



A Crisis of Democracy and Representation

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Editorial

One can seldom reach unanimous agreement on any topic in democratic politics. This is probably because democratic politics feeds on disagreement. However, there is one topic that seems to have reached the status of a generally accepted truth, and it can be summarized in the frequently heard cry: “We find ourselves amid a crisis of democracy!” This sentiment of crisis has become so ubiquitous; spreading both in new and established democracies. Almost everyone in academia today accepts the crisis as an undeniable fact; we can all list examples proving its existence, and we all either strive to defend our jeopardized democracies or at least worry about our democratic future. Nevertheless, there seems to be little agreement on the meaning of the crisis itself, its causes and its cures. In this volume, we intend to add to the ongoing debate on the contemporary crisis of democracy, understand its roots, and propose possible solutions. As the title of the volume suggests, we believe that there is a strong connection between the crisis of democracy and changes in the nature of political representation. Before delving into the details of that relationship, we must first answer the crucial question: what is a crisis of democracy?

What is a crisis (of democracy)?

The polyvalent character of the phrase “a crisis of democracy” has become a pre-condition for its success as a catchphrase. Therefore, we believe that some clarification of concepts is needed. To tackle this task, we suggest to put aside – at least for a moment – the concept of democracy and to concentrate more on the concept of crisis. As has been noted by other authors, the concept of crisis has its origin in the Greek word κρίνω that covers a whole range of meanings from separate to choose, judge or fight. Reinhart Koselleck has followed the development of the concept in juridical, theological and medical discourses and suggests that “(a)t all times the concept is applied to life-deciding alternatives meant to answer questi-





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ons about what is just or unjust, what contributes to salvation or damnation, what furthers health or brings death.”¹ This double meaning of the word crisis – crisis as a moment of extreme difficulty threatening the very existence of the political order, and crisis as a moment that demands our ability to act and use judgement – has been preserved and later applied to various social and political phenomena.

Taking this into consideration, can we talk about a crisis of democracy at all? Should we not tell the story of its inconceivable success instead? Just a little over a hundred years ago, there were hardly any democratic regimes. Since then, we have seen a somewhat steady growth in the number of democratic regimes worldwide. While different democracies’ rankings and indexes vary, it is estimated that almost half of the world population lives in some form of a democratic regime today. The exceptional position of democracy among world political regimes is partly acknowledged through authoritarian regimes’ misuse of the name of democracy or through references to the will of the people in order to render themselves legitimate. In addition, recent findings of the World Values Survey show that more than 90% of their 73.000 respondents from fifty-seven countries around the world believe that democracy is a good form of government.² To put it simply, after dethroning monarchy in the 19th century as well as defeating diverse forms of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes in the 20th century, democracy has undeniably established itself as the only game in town today.

If we take democracy’s success seriously, the position that there is a crisis of democracy becomes even less coherent. There are many explanations of the nature of the crisis at hand: while some deny its very existence and claim that it is actually a fiction of empirically ignorant theoreticians, others understand the crisis as a permanent (and not necessarily unhealthy) precondition of democracy, as a consequence of a national state’s failing autonomy in the process of globalization, as a result of the welfare-state retrenchment caused by neoliberal hegemony, as caused by an overload of democratic demands that states are unable to meet, as an outcome of late capitalism’s legitimation deficit, as connected to a public sphere that is privatized and fragmented by new means of communication, or simply as a misperception caused by our unrealistically high democratic expectations, to name just a few explanations.³ While we believe that these app-

