



VIRTUALIZATION OF THE
REAL AND CITIZENSHIP
PEOPLE, POWER, SOCIETY, AND PERSONS

BY
PAOLO BELLINI

[THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK]

Virtualization of the Real and Citizenship: People, Power, Society, and Person

Paolo Bellini

This paper intends to show the contradictions in democratic systems within the globalization process, through an interpretation of new technologies, whose virtualising and connective nature determines the transformation of the idea of person as a fundamental element of political individualism and liberal culture. In particular, it aims to develop a critical theory of the good citizen, intended as a symbolic paradigm of reference for the stabilisation of post-modern political systems in a liberal and democratic perspective.

I

Legitimacy, democracy and virtuality

The moment in which the myth of the sovereign people becomes true – as a translation, at least *de jure*, of the sacred centre of gravity of the power (God) to a secularised entity (the people) – will necessarily lead to a rethinking of the legitimation of power, which should originate from the bottom and be recognisable as a sum of individual wills under the principle of majority. This new founding myth appears to be a determining

force for modernity. However, it is not devoid of problematic elements, which concern not only its intrinsic logical and ontological contradictions (which will be discussed below) but also the representative option as opposed to the exercise of direct democracy. Both representative and direct democracy are indeed largely justifiable in accordance to the principle that people are sovereign and the ultimate foundation of any power. At first glance, the exercise of direct democracy would seem preferable in any case, since it always allows the ultimate holder of power (the sovereign people) to express themselves without mediation and representatives. In Rousseau's words, «Sovereignty cannot be represented for the same reason that it cannot be alienated; its essence is the general will, and the will cannot be represented, either it is the general will or it is something else; there is no intermediate possibility»¹. The author of *The social contract* is then echoed, in more recent times and in a much more radical way, by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, who, through a sort of federalist assembly project, promote a radical kind of direct democracy which may be able to determine the legislature, the executive and the judiciary². In the latter case, with due proportions, it appears to be the revival of the classic model of *extreme democracy* of Aristotelian type³. These forms of direct

¹ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The social contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin, 1974), 141.

² Cf. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Declaration* (Allen: Argo-Navis TX, USA, 2012.),

³ «For all the citizens to be members of the deliberative body and to decide all these matters is a mark of a popular government, for the common people seek for equality of this nature. But there are several modes of such universal membership. One is for the citizens to serve in rotation and not all in a body ...; and for there to be joint assemblies only to consider legislation and reforms of the constitution and to hear the reports submitted by the magistrates. Another mode is for all to assemble in a body, but only for the

democracy have always been criticised, from Plato to Talmon, for being potentially tyrannical⁴ or totalitarian⁵. In fact, without the principle of representation, a minority is not allowed to form, organise itself and contrast, with equal dignity, the majority in any way or circumstance. In this sense, the exercise of direct democracy always becomes, in the best case, the tyranny of a variable, faceless majority. As a matter of fact, for each issue, a minority cannot permanently organise itself, not in the way that is possible in a representative democracy. It is no coincidence that the latter political formula has undoubtedly prevailed in the course of modernity. However, globalization and the virtualization of the real are profoundly changing its nature and its mechanisms. Two fundamental and contradictory elements have indeed emerged: one that we could define as *external*, since it is linked to globalization and to the success of the liberal democratic ideology on a planetary scale, and a second, *internal* one, which is defined by an increasing difficulty with which the established powers try to represent the people, understood as its constituent foundation. In that regard, it is necessary to remark how the effectiveness and the global spread of liberalism and

purpose of electing magistrates, enacting laws, considering the declaration of war and the conclusion of peace and holding the audit of magistrates, ... Another mode is for the citizens to meet about the magistracies and the audits and in order to deliberate about declaring war and concluding an alliance, ... A fourth mode is for all to meet in council about all matters, and for the magistracies to decide about nothing but only to make preliminary decisions; this is the mode in which democracy in its last form is administered at the present day..." (Aristotle, *Politics*, Book IV, 1298a, 10-32, trans. H. Rackham. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1944), 377-379.

⁴ Cf. Plato, *The Republic*, Book VIII, 56-81.

⁵ Cf. Jacob Leib Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London: Penguin, 1986).

democracy ultimately hinge upon the ability to effectively propagate the narrative that the people hold the power and exercise it through its representatives within the boundaries set by liberal principles. This model, in turn, generates consent only in so far as it is represented in the media (*virtualized*) so that it be perceived as the only legitimate model, involving, both in a rational and emotional way, the peoples who are subject to it. In other words, it is necessary not only that liberal democracy be respected as the best form of government and political organisation, but that it also be loved and sought-after as a necessary condition to achieve individual and collective happiness.

