is to say a distinctive stoic hedonism that urges its followers to bet on their own self-realization even in a universe saturated with contingency and characterized by an exponential and haphazard multiplication of choice options.

VII. DEMOCRACY AND SOVEREIGNTY

It is from this crisis of liberalism as higher civility that sovereignist political realism derives most of its persuasive force. Conversely, the crisis urges advocates of liberalism to stress the civilizing mission of the liberal form of life, now anxiously pictured as the last bulwark against barbarism. This polarization, in turn, accentuates the impression of being faced with a conflict between the elite (made up of those who have no difficulty in overcoming the hurdle of socialization to the *civilité*) and the "people", the *demos* (identified with those who, conversely, struggle to adapt successfully to the new demanding model of personality and sociability). A major political phenomenon, which is generally described nowadays as the willingness of a growing number of citizens in Western democracies to give up a significant portion of their liberties that are perceived as disabling – I mean, "negative" in an evaluative sense – in exchange for a condition that is imagined, instead, as more secure or, if you will, more "sovereign", arises precisely from this tension (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti

2021; on a more positive note, see Norris 2002; Taylor, Nanz and Beaubien Taylor 2020).

Hence, the polarizing breakthrough concerns the widespread sense of a loss of control over one's destiny, which today's "sovereignists" can easily exploit by radically re-politicizing the fundamental questions of life. From their point of view, the concept of sovereignty functions rhetorically as a surrogate for the sense of empowerment coming from the tacit belief of being able to master one's own destiny. Sovereignists, in short, cunningly respond to a perceived loss of personal independence, by advocating a recovery of political sovereignty, which they situate, significantly, at the intermediate level of the nation-state: the most typical of modern political inventions.

But this should ring a bell precisely in the minds of those who are sensitive to the urge to re-politicize the malaise of modernity. The choice of the nation-state as a community of destiny, in fact, is not only theoretically onerous, but it is also a symptom of a blind spot in the sovereignist discourse, which is relevant especially for the political philosophers who are exercised by the flaws of neo-liberal common sense (on this, see Taylor 2025).

Let me elaborate on this further. The first problem concerns, so to speak, the diagnosis of the time. If sovereignists argue that the solution to the current crisis of liberal democracy lies in a substantial recovery of sovereignty by nation-states, their preference for a community that is no less imagined than the cosmopolis to which liberals are ideally committed to is unwarranted (Anderson 2016). Indeed, it is precisely this deficit of justification that brings to light a fact, which is too often overlooked by critics of globalization. The fact, that is, that, "humanitarian" rhetoric aside, states have never ceased to be major players on the international political scene. Only weak states have lost the ability to exercise full control over their own destiny. But this is no novelty in human history. Perhaps, the main cause of loss of sovereignty was once upon a time military weakness, while today it is economic fragility. But the end result is the same. From this standpoint, given the geopolitical trend in favor of state entities of "imperial" size after the end of World War II, the failure of the European unity project is better explained by the EU's failure to become a fully-fledged sovereign state and enter into equal competition with the other major world powers than by blaming an imaginary globalist project. Seen in this light, the insistent complaint about the loss of sovereignty looks like a petition of principle. That is, it is little more than an unrealistic plea to bring to an end or amend the building process of a modern statehood – a historical task for which, notoriously, there are no recipes.

However, the flaws of the sovereignist argument are not restricted to the time diagnosis. A second major weakness is the underestimation of the political issue par excellence in the modern age: the problem, that is, of democratic self-rule. Identifying democracy and popular sovereignty is not enough to account for the primacy of the democratic form of government in fostering freedom and justice. In some respects, it could even be taken to be a conceptual mistake. For it can be reasonably argued that, ideally, the purpose of the democratic form of government is not so much to implement a mysterious entity such as Rousseau's *volonté générale*, but rather to hollow out from within the modern idea of sovereignty, with which the principle of self-rule has only a contingent link. As a matter of fact, the exercise of self-government presupposes the existence of a robust sovereign state only because there is no other way to safeguard territorial integrity in the face of other states that favor sovereignty over self-rule (i.e., over the republican ideal of non-domination). Incidentally, Kant's (1991) distinctive blend of republicanism, cosmopolitanism and federalism was based precisely on this insight.

