The European crisis: between reality and misunderstandings

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In the last forty years we have seen an increasing gap between the growing importance of the European Union as an economic and political power and the participation of the EU citizens in the elections. The *voter turnout* has decreased from 62% in 1979, when the citizens of the member States voted for the European Parliament for the first time, to 43,09% in 2014, when the EU citizens voted knowing the candidates for the Presidency of the European Commission. There are many open questions concerning the reasons of this declining popularity. This article aims at investigating them by analyzing the parties and media communication, with a special focus on the role of nationalist propaganda within the general idea of a "crisis of the western democracies".

1. "Crisis" is everywhere: a short overview on recent theories of crisis

There is no other concept in political and social sciences that has acquired as much notoriety as the word crisis (Merkel, 2013: 2). Indeed, since the 1970s many scholars have analyzed how and to what extent crises affect our economic, political and social systems. Habermas (1973; 1975), for instance, spoke about the "legitimation crisis in late capitalism", warning about the effect of this situation on the long-term sustainability of our model of life. According to Habermas this kind of crisis generates a reaction in the citizens causing a "*mass withdrawal of support from formal democracy*", for example, in terms of diminishing electoral participation, and conducing to a "*motivational crisis*" that first of all affects the civic ethics in terms of "*a rejection of normative principles of the whole capitalist and democratic order*" (Merkel, 2011; 2013). In almost the same years Claus Offe (1972) proposed other crisis theories, and one of the most influential issues at international level was published by Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki (1975) and entitled "*Crisis of Democracy*". According to Merkel (2013: 7) "*the most influential critical debate about the state of democracy of the recent years has unfolded in the course of the* post-democracy *debate*". The reference is to

the concept elaborated by Rancière in 1995 and then extensively developed by Colin Crouch (2004) in order to conceptualize the progressive loss of substance of Western democratic institutions and practices, and their transformation in mere simulacrum.

All those approaches share a realistic, or rather pessimistic, view of the state of democracy: do they correctly show the current situation? If one agrees with Merkel (2013: 2) "*democracy is inconceivable without a crisis*". What does it means exactly? According to Zagrebelsky (2008) democracy is an open system willing to correct itself, and democratic life is a continuous research process based on the continuous confrontation between ideas and perspectives. This is particularly true in societies where the share of well-educated people and the access to multiple sources of information is growing up strongly. Nowadays the problem is that this endemic crisis of the democracy takes place in a pervasive context of multiple and systemic crises.

2. Democracy in contemporary world: a short overview of some empirical evidences

If democracy is in crisis, how may we explain the continuous increase in the number of democratic regimes all over the world since the 1970s? In brief, despite continuous internal criticism, democratic regimes are still more desirable than others because they provide protection and security to their citizens together with freedoms and rights, at least in principle. According to Freedom House (2013; 2014), a free country is "*one where there is open political competition, a climate of respect for civil liberties, significant independent civic life, and independent media*". The idea of "freedom" embodies a set of normative and practical elements, going beyond "free elections" and "free competition" in politics or in the economy. Therefore a "non free country" is "*one where basic political rights are absent, and basic civil liberties are widely and systematically denied*" such as in a dictatorship. Against this background, according to the Freedom House Report (2013), the number of free countries with democratic regimes has grown up from 44 in 1972 to 90 in 2012, while the number of not free countries has decreased from 69 in 1972 to 47 in 2012.

A further interesting category is that of "partially free countries", defined by Freedom House as "one in which there is limited respect for political rights and civil liberties. Partly Free states frequently suffer from an environment of *corruption, weak rule of law, ethnic and religious strife, and a political landscape in which a single party enjoys dominance despite a certain degree of pluralism*" (Freedom House Report, 2013). Fifty eight countries in 2012 were still in transition from not free to free countries. In Europe, for instance, according to this classification, some countries are still "partially free"; this is the case of Ukraine and Moldova that are formally "electoral democracies" though they are not considered fully free yet.

