

>DISCONTENT IN POLITICS



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Image: Although the causes and symptoms are different, in all democracies there is a significant discomfort among citizens towards politics.



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Two phenomenon have merged from the political turmoil installed in advanced democracies since the financial crisis of 2008. Firstly, the discontentment of a big part of the population severely affected by a worsened social environment –perfectly valid and comprehensible– and secondly the transmutation of such discontentment into a political *malaise*, or to be more precise the emergence of a clear discontent within politics itself. In this article, we will review the nature and origins of this latter phenomenon to discover it goes back before the crisis and finds its roots in an old bitter resentment towards social democracy in its turn reawaken into a new form of “discontent policies” that dispute the legitimacy of the Rule of Law.

Intro

The following reflections should be considered from a philosophical perspective. For better or worse philosophy doesn't merely represent an immediate and abundant storehouse of solutions, but more like a particular system of thought procedures for posing, outlining and defining problems in a conceptual manner. For the last three decades I've been conducting research enclosing what I could currently describe as “discontent” or “discomfort.” Naturally, this is a very ambiguous term –unreservedly vague to envisage any definite concept. Nevertheless, it has been strategically chosen on account of three main reasons. Firstly, and probably the most obvious argument, is the negative reference to the political project generally known as the ‘welfare state’. Whichever the interpretation of discontent I am trying to diagnose, it is evident that it is controversially connected to the welfare state, and will therefore demand clarification of its present avatars. Secondly, the evocation of Freud's 1930 book *Civilization and Its Discontents*. It must be underlined that the parallelism here is only occasional: my field study does not involve psychoanalytic methodology, therefore my research is not focused in the anthropological sense Freud gives to the term *Kultur*, but rather the cultural sphere in industrial and postindustrial societies where political turmoil is transformed into a ‘culture of discontent’ that particularly rejects the legacies of the Enlightenment meant to guide individuals through knowledge.

The third reason is, by far, the most important of all: it aims to address the vagueness of the term ‘discomfort’: from a nosographic point of view, it describes a slight uncomfortable pain that clinical medicine is unable to treat or cure. Precisely because of the uncertainty of its causes and the variety of its symptoms, modern medicine cannot confront a condition that doesn't seem

to stem from any specific syndrome. In similar ways, social discomfort or discontent has become resistant to the core institutions of the welfare state that should channel political conflicts, among other things because it is found within those same institutions. Therefore social discontents consolidated by policies of discomfort have transformed the public sphere.

The Obvious and the Non-Obvious of the Current Discontent

There is a type of discontent that will not be referred to here: the irritation of populations that have become impoverished, factually or legally, due to successive budgetary adjustments through which some of the most advanced democracies have tried to cut the accumulating public debt.

The 2008 public debt crisis was frequently intensified by the ‘political corruption’ scandals that have come to light during the same period of time. The uneasy feeling shown towards the immorality of politicians, injustice, poverty, or inequality is nothing but a perfectly natural reaction — one that could even be considered socially healthy. Therefore we see the need to reflect on the evolution of this social dissatisfaction into political discontent, or rather, the discontent with and in politics. There is a leap, which is neither obvious nor immediate, in (let us say it with this image) feeling indignation toward the decline in social conditions, versus being ready to vote for a xenophobic political party (or to one that questions the legal framework of representative democracy). This ‘leap’ is precisely what I have decided to analyze.

“THIS TRANSFER OF RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS ‘THE POLITICIANS’ (AND THE RESULTING SENSATION OF INNOCENCE IN THE PEOPLE THAT VOTED FOR THEM) IN THE CAUSE OF AN UNDERSTANDABLE FRUSTRATION THAT LEADS TO SOCIAL DIVISION.”

It is understandable that, before the situation triggered by the financial crisis, certain organizations were ready to capitalize on, politically speaking, that discontent. On many occasions, these organizations described themselves as ‘instrumental’ — meaning they did not have a determinable philosophy of their own in the already-known ideological spectrum (or if they had it, they were ready to shelve it), and that they offered themselves obligingly to the people as more or less neutral instruments (‘not left-wing nor right-wing’ in the usual sense) to politically assemble that discontent. They have generally been instrumental in an even more aggressive manner by trying to exploit discontent for electoral gain. It is worth noting that these organizations would have not reached their current level of success if their ideas had not permeated through a part of the population. The current political parties (in some cases consisting of a century

of tradition) were incapable of offering solutions for this discontent. This idea is far from spontaneous because it is precisely the center-left and the centre-right parties who built the welfare state.

If these 'welfare parties' appeared soon, in the eyes of many voters, as residues of 'old politics' that had to be overtaken, and if it was against these parties that these voters pronounced the slogan "They do not represent us", it was not because they had failed to fulfil the rules of the representative democracy (because, of course, they were, to this end, their legal representatives, as they had been for many years). It was because the supposedly 'instrumental' and 'neutral' organizations (the 'discontent parties') had a very well defined ideology, at least in its negative dimension: namely that the center-left and center-right parties that had taken turns in the government since World War II (or in Spain since the restoration of democracy in 1978) were precisely the culprits responsible for this discontent. This ideology was not proposed to subjects of a dictatorship or to the victims of a tyrannical government, but to citizens of the world most established democracies. By accepting this narrative, citizens were responsible for keeping the 'guilty ones' in power by giving them their vote; and consequently they would also have to accept some responsibility for their own discontent. Acceptance of this kind would have been very unpopular, and it would have hardly reached a relevant impact. How could it be possible, then, that a sector of the population (let us suppose we are talking about the people that has seen their jobs, their economic conditions and their prospects worsen) gets to blame the political parties they have supported for decades without accepting any responsibility for this decline?

