Foreword

It is a pleasure and a privilege for me to write a foreword to Luigi Di Gregorio's insightful and most timely analysis of *Demopathy and the Democratic Malaise*. There is a growing recognition that democracy is in trouble around the world, both in the older and well-established democracies and in more recently democratized countries. The current crisis reminds me of the years immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when several scholars invented new terms to describe the Third Wave of Democratization (Huntington, 1991). Collier and Levitsky (1996) identified 60 terms used by political scientists to describe new democracies, all labelled 'with adjectives' in the midst of a conceptual stretching trend. One of these terms was the oxymoronic concept of 'illiberal democracy', which is returning these days (Mounk, 2018) as a dystopian ghost that we should face and try to avoid. In fact, illiberal democracy seems more dangerous now than earlier, because today it is used mainly for some of the older democracies, not only for new ones, as it was in the 1990s.

What are the causes of this alarming development? Many scholars have tried to explain the reasons of the current democratic malaise. Political scientists usually focus on the crises of representation and of political parties, on personalization and leaderization, on disaffection and volatility of the voters, on anti-politics attitudes and populism as increasingly common trends throughout the West. Some authors, more aware of the new crucial role of political communication, have focused their attention on the mediatization of politics. At first the TV and then the Internet and social media are seen as the main elements of a fundamental change in democratic attitudes, behaviours and even institutions. Several studies have investigated the effects of fake news and of the so-called post-truth society on public opinion and its relations with media systems and the political elite.

Demopathy and the Democratic Malaise offers an original contribution to the literature, thanks to its multidisciplinary approach and its clear diagnosis. Luigi Di Gregorio goes deeper (and wider) than other studies. He chooses a hybrid approach in order to explain why and how the Western political systems, media systems and public opinions are all together in a vicious cycle, determined mainly by cultural, social and psychological factors. The basic reason of our contemporary crisis is that the democratic demos has deeply changed. People in Western countries are facing an anthropological transformation. That is why the author argues that democracy is affected by *demopa-*

thy. It is sick because the *demos* is sick. And the *demos* has become inevitably sick from a sort of autoimmune, degenerative pathology which is the outcome of changes that ironically are strongly desired in all advanced societies.

The democratic malaise derives from the long transition to postmodernity: individualization, loss of social meaning, the end of meta-narratives, the crisis of knowledge, institutions and cognitive authorities, narcissism, new perceptions and conceptions of time and space, the triumph of the consumer syndrome and of the totalizing 'throwaway' logic that has by now been applied in every existential sphere. All these concepts and changes are well explained in Chapter 2, at the beginning of the diagnosis. Of course, mass media and technological innovations do not disappear, and they also have a crucial role. They are somehow the drivers of the anthropological mutation. The thesis is that the digital transformation has accelerated the postmodern transition, heightening the logic of the consumer society: instincts, instants, imaginary, mediatic neo-real vs. 'empirical' reality, symbolic politics vs. real policy, widespread personalized truths, new tribalism that characterize mass opinion, dominated by echo chambers and polarization, well powered by algorithms on the Web.

The resulting mediatized and psychological democracy takes on the shape of a permanent 'pollcracy', whose leaders seem to be followers (pursuers of public opinion) and in which public opinion becomes public emotion, to the extent of becoming volatile and unstable in a dynamic instant, seeking instant gratification and characterized by immediate oblivion. This involves a vicious circle: we cannot ask our politicians to be something different from what they are, because they would risk disappearing from our perceptions, going out of (mediatic) sight. If they try to follow seriousness, complexity and competence, they become invisible to our eyes. These are boring things for the 'audience democracy' (Manin, 1997), useless to catch our poor attention; the same applies to the press and the media, which cannot pretend not to care about their market demands for entertainment, bizarreness, triviality, distraction, emotions. Finally, we (the market for both the politics and the media) are what we are, more or less distracted, ignorant, biased, volatile and fickle – more consumers than citizens, as Di Gregorio underlines many times in this book.

Is there any way out? What can be the possible cures of demopathy? The therapies proposed so far by scholars often seem unrealistic. Some of them are discussed in the last chapter of the book, mainly to show their low feasibility and their usual utopian approach. Democracy will not be saved by the fantasy of putting history in reverse gear, evoking the return to an alleged golden age, or by confiding in hyper-rational individuals who do not exist. The latter is another idea quite typical of the last century and it is today disconfirmed both by numerous research findings in cognitive psychology, and even simply by our own day to day experience.

My consociational model, which I have recommended many times in the last decades for deeply divided countries, would have trouble to be applied today in polarized, narcissistic and individualized societies. The consociational logic implies strong and stable cleavages among ethnic and religious groups, to be compensated by political elites and power-sharing institutions. When these stable groups tend to disappear and are replaced by a new tribalism based on ephemeral, intense (but not durable) beliefs and on instant (individual) gratifications, the consociational logic can no longer be counted on. Polarization, fast politics, oversimplification, narratives that shape reality, policies replaced by hyper-communication and announcement effects, new noisy but not durable identities, often with weak roots: there is little space for a consociational attitude for the ruling class, as well as for the media systems and the people. Everything seems to push towards another direction: polarization, fragmentation, individualization, growing mass dissatisfaction. These are real dangers for democratic survival because they threaten any real sense of belonging. Of course, I still hope that there will be sufficient space for consociational democracy to be applied, but the current scenario makes it less viable. The basic conditions, still alive a few years ago, are now falling: our societies seem more atomized than divided, and leaders gain more support by using the tactics of division in the short-run than by using a long-term unifying approach.

Therefore, following Luigi Di Gregorio, there is only one way forward, one evolutionary therapy: do not look back any longer and be aware of what we are. We need to reckon with ourselves. If we don't start from the demos, there will be no democratic cure. Politics, media and citizens are all part of the demos and they share the same vicious cycle.

That is why the last paragraph of the book concerns and describes the 'democracy of the imaginary', which is an attempt to save democracy by using contemporary tools, dealing with the actual democratic citizen and explaining why it would be useless and unproductive trying to go against history and recent social trends. If politics looks like a battle of narratives, we should invest in the 'fictional', trying to produce good narratives to contrast the toxic ones that threaten our democracy.

An old Chinese saying goes: 'When the wind of change blows, some build walls while others build windmills'. That is the spirit of Di Gregorio's therapy: we should work on ourselves to become – and to make our democracies – antifragile (Taleb, 2012) more than resilient, to exploit the changes more than resisting them, since any resistance does not seem to work. Since we are in the new Covid-19 era, this could be even more urgent in the next future. We owe this attempt to ourselves and to our political regimes.

The democracy of the imaginary is a therapy but also a research proposal to join forces of different academic disciplines and to break down existing boundaries, in order to increase and spread public awareness and to face democratic

problems with a feasible cure. It follows a Popperian approach: we study not disciplines, but problems; and problems often transcend the boundaries of a particular discipline.

These are the main reasons why this work offers a convincing analysis that stresses the mutual causation between political leadership, citizens and the media. I am confident that promising (and achievable) cures follow logically from this analysis. *Demopathy and the Democratic Malaise* is an outstanding book that democrats anywhere should pay close attention to.

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