3. The European Union and its democratic crisis

We have so far clarified the idea of "crisis" in democracy and explained how many political scientists have debated this concept about the growing of the democratic regimes around the world, as an example of attractiveness despite the critical aspects defined by the theorists of the crisis. It is well known that a crisis is an element inside democracies and can be considered an effect of the increasing number of critical citizens (more aware about the society and well educated).

More recently those kinds of analyses, addressing the simultaneous crisis and expansion of democracy at global level, were focused on the specific European context (Courch, 2013; Garton Ash, 2012; Sen, 2012). Nevertheless, behind the sometimes rhetorical speeches on the crisis of the European democracy, or on the "democratic deficit" of the EU institutions and politics, there are many other elements which need to be discussed. In the lack of popularity of the European Union we may recognize, at least, three fundamental reasons. First, the high complexity of the EU as political and economical entity, which may produce a lack of transparency and accountability; second, a strong process of de-legitimation through the implementation of controversial policies and the production of anti-EU speeches by national parties and media; third, the increasing awareness that democratic regimes cannot deal perfectly with everything.

3.1. The complexity of the EU

Very few European citizens know for certain what are the EU institutions and their competences and powers and, more important, *what they actually do*. There is still confusion about the European institutions, their peculiarities and their functions. When the Treaty of Lisbon came into force in 2007, the EU changed its governance. The so-called "triangle" provides the main institutions of the new EU:

1. the European Commission that represents the executive body with an almost-monopoly of the legislative power, in terms of promoting and implementing EU law;

2. the European Parliament that is the only one to be directly elected by people and has two main tasks: a) to elect the President of the EC, b) to exert the legislative power with the Council of the European Union (CEU) and to define the EU Budget (with the CEU).

3. the Council of the European Union, an institution composed by the national government ministers, often confused with the European Council, composed by the Head of States and Prime Ministers of the Member States.

In addition, there is the European Court of Auditors (ECA), the European Central Bank (ECB) and, the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU). The CJEU plays a very important role in the democratization process of European laws and institutions, especially in the implementation of the human rights regime incorporated in the EU Treaties. In particular,

national courts can ask the CJEU to solve controversies, and clarify the purposes and meanings of the EU laws in relation to national legislation and the EU Treaties.

Hence there are many different institutions, with similar names but with rather different competences and functions, interacting with each other, and with national governments, Parliaments and courts. A kind of multi-level, flexible structure which can hardly be defined "*user friendly*". The complexity of this governance makes citizens watch at European institutions as a "monster of bureaucracy", contributing to the "lack of popularity" of the EU. This high level of complexity is also one of the reasons of the opacity of the decision-making and political process of the EU.

3.2. The role of communication in disaffection against EU

Complexity is linked with the idea of opacity, as Marconi and Lloyd (2014) show in their analyses on the relationship between media and the EU. In fact, "communication" plays an important role in the misunderstanding of the European institutions, according to the second hypothesis on the "lack of popularity" of the EU. Moriconi and Lloyd (2014) argue that a "debate on the legitimacy of the EU's action has always existed (…) but it has never reached the current peak". Behind this debate there is this link between the complexity of the institutions and the opacity of the decisions made by politicians and experts. Many speak about the "secret rooms" where few take decision that affect the life of many without any kind of accountability and control.

This issue has many other implications. First, more and more people are only sporadically interested in politics and public institutions such as those of the EU. Important decisions are usually taken in secret negotiations between Head of States or unknown persons: who knows the names and the curricola of the Eu Commissars and/or their staff? There is also a distorting information provided by some nationalistic Parties or some tabloid newspapers or television such as the Daily Mail and the Sun in UK (Moriconi and Lloyd, 2014).

Many political parties and politicians use the media to argue that the economic (and the political) crisis is the result of incorrect, anti-popular European policies. EU is thus depicted as a hostile entity, far away from citizens and their needs, interested in draining resources and maintaining budgetary balances, without any concrete plan of action in order to end recession and enhance the welfare of the European population as a whole. It is worth noticing that national parties evoke the EU in different, even contradictory ways, in their speeches. In Italy, for instance, regardless to the color of the ruling government, when they have to cut on public expenditures or to impose higher taxes in order to reduce the debt, they argue that "*the EU is asking us to do so*". Nevertheless, when some beneficial or progressive measures have been adopted at European level, they are not recognized and presented as such but as "*the result of an effort of the government*" which "beat his fists on the table". This kind of rhetoric was used by Silvio Berlusconi, Mario Monti, Enrico Letta and lastly also by Matteo Renzi.