To go from "I am not doing well" (or "I am worse") to "politics are guilty for my discontent" needs a middle ground, that is, the breaking of the representational link between citizens and elected officials (symbolized, in the propaganda field, by the aforementioned "They do not represent us:").

In other words, this transfer of responsibility towards 'the politicians' (and the resulting sensation of innocence in the people that voted for them) in the cause of an understandable frustration that leads to social division. Additionally, a part of the electorate that was until recently 'their supporters' are now 'their opponents' that consider the public agents not as representatives of the voters, but as their predators, as the 'instruments' of a privileged social class that has decided to deprive the citizens from their rights and that are, as such, the enemies of the people. This upheaval cannot be explained solely because of the worsening of materialistic conditions or the growth of social inequality because, among other things, although inequality rates are sometimes dramatically pronounced, such as in the early 20th century, in the countries concerned, and despite their flaws, there are still social protection structures that no other society has ever enjoyed. If it has not been possible to substantiate dissatisfaction as it had been done since 1945, for example by the alternation in government of conservatives and

social democrats, it is because the demand of another alternative has become necessary. This is due to a general distrust that is not the discredit of certain policies or of some specific politicians, but a total discontent towards politics, at least, towards what we have been considering 'politics' in the advanced democracies since the end of World War II. And as what we have been considering as 'politics' in this context is, precisely, the Welfare State based on the rule of law, the emerging discontent (although it is marked by the rhetoric of the defense of the law and universal public services) is really a discontent within the welfare state (that is now interpreted as a fraud or an optical illusion).

It is, therefore, a kind of 'political disaffection' that goes beyond the disappointments caused by the illicit enrichment scandals of people holding public office or by the irregular financing of political parties as it points to suspicion, essentially, towards representative democracy. It implies it implicitly because it presupposes that these institutions have been, for more than half a century, a simple 'disguise' for the domination of the privileged over the rest. Furthermore, the economic crisis would only have uncovered its grimmest facet: a domination that would have been exerted through means that outpace the legal and institutional controls of the parliamentary democracies and that, therefore, could only be fought through means that also go beyond this political framework (hence the need for 'new politics').

Streets full of whistles, symbols of opposition to the government's austerity measures in Greece.



Needless to say that, clearly, the success of such an implausible account (in the case of Spain, it entails accepting an objective political continuum between Francoism and the 'regime of 1978') would have been impossible without this other contributing factor: the clumsiness (or maybe the excess of craftiness and tactics) of the political parties that I have called 'the welfare parties'. This foundational negligence, which was being used to take turns in holding onto power with little effort and even less discourse, had become, little by little and to a large extent, electoral machinery. These machinery, when threatened by an unexpected rival, reacted too little and too late, underestimating, scornfully, their rivals in the first place, and trying later to imitate their slogans to stem the leak of supporters which increased ironically the support and credibility of the 'political parties of the discontent'.

As a consequence of all this turmoil we tend to lean towards certain 'anthropological pessimism': the fact that today we speak of 'political disaffection' seems to presuppose that, before the financial crisis, citizens seemed interested in participating in political debates. But, when we see how quickly the (apparent) confidence in social democracy based on the rule of law has become a detestation of the 'political leaders', does this not incite us to think how much patronage there was in this presumed confidence?

It would be an error to think that this discontent is a radically new phenomenon and that it is exclusively related to the recent financial crisis: its roots are much deeper and its history much older.

Social Agreement and Modern Politics

Although we frequently tend to forget, the origin of states based on the rule of law —a rule of law that still confers meaning to our actual understanding of 'politics'—, goes back to the 17th century as the result of endless religious wars which devastated Europe for more than a hundred years. In order to put an end to a dreadful situation, an unprecedented political legitimacy (the so-called 'social contract') was established to pacify identity conflicts and to settle a new frame of cohabitation that would strengthen the forthcoming liberal revolutions. The 'original position' of the social contract — that contains the legal grounds of the liberal state as a form of social organization— posit free individuals ("liberated" from any previous attachment: family, social, military, religious, cultural, ethnic, hierarchic or of loyalty) that have consented to meet in an assembly to agree under equal conditions and without any external coercion, the rule of law according to which they accept to live together in exchange for protection of their rights. In this setting, Hobbes, so to speak, placed 'at the beginning' (as if it was an existing reality) what could only be 'at the end' (if society has success, and this being its most exquisite achievement): a group of individuals. It could not be any other way because, as we have already said, it was about (in the Europe of the 16th and 17th centuries) reaching the peace treaty that would

put an end to the devastating and hateful religious wars that seemed endless, precisely because they stemmed from the irreducibility of the antagonistic cultural identities (that condemned them to resolve their superiority in the battle field). The social agreement demands as a precondition for cohabitation that only after having been signed, individuals can acquire a certain identity (family men, firemen, Bretons, Protestants, priests or soldiers) based on the understanding that it is compatible with the private identity of each of the remaining signatories. This is the reason why public law is always the precondition and the foundation of private law. It has always been known that this setting is a 'fiction', and that it does not match any empirical reality. But, it has also been known that the political legitimacy of the state based on the rule of law and of the laws that derive from it can only be thought of as if fiction would have been (and still is) a fact granting legal reality to what lacks material reality and hence using that ideal model as the aim towards which legislation should tend.