Seen from this angle, neo-populist urges to empower the *demos* are not self-justifying, as if they were a functional requirement of demo-cratic self-government. They would be, if democracy coincided with the will of the people and its expression. But it does not. Rather, the biggest challenge of contemporary democracies lies in devising contexts of common agency and spaces of shared identity, which are sufficiently inclusive to make pluralism a political asset rather than a destabilizing factor in expanding the frontiers of self-government (Taylor 2011). From a democratic point of view, a functioning political community is exemplified less by a fully sovereign state, than by a people taking shape around a public sphere that operates as a theater of the plurality of citizens' opinions under conditions of security, stability and solidarity. As a result, distribution of power is a key condition for democratic empowerment of the citizenry (especially of the less well-off).

Once today's transient polarization, and resultant stalemate, between Sovereignists and Neoliberals is overcome, we will perhaps be able to calmly return to the big question facing us in the current crisis of democracy. Put bluntly, this is the colossal de-politicization of the Western form of life and the unforeseen effects that this long-run historical phenomenon has had on the personality structure of today's citizen-consumers and, consequently, on their ability to regain a reliable sense of control over their own life.

VIII. THE HIDDEN WEAKNESS OF THE SOVEREIGN SELF

Ideally, members of a democracy aspire to live in a condition of (even psychological) non-submissiveness or, to evoke Philip Pettit's (2002) influential stock phrase, "non-domination." Non-domination is a condition that every citizen should be able to enjoy in principle – that is, as a result of the institutional framework and the social practices that translate that framework into everyday experience – but, in fact, it cannot exist unless it is exercised concretely and personally. This is why the notion of sovereignty – that is, of an ultimate, not further divisible power – involves a distinctive feeling, which is experienced when one behaves as a fully autonomous subject. In other words, sovereignty implies at least one act of self-determination, i.e., the satisfaction of being able to say once in a lifetime: "the buck stops here."

Not accidentally, when one thinks about the political equivalents of such personal claims to control over one's existence, the mind immediately goes to heroic historical episodes. It may be the uprising of the Ionian colonies against Persian rule in the early 5th century B.C.E. Or, better still, it typically is the *Declaration of Independence* of the thirteen British colonies in North America on July 4, 1776, when their natural right was asserted to "assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of Nature's God entitle them." In both cases, the master image is that of the emergence from an unjustified condition of minority, which has been imposed on the dispossessed subject by an arbitrary asymmetry of power that has deprived him or her of the natural right to lead their lives in full autonomy.

But it is precisely at this practical-theoretical juncture that the aspiration for emancipatory freedom – to take back control, to be master *at least* in one's own house, not to be subjected to the arbitrary will of another human being where liberty is at stake – ceases to be self-sufficient and self-interpreting. While every appeal to sovereignty includes an element of self-assertion against an overarching power, its crash test lies in the arduous transition from a preliminary "freedom-from" to a more positive "freedom-to," that is, from the purchase of an opportunity to its exercise (Taylor 1979; Costa 2024).

To sum up, every declaration of independence involves a claim to sovereignty. In its non-despotic variant, however, the latter takes the form of a self-government that opens up the possibility to thoughtfully deliberate over one's own ends without submissiveness and with only the boundary constraint of resource scarcity. Yet, to come to the point, the only creatures for whom a successful claim to sovereignty constitutes a necessary and sufficient condition of public happiness are individuals who, on the one hand, are provided with the

power to oversee and endorse self-contained options, and, on the other hand, are buffered against any intrusion into their innermost sphere by sources of meaning beyond their control. A sovereign self should be able to choose its life plans without being troubled by uncertainty or a feeling of inadequacy.

But ordinary men and women are neither disembodied creatures nor self-referential decision makers. On the contrary, they are people whose flourishing depends, to begin with, on the existence and full exercise of their own finite bodies. We imagine them, in fact, as subjects who wish to be desired as unique and irreplaceable individuals and who want to desire equally unique and irreplaceable individuals. Beings who want to get the most from their body both as a site of refined pleasures and as a creative and generative force. And, finally, selves who accept not only the blossoming, but also the vulnerability, needs, even the decay of their liveliness.

Even when it legitimately proclaims its independence, such a self is sovereign only in a broad sense. One need not embrace the controversial Freudian metapsychology to make a case for this. Take one of the oldest philosophical myths devised to make intelligible the mixed nature of human mental and affective life. In the middle part of the *Phaedrus*, Plato (1925, 253d-256e) puts into Socrates' mouth a speech in which, betraying the expectations of his fictional and real audience, he argues for the divine, that is, ultimately morally elevating, nature of erotic desire. To this end, the reader is familiarized with a picture of the soul as a principle of action – a "compound power" (*symphyto dynamei*) – not spontaneously harmonious, but composite, dynamic and in some cases painfully conflicting (Plato 1925, 246a).