The impact of this kind of discourses, together with the effects of the economic and financial crisis exploded in 2008, and the implementation of austerity measures and "structural reforms", was evident in the last European elections. The right-wing and anti-EU parties improved their consensus more or less across all Member States. The nationalist propaganda enacted by many parties obtained good electoral results in Germany, France, United Kingdom, Greece, Austria, Denmark and Hungary. The anti-Europe propaganda is not the only element that can explain the success of these movements and the growing lack of popularity of the EU.

3.3. The anti-Europe propaganda and the issue of "stolen sovereignty"

People still believe that the EU affects their lives much less than national States or regions (Eurobarometer, 2012 n.77 and 78). Nevertheless, if we consider the growing impact that European policies and legislations have on national arenas, especially after 2008 in the crisis management, the idea that "Europe is too far" from our lives and interests appears not only as a myth but also as a paradox. The problem is not how far Europe is from the citizens but the fact that the efforts done and the measures adopted to face the crisis have failed and have determined a declining trust in the European Institutions. Nevertheless, European citizens' expectations are still high especially on two topics: unemployment and economic crisis (Eurobarometer, 2012 n. 77). Hence, a share of the EU population agrees to say that EU is now a problem and not a solution (at least according to the results of the elections, in terms of growth of eurosceptic parties): why?

The financial crisis played a very important role. Since 2008 European countries have fought against one of the worst economic and financial crisis that the West has ever faced. In the South of Europe the unemployment rate has been dramatically increasing and in the North of Europe right wing parties are using this situation in order to create nationalistic and xenophobic reactions. According to Grazzini (2014) the economic crisis in Europe has evolved into a crisis of the Euro, whose solution can be found only in a new form of monetary sovereignty by member States. Nevertheless, he suggests to reconsider the democratic function of sovereignty without renouncing to the Euro as a common currency: a critical position against the Euro, without nationalistic intensions, as it is the case for many right-wing and populistic parties such as the Five Star movement and the Northern League in Italy, the National Front in France, and Alternative for Germany, which support a full monetary independence of the member States.

The EU has faced the crisis mainly through the so-called "austerity measures", which created more problems than solutions (Truger and Paetz, 2012). Austerity, mainly by Germany, was harshly criticized in Southern Europe, especially in Greece, Italy and Spain, where "structural reforms" and cuts in public expenditures, public work, and public services contributed to a strong recession and to the inability to revive the economic cycle. Luciano Gallino (2014), for instance, wrote recently about the "dictatorship of the EU" focusing on

the "stolen sovereignty" of the Member States and the negative effect of the so-called "Fiscal Compact" that forces States to reduce their debt to the 60% of the current GDP: a very difficult, rather impossible target for countries like Italy, Greece or Spain, but also for France.

Finally, in this tense scenario, after the last European elections the Socialist European Party joined the European Popular Party in order to support a moderate version of the austerity measures. This may have reinforced the "lack of popularity" of the EU: citizens can hardly understand this kind of cooperation between political competitors, as explained by Nobel Prize Paul Krugman (2014).

4. In search for another Europe

According to Colin Crouch (2013: 40) there are at least "*three ways in which Europe can attempt to meet the challenge of post-democracy*" and thus also of the crisis: institutional reforms, in order to simplify the complexity and ambiguity of the EU institutions; party re-orientation; social investments to assure the welfare state, with a special focus on youth.