1 Koselleck, R. – Richter, M., *Crisis. Journal of the History of Ideas*, 67, 2006, No. 2, p. 361.

2 Van Reybrouck, D., *Against Elections: The Case for Democracy*. London, Bodley Head 2016, p. 1.

3 See respectively Merkel, W., *Is There a Crisis of Democracy? Democratic Theory*, 1.2. 2014, pp. 11–25; Runciman, D., *The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present*. Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press 2013; Allan, J., *Democracy in Decline: Steps in the Wrong Direction*. Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press 2014; Della Porta, D., *Can Democracy be Saved?: Participation, Deliberation and Social Movements*. Cambridge, Polity Press 2013; Crozier, M. – Huntington, S. – Watanuki, J., *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*. New York, New York University Press 1975; Habermas, J., *Legitimation Crisis*. Cambridge, UK, Polity Press 1976; Cass R., *#Republic*:



roaches can provide useful partial insights into the contemporary crisis of democracy, we also believe that they can distract our attention from some of its crucial aspects. Therefore, to understand the nature of the contemporary crisis, we propose examining its symptoms rather than its causes.

So, what are the symptoms of the crisis? There appears to be a form of consensus about what constitutes the main symptoms, and we believe they can be divided into two non-exclusionary and overlapping clusters. While the first cluster concerns the workings of the political system (in a narrow sense) in democratic countries and its main constitutive elements, the second cluster encompasses citizens' perspectives on the working of the political system. A crucial symptom that belongs to the first cluster is the decline in voter turnout and the transformation of political parties and partisanship. Despite some differences, all liberal democratic countries have been facing a steady decline in voter turnout in the last few decades which testifies to citizens' increasing disinterest in politics and therefore challenges the very sources of democratic legitimacy. Analogous to the decline of voter turnout, the decline of political partisanship also challenges sources of democratic legitimacy. Despite the firm grip of the iron law of oligarchy, mass political parties not only made mass democracy possible, but they have also provided mediation between parties' grass-roots and parties' elites thereby successfully mediating between society and its political representation. However, in the last few decades, we have witnessed a steep decline in political party membership, an upsurge of voter volatility damaging traditional mass political parties, and a shift towards the personalization of politics coupled with an emergence of a new form of political movements. Contrary to traditional ideology-based political parties, these new political movements provide support for their (charismatic) leader(s) instead of functioning as vehicles for promoting party line. The decline of traditional forms of political representation linked to election and political parties is accompanied with the emergence of new forms of non-elected representatives (e.g. NGOs, international organizations, prominent media figures) who challenge traditional representative channels through their representative claims.

The second cluster of symptoms looks at the crisis from citizens' perspectives. The main feature of this perspective is the rise of citizen distrust in governments and political institutions. For example, the trust in government in OECD countries has lately fallen to 40%.⁴We should include among the symptoms connected to this decline in trust the upsurge of citizen initiatives pursuing what Pierre Rosanvallon calls "politics of distrust". As Rosanvallon suggests, from antiquity until present

Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media. Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press 2017; Bobbio, N., *The Future of Democracy: A Defence of the Rules of the Game*. Cambridge, UK, Polity Press 1987.

4 <http://www.oecd.org/gov/trust-in-government.htm>, visited on 21st of August, 2017.



time the democratic ideal has contained two interlocking parts; the idea of legitimacy based on elections that bestow political power upon the selected few, and the idea of mistrust towards political representatives. However, as Rosanvallon makes clear, profound changes in modern societies, including limits on the ability of democratic governments to make decisions *vis-à-vis* the global market economy and international organizations, the influence of mass-media and social networks, and the growth of education levels enabling citizens to take more active roles, all have led to a shift in balance between the two parts of the democratic ideal towards mistrust. Rosanvallon further argues that in modern societies of distrust, citizens' roles have shifted from forming policy decisions via selecting their representatives toward vigilance, denunciation, and the evaluation of political leaders and their actions. Therefore, the distrust itself is not a problem, as it has always been an integral part of the democratic experience. The problem is the high level of distrust that undermines the working of democratic institutions.⁵

