# The Contemporary Crisis of Representative Democracy

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Is there a crisis of democracy? At one level democracy is always in crisis, and as authoritative historians of representative democracy note (Manin 1997; Rosanvallon 2011), there has never been a period in the evolution of representative democracy when someone somewhere has not declared democracy to be in crisis. What is unusual in the current conjuncture is the degree of consensus underpinning the analysis. In the past those that shrieking "fire!" tended to be in a minority – oddball figures, radicals, zealots. Today, it would be easier to assemble those who *didn't* think something fundamental was amiss than those who did. Political scientists, not noted for alarmist tendencies, huddle in conferences entitled "Representation and Renewal", "Is the party over?", and so forth.[1] A minor publishing industry has sprung up to examine the contours of the crisis, and where it is heading. Texts already pick over the entrails of the "dead" democratic body and our "post-democratic" future (Crouch 2004; Keane 2009; Della Porta 2013). Nor is the sense of crisis confined to those with a particular political leaning. Liberals, Conservatives, Marxists agree that at some level or other representative democracy is in the doldrums. Where they disagree is what to do about it. But let's ponder for a moment what is peculiar about this particular conjuncture.

*Contours of a crisis*

What we can note is that the various measures used by political scientists to measure the health and well-being of representative democracy are on a downward trend. Amongst the measures, four standout: *voter turnout, party membership, trust in politicians, interest in politics*. As regards voter turnout, what is becoming ever more evident is that we are becoming reluctant voters (Dalton 2004; Hay 2007). This is highly marked at moments in time or in contexts where voting little seems to be at stake. On the other hand, where voters perceive a lot to be at stake, then we can see an upturn (Wessels 2011). However, the general tendency is clear. The golden age of voter turnout was half a century ago, and since then we have seen a fairly steady decline more or less across the board as far as the advanced democracies are concerned.

Perhaps more telling measure of the decline of representative democracy is the decline of *party membership*. Parties are the crucial point of mediation between citizens and the institutions of governance and thus a vital measure of health as far as political engagement is concerned. Again, the picture is clear (Mair and Van Biezen 2001; Van Biezen, Mair et al. 2012). In the 1960s it is common to see around 30% of the voting population in the advanced democracies as members of political and parties. Today we see a fraction of that figure, and often as low as 1 to 2% of the voting population. Citizens are deserting political parties in droves. The result is that parties are forced to huddle up to other sources of financial support, notably corporations and private benefactors. This feeds the problem of distance from the ordinary citizen creating a vicious circle. The closer they get to business, the less they seem to care about the needs and wishes of the ordinary voter – or indeed party member.

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[1] Respectively the titles of the American Political Science Association Annual Conference 2012 and the UK Political Studies Association Annual Conference 2013.

This in turn feeds the third variable, which is the *declining trust* in politicians. Survey after survey shows that we hold politicians in near complete contempt (Goot 2002). A recent survey in Australia found that only 4% of citizens thought that politicians could "almost always" be trusted.[2] Another survey placed politicians in last place amongst a basket of professionals that included second-hand car salesman, lawyers and estate agents. The very word "politician" has become a byword for sleaze, self-serving, narcissism and incompetence. Long gone are the days when politician meant "public servant", and when public service meant putting to one side one's own needs and interests in favour of that of the collective. The phenomenon has given rise to the emergence of populist anti-politics. Some of the great political successes of the last decade or so, the Tea Party, the Five Star Movement, the UKIP Party- are led by figures who trade on contempt for political elites.

Finally, we need to mention *interest in politics*. Whatever measure one cares to choose whether it be the number of pages in the newspapers devoted to coverage of mainstream politics, the number of hours broadcast on the popular or mainstream media devoted to elections in Parliament, or the general knowledge of ordinary citizens, the picture is bleak (Bennett 1998; Corner and Pels 2003). We no longer care about politics is this is usually defined. Citizens have turned their backs on the affairs of politicians, except of course when that can be read literally, as sexual affair. We are interested in mainstream politics when it is a story wrapped in a negative: when it shows politicians in a bad light, doing bad things to bad ends.

*Democrats against democracy*

So at one level, it is now a truism to note that democracy is in crisis. Yet this is not the whole story. As Wolfgang Merkel and others have rightly pointed out, when citizens are asked in broad terms about whether they support democracy and democratic institutions they tend to agree – often strongly (Alonso, Keane et al. 2011). There is no real challenge to the hegemony of "democracy" in the contemporary imaginary. Rather we should be interested in the crisis of actually existing *representative* democracy, a democracy that rotates around politicians, elections, parliaments. This kind of democracy *is* in crisis – though saying that should not be taken as implying that there is any likelihood of representative democracy disappearing soon. It won't. One of the virtues of representative democracy according to advocates like J.S. Mill is, paradoxically, that it barely needs us, the *demos*, at all. Whether 80%, 60% or 10% of citizens turn up to vote does not affect the capacity of the system to reproduce itself. We need to be careful therefore not to assume that a decline in engagement equates to systemic crisis. If the cause of the current crisis is *apathy*, as many believe it is, then this might as well be read as a help to the system. Apathetic citizens are citizens who pose little threat to elites but rather who can be watched, governed, taxed, pushed around with impunity. Democracies are not going to collapse because citizens are reluctant to turn up to vote or join political parties.

