

# Reflections on the Meaning of the “Crisis of Democracy”

Nadia Urbinati

► **Abstract:** This article addresses a question that sits at the heart of democracy studies today: **What do we mean when we speak about a “crisis of democracy”?** The article opens with introductory clarifications on the meanings of the concept of crisis—namely its root in medicine, and on three contemporary perspectives of democracy—trilateral, deliberative, and crisis. These perspectives are analyzed using monoarchic and diarchic distinctions. Next, the article lists the main discourses about crisis in recent political theory literature. In conclusion, the article proposes an answer to the question of what we mean by crisis of democracy by arguing that it is not democracy in general but one form of democracy in particular that is in crisis—a parliamentary democracy based on the centrality of suffrage and political parties.

► **Keywords:** crisis of democracy, democratic theory, government, parliament, political language, political parties

This article is an exercise in the interpretation of ordinary political language on the status of democracy. It is motivated by the desire to **test how our theories of democracy help us make sense of what citizens think about their actual democracies.**

Recent issues of two academic journals, the *Journal of Democracy* and *Democratic Theory*, have been dedicated to the analysis of the crisis or decline of democracy (Ercan and Gagnon 2014; Plattner 2015). Drops in electoral participation and citizen discontent with democratic governments' performance in consolidated democracies **lead the editors of these journals to conclude that democracy is indeed facing a crisis.** As a matter of fact, surveys, essays, and talks on the “crisis of democracy” have boomed in the last years of deep economic crisis (Chou 2015), particularly in Europe, which is the privileged context of this article. **The growth of poverty after several decades of expansion and consolidation of economic and social well-being, along with the plague of unemployment and the irreversible erosion of the welfare state, translate into a decline of citizens' confidence in their elected leaders and the effectiveness of democratic**



institutions in delivering fair or satisfactory decisions (della Porta 2013; Diamond and Morlino 2005).<sup>1</sup> To utilize a neo-Marxist scheme of interpretation familiar to social and political scholars in the 1970s, one may say that the ability of political democracy to mitigate the legitimization deficit posed by advanced capitalism is gravely crippled (e.g., Habermas 1975: 68–75). Yet within the current horizon of European integration, it is not the language of class and the strategy of working organization that attract people's political imaginary – it is rather the old nationalist rhetoric. The disquieting and increasing success of anti-immigration sentiments is primed to redirect electors toward populist and anti-European movements, while a nondemocratic Europe, whose decisions heavily reflect the disproportionate power of Germany and dominant international banks, add to the mounting feelings of political mistrust.

Within this context two currents of analysis have emerged in recent decades. One that connects the decline of the efficiency of democracy with the decline of the efficacy of the nation-state in many substantial areas of human activity as regional and global agencies have strengthened (see Archibugi et al. [1998] for discussion of the paradox that sees democracy expand in the world but its efficacy and power decline). And one that situates the decline of democracy in a causal relationship with the financial transformations of capitalism and the progressive erosion of economic equality, which neoliberal politics and an extensively privatized public realm second (see, especially, the postscript in Przeworski 1985).

Both are essential analyses. They are interrelated and point to the growing power of nonpolitical actors (market agencies and multinational corporations above all) within a global system of power relations that humiliates the institutions traditionally associated with the sovereign legal authority of the state (Cohen 2012; Gould 2014). Claus Offe (2012), who was among the first social theorists who proposed, already in 1973, an original reflection on the unavoidable development of rational deficits in corporate capitalism, has come recently to the conclusion that both the social-democratic project and the liberal-pluralist project have become obsolete, as have the two paradigms they relied on.<sup>2</sup> The result of both defeats manifests in a decline of the moral legitimacy of the democratic order, which surveys register. This is the broad and complex context in which we have to situate the new wave of discourses on the crisis.

Certainly, the growth of economic inequality and a muscular oligarchy ruling the financial global market are factors that play prominently in igniting the discourse of the crisis of political institutions, particularly if we consider that liberal democracy was historically redefined after World War II on the assumption of compatibility between, on the one

hand, nation-state sovereignty and democracy and, on the other, capitalism and democracy.<sup>3</sup> While aware of the role played by these economic factors, I choose to focus on the political domain only and treat the crisis of democracy as a phenomenon in its own right that pertains to a political system, some specific procedures, institutions and rules, which are distinct from the economic organization of society, although it is a historical fact that these two levels cannot be understood apart from each other. Simon Tormey (2014) has proposed to interpret the decline of “voter turnout, party membership, trust in politicians, and interest in politics,” as a symptom of the end of representative politics upon which modern democracy was edified. My argument differs. I claim that the decline of confidence is not on representative democracy per se but on its parliamentary form. As we will see at the end of this article, although the abovementioned signs of decline are common to parliamentary and non-parliamentary government, they seem to be fatal to the former.