After the Second World War, this goal was certainly met within the Western civilization, so that liberal democracy was able to take roots even in those countries that had experienced a totalitarian or quasi-totalitarian form of government, such as Germany (Nazism) and Italy (Fascism). After 1989, the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the liberal democratic formula was exported, sometimes more in form than in substance, to the former Soviet Bloc countries, where real socialism (communism) was in place. These countries, for their part, often adapted to this new ideological condition, reinterpreting it within their own culture of reference with very distorted effects, especially in regard with certain fundamental aspects of liberalism, such as freedom of thought and other individual rights of equal importance⁶. In the rest of the world, instead, as with the Islamic civilization, the typically Western system of rights, as well as the representative democracy of liberal kind, appear to be almost utterly impracticable. Even where democracy sets in, it always

⁶ Cf. Anna Stepanovna Politkovskaya, *Putin's Russia*, trans. Arch Tait (London: Harvill, 2004).

coincides with forms of power which are plebiscitary and dictatorial and/or conditioned by a substantial inability to separate the political from the religious. Therefore a first and macroscopic contradiction emerges, related to a global display of a model of liberal democracy which in many cases has no real application, but it is experienced as a purely media-related and ideological object, generally used to produce consent and for the widespread distribution of a sort of *false collective consciousness*⁷. It is no surprise that governments always tend to justify their own wars as if they were actions meant to export *democracy* (liberal democracy), while knowing that in most cases this task is bound to fail. This contradiction, however, is inevitable for any *political formula*⁸, since there cannot be any legitimising authority⁹ (of whatever type) that is not determined by a narrative which, by its

⁷This concept is derived from Engels, who describes it in the following terms: “Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker. Consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process.” (Friedrich Engels, “Letter to Franz Mehring, July 14th 1893”, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx and Engels Correspondence*, trans. Donna Torr, London: International Publishers, 1968). Here the false consciousness is to be interpreted with a more general meaning, as a distorted perception of reality, conveyed by the mass media, through the display of impracticable models in specific historical- geographical contexts.

⁸ This term is derived from G. Mosca, who points out how those who hold power justify the status quo. “... ruling classes do not justify their power exclusively by *de facto* possession of it, but try to find a moral and legal basis for it, representing it as the logical and necessary consequence of doctrines and beliefs that are generally recognized and accepted” (G. Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1939), 70

⁹ Intended as a source of legitimation of power and political action, so that it is always necessary to justify in the eyes of the governed people the reason for which a class, a group or an individual holds an actual power and the ability to exercise coercion.

very nature, produces a gap between reality and ideology. In other words, the legitimation of power and command can only have a fictional character, determined by the ever-present hiatus between reality and its representation, which is particularly noticeable in relation to those political phenomena which are subject to remarkably heterogeneous interpretations. A typical instance in this regard is the attempt to move beyond the sacred and divine origin of power, through the symbolic invention of the sovereign people. If, on one hand, it is impossible, despite the numerous theological attempts, to prove the existence of God through empirical, objective and incontrovertible proof or abstract reasoning that leaves no room for doubt¹⁰, it is equally difficult to prove with certainty that the power belongs to the people, who hold it as its attribute. As a matter of fact, it is possible to argue that the people are a political object whose existence depends on the power which forms before and beyond the people. As Cicero had indeed understood, «...the people is not every group of individuals brought together in any manner, but the coming together of a multitude of individuals united by agreement about law (*iuris consensu*) and by community of interest (*utilitatis communione*)»¹¹. If we accept this definition, we can easily infer that the people cannot exist apart from the power that makes it such, precisely because of the fact that justice (understood as the set of laws and rights determined by specific ethical convictions), as well as the pursuit of common interests, which are the necessary condition for the existence of a people and characterise it, depend in turn on the power. Power, in other words, exists only as a possibility of production of ordered forms of collective existence;

¹⁰ Cf. Piergiorgio Odifreddi, *Il Vangelo secondo la Scienza. Le religioni alla prova del nove* (Turin: Einaudi, 1999), 137-154.