Activists in the streets protest against the scandalous increase of corruption in São Paulo, Brazil, in 2016.

Hobbes knew that in real societies individuals came from a certain identity (at least that of the lineage community that they belong to), but he subjected those communities to the jurisdiction of a society that makes their members free enough to judge, independently of their identity and, therefore, of their prejudices. The same objectivity is demand, nowadays, to a citizen that is a member of a



jury, a representative of the parliament, or a judge that presides over a court — that is the ability to place public interest over private interests — related either to their community or their identity. And that is what the educational institutions of the Enlightenment have always professed: those individuals, once in the limits of the institutions, can get rid of their identity and communities' characteristics (not to betray or eliminate them, but to relativize them) in order to rise to a virtually universal level (in which arts, science and philosophy are to be found, as they happen to be disciplines that demand universality and refuse to accept excludable communities) where they will be able to empathise with any other individual when it comes to judge legislate or rule.

During the 19th century, the liberal societies experienced several forms of discontent and received very articulated and well-deserved criticism from (or in the name of) those deprived of civil rights and liberties that should constitute citizenship. Some of them were deprived *de iure*, regardless of their financial condition, just because they belonged to stigmatized groups (that is, they could not 'free' themselves from their identity and, therefore, sign the agreement); others owed this exclusion to their material poverty that prevented them, *de facto*, from exercising these rights. We must say, of both, that they had good reasons to feel discontentment towards the rule of law (which was not such for them), and that they reclaimed their nature as citizens with full rights. Their claims were, therefore, totally integrated in the frame of the principle that law should govern a nation, and their "discontent" was the type of discontent that we previously said couldn't be questioned because it was already fully justified. It took its time for the complaints regarding this flagrant inequality to make its way. Although it is somehow 'obvious' that the exercising of the civil rights is impossible in practice for those who lack all material welfare or the legal status of individuals, this circumstance goes unnoticed for those that already enjoy both things and that, therefore, tend to think of civil rights (and, likewise, of their absence) as something relatively 'natural', blaming the 'nature' of the workers, women, or colonized populations for their lack of material resources or public liberties. What the labor movement laid on the table was the evidence that a society that grants 'civil rights' to all of its members but denies some of them the material resources that would allow them to exercise them cannot be considered fully democratic. But, it would not have been possible to interpret the labor movement of the 19th century as a political movement if it had had material welfare as its only goal. It had political relevance because the aspiration for social rights was a mean to reach higher purposes: the full acquisition of civil rights and public liberties.

What is the Welfare State?

Regardless of how we define it, it is clear that what we call 'welfare state' is, in turn, the result of this double deficit of the state based on the rule of law that was incapable of managing the identity tensions emblazoned as nationalism and the social tensions shown by the labor movement. Consequently,

the state had to witness the enormous disasters of the two World Wars and all of their sequels. Due to this turn of events, after World War I, many politicians, intellectuals, jurists, philosophers and mere citizens experienced specifically political discontent against states based on the rule of law: they were convinced that this institution had been overwhelmed by unprecedented circumstances and that it had to be replaced by a new type of state in which many laid their hopes. But after World War II, it was dramatically clear that these “new states” were nothing more than totalitarian fascist states (that were defeated during the war) and communist states (that survived it). Since the coming of the Russian Revolution, the communist states had erected a universally material welfare coverage project. However, they denied their subjects the civil rights of representative democracies, which they considered a simple make-up for exploitation, so they never granted them even though they had enough material welfare to exert them. In fact, from communism’s ideological orbit, fascism was considered the contemporary form adopted by capitalism once it ended its ‘bourgeois’ stage (i.e., civil), in which public rights and liberties would still have been a façade that tried to hide the class domination, whilst fascism would have eliminated the façade for keeping only sheer domination. Hence communism appeared (for its supporters) as the only ‘force’ able to confront this domination with its own weapons, that is, from the perspective of the ‘improvement’ of the state based on the rule of law (and likewise, fascism became ideologically legitimated as the only ‘force’ capable of stopping communism and justified in this way its authoritarian structures). In this sense, fascism and communism were already mutually part, and despite their antagonism, of that ‘new post-bourgeois world’ in which so many believed before starting to use the term ‘totalitarianism’. In 1945, the ‘state of discontent’ was view as a ‘Cold War’ between the totalitarian states (gathered around the USSR)—that rejected parliamentary democracy—and states based on the rule of law that presented themselves as ‘socialist states’, and liberal democracies that had kept its institutions alive but that were by then tragically conscious of their social and political deficits. And it was the latter’s that, in order to meet the huge challenge, signed new civil agreements (symbolized by the consensus between the center-left and center-right parties) around a political project that defended a state that had to be both social (as the fascist and communist states were, in their own way) and based on the rule of law (as the modern parliamentary democracies had always been). This combination of juridical welfare (civil rights) and material welfare (social rights) is the so-called ‘welfare state’, that had never been proposed so explicitly before, although it was implicitly inscribed in the social contract. It was probably John Rawls, in the 20th century, who analyzed in more detail what I previously called the ‘original position’ of the social contract. Rawls understood that the state based on the rule of law had no other alternative than to be thought not only as a pacifier of identity tensions, but as what we nowadays call social state. As legislators, the citizens have the legal power to endow public rights, but they cannot

legislate on the amount of material welfare that shall belong to them (because it depends on circumstances that are not legally controllable) nor, therefore, foresee their private identity. And this means that, when establishing common law, they ignore their luck and the place they will hold in society because they do not know who they are or, in other words, who they are going to be (Rawls spoke of a 'veil of ignorance' that prevents the contractors from having this knowledge). And it is because of this ignorance that, when legislating, they will do it, necessarily, in such a way that those that are the unluckiest are not totally abandoned by their partners because any of them could be in the same situation in the future. And it is in this sense that it should be said that the liberal state has, implicitly and since its own creation, the need for democracy to be social, as well as juridical, despite the welfare state being the only entity which has set out this condition in a clearly obvious and manifest way.