When we try to circumscribe the discourse on the crisis of politics, some might object that this does not promise to be interesting since, from at least the eighteenth century onward, there has been a persistent refrain of discourses of crisis in both academic and non-academic writings. As David Runciman (2013: xiv) has observed, “democracy” and “crisis” can hardly be separated so that the story of its success and of its crisis are unavoidably intertwined. Democracy’s modern journey started along with the claim of its crisis, although it was the turmoil of the 1920s that set the tone for the most dramatic discourse on the crisis. Crisis was then fatal to constitutional government. This is not what we experience today even though discourses on crisis are booming. Wolfgang Merkel (2014: 23) writes in the abovementioned special issue of this journal that what we are witnessing today is not an institutional crisis but “some ‘subterranean’ erosion of democracy,” in the form of protest movements. Social conflicts are the most tangible sign that democratic governments and their policies face a deep crisis of consent. Contemporary diagnoses of crisis pertain today to the sphere of opinion and the parliamentary form of representative democracy thus, rather than the constitutional order.

The transition to constitutional democracy in Continental Europe after World War II seemed able to change the perception of the crisis, so that Reinhart Koselleck chose to end his 1982 historical and analytical reconstruction of the meanings of the concept of *krise* (crisis) with the following words: “‘Crisis’ remains a catchword, used rigorously in only a few scholarly or scientific contexts” (Koselleck and Richter 2006: 397). In the domain of politics, detection and proclamation of crisis lost rigor once democracy entrusted its legitimacy to a constitutional pact that sanctioned, organized, and limited the power of its institutions. Unless

the constitutional order is subverted or violated, claiming crises seems hardly warranted. Thus the question arises: What do we mean when we speak today about a “crisis of democracy”? Or, what kind of democracy do we refer to when we argue that democracy is in a crisis?

This article offers a plausible although tentative answer to this question. There is ambiguity in the use of the concept of crisis when applied to democratic politics as its use is either trivial or mis-specified. When we try to pin down what we mean by crisis (in an existentially threatened sense), we find that not democracy in general but one form of democracy in particular is in crisis – parliamentary democracy based on the centrality of suffrage, political parties, and the priority of the lawmaking power over the executive. Pierre Rosanvallon (2015) has described this phenomenon as presidentialization of parliamentary democracy. What we detect as a crisis is thus a transition from a democratic system in which the barycenter of the political order was the collective deliberative assembly of representatives to one in which the center is the executive and the personality of the leader instead.



## Crisis as Break, Judgment, and Catastrophe

In his contribution to the issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, Philippe Schmitter (2015) writes that we should talk not of decline of democracy but of crisis, thus presuming the latter is a clearer guide to interpreting the state of democracy. Yet the term “crisis” is far from clear and uncontested. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines this word in contemporary general parlance by going back to late Middle English when “crisis” started being used in medical language to denote “the turning point of a disease.” This medical and Latin root was meant to indicate a change in the status of a sick person from better to worse or vice versa (Merkel and Gagnon 2016) – although the former became more familiar. In the nineteenth century, Jacob Burckhardt adopted this meaning to question one-way interpretations (namely catastrophic developments) and to argue that “crisis may mean a permanent possibility in history” (Koselleck and Richter 2006: 387). Thus, Burckhardt suggested, there are phases of changes in the condition of a person or of a country, which are only rarely critical to the point of turning revolutionary (death in the former case and regime change in the latter one).<sup>4</sup> Clearly, this presumes we know the state of health, or the normative or functional status of a body or a regime in relation to which we detect changes.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* includes a second set of meanings of the Greek word *krisis* as decision deriving from *krinein*, meaning to decide or

cut a knot, **interrupting regularity or normality**. Every time we have to decide we are in a condition of crisis as we have to interrupt a current doing with an act of the will that impresses a change (this was the sense used by Thucydides in relation to wars and by Carl Schmitt in relation to decisions as the expression of the state's sovereignty). In this sense, crisis means breaking, divorce, fight, and quarrel, all of which suggest a disjunction where our condition is *either* one thing *or* another.