So we're in a particular *kind* of crisis - less a crisis that threatens the ability of the system to reproduce itself, so much as one in terms of public engagement with party-

[2] "Mapping Social Cohesion" report by the Scanlon Foundation, which can be found at http://www.scanlonfoundation.org.au/docs/2013_SocC_report_final.pdf

based liberal democratic politics.  Representative democracy looks exhausted, feels exhausted. Why?

Much of the stress in current commentary lies on short term or contingent factors: New Public Management, the rise of neoliberalism, the decadence of the current crop of politicians, and so forth (Hay 2007; Flinders 2012).  It's for this reason that many normative democratic theorists believe that with a few tweaks here and there, democracy can be restored to vigour. I think we should be more cautious in our assessment.  This is a crisis located in longer term structural and technological changes that are now beginning to be felt in the political field as well as the economic and social where the transition to 'reflexive" or "second" modernity is well documented.

Representative democracy is a product of the modern imaginary. This in turn is built on a series of relatively simple propositions. These include the idea of the *nation state* as a relatively homogenous and distinct territorial entity. It also includes the idea of *sovereignty* as something located in the state and which can therefore be held and possessed in the manner of a tool or resource. Integral to the idea of representative democracy is the idea that power is exercised in the name of *the people*, or rather its representatives. The exhaustion of representative democracy correlates to the progressive irrelevance of this particular image of how power and politics works under contemporary conditions.

As is well documented in the social theory and sociological commentary on the evolution of modernity, these building blocks of our understanding of the political landscape are waning in terms of their utility (Harvey 1989; Beck 1997; Habermas and Pensky 1998). We are steadily and inexorably moving towards complex territorialities, complex sovereignties, and complex non-or post identities.  As regards the first, much obviously has been written about the impact of globalisation on the integrity of the nation state. The reality for most nations in the world is that they increasingly rely on regional alliances, blocs, coalitions, all of which press against the image of the post-Westphalian state. The nation state may have a certain resonance for certain purposes: but citizens increasingly understand that for much of the time and for many purposes, the action is elsewhere.

This in turn impacts on the nature of sovereignty.  The image of the autarchic self-governing community at the heart of a certain image of democracy is fading. It's not just a matter of territorial or geographical interdependence, but the nature of global capitalism that for a large part operates beyond and outside the jurisdiction of discrete states (Crouch 2004; Hay 2007). This is not the same as saying that states are unimportant, or that they have no power. What it means is that the fate of ordinary citizens is much less dependent on the decisions of national politicians and much more dependent on the decisions of a welter of transnational corporations, money markets, derivatives traders, international agencies and so on. All of these agencies exercise power. They all have an impact on what it is that states can do and must do under threat of sanction.

Globalisation has also impacted the integrity and plausibility of 'the people" as the subject of democratic deliberation and procedures (Rosanvallon 2008). The idea of a people as an actor or agent in its own fortunes was always more myth than reality, but

at least held some plausibility in the minds of ordinary citizens in an era of relatively homogenous ethnicities and nationalities. As transnational migration, decolonisation, and the diaspora effects of various political and economic processes speeds up, so the impact at the metropolitan core so this singular image of the people is undermined. Leaders stand Canute-like in the face of these forces seeking ways of instilling "patriotism", loyalty and a sense of national pride in their increasingly bemused or indifferent citizenry.

*The end of representative politics*

In the wake of these changes, it should be little surprise to find that the energies of the most politically active parts of the citizenry have moved away from a preoccupation with capturing power at the nation state level to enact a comprehensive programme or manifesto – the rationale of party-based representative politics. Today's activisms and political initiatives are better encapsulated in terms of *contesting injustice* whether it be issues around migration, or climate change, sweatshops, animal rights, austerity or whatever. Alongside this changing disposition is the adoption of repertoires of activism that dispense with the party in favour of flatter or more "horizontal" styles of interaction based on networks (Castells 2012; Cadwalladr 2013; Micó and Casero-Ripollés 2013). This tendency, which has become increasingly evident over the past three or four decades, has been further catalysed by much commented upon developments in ICT and social media (Shirkey 2009; Hill 2013; Mason 2013). In effect we are seeing a revolution in terms of the manner and style of political mobilisation away from people and parties that represent towards styles and forms of politics that seek to draw attention to and contest injustices.

