1. Introduction to demopathy and the democratic malaise

This book came into being in university classrooms and electoral ‘war rooms’, research discussions and political consultancy experiences. It’s a result of hybrid skills, study and experience, academic and otherwise.

I began to wonder what democratic politics was becoming when, several years ago, I started to see political leaders who ‘lived to communicate’; spending whole days answering press releases and seeking visibility at all costs, on TV or in newspapers; opening morning meetings by reading newspapers and consequently shaping their political agenda (and their lives) on the splashy titles they’ve just read. It was becoming a politics conceived by thinking about what to say off the cuff, much more than what to do in the longer term, with an agenda totally dominated by the mass media.

In the same years, while I was at work on drafting various electoral platforms, I gradually became aware of their total uselessness. Or rather, if they had some function, it was certainly not the intended one; no citizen reads them. Still, if you ask any voter why they choose one party instead of another, they will answer without hesitation: ‘for the platform!’.

In any case, woe to not having one. Its absence is shocking, automatically becoming a newsworthy topic, and one ends up chasing – and buffering – the news of the non-platform. And the circle, opened by ‘living to communicate’, closes.

In short, I began to wonder about ‘where we’re going’, starting from the mediatization of politics. Not just for having studied it, as above all for having experienced it, as a consultant in a phase already in full permanent campaign mode and as head of Communications of the City of Rome. In my years spent there, I used to say that I worked in an emergency room, in a continual, frenzied search for instant therapies for placing bandages on what were often truly imaginary ailments – or rather, ailments of the popular imagination, made up of media-exaggerated realities and expectations ‘nobbled’ by instant mass media logic.

Instincts, instants and imagery are three keywords of this work. In my opinion, they perfectly sum up the killer applications of contemporary society – and consequently, of politics. Anyone who doesn’t work on instincts – that is, on emotions/perceptions – in a very short-term perspective and without build-
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ing on a powerful narrative, is cut off, in any sector. Whether it’s a company, a party, a pop star or a consumer product, nobody can help but think in these terms and build a story and an image profile tailored to these ‘needs’.

But, if so, what has happened to the rational consumer and voter, democracy as the realm of communicative action and informed public opinion, the Web as a harbinger of collective intelligence? How come post-truth, fake news, populism, narcissism, political marketing, echo chamber and polarization dominate public debate in an eternally inconsistent, explosive and ‘fragmented’ present? And why does democracy struggle in terms of performance and legitimacy just when it seemed triumphant and devoid of viable alternatives in most of the world?

It’s what I try to answer in this work. And the thesis is as follows. Democracy is afflicted by demopathy. It is sick because the demos has become sick.

Being a pathology (or at least a malaise), this book is structured along the lines of a ‘clinical’ model. The patient is liberal democracy.

Part I focuses on the symptoms of the contemporary democratic crisis: decline in voter turnout, increased electoral volatility, increased number of parties, reduced duration of governments, growth in the use of the tools of direct democracy, explosion of populist parties and leaders, which add to the by now ‘classic’ indicators of the decline of confidence in politicians, parties and representative institutions. Most of these indicators are based on data for the 1945–2015 period, in 19 European democracies.

As we’ll see, democratic governments are going through a highly critical phase both on the input side (participation and representation) and on the output side of the political system (sovereignty, efficacy, efficiency, in a word, accountability). In practice, we’re in a vicious circle with no apparent way out.

Part II deals with the diagnosis of the democratic malaise. Unlike most works of political commentary, mine tries to explain the current critical phase by using not so much political as cultural and psycho-social variables, interpreted in diachronic terms. My basic thesis, to repeat, is that democracy is sick because the demos is sick. And the demos has gotten ‘inevitably’ sick (a sort of autoimmune and degenerative pathology) because its pathology derives from the long transition to postmodernity. That means individualization, loss of social meaning, end of meta-narratives, crisis of knowledge, institutions and cognitive authorities, narcissism, new perceptions and conceptions of time and space, triumph of the consumer syndrome and totalizing logic of the ‘throwaway’ mindset, end of public places and the proliferation of non-places.