4.1. Was this time different?

 The last European elections have offered a new chance to redesign the idea of Europe, in terms of a more democratic one because, for the first time, almost each European political family (or group) designated a candidate and presented him/her to the European citizens. For the first time the European Council, whose task is to propose the President of the Commission to the EU Parliament, have to take into account the will of the European voters. The agreement between EPP and PES on the President candidate of the EPP should be interpreted, according to the official declaration, as a defense of this principle of transparency and accountability: only one of the candidates must be chosen as President.

Unfortunately, as Crouch foresaw (2013: 41), the nomination of the Commission may also be a strong way for the more powerful States to control what happens in Europe, and a Commission entirely elected by the EU Parliament (a common rule in parliamentary democracies) would be difficult to accept. This really happened during the last months with Cameron's opposition to Jean Claude Junker, the winner of this EU competition.

4.2. Rebuild parties and reshape participation, including through the Internet

 The new media haven't created a "passive citizenship" and that really matters in such a historical moment. According to Crouch (2013: 41) "thanks partly to the Internet, our present period is witnessing a great wealth of campaigns and movements" and though the new media cannot be the instrument through which we can change the world, nevertheless we can find new ways to be interconnected and politically active. It is important not to overlap the idea of a "new form of participation" with a "new form of democracy": "*in the socio-*

cyberspace citizens (at the same time users of the websites) are experimenting a new innovative form of political participation, a digitalized and multimodal participation (from mobiles, from television, from social media), to the political choices".

There is an interesting case-study concerning this idea: the PES European campaign called #knockthevote, which involved thousands of volunteers all around Europe from all the national parties of the European socialist family such as the PSOE in Spain, the PD in Italy, the SPD in Germany, the PS in France, etc. Using the hashtag #knockthevote on twitter the European socialist and democrat volunteers started a European, multilingual and intercultural campaign. From virtual to reality. It is the meaning of the "new form of participation" starting from virtual dimensions, creating consensus and mobilizing energy that can be reversed in the reality. Only in this way the political interest and participation can be re-shaped. The target of this campaign was to reach as many people as they could in order to talk with them about Europe, the future of this project and in order to ask about their expectations.

4.3. Leading the future

The economical and financial crisis has left behind lots of ruins and it is the duty of the EU institutions to cooperate with the Member States in order to rebuild a new social welfare. In a easy way, quoting again Colin Crouch, it's time to "*get millions of people back to work*" and the only way to achieve this result is to reject austerity measures, as suggested by many critics.

As far as the functioning of the EU itself is concerned, some points should be still clarified. The anti-Europe propaganda usually refers to the EU as an expensive and badly organized entity. On the contrary, according to the EU data the European Budget represents only 1% of the National budgets, and it *"is always balanced, which means no single euro is spent on debt. And 94% of what is paid into the EU budget is spent in Member States on policies and programs that benefit citizens directly*". Moreover, the costs of maintenance of the EU are really low, less than 6% of the entire EU Budget. Money in the EU is re-invested in many key-sectors such as agriculture, rural development, environment and fisheries (41,6% of the EU Budget) and the Economic, social and territorial cohesion (33%).

By deepening and expanding this role, the EU can provide support to many kinds of projects ranging from the contrast to unemployment, to the support of training and mobility programs, to Erasmus, or even to the environmental security of our territory. In order to gain back trust, a priority should be the fight against youth unemployment and the support of the so-called "Youth Guarantee": a new approach which ensures that all young people under 25 – whether registered with employment services or not – get a good-quality, concrete job offer within 4 months after leaving formal education or becoming unemployed, through paid apprenticeship, traineeship, and other similar active policies.

Conclusion

In order to have a future beyond the crisis and maintain *peace*, both in the sense of absence of conflicts and of social justice, the EU should involve people in the political life and in the decision processes, including crucial matters such as the economic and the financial governance. Real participation is something radically different from going to the polls during the elections. Unless people "feel" their European citizenship as a worthy form of belonging, votes do not express any useful meaning. European citizens have the right to make their own history instead of being the target of austerity measures they had no chance to discuss.

For European people today peace means the certainty of a job, the possibility to study and to travel freely through the boundaries, and the chance to decide on their own future. The conviction is that people want to participate, but only if they feel that they are not wasting time and energy.

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