Another manifestation of citizen's distrust is the recent upsurge of protest movements. It should be emphasized that the very existence of protest movements does not necessarily testify to a crisis of democracy. In fact, the existence of a vibrant and contesting public sphere might be a sign of democracy's good health. Hence, what we understand as a symptom of the crisis is not the existence of protest movements *per se*, but their peculiar character. Ivan Krastev's analysis of seventy protest movements that emerged throughout the world after the 2008 economic crisis has shown that these movements – while different in many aspects – share an anti-political stance. In other words, these protest movements (Aganaktismenoi, Indignados, and Occupy are perfect examples in liberal-democratic regimes) deliberately abstain from traditional politics because they see it as irredeemably flawed and corrupt, and propose instead a horizontal notion of politics that is incommensurable with the traditional understanding of representative politics.⁶ And finally, the ubiquitous citizen mistrust materializes in the concomitant emergence of diverse forms of populist movements and politicians – be they either left or right-wing – who challenge traditional representative channels and instead claim to represent the people directly either via instruments of direct democracy or via charismatic leadership.

We believe that taking this into consideration allows us to disclose the nature of the contemporary crisis of democracy. As we have seen, all these symptoms are connected to representation and traditional representative channels (political parties, parliamentary politics). However, we also believe that these symptoms do

5 Rosanvallon, P., *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*. New York, Cambridge University Press 2008.

6 Krastev, I., *Democracy Disrupted: The Politics of Global Protest*. New York, University of Pennsylvania Press 2014. For a critique of horizontalism see also Mouffe, C., *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. London, Verso 2013.



not suggest the end of representative politics but rather – to use Bernard Manin’s concept – its “metamorphosis”.⁷ In our view, even though traditional forms of representative politics face a crisis, we do not face neither the end of representative politics and representative democracy nor the advent of post-representative politics as some believe⁸. This is primarily because new forms of representation are emerging. In other words, we agree with Nadia Urbinati that at the core of the contemporary crisis of democracy is a crisis of parliamentary democracy that is being supplanted with illiberal democracy either in the form of populism or plebiscitarianism.⁹ While we do not understand these new democratic forms as utterly undemocratic, we believe that they depreciate democracy as they lower citizens’ ability to influence decision-making processes.¹⁰

The present crisis of democracy and the representative turn in democratic theory

Our account of the contemporary crisis of democracy as a crisis of a specific form of representation should be differentiated from democratic theory’s traditional suspicion of representation – under the spell of Rousseau and ancient democracy – usually prefers participation to representation and sees the latter as inherently undemocratic, oligarchic or, at best; as an expedient device that makes democracy possible in the messy reality of modern societies. In other words, representative democracy is understood as the second-best option to direct participation. However, our understanding of the contemporary crisis of democracy and representation has been informed by recent development in democratic theory that have challenged the old-fashioned view of the incommensurability between representation and democracy under the banner of “the representative turn” Plotke articulates the main impetus of the representative turn well: “the opposite of representation is not participation. The opposite of representation is exclusion. And the opposite of participation is abstention. Rather than opposing participation to representation, we should try to improve representative practices and forms to make them more open, effective, and fair.”¹¹

Included in this volume is a review article titled *The Representative Turn: A New Way of Thinking about the Relationship between Representation and Democracy*,

7 See Manin, B., *The Principles of Representative Government*. New York, Cambridge University Press 1997.

8 Tormey, S., *The End of Representative Politics*. Malden, Mass., Polity Press 2015.

9 Urbinati, N., Reflections on the Meaning of the “Crisis of Democracy”. *Democratic Theory*, 3, 2016, No. 1, pp. 6–31.

10 Nadia Urbinati has – as we believe – rightly called populism and plebiscitarianism as democracy’s disfigurements. See Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press 2014.

11 Plotke, D., Representation is Democracy. *Constellations*, 4, 1997, No. 1, p. 19.



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in which Markéta Mottlová thoroughly discusses several key works and aspects of the representative turn. Therefore, we want to briefly emphasize only three facets of the representative turn which allow us to differentiate our position from the traditional view of the incommensurability of democracy and representation. We do so in order to better understand the challenges of the contemporary crisis, and to acknowledge the democratic potential of representation.