The image is renowned. Socrates compares the soul to a winged chariot, consisting of a charioteer and two horses, one mild and noble in nature, the other impetuous and rough. The charioteer obviously has the task of driving the vehicle, but he is far from being a dispassionate creature. On the contrary, while restrained by modesty and temperance, he responds eagerly to the motivating good (the "beloved") leading him. The horses, in turn, react to this impulse of the will with divergent motions making at once difficult and exciting the task of steering the chariot, which proceeds by jerks toward the goal that directs its movement, until, "at last, the lover follows the beloved in reverence and awe" (Plato 1925, 254e).

Metaphor aside, Plato is offering here a plastic representation of ordered self-rule (the "government of the soul"), which is pictured as an exercise of power that is anything but linear. On the one hand, the main source of movement is external and not internal. Whether accelerating or braking, the chariot is at the

mercy of the passive force of the mover. On the other hand, the vehicle's direction of motion is the product of divergent thrusts that must be harmonized, and harmonization is the result of negotiating or rather balancing forces and counterforces that are all useful and all dysfunctional in their own way. In turn, the receptivity of the charioteer (especially his keen eyesight), the timidity of the noble horse, and the impetuosity of the rough horse, both help and hinder the fulfillment of the goal (which is, on balance, the achievement of a right distance between the possessive passion and the maximally lovable good which, as such, is worthy of special regard). Contemplated in this light, self-mastery appears to be the upshot of an effort to reconcile opposites. This also amounts to a learning process leaning towards an external good that escapes the direct control of the undisciplined power that must learn to rule oneself.

The self depicted by Plato in this influential philosophical myth is thus no self-reliant self. It is indeed a self-governing self, but the kind of government of which it is both ruler and subject bears no resemblance whatsoever to what is normally grasped as sovereignty in the modern age, that is, an indivisible, exclusive, original power that admits of no exceptions or compromises.

IX. DECLARATIONS OF DEPENDENCE

What meaningful political lesson can be drawn from this way of contextualizing and problematizing the legitimate human aspiration for an independent and non-dominated life?

No unambiguous lesson, I would say. Instead of a "lesson," it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of a scruple. Having the desire to be master at least in your own house is a good starting point for an active member of a democracy, but it is only the first step in a long process of accommodation/learning that has as its mover and end goal the love of non-domination and equal freedom rather than a real or symbolic compensation for one's frustrations.

Put differently, sovereignty does not and cannot have the last word in a radical-democratic horizon. At the most, it can be granted de facto precedence. For, in an action realm in which the bully logic of *fait accompli* wield an unquestionable veto power, an enabling condition of democratic self-rule unquestionably is the capacity for self-defense and self-determination. To use modern political categories, self-government demands the exercise of some kind of national sovereignty. If you want, this requirement can be pictured as the political equivalent of the reality principle in individual psychological life.

While it is important to respond resolutely in the face of even the slightest suspicion of being subject to the arbitrary domination of an external will, a mere rejection of subjection is not enough for a modern democratic ethos. For as long as it remains at a purely reactive level, the impulse not to be dominated is exposed to the risk of being hijacked by those sly demagogues who know all too well how much the instinct to isolate and punish opportunists, cheaters, free riders is ingrained in the human mind. After all, the latter are the ones who, since the Stone Age, have parasitized and undermined the cooperative strategies by which humankind has become the most successful biological species among large animals (Tomasello 2009). These are the egalitarian passions that underlie the "sociétés contre l'État" studied by Pierre Clastres (1987) and Marcel Gauchet (2005, chapter 3). Populist or nationalist resentment, on the whole, is nothing more than an amplified variant of the anger bubbling just below the surface in any democratic community, as the principles of equality and horizontal access are constantly threatened by the spontaneous flourishing of hierarchical relations and their subsequent institutionalization through the ossification of various chains of command. However, as is taught by human history at every latitude, these waves of mass hatred usually come down less against opportunists than against eccentrics, following the sad logic of scapegoating, which is the laziest, most conservative and bloody strategy human beings have ever devised to maintain internal order and peace (Girard 1986).

More difficult, however, is to give a name to the other idea-force, which may sustain the hopes of those who regard democracy as more than a technology of government or an aporetical variety of the modern cult of sovereignty or self-mastery. These are the ones who see it as a form of life in its own right, i.e., as a way of being in history as initiators and not as victims, as agents and not as patients (Dewey 1939).