“ANY SOCIAL IDEA ABOUT ‘WELFARE’ MUST REFER, IN THE FIRST PLACE, TO MATERIAL WELFARE: THAT IS, THE COVERAGE OF THE BASIC NEEDS OF LIFE.”

This being the state of things, the construction of a democracy that was social and based on the rule of law at the same time, was an explicit and unprecedented programmatically experiment. World War II, with its devastating destruction and brutality, was the sinister setting in which this wager became necessary because the state based on the rule of law itself (this is, 'politics', as they had been developing since the 17th century) was risking its survival in the face of totalitarianism.

With any type of doubt, any social idea about 'welfare' must refer, in the first place, to material welfare: that is, the coverage of the basic needs of life and solving of human shortages, despite the notion of 'basic needs' being always an object of debate. We can see that material welfare depends, on the one hand, on the production activity of individuals and, on the other hand, on the circumstances, never fully manageable, which are external to them. In this sense, no state can guarantee to all its members the 'right to be always well', but only (and that is what the welfare state is about) the right to be as well as the collective material conditions allows it in each and every moment. In other words, the state grants the right to expect a fair distribution of wealth and poverty in each historical situation (this is an important observation, because in 1945, when the project of the welfare state appeared specified in the advanced liberal democracies, Europe was economically destroyed by the war, and there was not much wealth to share out).

This is normally what we refer to when we talk about the acknowledgement by the state of social rights of the population or of social cohesion programs, and the programs for fighting against financial inequalities, which are some of the

distinguishing features of the welfare state. Nevertheless, the mention of ‘law’ in previous paragraphs already tells us that welfare is not only material. Material welfare (and the social rights that guarantee it) is the condition for a superior type of welfare: juridical welfare that entails the exercising of civil rights that transform individuals into politically free citizens ‘of legal age’, responsible for their public life, and masters of their private life.

Material welfare is necessary because (up to where it is possible) it ‘frees’ individuals from nature and external circumstances. Nevertheless juridical welfare will only be satisfied if it guarantees that this material liberty will become political liberty: that is to say, the liberty to choose the public law that will allow one to live in peace with the rest of individuals, regardless their origin or social position, and the liberty for individuals to choose their own life paths.

The Origins of Discontent

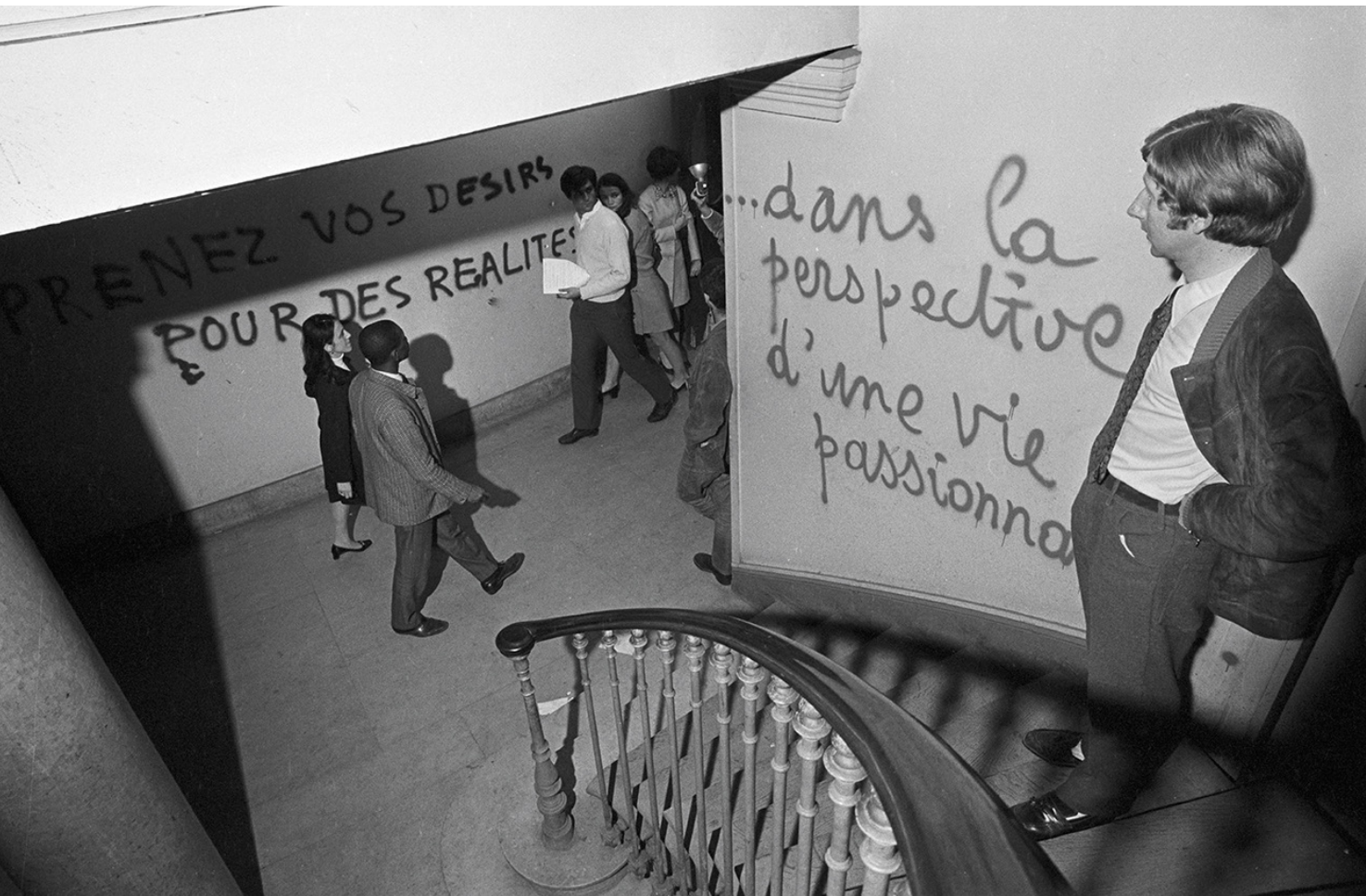
The citizens of the countries where the welfare project had started in 1945 supported with a large majority the ‘moderate’ parties that backed it (which actually meant a new definition of the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ in politics). Only those who took side with totalitarian political solutions (communists or fascists) were left out of this consensus —they were, electorally speaking, a minority and therefore were rejected towards the ends of the political spectrum, and were almost always left outside from parliaments.