 From the Greek comes another set of meanings, less radical in their implication and yet directly applicable to politics and democracy. These are meanings like “judgment” and “trial.” Aristotle (*Politics*) used this sense when he talked about the juridical decisions made according to procedures or justice (δίκη τοῦ δικαίου κρίσις, 1253a: 35), and about the citizens as having the authority to make decisions (ἀρχή κριτική, 1275b: 19). “Justice on the other hand is an element of the state; for judicial procedure, which means the decision of what is just (δικαίουν κρίσις) is the regulation of the political partnership” (1253a: 39–40). **A critical mind and crisis go hand in hand with the status of political liberty as a *diarchy of discussion and decision*, the power of voice and of vote; the implication is that “κρίσις (krisis) is most necessary for the community, representing what is at once just and salutary” (Koselleck 2006: 359).**

Finally, the idea of crisis as judgment, Koselleck tells us, transmigrated to Latin, and then to the Greek and the Latin translation of the Old and New Testament that restated the identification of crisis with judgment but in a wholly new rendering as the “last judgment.” The court in this world is, in the Jewish tradition, linked to God, who is simultaneously both the ruler and judge of his people. Hence the act of judging also contains a promise of salvation. Beyond that, the concept gains central significance in the wake of apocalyptic expectations: “the κρίσις (krisis) at the end of the world will for the first time reveal true justice” (Koselleck and Richter 2006: 359).

In sum, the Greek meanings of the term “crisis” cohere with the medical meaning and suggests the following polysemy of the term crisis whose implication for politics is predictably very fecund, and which can mean: a) a radical break (either/or situations like war, dictatorial break, and revolution); b) a process of political and juridical judgments that partakes of the system of decision making in a constitutional government and is engrained in political liberty; and c) a teleological judgment guided toward an end that it already presumed, or a new epoch and a new order, or a catastrophic fatal trend. Koselleck, for instance, wrote that the philosophy of history is the home of both utopian and apocalyptic scenarios.

In relation to democracy, it is possible to derive two inferences from the above taxonomy. In one sense, crisis is endogenous to this system

since it denotes politics in its own right as an art by means of which free citizens judge on their deeds, make judgments in and for the public, propose their critical opinions, and devise decisions according to consented procedures. In another sense, crisis denotes a radical break or a situation of exceptionality or emergency that can take on catastrophic characteristics (something that a constitutional democracy is not supposed to face). **In other words, on the one hand, crisis embodies the “stuff” of politics itself; on the other, it denotes a break with ordinary politics.**

It is possible to speculate about these meanings as samples of **two broad conceptions of politics that the polysemy of crisis involves: one rhetorical or discursive and one technical or problem solving**. The former as an expression of subjective evaluation and judgment made endlessly by free citizens in a constitutional regime, and the latter as an objective and detectable condition of instability that asks for a functional and specific or extraordinary resolving by authority (the spectrum of possibilities goes from elections to the decisive intervention of the sovereign). **We should keep in mind this rich constellation of meanings of crisis and politics when we approach the discourse about the sense of the crisis of democracy.**

But, yet again, to what kind of democracy do we refer when we diagnose a crisis?

### **Three Perspectives on Interpreting Democracy: Trilateral, Deliberative, and Crisis**

Presumably, the kind of democracy citizens refer to in ordinary political language is the one in which they live: **a constitutional representative democracy**. The institutions of this form of democracy – which pivots on parliament and its lawmaking function – were designed and implemented during the eighteenth century in order to allow citizens to peacefully resolve their differences without ever making them disappear. Constitutions and procedures were constructed in view of allowing a crisis of consent (hence the break of unanimity and the adoption of the rule of majority) without shattering the system and without curtailing freedom of opinion and criticism either. **Modern democracy’s procedures and constitutions wanted to be guidelines for governing the crisis, which they assumed were congenital to democracy, not accidental.**<sup>5</sup> Freedom – civil and political – and majority rule are thus the essential conditions that characterize democracy so that, if one of the two declines, that would be the sign of a radical crisis that is not manageable with ordinary democratic procedures. **This led scholars to argue that democratic regimes**



stand opposed to both permanent revolution and autocracy (see, for instance, Dahl 1989: 89–91 and Kelsen 2013: 67–78 for why majority rule rather than unanimity maximizes the principle of equal political liberty). “Let us not think that we can justify all extreme actions,” as it is only “on necessity, the excuse of tyrants” (Condorcet 2012: 194).

