On a cold pre-winter evening in London, November 23, 2019, the celebrated comedian Sacha Baron Cohen was awarded a prize by the Anti-Diffamation League. During the ceremony, he delivered a passionate speech focused on the threats posed by fake news, new media and their intensive stimulation of the emotive sphere of individual citizens, linking it all to the crisis presently hitting Western democracies:

Democracy, which depends on shared truths, is in retreat; and autocracy, which depends on shared lies, is on the march. Today, around the world, demagogues appeal to our worst instincts. Conspiracy theories once confined to the fringe are going mainstream. Hate crimes are surging as are murderous attacks on religious and ethnic minorities. All this hate and violence is being facilitated by a handful of internet companies that amount to the greatest propaganda machine in history (Baron Cohen 2019).

As long as it goes, the speech raises many questions which deserve to be dealt with in academic debates as well. Why do emotions shape the arena of contemporary politics? Are post-truth and polarization the most powerful tools of the populist approach to politics? Do they pose a challenge to liberal democracy? How can we bring back rationality in public deliberation and political discourse?

In this short paper I will try to show how intellectuals are treating these issues, at first sketching briefly the role of emotions both in classical propaganda and contemporary analyses; secondly, I will focus on the dispute regarding post-truth and polarization by connecting these issues to the spread of populism. Additionally I will offer a critical survey of some up-to-date theoretical solutions to those dilemmas and finally try to assess a partial and provisional proposal, hopefully useful to build a working paradigm to take hold of passions and bind politics to a more rational and prospective approach.

Propaganda and Emotions

There is nothing new in the attempt to get rid of rationality and strike the emotional side of our perceptions. Walter Lippmann, in his classical study on public opinion, insisted on the gnoseological weakness of mankind and the persistence of stereotypes which, for a great

number of individuals, were nothing but «an ordered, more or less consistent picture of the world, to which our habits, our tastes, our capacities, our comforts and our hopes have adjusted themselves» (Lippmann 1991 [1922]: 95). This is why war propaganda, in the years of WWI, had revealed so effective, since it was targeted to stimulate an emotional answer through a more or less overt appeal to stereotypes and prejudices.

But it was Edward Bernays to make clear, in some astonishingly explicit statements, that commercial and political communication was increasingly connected and grounded on both individual and collective emotions, shaped by a bunch of professionals:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. […] Trotter and Le Bon concluded that the group mind does not think in the strict sense of the word. In place of thoughts it has impulses, habits and emotions. […] By playing upon an old cliché, or manipulating a new one, the propagandist can sometimes swing a whole mass of group emotions. […] Men are rarely aware of the main reasons which motivate their actions. A man may believe that he buys a motor car because, after careful study of the technical features of all makes on the market, he has concluded that this is the best. He is almost certainly fooling himself (Bernays 1928: 9, 50, 51).

Bernays had learned much from his participation to the celebrated *Committee on Public Information*, created by President Woodrow Wilson in 1917 to persuade American public opinion of the necessity to enter the war. The head himself of the Committee, the journalist George Creel, described its proceedings in terms of an attempt to convey public emotions in an effort to sell a product: the American commitment in WWI (Creel 1920). In fact it was precisely the industry of advertising, both commercial and political, to benefit more and more from the growing challenge to bypass the threshold of rationality.

It was precisely this phenomenon to be denounced by Vance Packard in his well-known book *The Hidden Persuaders*, where he spoke with the loudest voice against «the large-scale efforts being made, often with impressive success, to channel our unthinking habits, our

purchasing decisions and our thought processes» (Packard 1957: 1). The pattern is still valid; something more needs to be added, though.

In the last decades, according to William Davies, the building blocks of modernity have fallen apart. And what we see is a widespread decline of reason in favour of a concrete state of public and private phrenzy:

The modern world was founded upon two fundamental distinctions, both inaugurated in the mid-seventeenth century: between mind and body and between war and peace. These two distinctions appear to have lost credibility altogether, with the result that we now experience conflict intruding into everyday life […] As society has been flooded by digital technology, it has grown harder to specify what belongs to the mind and what to the body, what is peaceful dialogue and what is conflict. In the murky space between body and mind, between war and peace, lie nervous states: individuals and governments living in a state of constant and heightened alertness, relying increasingly on feelings rather than facts (Davies 2019: xi-xii).