But the fact that ‘discontent within the welfare state’ was parliamentary invisible or comprised a minority does not mean that, from a general social viewpoint, it lacked importance. On the contrary, the ‘extreme left’ (that is the name adopted then by those who defended the validity of the communist project as an ‘improvement’ of the state based on the rule of law and, by extension, of the welfare state) occupied the intellectual front with great success (no wonder Kolakowski, the great historian of Marxism, stated that ideas are the respiratory system of communism) and gave place to the so-called ‘new left’, a merely rhetorical name because in fact it was in principle that ‘old communist left’ that had been politically discarded by the victories of the welfare state. When talking about ‘intellectual success’ I am not only referring to the hegemonic communist ideology within the intellectuals in Europe between 1945 and 1980 (and the resulting discredit of the writers that, like Berlin, Aron, Arendt, Koestler and many others, were expelled from the field of legitimate ideas under the accusation of being ‘reactionaries’), but also, and above all, to the construction of the so-called cultural left. From positions of power at universities, in publishing houses or on the art scene, the new left produced a genuine ‘culture of discontent’ within the welfare state compensating its parliamentary irrelevance. That gave place —especially in France— to a series of leading figures that kept alive the myth of the ‘moral superiority’ of the left (the authentic left that was certainly different to the one occupying its seats in parliaments) based on its ‘intellectual

supremacy” —“ideas” still were the “respiratory system” of leftism. From the moral and intellectual superiority which disregarded parliamentary democracy as being an optical illusion (resuming in this way the traditional speech of the revolutionary communist parties), the cultural left adopted political models that were no longer historical heirs of the Russian Revolution (because they had lost, in their opinion, their revolutionary authenticity when agreeing on a pax oligophrenica with capitalism). However, the leaders of communist revolutions in the Third World questioned the ‘international order’ of the Cold War.

Without the implementation of the authentic left (that was not the real political left) in the cultural front, the first great explosion of ‘discontent within the welfare state’ that meant the events of May 68 events in France, preceded by Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* —because that was, for Debord, the welfare state: a spectacle that distracted people from their revolutionary destiny—, would be inexplicable. Many thought that this explosion was ‘unimaginable’ and ‘unmotivated’. What then was the reason for young students who had enjoyed liberty and materialistic conditions never before achieved, to revile the European and North American democratic societies in the 1960s and idealize, romantically, those of other places in the world like Cuba or Vietnam where, to be honest, there was little welfare? They disdained what Foucault or Deleuze called ‘macropolitics’ (those developed in parliaments, governments and courts), and they promoted micropolitics of desire that, in the words of Guattari, announced a molecular

May 1968 in Paris, University of the Sorbonne. The popular movement exploded against traditional society and capitalism, but also against the Gaullist power of the French government.



revolution where the frame of the state was no longer a reference because it was positioned beyond (in a stage of international movements) or nearer to it (in what had, up to then, been called 'civil society'). For all of them, the welfare state, with its dense and powerful social assistance, could be interpreted as a micropolitical (biopolitical, more specifically) control device against populations. And the discredit that this entailed for the concept of 'class' (that had been a fundamental reference for articulating the political speech of the left) made its replacement emerge strongly: the concept of identity. This concept was not only valid for 'Third World' countries where it was impossible to talk about a 'proletarian' or a 'working class', but was also used to designate new political agents accredited by these 68's events (The Feminism Difference, the LGTB movement, ethnic minorities, the 'psychiatrised', etc.), whose claims, precisely because they did not demand an independent state (not even, a party nor a union), did not fit well in the institutional fabric of the welfare state and defined a new territory of 'cultural fights'.

“POPULISM IS TO POLITICS WHAT SENSATIONALISM IS TO JOURNALISM.”