Theorists of participatory democracy may not be satisfied with this rendering when they claim that democracy entails a substantive conception of politics and that electoral democracy is distant from it and even a betrayal of it.<sup>6</sup> In this case, any discourse of crisis would be meaningless. Dualism between “ideal” and “real” makes all analysis of the existing democracies an unavoidable picture of crisis, with the implication that democracy is never in place anyway because, if in place, it would mean harmony—and thus unanimity—as opposed to crisis. A vision of democracy as perfect or total consensus on what is the general good of the city is what we get when we split the “ideal” and the “real.” To paraphrase Jean-Jacques Rousseau, we might say that the general will lies prior to our judgment or critical reflections as it is an act of discovery of what already exists in the normative reason of the citizen. The general will is not a searching process. Thus, any decision that passes a majority vote is, as it were, symptomatic of a crisis of substantive legitimacy. Apart from unanimity there is always a crisis.

To have a substantive conception of democracy means to hold democracy instrumental to some predefined goal, which is what gives value and substance to the empty shell of democratic procedures and institutions. Thus, for instance, material equality, or justice, or competent and good decisions, or the homogeneity of the people are some substantive goals whose attainment conditions democracy’s legitimacy or, conversely, its crisis. But unless the authoritative judges of these achievements are the citizens, or their representatives in parliament, the risk of democracy’s depreciation and even subversion that the appeal to substantive meanings involves, is high. Indeed, in the very moment we list some substantive goals to be attained we violate the principle of political autonomy if we assume that there is someone else besides citizens who is authorized to decree what the substantive problems are and whether they are solved or not. For democracy is predicated on the idea that coercive legal norms are only legitimate to the extent that those who are subjected to them have contributed—in direct and indirect ways—to making them, while all other political regimes are predicated on a principle of “authority,” which ultimately involves a measure of heteronomy (Bobbio 1984: 23–42).

This does not mean that democratic governments are indifferent to issues of economic inequality, social injustice, incompetent decisions, and radical divisions within the citizenry. It means that the judgment

and denunciation of social inequalities, ineffective decisions, and social disunions **are only possible within a political and legal order that has political autonomy of citizens – their will and their opinion – at its core.** Hence democracy is strong when and until its citizens can mobilize and have a chance to press the system for or against policies they judge to be in agreement or in contradiction with democratic promises. In this sense, Hans Kelsen (2013: 97) wrote in 1929 that “formal” and “substantive” democracies are “inseparable from one another.” This is what makes **democracy a government of crisis.** If we agree with this political procedural approach, we must also **agree with Koselleck that use of the word “crisis” risks thoughtlessness when referred to democracy, if by politics we mean the power of citizens to develop their critical mind and make political judgments, as Aristotle suggested.**

Yet a **political procedural approach** does not have a univocal rendering. It can be interpreted in two different ways, **which I call monoarchic and diarchic respectively.**

For the sake of brevity, we may say that **the monoarchic approach identifies democracy with electoral selections and politics with decision making within institutions.** (To recall the closing of the previous section, it corresponds to the technical meaning of politics). Joseph A. Schumpeter was the main contemporary theorist behind this rendering. According to Schumpeter, democracy “means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them,” and that their decision occurs through a method of “free competition among would-be leaders for the vote of the electorate” (Schumpeter 1942: 285). **Democracy as a theory of competitive leadership was Schumpeter’s strategy for nullifying all discourses about crisis.**<sup>7</sup> The actor within an electoral democracy knows nothing beyond what his own economic interest dictates to him, and assumes that the only constraint on his action is the solution that would optimize his preference-satisfaction. A mobilized civil society would thus signal that the institutional performance does not satisfy the requests coming from society: **participation would be an indication of crisis while apathy would signal health.** Thus Schumpeter concluded that “crisis” is an imprecise word guilty of thoughtlessness because people’s opinions on what government should or should not do are terribly incompetent and sensitive to “non-logical influences” (1942: 257). **Until elections occur regularly, there is no such thing as a crisis, unless we rely on citizens’ emotions and imprecise impressions.**

The **diarchic approach** holds instead that **democratic proceduralism acquires justification as the norm of political liberty and gives a key role to equality in the distribution of the political power and voice on how institutions should perform,** not merely to electoral selection as it reiterates

the above-mentioned rhetorical meaning of politics. Political freedom is the kernel of the normative character of democratic proceduralism, as both its method and its objective, because while it defeats violence it makes decisions by majority rule legitimate and not a second best (Kelsen 2013: 31). **In this sense, normative and functional components cannot be disjoined; democratic procedures are never merely formal, and the detection of crisis is intelligible because the procedure itself allows for reflexive critique** (for the articulation of normative and functional components of democracy, see Elster 1997: 3–33).