¹¹ Cicero, *De Republica*, Book I, 25.

disregarding this or that form, it cannot be eliminated, because it ensures the existence of the political horizon which is necessary for the survival of the human species and a self-conscious subject. While power, in order to exist (*ontological position*), needs neither *justice* nor *community of interests*, these latter depend instead on its very own existence. Power, in other words, is not truly an object, but a relationship among individuals, groups or political systems¹², so that the very existence of the people presupposes power as its foundation, since the people itself, before becoming such (in conformity with justice and community of interests), can only express itself as an aggregate of individuals dominated by asymmetric relationships of power. This is determined by the very nature of the human species, marked by a tendency to establish social relations. It is therefore possible, for instance, to subjugate individuals or entire human groups by identifying specific relationships of power, without it necessarily presupposing the existence of a people as we have defined it. By contrast, it proves impossible to exercise any kind of *justice* or *community of interests* outside of the relationships of powers that put them into effect by giving them an empirical consistency. Moreover, the very existence of the idea of justice, as well as the idea of interest, presumes some form of education and acculturation which identifies the relationships of power of some kind (both at an embryonic stage, as in the teacher-student relationship, and more articulate and complex ones, as in the case of the educational institution). Finally, from a purely logical point of view, the very existence of justice or community of interests, without relationships or systems of power, exists only in the

¹²Cf. “Potere”, in Norberto Bobbio and Nicola Matteucci and Gianfranco Pasquino, *Dizionario di Politica* (Turin: U.T.E.T., 2004).

abstract, since it expresses, in most cases, claims that are contradictory and undecidable¹³.

However, beyond these theoretical discussions and of greater practical relevance, a contradiction within the dynamics of spectacularization and the virtualization of the established power tends to deeply undermine from inside the Western civilization the premises on which the liberal democratic system stands. New technologies, as we touched upon at the beginning of this paragraph, make the exercise of direct democracy potentially feasible, since they remove space-time barriers, which had always prevented it on a large scale. This way, by eliminating representation and taking away from minorities the ability to establish themselves as bearers of instances which are different from the will of the majority, new technologies let the absolute idea of the sovereign people emerge, and such an idea tends to conflict with political liberalism, with fatal effects on it, and on the typical values of Western civilization based on individual rights and the dignity of the person. New possible forms of

¹³ Concepts such as *justice* and *community of interests* make sense only within a system of power that establishes *justice* (i.e. who, among two or more contenders, is right) and what is, each and every time, the *common good*; otherwise, those concepts remain arbitrary expressions of an individual consciousness. “When two people (in good faith) argue in court around a point of law, i.e. they seek justice, they do it because they perceive justice in a different way. Justice is, therefore, *a different thing* for different people; there is no *Justice*, but several *justices*, as they are revealed and expressed by two conflicting consciences. ... The consciousness of the two contenders says: justice is clearly as I see it, it is the one I see, it is what my inner self, pronounced in a very clear and indisputable way, shows me. And that is what two *opposite* consciences say; in fact, they even seek a judgement, i.e. each one wants the judge to give strength to their own justice, which is the *opposite* of the other person’s”. (G. Rensi, *La mia filosofia*, Milano: Dall’oglio editore, 1989, 142-143).

totalitarian democracy are therefore revealed, which deeply call into question the double-edged nature of liberal democracy, breaking the balance between what is public and common and what instead belongs to the individual dimension, intended in terms of self-property and free will. If the people were to effectively establish themselves on a virtual plane as a power without representation, and if, as is currently the case, no sacred, natural, metaphysical or cultural order, capable of limiting the power of this new sovereign (the people), were to be recognised, there would soon be no way to curb the absolute exercise of such power by those who claim to be the bearers of the general will. In this respect, a sort of Orwellian totalitarianism or, in the best case, something that the great liberal thinker Alexis de Tocqueville would have called a subtle and imperceptible form of tyranny¹⁴ would appear.

¹⁴ “I want to imagine under what new features despotism could present itself to the world; I see an innumerable crowd of similar and equal men who spin around restlessly, in order to gain small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each one of them, withdrawn apart, is like a stranger to the destiny of all the others; his children and his particular friends form for him the entire human species; ... Above those men arises an immense and tutelary power that alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyment and of looking after their fate. It is absolute, detailed, regular, far-sighted and mild. It would resemble paternal power if, like it, it had as a goal to prepare men for manhood; but on the contrary it seeks only to fix them irrevocably in childhood; ... It works willingly for their happiness; but it wants to be the unique agent for it and the sole arbiter; it attends to their security, provides for their needs, facilitates their pleasures, conducts their principal affairs, directs their industry, settles their estates, divides their inheritances; how can it not remove entirely from them the trouble to think and the difficulty of living? This is how it makes the use of free will less useful and rarer every day; how it encloses the action of the will within a smaller space and little by little steals from each citizen even the use of himself” (Alexis de Tocqueville, “What Sort