Naturally, the criticisms towards the welfare state are legitimate and even essential in a political regime that, just like parliamentary democracy, makes criticism its fundamental device for rational deliberation. Without a doubt, during those years there were many things open to criticism in national and international stages (starting with the Vietnam war). But the most remarkable aspect of this movement was that the political organisations that developed it (that were and still are politically marginalized) used the same militant rhetoric of war and considered the authentic political leaders to be Che Guevara or General Giap, whilst the Presidents of the republics and the Prime Ministers of the liberal democracies were considered wimps of the Great Capital. In other words, 'criticism' of the welfare state was not made in the name of a state based on the rule of law or social democracy, but precisely from a project consisting in overcoming those institutions that in the times of the World Wars gave place to totalitarianisms (certainly, its geopolitical models were no longer the USSR and its satellites but, as we have said, Castro's Cuba, Mao's China or Ho Chi Min's Vietnam; although those regimes seemed then much more exotic, they were not less totalitarian as a result); a project that excluded every form of criticism within its own functioning, and where any 'anti-system' movement like the one that took place in France in 1968 would have been literally impossible. The political goals of the 68' movements were far-fetched (the establishment in France of a Soviet government, the dissolution of the family, etc.), and in this sense, they may have appeared as a tantrum without any political consequences (De Gaulle won the elections of June 1968 and, so, both the communist and the socialist parties lost deputies). But it wasn't the case because the cultural consequences were incalculable, starting with a rooted bitterness against the

welfare state due to its social nature (in which the Foucaultians, as we have said, saw a clear attempt of biopolitical control of the populations). And, although it is common to speak about the 'cultural revolution' of 1968, the truth is that these movements, despite not achieving the revival of class conflict, are to be found at the base of the 'cultural wars' that would end up taking shape, by the late 20th century, of the so-called 'identity policies'. In spite of their emancipating orientation, these 'identity policies' are already part of what we could call the policies of the discontent to the extent that in its most 'radical' facet, despite not proposing any alternative model to the welfare state, they contribute to the systematic undermining of the central figure of the 'system' erected in 1945 in advanced western democracies: that of the autonomous citizen and subject of rights. If at this point we can talk of a "discontent in the culture sphere" it is necessary to mention a kind of 'resentment' against the welfare state which found refuge in the territory of culture because those cultural wars which focused on identity soon went on to become hostility policies. That way the concept of identity ended up replacing that of 'social class' as target of the new conflict because the identity, understood as political identity, is always antagonistic (it is based on the denial of the identity of the enemy), and it attacks the pillars of the state under the rule of law.

From 1970 onwards, the criticism and the attacks against the welfare state came mainly from the right (although certain elements of this criticism became politically transversal, and part of the ideological language born in 1968 became generalized). It was from here that a 'new right' (that is not that new) who had a higher profile in the media, rather than a 'cultural' one, was born, and it quickly set up, with a great electoral success, its own policies of discontent, discrimination, social hostility and division in which the notion of identity also played a starring role. Because policies of discontent are all those that in spite (as happened with the 'goals' of May 1968 in France) of proposing positive chimeric and extremist targets (the total closure of the national borders or their total elimination, for example), tend to divide society into friends and enemies, mining the pre-political consensus that supports the civil agreement. During that same decade, the businessman and economist, John Harsanyi, submitted Rawls's assumption mentioned before to criticism regarding the implicitly social nature of the civil agreement that supports the state based on the rule of law.

This theorist held that, from the rational decision point of view, the gamble of the signatories of the social contract (that legislate thinking that they may have the worst of luck and hence promote a social state based on the rule of law) is too conservative because if they accepted higher risks (this is, if they cease putting themselves in the place of the most disadvantaged) they could obtain greater benefits. From an apparently antagonistic position, this argument does not only express its "discontent with and in the welfare state" (criticizing its condescendence towards the less fortunate), but it directs its attack towards the same goal (the public welfare policies). If the 'new left', reviving the Marxist philosophy of the

‘ideological fight’, saw in this group a biopolitical control apparatus of the dominant classes over the people (Althusser, for instance, considered public education one of the main ‘ideological apparatus’ of the ‘bourgeois state’), the ‘new right’ (also recycling populist arguments from the 1930s), identifies them with overspending, corruption and social parasitism. The sociologist Richard Sennett, at the end of his book *Respect in a World of Inequality*, shows us an image that could serve as a symbol of ‘the last supper’ of the welfare state or, even better, of the first of the ‘state of discontent’. Let us imagine a group of friends, colleagues or neighbors that gather once a year at a restaurant for dinner. As time has gone by, they have established a habit: when supper is over they share the bill, each contributing with the same amount. But one night, one of the dinner guests refutes this habit and announces that he will only pay for what he has actually consumed. This unexpected decision forces the rest to proceed equally, and as a result, one of the guests does not have enough money to pay the bill.

Consequently, what had for years been a group of friends becomes suddenly divided into two sides: those who can pay and those who cannot.

These “can-nots” are suddenly considered ‘scroungers’ who have been taking advantage of the first group (it is important to point out that the book was written in 2003, some years before the effects of the 2008 global crisis, because it warns us that the ‘decline’ of the welfare system is previous to the financial crisis, although the latter conferred it its most sinister tinges).