The main drivers of this transition have been (and still are) the mass media, interpreted according to McLuhan’s idea that the medium is the message. The media of the electronic age and its digital sub-phase have accelerated the postmodern transition by increasing the victorious logic of the consumer society; instincts, claims, imaginary, mediatic neo-real perceived as more relevant than
actual ‘empirical’ reality, symbolic policies and stagey announcements that outrank concrete policies and implementation. The democracy that derives from this, mediatized and personalized, seems rather a permanent pollcracy, whose leaders take on the guise of followers (pursuers of public opinion) and in which public opinion looks more like ‘public emotion’, so much has become volatile and fickle in an instantaneous dynamic. All this gives rise to a ‘cannibal ceremony’ that progressively makes mincemeat of professional politicians and opens the doors of parliaments and governments to droves of outsiders, often convinced by a generalized Dunning-Kruger effect that they can do better than their predecessors. Politics has become so delegitimized and hyper-trivialized in the media that anyone thinks ‘I can do it’ even without experience or expertise. Indeed, having no experience becomes an additional weapon, a moral virginity guaranteeing results in the eyes of citizens.

However, the cannibal ceremony is no exception, because it’s intrinsic to the consumer syndrome; anyone gains consent exclusively by making a splash and promising a ‘big rock candy mountain’ with a wilful, unwavering posture, but ends up failing to maintain the level of emotional mobilization for the long haul, and is trashed and forgotten by citizen-consumers over a constantly shorter time. Wilfulness thus becomes unrealistic and the spiral of delegitimization proceeds inexorably towards a true democratic depression.

Part III deals with therapy. After listing and analysing several attempts to get out of the current phase of democratic reflux already present in the literature, I propose a therapy that doesn’t look to the past (a ‘retrotopia’, to use Bauman’s term) and that isn’t clearly utopian in this historical and psycho-social scenario. It is a functional therapy that could be called ‘democracy of the imaginary’. If politics is becoming predominantly a battle of narratives in a context in which the media’s ‘augmented reality’ prevails over data and facts, and in which truth is now ‘personalized’ and hyper-fragmented, truth must be manipulated to sell it. Liberal democracy must be defended by building a positive narrative that isolates and counterbalances the effects of ‘toxic’ narratives. In other words, we must work to find a way out of the crisis that doesn’t contradict psycho-social and cultural tendencies but is in harmony with them. We should do it exploiting contemporary trends – those that in many ways have produced the demos sickness – in order to reverse this critical direction. It’s the terrain of marketing, cognitive psychology, neuroscience, storytelling: this is the only field that can any have real effects, by paradoxically investing in the ‘fictional’. We live in the realm of the perceived and in the society of sensation-seeking, where what triumphs is Thomas’s theorem: ‘if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’. This was already clear before mass society. See, for example, Napoleon, ‘The truth is not so important as what people think to be true’. However, our digital, fast, consumeristic and disoriented life seems the best field to reinforce this old truth.
We have no other alternative than to invest in defining reality and have faith in the consequences.

A final preliminary remark concerns what’s new in comparison with the Italian version, published in April 2019. Several parts of the book have been updated and modified. In particular, some months after the first publication the world started to deal with a pandemic disease, and we are still in the midst of the fight against it. Of course, the English version, published in 2021, could not pretend like nothing happened. That’s why the Afterword of the book focuses on Covid, trying to consider the impact of the pandemic on us and on democracy. I consciously use the verb ‘trying’ since I’m aware of the fact that we still don’t know how much this ‘black swan’ will change things. Many scholars are investigating this impact, but it’s too soon to state that Covid is a game changer or, on the contrary, that it’s just a footnote in history. For this reason, the Covid Afterword is written in a problematic way, leaving open various options for the next future. That said, following the main thesis of the book, I’m sure that this pandemic disease has produced a sort of ‘global perception bubble’ which has significantly altered our sense of reality. The pandemic has dominated our media and political agenda from the beginning and has created a mass psychosis that does not help unbiased evaluations. If that is true, it will likely not be a revolutionary event, especially if we’ll be able to get out of it within a reasonable time. It will change several things, but it will probably not change the underlying long-term trends identified and listed in this book.