But if emotions rule the world, the political impact of this very fact cannot but be huge. Davies explicitly states that «feelings of nostalgia, resentment, anger and fear» were involved in «populist uprisings, as manifest in the victories of Donald Trump, the Brexit campaign and a wave of nationalist surges across Europe» (Davies 2019: xiv). And even though he is prudent and honest in admitting that these are mere symptoms, not the cause of nervous states, he nonetheless depicts a scenario which deserves to be fully appreciated:

Since the late nineteenth century, nationalists have sought to manufacture popular mobilizations by conjuring up memories of past wars and enthusiasm for future ones. But something else has happened more recently, which has quietly fed the spirit of warfare into civilian life, making us increasingly combative. The emphasis on "real time" knowledge that was originally privileged in war has become a feature of the business world, of Silicon Valley in particular. The speed of knowledge and decision making becomes crucial, and consensus is sidelined in the process. Rather than trusting experts, on the basis that they are neutral and outside the fray, we have come to rely on services that are fast, but whose public status is unclear (Davies 2019: xvi).

Therefore, we should address the following question: are post-truth and polarization somehow connected with contemporary populism and fostered by new media?

Post-truth, Populism and Polarization

The phenomenon called 'post-truth' has been defined as «relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief» (Oxford Dictionaries 2016). Quite a controversial definition, indeed, since contemporary philosophy has been teaching us that "facts" and "truth" are very contested concepts (Schantz [ed.] 2002). Aside from the epistemological quarrels, however, Lee McIntyre has correctly suggested that «what is striking about the idea of post-truth is not just that truth is been challenged, but that it is being challenged as a mechanism for asserting political dominance». But it's not just that: «what seems new in the post-truth era is a challenge just not to the idea of knowing reality but to the existence of reality itself» (McIntyre 2018: xiv, 10).

Both points are essential in order to understand why the most relevant political events of the last 5 years are somehow connected to the post-truth paradigm. Quoting again from McIntyre's brilliant research:

With the largely fact-free campaign over Brexit in Great Britain – where hundreds of buses advertised the bogus statistic that the UK was sending 350 millions euros a week to the EU – and the growing use of disinformation campaigns by politicians against their own people in Hungary, Russia, and Turkey, many see post-truth as part of a growing international trend where some feel emboldened to try to bend reality to fit their opinions, rather than the other way around. This is not a campaign to say that facts do not matter, but instead a conviction that facts can always be shaded, selected and presented within a political context that favors one interpretation of truth over another (McIntyre 2018: 5-6).

No surprise that Donald Trump revealed himself a champion of this trend. The day after his inaugural address the White House press secretary, Sean Spicer, told journalists that «this was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, period, both in person and around

the globe» (Spicer 2017). What's the reason behind such a harsh statement? The fact that many international newspapers published a photograph which portrayed the not-so-exciting popular attendance to Trump's inaugural compared to Obama's 2009 (the most attended inaugural so far). The press reacted with both irony and dismay, criticizing the White House's improbable strategy; so that the senior aide to the President, Kellyanne Conway, felt compelled to address the astonished NBC News Political Director Chuck Todd with a sentence that soon became considerably popular: «don't be so overly dramatic about it, Chuck. You're saying it's a falsehood…Sean Spicer, our press secretary, gave alternative facts to that» (Conway 2017).

It is common knowledge that populism plays with a wide range of emotions, in order to flatter 'the people': anger, pride, loyalty, hate, mistrust, insecurity and so many more. Populists, though, deal especially with fear: Ruth Wodak correctly wrote, in her most relevant book, that «currently we observe a normalization of nationalistic, xenophobic, racist and antisemitic rhetoric, which primarily works with fear» (Wodak 2015: x). And yet something new happened in the last few years: populism dances systematically with the denial of facts and dismiss the search for truth as a shared social goal. Why? The Australian scholar Silvio Waisbord recently offered a persuading response:

Populism rejects the possibility of truth as a common normative horizon and collective endeavour in democratic life. […] The root of populism's opposition to truth is its binary vision of politics. For populism, 'the people' and 'the elites' hold their own version of truth. All truths are necessarily partial and anchored social interests. Truth does not exist as collective, common goal. A common truth is impossible given the essential nature of agonistic, conflict-centred politics. Instead, truth-seeking politics entails the reaffirmation of 'popular' truths against 'elite' lies. […] Facts never change the unfalsifiable premise of populism – the eternal division of 'pure people' and 'evil elites'. This conception of politics turns into a political fantasy that cannot ever be proven wrong. Populism dismisses facts that challenge overriding narratives. No matter what happens, populism obstinately clings to the notion that elites are always in power and continue to distort the truth through their institutions. Populism can never be corrected by its critics. […] Preserving a populist, fact-proof narrative is necessary to safeguard the vision that truth is always on one the side and that lies are inevitably on the other side. Facts belong to one or other camp. Facts are not neutral, but they are political owned and produced. Post-truth communication is exactly

where populism wants politics to be – the realm of divided truth, binary thinking, and broken-up communication (Waisbord 2018: 25-26, 30).

This being true, we'd find it easier to understand why populists foster polarization, mostly by means of social media. According to Cass Sunstein, polarization occurs «when members of a deliberating group move toward a more extreme point in whatever direction is indicated by the members' pre-deliberation tendency» (Sunstein 1999: 3-4). Because of polarization a free and fair public debate becomes virtually impossible since citizens are trapped inside the so-called 'echo-chambers'. This is particularly valid when applied to many political communities online, most notably belonging to the alt-right (Neiwert 2017: 213-261). Polarization, of course, shouldn't be confused with partisanship, which Jonathan White and Lea Ypi defined as «a practice that involves citizens acting to promote certain shared normative commitments according to a distinctive interpretation of the public good» and whose goal «is to make their concerns heard in the public sphere so that they may be brought to bear on the course of collective decision making» (White and Ypi 2011: 382). What is more, social media play a significant role in a wide series of collateral phenomena connected with polarization and the poisoning of public debate itself:

How might social media, the explosion of communication options, machine learning, and artificial intelligence alter the capacity of citizens to govern themselves? To the extent that social media allow us to create our very own feeds, and essentially live in them, they create serious problems. Self-insulation and personalization are solutions to some genuine problems, but they also spread falsehood, and promote polarization and fragmentation (Sunstein 2017: 5).

A recent report produced by the European Parliament Research Service (EPRS 2019) set forth a distinction between two types of polarization:

1) polarization by design;

2) polarization by manipulation.

The first is focused on the inner structure of social media and suggest that they «could be driving citizens apart by encouraging the dissemination of increasingly partisan and

emotionally-charged content». But the second is even worse, since social media not only «have proven susceptible to amplifying the reach of polarising and conspiratorial content and spreading it into the public mainstream» but they host «influence campaigns designed to sow division and manipulate the public thrive» by means of «bots, junk news and propaganda». The result is that «these tactics have become entrenched in political discourse where foreign and domestic actors rely on them to influence political life» (EPRS 2019: 17, 24).

Post-truth and polarization, in sum, threaten democracy in so far as they emphasize disruptive emotions in order to manipulate procedures of collective (as well as individual) opinion and decision-making. The question thus now being: how can we anchor politics to a more rational pattern and minimize both the explosion of manipulated emotiveness and the dangers of authoritarian populism?

Two Alleged Remedies: A Critical Survey

Aside from 'technical' interventions (social media self-regulation, anti-fake news/hate speech laws, digital literacy etc.) we can find on the marketplace of ideas a bunch of normative approaches which aim to bring back rationality by means of two principles: knowledge and participation. In this paragraph I will offer a quick but (hopefully) consistent critical survey of the most relevant two: epistocracy and e-democracy.

In his ground-breaking book *Against Democracy*, the American philosopher Jason Brennan argues that we should give epistocracy a try given the (low) epistemic skills of the citizenry. In fact, he distinguishes between three categories of citizens, conceived as ideal types in Max Weber's terms:

1) *Hobbits*: individuals who do not care about politics nor know anything about it. They may sometimes vote but their behaviour is irrational, and their ignorance certified.

2) *Hooligans*: deeply polarized and biased voters. They seek information only in so far as it confirms their political beliefs and «tend to despise people who disagree with them, holding

that people with alternative worldviews are stupid, evil, selfish, or at best, deeply misguided».

3) *Vulcans*: a restricted minority of citizens who «think scientifically and rationally about politics. Their opinions are strongly grounded in social science and philosophy. They are interested in politics, but at the same time, dispassionate, in part because they actively try to avoid being biased and irrational» (Brennan 2016a: 4-5).