Of course, this isn’t about defending, in any sense, cadgers: the only way for citizens to pay their taxes with serenity and conviction is that they have the safety that any abuse or fraud will be prosecuted (the ‘veil of ignorance’ must also, and very specially, affect the Ministries of Finance). It’s about understanding that welfare is not a ‘natural’ social condition, but the result of certain public policies regarding the fiscal redistribution of income and wealth. The important thing here, in one case or the other, is the replacing of the image of the agreement for that of the confrontation between the ‘scroungers’ and the ‘payers’. Regarding that point, it is an unimportant matter who we place under the label of scroungers (immigrants, millionaires, politicians...) or of payers (businessmen, the ‘underground’ workers, the uncomplaining citizens...). What counts is the replacement of welfare policies for policies of discontent (segregation and discrimination) that have as a reference, in all the cases, identity (that of the presumed and mythical ‘majority’ that supports the ‘western values’ or the ‘national essences’, or the sum of the minorities whose offended identities demand reparation) and therefore only shine under antagonism.

A False Alternative

For a while, the idea has spread that the political expression of this antagonism would take shape, currently, in the apparent confrontation between ‘populist’ policies (those that guarantee that nobody will receive a bill that cannot be paid,

but that, unfortunately, cannot guarantee us that we have food to bring to our table), and the 'neoliberals' (the ones that guarantee us that we will not have to defray some scrounger's expenses, but that, unfortunately, cannot guarantee us that we may ourselves have to become scroungers someday). But under these labels there is no mention to two political programs as it is to a same (and paradoxical) emotional and rhetorical load with two heads. In its polemical meaning, the term 'neoliberalism' refers sometimes to Hayek, other times to Friedman, occasionally to Tony Blair, and in some cases to concepts so different as corporatism, protectionism or the so-called 'social liberalism', and its only stable feature seems the roughly sketched reference to the politics of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, two leaders that were the first ones to be described, in their day, as... populists! This description has been, for its part, also used so profusely, with such variety and for so many different cases that it seems, due precisely to this overuse, to have lost all its conceptual value. Or, in other words, it seemed that it had lost all its conceptual value until some of its receivers decided, more or less in the turn of the century, to transform this sign of infamy into a sign of distinction (so to use the terminology of Pierre Bourdieu) and give this term a positive meaning. By providing the term 'neoliberalism' with theoretical content (at least apparently) and a new semantic it not only changed into a legitimate political instrument, but even the essence of politics itself (maybe as the only way for politic making to keep up with the times). And this is the subtle sense that makes it more interesting.

The dome of United States Capitol building, the seat of the United States Congress.



I normally say that populism is to politics what sensationalism is to journalism.

There are probably very few journalists that have not accused their rivals of being 'sensationalist', but there are even less that have not resorted to sensationalism to embellish sales figures or the number of visits to their webpage. Despite the irony, this does not mean that we must give up to the confusion of 'journalism' and 'sensationalism' (or at the most, to distinguish between good sensationalism —the one put at the disposal of 'popular', 'politically correct' or morally irreproachable causes— and bad sensationalism).

Regardless of how widespread the disease is, sensationalism is still a disease that makes journalism bleed and move away from public interest (that is, serving as an instrument for the formation of public opinion which is essential in democratic societies) to merely follow, as someone said, the flow of concern of the public, frequently with the lowest and meanest interests, often contradictory and always changing and opaque, and that have certainly nothing to do with the public interest. Despite all, it is worthwhile to keep the difference (at least the *de iure* difference) between journalism and sensationalism, as even the noblest purposes become corrupt when they are pursued through miserly means that transform information into sentimental propaganda. Something similar happens with populism (and with neoliberalism as one of its facets). It is very easy for a politician to discredit their rival as being 'populist' by saying to the people what they want to hear despite not being true and promising them things that they know are impossible to achieve. But it would be very difficult to find a politician who, during a campaign, has not resorted sometimes to these messages or promises to obtain a handful of votes or to obtain better results in the surveys. Nevertheless, the solution cannot consist in accepting the confusion between politics and populism as a fatality, resigning oneself to choose between better or worse populists. Although in an apparently imprecise way, the term 'populism', as it happened in the past with the term 'totalitarianism', helps us to understand something the different political stratagems, which seem separated by great ideological barriers, have in common and to see that all of them constitute one of the main transversal dangers that stalk representative democracy from the inside. When democracy works well (something that does not happen every day nor in every place), the politician that fosters the base instincts of their followers, or that makes implausible promises, ends up paying for these excesses in the ballot boxes. There is only one way of getting rid of this punishment. It involves disbelieving political representation and forging the myth of an omnipotent and ruthless enemy that penetrates all the institutions, that perverts conspiratorially all the spaces of liberty and criticism, and that is immune to the formal mechanisms of liberal democracy. And this is precisely the populist formula. When this formula is successful, when it effectively leaves a mark on citizens, the idea that in order to beat this enemy we need something more than social democracy based on the rule of law and something better than politics in the modern sense also permeates. And to achieve it is necessary to

appeal to the people that must go beyond their Constitution to fight against their enemies.

Then politics are replaced by morality (or by 'moralized' politics that demand to close ranks against the enemies of the people annulling pluralism). And what then takes its toll in the ballot boxes is contradicting the desires of the followers or rejecting promising chimeras.