Firstly, we address the thinking about the relationship between representation and democracy after the representative turn overcomes the limits of the electoral notion of representation. Electoral representation connects representation (almost) exclusively with elections and claims that ballots are the main or the only means that citizens can use to influence political decision-making. This view has been adopted by Schumpeterians and proponents of minimalist democracy among others and has been rightly criticized for its elitism.¹² In arguing against the electoral notion of representation, proponents of the representative turn emphasize that representation is a continuous process that entitles citizens to influence political decision-making even in between elections, which in turn renders it more democratic or egalitarian than is usually acknowledged.

This takes us to the second facet of the representative turn that concerns citizen power. As should be clear by now, citizen power should comprise more than the ballot. For example, Nadia Urbinati conceptualizes representative democracy as a diarchy suggesting that it contains “will” and “opinion” as the two powers of the sovereign citizen. By “will” Urbinati means decision-making power stemming from citizens’ ballots and practiced inside a democratic state’s institutions. Yet, by “opinion” Urbinati means non-formal power that has its origin in citizens’ discussions and deliberations. “The conceptualization of representative democracy as diarchy makes two claims: that ‘will’ and ‘opinion’ are the two powers of the sovereign citizens, and that they are different and should remain distinct, although in need of constant communication.”¹³ This is what differentiates representative democracy from direct democracy and indeed makes representative democracy superior to direct democracy. Whereas representative democracy is diarchical – meaning that the final decision is always a result of a never-ending conversation between “will” and “opinion” – direct democracy is mono-archival as a citizen’s “opinion” immediately translates into political “will”. Affirming the “opinion” as one of two powers of a sovereign citizen links representation to the citizen’s judgment and enables bridging representation and some progressive models of democracy such as the deliberative one.

12 Schumpeter, J. A., *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. New York, Harper Torchbooks 1976; Przeworski, A., *Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense*. In: Shapiro, I. – Casiano, H., *Democracy’s Value*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1999, pp. 23–55; Manin, B., *The Principles of Representative Government*, op. cit.

13 Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured*, op. cit., p. 2.



The third facet of the representative turn that we would like to highlight is representation's constructivist dimension. The traditional understanding of democratic representation views its legitimacy in "mirroring"; in correspondence between the interests of the represented and the actions of the representatives. Hence, in her seminal works, Hanna Pitkin claims that "representing ... means acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them."¹⁴ However, this osmotic view of representation has been recently challenged by some proponents of the representative turn. Many theoreticians suggest that representation has performative or constructivist dimensions, and therefore that the interests and identities of both of the represented and the representative are outputs of the representative process rather than its inputs. While proponents of representations' constructivist dimension vary in their understandings of the construction mechanics of the represented and their limits¹⁵, the constructivist turn – through its rethinking of representation – shows that representation is an open double-sided process that challenges our traditional understanding of democratic accountability based on a representative ability/willingness to meet the demands of the represented.

We believe that all three aspects of the representative turn and the innovations they bring into thinking about representation can help us understand the nature of representative democracy as well as its predicament. The articles collected in this volume therefore endeavour to use the insights of the representative turn to develop our understanding of representation's democratic character, to understand the contemporary crisis of democracy as a crisis of a specific form of representation, and for a critical discussion of theoretical attempts that justify the emergence of new forms of representation such as populism and plebiscitarianism.