Though admitting that the majority of democratic citizens belong to the first two groups, Brennan points out that the final destination of a political regime shouldn't consist in investing Vulcans with power, given the fact that «no one manages to be a true vulcan; everyone is at least a little biased». But he is pretty sure that democratic participation doesn't make us better: quite the reverse, the «most common forms of political engagements are more likely to corrupt and stultify than to ennoble and educate people» (Brennan 2016a: 6, 55), turning most citizens into hooligans. Therefore, we could and should put a strict limit to the damages caused by polarization, the rule of emotions and incompetence:

Consider an alternative political system called epistocracy. Epistocracies retain the same institutions as representative democracies, including imposing liberal constitutional limits on power, bills of rights, checks and balances, elected representatives and judicial review. But while democracies give every citizen an equal right to vote, epistocracies apportion political power, by law, according to knowledge or competence. The idea here is not that knowledgeable people deserve to rule – of course they don't – but that the rest of us deserve not to be subjected to incompetently made political decisions. Political decisions are high stakes, and democracies entrust some of these high-stakes decisions to the ignorant and incompetent (Brennan 2016b).

Epistocracy, then, would put a brake to the disruptiveness of emotions by giving priority, in the participation to decision-making processes, to those individuals deemed rational and competent. Practical solutions may vary – restricted suffrage, plural voting, enfranchisement lottery, epistocratic veto or weighted voting (Brennan 2016a: 15) – but the inner logic is always the same.

On the opposite side of the political and theoretical spectrum, e-democracy theorists clam that digital technologies, and most notably the internet, may help us in re-shaping democracy as a shared practice grounded on the participation of any citizen to debate and decision-making. These beliefs have been cherished since the first days of the digital revolution; so that, for instance, Nicholas Negroponte claimed that «the change from atoms to bits is irrevocable and unstoppable» and that «computing is not about computers anymore. It is about living» (Negroponte 1995: 4, 6). Besides, being digital would have changed the face of politics like never before:

As we interconnect ourselves, many of the values of a nation-state will give way to those of both larger and smaller electronic communities. We will socialize in digital neighbourhoods in which digital space will be irrelevant and time will play a different role. […] While the politicians struggle with the baggage of history, a new generation is emerging from the digital landscape free of many of the old prejudices. These kids are released from the limitation of geographic proximity as the sole basis of friendship, collaboration, play and neighbourhood. Digital technology can be a natural force drawing people into greater world harmony (Negroponte 1995: 7, 230).

The last fifteen years have witnessed a strong and unprecedented «deployment of online decision-making platforms» that «has a clear utopian element» since it is «presented as the means of making politics more democratic and direct» (Gerbaudo 2018: 5). Of course we may find more technical and neutral approaches that focus on a new type of citizen, «surrounded by public administration digital services» and «the transition from his traditional role and behaviour to the new ones» (Ronchi 2019: 2). But the most relevant contributions to the e-democracy paradigm come from the recognition of the highly positive role of «the flexible organizational affordances and mass outreach potential of social media» (Gerbaudo 2018: 6) and digital technology in fostering popular participation both at a party level (such is the case of the platforms provided by Podemos, the Five Star Movement or the German Pirates) and, more broadly, in the realm of direct democracy, all over the world and particularly in Europe (Hennen et al. [ed.], 2020). Online participatory procedures, it is thought, not only will reduce the distance between the people and the establishment, but contribute to the attempt of neutering the emotion-led propaganda practices and bring the voice of public opinion inside the most sacred palaces of power – a reason very close to the one shared by those who support sortition as a means of selecting representatives (Van

Reybrouck 2016).

Unfortunately enough, both epistocracy and e-democracy seem marked by a number of contradictions which would render them unable to stand as useful solutions to the dilemmas above mentioned. As to epistocracy, there is no serious guarantee – like many critics of Brennan's account have duly noted (Christiano 2018: 68-72) – that superior knowledge necessarily imply more rational and less biased decisions, particularly if we forget to consider socio-economic cleavages and their effect on public opinion. What is more, granting every citizen equal political rights might help institutions to 'sterilize' emotions: that's why Hans Kelsen classically praised proceduralism and mutual recognition between majority and minorities as the basis for constitutional democracy (Kelsen 2013 [1920]).