This nonsovereignist understanding of democracy can be regarded as the enactment of the politically greedy desire to experience *better* freedoms. This amounts to say that the question of self-rule remains open even after the counterdemocratic (Rosanvallon 2008) check of the arbitrary domination of hierarchical organizations through a systematic sabotage of their disciplinary techniques and practices of subjugation has been achieved. By "democratic self-rule" I mean a network of social practices potentially capable of multiplying through common action the capacity of individuals to confidently cope with reality. This power, then, can be equitably distributed to the point of including in a horizon of public happiness even those who have traditionally been excluded from such a possibility and who have experienced politics always and

only as a force removed from all control precisely because of their condition of disempowerment (Taylor, Calhoun, and Gaonkar 2022, chapter 1).

This is evidently an optimistic, in a good sense utopian, view of political action. From a minority position, it challenges the hegemony of Hobbes' all too influential picture of the state as the Great Peacemaker, the ultimate guarantor of the political order by virtue of its exclusionary ownership of the power to suspend the rule of law and legitimately produce a state of exception in which physical violence is no longer limited by the clemency of the law (Agamben 2005). This understanding of the essence of politics in terms of the contrast between a (virtually) limitless sovereignty and a (virtually) rightless existence is countered by a non-autarchic view of democratic self-government. This sees society as a community of individuals who are granted the possibility of enjoying a fragile form of mastery over their own destiny as long as they are willing to combine their desire for independence with the urge to try out innovative, non-conformist relationships with others.

However, this optimistic view must be qualified. Even from a nonsovereignist standpoint, democracy, like any other kind of political régimes, does bear the burden of imposing at least partial order on the plurality of ends, desires, and needs that inevitably creates rivalry among members of an association of individuals who are no moral saints. Competition is a fact of life. There are no democracies without that minimum rate of plurality, which characterizes any human aggregate. And since a self-ruling society is the institutional embodiment of a form of power, it cannot survive in a condition of absolute indeterminacy or anarchy. In this sense, democracy is neither an entirely open system nor a hermetically shielded polity. Rather, it is bound to waver between the two opposite poles. So, it is better seen as a site of exploration of the boundaries of identity space, whose main stake is the clarification of how normatively inclusive the self-determining "We, the People" can be.

This cannot be established a priori. For the outcome of such exploration depends to a large extent on the ability to motivate citizens and influence the main springs of their allegiance and attachment to democratic institutions. Put simply, the future of modern democracies is contingent on their ability to steer clear of both cynics and purists. This means, to begin with, loosening the grip of the instrumental and utilitarian mentality on politics as much as possible. Of course, the democratic government of public affairs also has the purpose to facilitate the pursuit of individual ends. But democracy ultimately is an end in itself, as long as it is capable of opening up a realm of experience – common agency – which has among its often underestimated merits the ability to re-

establish direct contact with reality and its various faces: harsh, gentle, tiring, unpredictable, instructive, painful. This is the deeper meaning of democratic political realism.

In an emotionally bipolar world such as ours, which is dominated by both overexcitement and fatigue, zeal and dejection, it might be a non-negligible consolation to find out that not far from us, almost at hand, there is an effective remedy for the widespread malaise engendered by the obsessive pursuit of individual happiness (Han 2017). It is a medicine based on an all-too-trivial active ingredient: participating in one or more of the various venues where popular self-rule is distributed these days, without being obsessed by the desire to see your shielded self affirmed through the support of the will of the majority, but simply for the sake of accessing a dimension of experience, which is not attainable with the aid of your own power alone (Taylor 2025). After all, if human life itself is an insoluble riddle, what we need are forms of action and experience that help us bear its burden without making us feel like passive victims of fate. Strange to say, but a well-functioning democracy can also be an effective remedy against the "mal du siècle:" melancholy (Arendt 2005; Costa 2014b).

X. DEMOCRACY NEEDS RELIGION

I have been cautious so far, but my resilient belief is that imagining the future of democracy under the logic of escalating individual and collective sovereignty may turn out to be a catastrophic categorical mistake in the end. The promise encapsulated in democratic ideals is far more ambitious. Indeed, I would go so far as to maintain that it presupposes a bias for radical hope (Lear 2006). As Hartmut Rosa (2022, 68-74) recently argued in a book significantly titled *Demokratie braucht Religion*, democracy is a form of government that entails the kind of hypergood (or "metacriterion," see Rosa 2019, 450) he calls "resonance." As such, it demands a radical reconfiguration of the way we relate to the world and others. Such "optimistic credo" (Rosa 2019, 444), accordingly, can benefit from the resources embedded in religious imaginary, particularly in the Christian theological imagination. Let me add, in the end, my take on this issue and thereby succinctly wrap up the long argument developed so far.