In the first article, *Political Will and Public Opinion: On Hegel's Theory of Representation*, Milan Znoj provides a genealogy of the concepts of political will and public opinion that he finds paradigmatically explicated in Hegel's political philosophy. Znoj's analysis focuses on Hegel's notion of representation based on his critiques of Rousseauistic direct democracy and of liberal contractualism. He suggests that the main problem in Hegel's notion of representation is not the fact that it presupposes representation of estates (Stände), but rather an utter suppression of representation's democratic features. In this view, parliamentary representati-

14 Pitkin, H., *The Concept of Representation*. 5. [Dr.]. Berkeley, Calif., University of California Press 1985.

15 See e.g. Ankersmit, F. R., *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy Beyond Fact and Value*. Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press c1996; Disch, L., Toward a Mobilization Conception of Democratic Representation. *American Political Science Review*, 105, 2011, No. 1, pp. 100–114; Disch, L., The "Constructivist Turn" in Democratic Representation: A Normative Dead-End? *Constellations*, 22, 2015, No. 4, pp. 487–499; Laclau, E., *On Populist Reason*. London, Verso 2005; Saward, M., *The Representative Claim*. New York, Oxford University Press 2010.



on is intended to be nothing more than an educational theatre that turns common people into state citizens who learn their rights and accept their duties.

In his article *Democracy without the Demos: Rosanvallon's Decentering of Democratic theory*, Pavel Barša analyzes the crisis of democracy from Pierre Rosanvallon's point of view. Barša is primarily concerned with Rosanvallon's claim that contemporary democracies have proved unable to represent the people and their legitimacy. Therefore, democracies shifted from providing proper representation to becoming "good governments". Barša suggests that the shift from representing to governing necessitates a radical break from traditional democratic theory which finds sources of democratic legitimacy in the desirable and impossible identification of the governors with the governed.

The perils of populism are discussed by Giuseppe Ballacci in his article *The Creation of the "People" in Laclau's Theory of Populism: A Critical Assessment*. Ballacci claims that Ernesto Laclau's defence of populism as a project of democracy's radicalization implicitly endorses decisionist and authoritarian views of power. To prove this thesis, Ballacci differentiates Laclau's approach towards the construction of 'the people' from approaches of other proponents of the constructivist turn and suggests that Laclau's theory completely misses the role of judgment and deliberation, which other constructivists see as a crucial part of the relationship between representatives and the represented. Ballacci further argues that this lack is a result of Laclau's strictly formalistic understanding of rhetoric. He also suggests that a return to the Aristotelian-Ciceronian tradition of rhetoric could not only enrich Laclau's theory but could also overcome its democratic deficit.

In his article *Democratic Spectatorship beyond Plebiscitarianism: On Jeffrey Green's Ocular Democracy*, Jan Bíba disputes the plebiscitarian revival in democratic theory. His main focus is Jeffrey Green's theory of ocular democracy and Green's notion of spectatorship. Bíba suggests that Green's rendering of spectatorship is impoverished because it presupposes a spectator's essential passivity. In contrast to Green, Bíba argues that not only are seeing and spectatorship both active processes, but also that spectatorship is compatible with representative democracy.

In his article *How to Escape from the Dead End of Post-Democracy? Representation and the Principle of Popular Sovereignty*, Michael Augustín discusses the destiny of the concept of post-democracy. This study presents three approaches to post-democracy from three theorists: Jacques Rancière, Jürgen Habermas and Colin Crouch. Augustín claims that various conceptualizations of post-democracy represent different perspectives on the changing paradigm of representative democracy as it was established in Western Europe after the Second World War. Further, he introduces post-democracy as a theoretical attempt to escape from the trap of the end of history – the definitive paradigmatic victory of liberal democracy and market capitalism – and to revitalize the internal critique of the democratic regime using a specific periodization and temporalization of the era of liberal democracy.





Our aim was not to provide a definitive solution to the contemporary crisis of democracy. The articles collected in this volume point from different perspectives to the fact that the contemporary crisis of democracy has its origin in a failure of established forms of citizen's representation. However, their authors do not plead for a revival of direct democracy but - building on the insights of the representative turn - instead examine a possibility of opening democracy's new dimensions that, while entrusting citizens with political power, avoid perils of populism and plebiscitarianism.

Jan Břeba, Milan Znoj