II

Power, person and institutional crisis

The only way to restrain all forms of tyranny within the democratic system must therefore rely upon the symbolic translation carried through the framework of representation. With all its limitations, it is this framework that allows, through a vote, to transfer the conflict on a purely symbolic level, defusing, through the electoral competition, any possible resort to violence among the parties¹⁵, which otherwise would find its *raison d'être* in the exercise of direct democracy, where a portion of voters is systematically reduced to silence. It is evident, however, that the effectiveness and proper functioning of this translation depends in large part on how the power is able to shape the imaginary of the population. From this point of view, it is of paramount importance the task, bestowed upon the institutions and the media, of forming a *good citizen*, by creating an appropriate image and inspiring the highest possible number of individuals to conform to it. In every liberal democracy, so, the *good citizen*, as a person with rights and duties, becomes a symbolic paradigm of reference, whose circulation and metabolization at the social level ensures the proper functioning of the political formula (the liberal democracy). Within Western civilization, if we analyse the symbolism that distinguishes it in greater detail, disregarding some specific cultural nuances, it can be maintained that the *good citizen* embodies certain characteristics that qualify it as such, that is, the love of country, the desire to actively participate in the management of public affairs, a respect for the institutions, a

of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear”, in *Democracy in America*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 812).

¹⁵ Cf. Elias Canetti, “The Nature of the Parliamentary System, in *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Continuum, 1978), 188-227.

tolerant attitude, honesty, commitment to work, and respect for the law. Obviously, hardly any individuals within the political body can actually and definitely boast all those qualities in their entirety; they are rather symbolic elements that define, in terms of the collective imaginary, the most widely shared narrative¹⁶. However, this narrative is undoubtedly going through a very serious crisis, which threatens to put the durability of the liberal democratic political formula at risk.

The crisis is determined by the same virtualising and pluralistic vocation of Western civilization, which, on one level, clashes with cultural models that are inhomogeneous and different and, on another level, suffers from a series of internal contradictions which affect the very operating mechanisms that legitimise power. First, it is necessary to remark how the globalization process¹⁷, which is probably reaching its climax during this century, inevitably dictates, both on a territorial and a virtual¹⁸ level, a complex dialectic, and sometimes a conflictual one, among civilizations on a planetary level¹⁹. In particular, within the

¹⁶ Cf. Salvatore Natoli ed., *Le virtù della cittadinanza*, (Brescia: Grafo, 1998); “Citizenship and Civic culture, in *The concise Oxford dictionary of politics*, ed. I. McLean and A. McMillan (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); *The civic culture revisited*, ed. Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba (Sage Newbury Park -CA: Publications, 1989).

¹⁷ For an in-depth analysis of globalization from an economic and political point of view, cf. M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society I, The Power of Identity II, End of Millennium III* (Cambridge, MA, USA: Wiley-Blackwell 2000); Paolo Bellini, *Cyberfilosofia del potere. Immaginari, ideologie e conflitti della civiltà tecnologica* (Milan – Udine: Mimesis, 2007) and *Mitopie tecnopolitiche. Stato-nazione, impero e globalizzazione* (Milan – Udine: Mimesis, 2011).

¹⁸ For a definition of virtual, cf. Pierre Levy, *Becoming Virtual*, trans. Robert Bononno (New York: Plenum Trade, 1998).

¹⁹ Cf. Samuel Phillips Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone Simon & Schuster, 1998).

post-modern and technological West the massive presence of numerous little-westernised ethnic groups produces a continuous conflict of values which, in conjunction with the progressive fragmentation of the person²⁰, threatens to undermine the foundations of civil coexistence, which, among its fundamental traits, includes, as seen in relation to the *good citizen*, tolerance²¹. Furthermore, the *good citizen*, by acquiring an increasing and dangerous deconstruction of himself as a distinctive feature, which in some ways brings him back to a Homeric condition, devoid of a true and proper personal identity and subject to divine *possession*²², conforms to the typical logics of the virtualization of the real. In the virtual world, indeed, the person-individual is fragmented and dispersed in provisional and fluctuating identities, within which he projects an ever-changing and unstable self, characterised by a *noncommittal-being-together*²³.