Under second or reflexive modernity, activists seek out styles and forms of intervention that make a direct or immediate impact in the political field. We are moving from a politics that defends or sustains collective identities towards "individualised collective action". (Micheletti 2003; Micheletti 2003). Flash politics, immediate politics, sit downs, protests, demonstrations. Actions such as these can be coordinated using ICT as opposed to the infrastructure associated with a political party, with permanent offices, a bureaucracy, leaders, a division of labour. But what's becoming evident is that the progressive ease of organising and connecting to others is taking us well beyond a piecemeal style of activism that is content at influencing what representatives do or say, usually termed 'participation" in the political science literature. Recent events in the Middle East, Spain, Turkey, Iceland, Brazil reinforces the sense in which we are beginning to see the emergence of styles of activism that are *insurgent* as well as reforming or participatory. Indeed this "connective" logic now allows for an almost *constituting* energy to emerge in which citizens act collectively to overhaul their own systems of governance, to bring power closer to the populace, to combat opaqueness in decision-making as in the Pots and Pans revolution in Iceland (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). So "combatting injustice" need not imply an issue-based politics or "social movement" style of politics. It can where appropriate lead to a form of politics that seeks an overturning of existing institutions and processes in favour of something more democratic – *Real Democracia Ya*!

As citizens become emboldened to take more matters into their own hands, so those who are elected to represent them come to appear less as representatives and more as

"politicians"; less like one of "us", and more as one of "them", part of the governing apparatus.  As the distance develops between a governing apparatus and citizens so the latter seem to be becoming emboldened to recuperate their own voice, by-passing the traditional structures in favour of "post-representative" initiatives, street initiatives, and latterly pop up parties on an "easy come, easy go" basis.  In Spain for example, 490 new political parties have been created since 2011 (FnfEurope 2013).  The common denominator?  They are almost all parties of protest, anti-party parties, post-political parties: Facebook or Twitter creations with low start up costs.  Just as the internet is undermining the old bricks and mortar retail model, so it is undermining the bricks and mortar *political* model.  Politics is becoming much more a "pick-up", DIY, evanescent activity – and much less a matter of choosing others to speak and act on our behalf.

*Post-representative democracy?*

How to characterise the present conjuncture? On the one hand, there is little threat to democracy either in normative terms, or in terms of the ability of representative democratic systems to reproduce themselves. On the other hand, it is becoming clear that the classic party-based model of political representation is becoming exhausted. The represented increasingly feel less represented by the representatives.  Politically active citizens increasingly want to speak and act in their own names – and not just participate in little deliberative chambers, forums or assemblies designed to give them the impression of gaining "voice". New tools, new repertoires of activism, engagement and mobilisation mean that citizens can organise beyond or outside the mainstream however defined.

Commentators such as Keane, Rosanvallon and Brito Viera and Runciman have remarked in an offhand way that the present moment is "post-representative", and I think that this captures well where we have got to (Brito Viera and Runciman 2008). We can't live with representative democracy, but nor it seems are we ready to move beyond it. We live in a kind of in between world. One political logic seems exhausted, but there seems little sense of appetite for an alternative to representative democracy. Political theorists peddle their wares ("strong democracy", "associative democracy", "deliberative democracy" etc.) to an audience that is by and large oblivious to the representations of intellectuals no matter how well meaning.  The mood is not contemplative or deliberative.  It is angry and resentful.  It seeks to punish politicians, but not to overturn them or to transform democracy itself.  Iceland's revolution did not banish politicians so much as seek to remind them of their obligations and duties. Many of Spain's initiatives are in the name of a "second transition", shorthand for a better, more sensitive model of representation than the blunt electoral system currently on offer. We are, as Rosanvallon notes, in the grip of "counter democracy", a kind of massing of the citizenry against their representatives in a stance of suspicion, disdain, remonstration.  But citizens are not seeking power for themselves. Yet.

This is not, however, to say that we are stuck in a kind of closed loop of a necessarily destructive kind. Many of the key initiatives we see around us are I think *democratising*. They are seeking to bring citizens closer to decision-making, to the power makers, to the point where they can make an impact. Many of these initiatives contest the basic coordinates that inform and underpin representative democracy: the monopoly of power in the hands of a few ("the 1%"), the secrecy and lack of

transparency around how particular processes and institutions work, and the generalised sense of resentment about the direction in which global economic processes are unfolding.

"Post-representative democracy" may thus have the air of something transitional about it, but that doesn't mean that nothing is changing. On the contrary, the waning of the paradigm speaks to a certain recuperation of the sense of democracy as the affair of the *demoi* themselves, not their representatives. It speaks to a recognition that noise, resonance, direct engagement on the streets, in the squares, outside parliaments is *part of* democratic life. As Ranciere points out, this sense of democracy being the affair of "anyone and everyone" used to be held to be intrinsic to democracy, that is before the guardians, technocrats and politicians took over (Rancière and Corcoran 2006). So this is less a crisis of democracy, than a crisis of a particular iteration of *representative* democracy, a democracy of, by and for *politicians*. It's a crisis that may, ironically, be the condition of possibility for the return of some of those elements once held to be indispensable to democracy: dissensus, noise, politics, and the direct involvement of *demoi* – as opposed to those who would represent them.

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