When it comes to e-democracy, we cannot but put forward the obvious reflection that, in absence of any instrument to lead individuals avoiding post-truth communication and polarization fuelled by social media, political participation by means of online platforms will not likely reduce personal and collective biases. This is why some authors have warned that «despite the promise to allow for a more bottom-up involvement in the political process, with authentic engagement from the base of participants in important decisions», it is «more top-down forms of democracy of the representative and plebiscitary kind that have ultimately prevailed in terms of the participation they have attracted and of the political impact they have produced» (Gerbaudo 2018: 127).

What do we need, then, to minimize the influence of post-truth, polarization and any other threat posed to liberal democracy by the predominance of unchecked emotions? In my view, we should try to implement a threefold strategy:

- a long-term perspective embodied in an intergenerational constitutional compact;
- the spread of informed and reasoned participation to decision-making;
- the right to rational and discursive dissent within a democratic institutional arrangement.

A Modest Proposal: The Road Towards Intergenerational Republican Democracy

It is not my aim, in this brief, final section of the paper, to outline a plan able to translate into a comprehensive normative theory, but also to put into practice, the three aforementioned pillars. Rather, I will try to submit some modest suggestions for future attempts to sketch such a model, that I would provisionally label *Intergenerational Republican Democracy*.

As to the first point, it seems to me that the first step towards a more rational approach to politics must include the implementation of an intergenerational perspective in any field of the decision-making process. Intergenerational justice, we should recall, has made a significant comeback in the last decade (Gosseries and Meyer [eds.] 2012; Thompson 2013), substantially driven by the urgency to address environmental issues; but its scope goes even beyond this fundamental concern.

Even though we cannot accept the easy justification submitted by James Madison, according to whom «there seems then to be a foundation in the nature of things, in the relation which one generation bears to another, for the descent of obligations from one to another» since «equity requires it» and «mutual good is promoted by it» (Madison 2006 [1790]: 191), it wouldn't be so hard to agree that an intergenerational, long-term view would suit the scope of rendering collective decisions less subject to manipulation, irrationality and haste. How? For instance, introducing into democratic constitutions the requirement for an *intergenerational political compact*, granting an equitable share to each generation's future expectations in drafting the guidelines of public policy and law-making (even at a constitutional level) while binding every actor to the respect of fundamental human rights already enacted.

But how can each generation contribute to this complex procedure? By means, I would suggest, of a mechanism inspired by the so-called 'deliberative opinion poll' envisaged by James Fishkin (Fishkin 1991 and 1995), which consists in «exposing random samples to balanced information, encouraging them to weigh opposite arguments in discussions with heterogeneous interlocutors, and then harvesting their more considered opinions» (Fishkin and Luskin 2005: 287). The system would bear the advantages of rational deliberation – that is, being informed, balanced, conscientious, substantive and comprehensive – and political equality, since «every citizen has an equal chance of being chosen to participate» (Fishkin and Luskin 2005: 285, 286). This tool was conceived precisely in order to overcome

polarization, misinformation and any other propaganda device, and seems particularly useful to supply policymakers with reasonable (in the Rawlsian sense) contributions, even from an intergenerational standpoint.

This all should be accompanied, in my view, by a series of special provisions which would grant a right to dissent very close to the model of 'democratic contestability' sketched by Philip Pettit, who maintained that «if a constitutionalist system of law is necessary for the promotion of freedom, then it should be clear that something else is needed too». This component may be represented by «the ideal of a democracy based, not on the alleged consent of the people, but rather on the contestability by the people of everything that government does», which practically means providing «systematic possibilities for ordinary people to contest the doings of government», in order «to ensure…that governmental doings are fit to survive popular contestation» (Pettit 1997: 183, 277). Institutionalizing dissent could possibly lead to freeze opposition conceived as a spread of polarized and biased hostility and foster constructive criticism within constitutional boundaries.

Are these approaches theoretically compatible? And will they suffice in establishing a working paradigm? I must confess I have no clear answers – not yet, at least. Likewise, it seems rather hard to make any serious forecast on the possible practical outcomes of the project, nor is this my main purpose right now. I just wanted to shed light on some troublesome challenges for each scholar in the realm of political sciences and start to add another little piece to the intricated puzzle of the long-debated connections between constitutional democracy, public opinion, populism and emotions in contemporary politics.

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