However, while Western culture has developed, throughout modernity, a mindset based on freedom of expression and worship, practising the separation between politics and religion, other civilizations have not evolved in the same direction. Hence, whenever the West argues that the political power bears no right to interfere in religious matters, or that religious ministers, as

²⁰ For a symbolic analysis of the concept of person, cf. Antimo Cesaro, "Il pensiero antico di fronte alla crisi delle istituzioni: l'emergere del concetto di persona", *Heliopolis. Culture, Civiltà, Politica* 1 (2002)

²¹ Voltaire, *Treatise on Tolerance*, trans. Brian Masters (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000); Nicola Abbagnano, "Tolleranza", in *Dizionario di filosofia* (Turin: Tea, 1993).

²² Cf. Cesaro, "Il pensiero antico di fronte alla crisi delle istituzioni: l'emergere del concetto di persona"

²³ Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 131-134; Cf. Bellini, *Cyberfilosofia del potere. Immaginari, ideologie e conflitti della civiltà tecnologica*, 93-107.

such, have no power to directly influence political choices or cannot forcibly tie the population to a specific religious belief, it inevitably clashes with those who do not accept such a worldview²⁴. In particular, it can be quite easily observed how, on this subject matter, since the beginning of the modern era, there has been and there is still a significant conflicting opposition (in a symbolic and empirical sense) between the Western civilization and Islam²⁵, which is expressed as much in the management of foreign affairs as in the internal ones. In Europe, for instance, for historical and geopolitical reasons, this conflict is most intensely felt, so that several countries with an important colonial past, such as France or the United Kingdom, increasingly experience a deep identity crisis which affects the relationships among citizens (or subjects) of different religious beliefs. The presence of Islamic groups, more or less organised, on Western soil causes a political radicalisation of identity values, in an ethnic, national, religious or simply cultural sense, which, in turn, significantly weakens other symbolic components of the imagery of the *good citizen*, including tolerance and respect for institutions and laws. In other words, it is becoming increasingly difficult to mould society on the basis of such a symbolic paradigm; the durability of which, however, is

²⁴ “The State is actually a *society of human beings established only to preserve and promote civilian goods*: that is, life, freedom, bodily well-being and integrity, the possession of external goods etc. Among its duties, then, the care of souls and their eternal salvation is not included... On the other hand, the Church is a *free society of human beings, who spontaneously came together to publicly serve God, in the way they deem it will be the best-received by God himself, in order to promote the health of their souls*. As a free and voluntary society, it cannot compel anybody by force...” (Abbagnano, *Tolleranza*, in *Dizionario di filosofia*).

²⁵ Cf. Paolo Bellini, “Civiltà e conflitto come forme di rappresentazione della realtà”, *Metabasis.it* 18 (2014), accessed May 10, 2016. DOI/10.7413/18281567038

crucial for the proper functioning of the liberal-democratic formula. As it is indeed easy to understand, the stability of every political formula must be founded on its ability to spread within the political body, inducing behaviours consistent with its premises, so that, *de facto*, every ideological option, in order to be effective, must necessarily echo within a political subject that interprets it in the reality of daily life. Otherwise, it turns into a mere object of study, more suitable for a book on the history of political doctrines than for the functioning of institutions and the practices to legitimate power.

The king is naked, like the Emperor in Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale²⁶, the political power in the West reveals its own weakness every time it proves unable to shape a *good citizen*, weaving a dress of liberal and democratic kind that struggles to obtain proper recognition at the social level. This will necessarily force the Western political systems to either influence more effectively the collective imaginary of the political body (exploiting the mass media in all their power and mobilising institutions to reinvigorate the typical values of modern culture) or to reformulate their narrative around the civic virtues, intercepting and digesting the new ideological and identity pressures that populate the social universe. In both cases, more than democracy, as a form of government and power legitimisation, but liberalism itself is at stake, with its political principles and the assertion of individual rights, that, without values like tolerance and respect for institutions, combined with a

²⁶ Cf. Hans Christian Andersen, *The Emperor's New Clothes in Fairy Tales Told for Children. First Collection*, trans. Tiina Nunnally (New York: Viking, 2005). For an analysis of the political symbolism of this fairy tale, cf. Claudio Bonvecchio, "I vestiti nuovi dell'imperatore: un racconto archetipico sul potere", in *Simbolica politica del terzo*, ed. Giulio Maria Chiodi (Turin: Giappichelli, 1996).

conception of the citizen as a person with great stability in terms of symbols and values, run the risk of dissolving into an empty rhetoric which states *de jure* what *de facto* is denied.

Università degli Studi dell'Insubria

(Varese – Como)