The discontent in today's politics consists, specifically, in the consideration of an alternative between those supposed extremes, as if they were the terms of a new political confrontation. That we have to accept populism (whose vices we know more than enough thanks to recent politics) to avoid falling into neoliberalism or that we must resign ourselves with neoliberalism to avoid the populist drift is the 'populist' approach to which we must not give up to. It is this exact approach that repeats (only in the discursive sphere) the old justification of communism as the 'last barrier' against fascism, or of fascism as the only obstacle for communism, leaving aside the bet for the social state based on the rule of law that was able at that time to neutralize both dangers. Populism is not an alternative to neoliberalism (neither is the other way around): both are symptoms pertaining to the same political decline syndrome, of the breaking

Building exterior of the European Parliament in Brussels and a row of EU member states flags.



of the social contract that has been at its foundation since the appearance of modern society.

Something similar to what I have described on the occasion of the founding of the welfare state happened, *mutatis mutandis*, in Spain in 1978: those who had been irreconcilable enemies during the Spanish Civil War and the 40 years of Franco's dictatorship, and those who rejected this agreement (especially the extreme left, including the Basque and the Catalan nationalist left) became electorally irrelevant and, except the minority that kept on with the 'armed fight', they took cover in the university lecture rooms, the theaters, the newspapers and the art galleries. And it was there that they forged this cultural-revolutionary speech according to which the social state based on the rule of law born from the Constitution of 1978 was a dream (a 'spectacle', according to Debord) that actually hid a continuation of Francoism. Those of us who were unlucky enough to know the Francoist Spain know that the identification between Francoism and parliamentary democracy is a historic fabrication of evidence, but, when transformed into an ideology, it produces a great emotional yield to those who practice it. This practice reinforces their moral and aesthetic identity, and it even brings them economic benefits. Without this poetic license creating the image that Spain was asleep, first because of the Francoist nightmare, and later by capitalist drowsiness, it would be impossible to consider the '15M' as an 'awakening'. But, just as it happened in May 1968 in France, unexpectedly this 'political poetry' was no longer a minority and became (even electorally) plausible, it mixed up with history, and for an important part of the people, the transition to democracy boiled down to a jumble of corruption and conspiracy.

“THE IDENTITY, UNDERSTOOD AS POLITICAL IDENTITY, IS ALWAYS ANTAGONISTIC AND IT ATTACKS THE PILLARS OF THE STATE UNDER THE RULE OF LAW.”

It is true that, in this case, their logic is much more transparent than in the case of May 1968. It was justified enough with the difficulties caused by the budgetary adjustment with which the public debt crisis was fought for the sake of appearance in 2011 with little difference in a few months, of the awakening of the oppressed people and of the abused nation, that had been kept (according to this account) in a comatose condition for 70 years through the anesthesia of the damned 'welfare'. The result of all this has been a fictitious shift of the ideological spectrum thanks to which, in the imaginary revolutionary 'awakening', those who, by then, were in the center-left or the center-right (but against nationalism and caviar communism), have, without changing ideas, been cornered in a 'reactionary' position. The result is that their positions are even more extreme than that of Trump or Le Pen, because these two are at least

'anti-system' and this gives them an extra dose of authenticity; and extreme ideologies have, nevertheless, occupied the center of the political spectrum. I would say that this, rather than an 'awakening', is an optical-political illusion. But I understand that when millions of voters act like they believed in this hallucination and they join their policies of discontent and confrontation, insisting on a clear differentiation between poetry and history may be a lost battle. These kinds of battles take place very frequently, in an intellectual sphere. Because the policies of discontent do not triumph because the voters 'believe' in the viability of their 'positive' goals (unearthly and badly defined), but because they 'want' the 'negative' or aggressive means that their propagandists propose, because they want to see their enemies punished: those enemies (the 'caste', the 'immigrant', the 'enemies of the people'...) are constructed ad hoc and are considered guilty for all their misfortune.

Thousands of citizens mobilized by the Movement 15-M in the Puerta del Sol of Madrid, on May 8, 2011.

In conclusion, situational losses are not enough to understand why this same sector of the population, which until yesterday seemed to identify itself with social democracy based on the rule of law, is now capable of supporting at the ballot boxes political leaders that defend without too many scruples racism, xenophobia, excluding nationalism (providing there is any other kind of



nationalism), sexism, and quitting the European Union, free trade agreements or agreements regarding environmental policies. We often ridicule these 'new leaders' saying that they are 'clowns', 'louts' or 'second class comedians', because many of us cannot accept that they take the things they say seriously. But, if they are so ridiculous and undependable, how is it that the same population, which until little time ago seemed 'sensible' and 'well-balanced' regarding their electoral behavior, let themselves 'be fooled' by lies that we consider so crude? The social discontent caused by the degradation of social welfare structures would have not devolved into political malaise in the sense outlined right now if it had not connected, in the first place, with a malaise with the welfare state that occurred far before the financial crisis, that became already visible when there was full scale 'welfare', and that, therefore, is not only related to material scarcities; and secondly, with a criticism towards the state based on the rule of law and the fundamentals of the social contract that support liberal democracy, and that has even deeper historical and philosophical roots. It has sometimes been upheld, abusing Marx's well-known dictum, that whilst discontent—e.g. the one that appeared already in the 19th century, and later on, during the times of the two World Wars— has a tragic expression, it has in our time the traits of a comedy. I mistrust any 'philosophy of history' and therefore, also this presumed law of political events that says that all the great occurrences appear first as a tragedy and then as a farce among other things because it is easy to laugh at Hitler and Stalin and reduce their tragedies to the category of comedies when we do not have to endure their consequences.

Ultimately, as history has a tendency to repeat itself, I am sceptical because the farce can easily become a tragedy when the deceitful seize power.

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