What has emerged from my theoretically oriented and historically informed account of today's vexing political crisis can be summarized by saying that you cannot fully enjoy the basic good of self-rule unless a shared faith in the democratic promise is nurtured and cultivated. Such pledge, in turn, is

undermined both by the instrumentalist view of politics underlying the liberal ideal of civility and by the siege mentality characteristic of political views shaped by the modern fixation with sovereignty (including popular sovereignty) as state dominance.

In this regard, I follow the example of John Dewey (1934), who understood the enhancement of the self, stemming from a deeper adjustment in life that brings with it a distinctive sense of empowerment, as a common variety of practical *faith*. According to Dewey, this expansive attitude can only be the product of an imaginative effort as long as "the idea of a thoroughgoing and deep-seated harmonizing of the self with the Universe […] operates only through imagination" (Dewey 1934, 19). For him, such comprehensive stance that integrates the self is displayed in good citizenship as well, and it is religious in quality since it is "moved by faith in what is possible, not by adherence to the actual" (ibid., 23).

To substantiate my claim about the religious undertones of democracy, I can do no more, here, than gesture to an exemplary case of endorsement via creative rearticulation of faith in the democratic promise that makes the most of the image of the epiphany of a public space, which is both the site of an axiophany (a deepened sense of values) and a hierophany, i.e., a consecration of the regenerative force of democratic self-rule (for a full-fledged argument about the purported sanctity of democracy, see Costa 2025). The relevant example is offered by one of the most influential modern theorists of a participatory variety of democracy.

It is no coincidence, I think, that the *pars construens* of Hannah Arendt's, in other respects, pessimistic view of the future of politics in the modern age revolves around insights, which she is largely indebted to Augustine – the topic of her doctoral dissertation (Arendt 1996; Kiess 2016, chapters 3 and 4; Weinman 2025). To begin with, *The Human Condition* claims that *natality* – the uniquely human power to initiate something new, unforeseen, uncaused – is the source of the immeasurable value of political action and of the public realm that serves as its rescuing theater. As Nikolas Kompridis (2023, 137) recently observed, "any creation of a new worldly space of freedom *also* aspires to the condition of sacred space, however transient and 'improbable' its spacing." There is indeed something bafflingly creative, something "religious" in Dewey's sense, i.e. expansive, transformative, empowering, about democratic

generativity. This is the first "extravagance" encountered while engaged in collective self-government[3].

Members of a deliberative community based on the practice of nonsovereign freedom need, moreover, to relieve each other of the burden that past and future events load on their shoulders. Promises, mutual commitments, not bearing false witness, are the political agent's other-regarding and cosmophilic means for curtailing the contingency of future events and the ensuing temptation to exploit to their own advantage the "negative" freedom of action that this indeterminacy discloses to free riders. Conversely, the ability to *forgive* is the gentle power enabling people to recognize that human agents are always more than their acts and, for that very reason, deserve to be relieved as far as possible of the mortgage that their inevitable mistakes inscribe on possible future mutual agreements, that is, on the generative potential for true common agency (Arendt 1958, 237). This is the second "excess", which citizens are called to make sense of in democratic life.

Precisely due to this boundless generativity, unsovereign democracy is the poignant political embodiment of radical hope. I am thinking here of the extravagant communal dreams of exemplary democratic leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. or Desmond Tutu. This is hope grounded in the resilient belief that there can be a way of being free together which goes way beyond zero-sum games (Taylor 2024, chapter 15; Nussbaum 2013; Taylor 2025). In other words, just as even the most powerful tyrant will never be as powerful as a community of free human beings, so an individual who is absolutely sovereign but overwhelmed by self-centered reactive passions can never be truly independent until he or she adheres to the declaration of dependence, which makes possible the kind of empowerment that alone can enable them to initiate something genuinely new.

While Arendt believed that this kind of hopefulness was an expression of true love of the world, it must be admitted that it is a love that has very little of the mundane (Weinman 2025)[4].

3 In particular, the foundation from scratch of a new realm of political freedom, beyond the episodic event of liberation from the oppressor, appears to modern common sense as a metaphysical conundrum. Force and contingency aside, on what authority can the founders rely? As Arendt (1978, II, 210-217) perceptively noted in the final chapter of *The Life of Mind*, the Western political tradition has looked for the solution to the riddle in the suggestive and existentially charged image of a second birth, the re-establishment of an out-of-time generative power.

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