This entails that democracy designates two levels of politics and of judgment on politics. As a form of government based on consent, it is exposed to cyclical crisis (consent by its citizens and temporary tenure of all political functions are related to and incubate contestations, in this sense crises), and as a political process it promises to govern disagreement without solving it once and for all (regulating succession in power holding and guaranteeing freedom of contestation to the people: as per Machiavelli [1970: 58], popular government is the only one that allows everybody “to freely speak ill” of the people and the government). In other words, democracy is a government of crisis par excellence as its procedures presume a permanent occurrence of disagreement and dissent, which are not deemed a source of instability *per se*. This means that in representative democracy, good indicators of trust in democracy are to be found in the performance of the parliament, political parties, and in a vibrant public sphere of opinions which is the medium that keeps the inside and the outside of the institutions connected (Saffon and Urbinati 2014). Within this approach, when we talk about crisis we point probably to the communication (the medium) between the process of contestation that free speech and freedom of association guarantee us and the process of deliberation and decision at the institutional level.<sup>8</sup>

The diarchic view of procedural democracy can orient us in interpreting how in today's literature the term crisis is used to denote a condition of dissatisfaction and distress in consolidated democracies – European in particular – when people's opinion seems not to be on the side of the ruling majority, not even when their voting is ideologically the same as that of the ruling majority. **The distance between institutional arena and extra-institutional arena is at the core of discourses about the crisis.** Hence, clearly, the issue at stake here is representative democracy, or a diarchic political order that contemplates two sources of authority: that of procedures – the constitutionalized decision making system, and that of opinion – the broad domain of the public sphere within which people freely form and express and change their political judgment. **Crisis would in this case denote a problem of communication between these two levels.** This is

the perspective I adopt and that in my view can help us make sense of the growing discourse about the crisis of democracy while avoiding the risk of thoughtlessness.

### ***Overload of Participation as an “Excess of Democracy”***

After World War II, when the trajectory of democracy started its journey in Western countries within a party system based on universal suffrage, the first and most explicit declaration of a crisis of democracy came from scholars who shared a minimal conception of democracy and whom I include in the monoarchic category. Michael Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki released in 1975 *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*. The Commission was made up of “private citizens of Western Europe, Japan and North America,” pressed to study the “crisis” provoked by the growth of social movements of contestation in almost all democratic societies. These movements were for civil rights, against imperialism and militarism, for the vindication and expansion of social rights, for a more participatory democracy, for social-democratic programs, and even for a socialist transformation of political democracy. In relation to those diverse forms of contestation, the Commission detected a crisis of “governability,” or the incapacity of democratic institutions to resist the pressures from associated citizens without capitulating to their requests. The crisis of governability was exemplified by social policies. One may ask the Commission members how they could appeal to a minimal proceduralism and yet detect a crisis of democracy.

In the Commission’s analysis, civil movements in the 1960s and 1970s made Western democracies “overloaded with participants and demands,” and caused them to become more bureaucratic. Social-democratic policies in Europe and the Great Society in the United States – both of which are politics of social equality of opportunities – made “government less powerful and more active,” as they increased its functions while decreasing its authority. Positive liberty, which commanded state intervention, originated a vicious circle that it could not itself stop since, while prompting citizens’ demands, it was forced to become itself more demanding. On the one hand, taxation increased and, on the other, society’s bargaining power against the state also increased. The “excess of democracy” could be stopped only by stopping social policies and deflating social movements. Minimalist democracy gained a truly perfectionist role as an ideology to be opposed against a recalcitrant reality.

The monoarchic theory gave birth to the following paradox: it narrowed democracy to electoral procedures yet could not make peace with

the fact that those procedures would open the door to citizens' participation and claimant movements. The paradox revealed a lack of understanding of representative government, which entails both the right to vote and the right to formulate and express judgment on representatives and institutions alike. **Electoral selection thus provokes demands and criticism from citizens and civil society: "excess of democracy" is part of the game, not its pathology.**

The Trilateral Commission detected the crisis of democracy on two correlated fronts: that of the state (whose necessary antagonism with the Soviet Union brought it into a kind of competition on the terrain of social equality) and that of citizens and civil society (as states' social activism expanded people's demands as well). That slippery slope movement could be stopped by containing participation from below and by interrupting the welfare state from above. **The neoliberal dismantling of social policies and a repressive state were the long durée message of the Commission, the perfectionist project concealed under the detection of the crisis of democracy: in response to the growing demands on the state from civil society, the neoliberal response coopted the logic of individual freedom to state the primacy of civil society against the state's politics of social justice.** In 40 years, that vision of monoarchic democracy would become victorious: **today's decline of political participation and of social policies makes many consolidated democracies the land of neoliberal perfectionism.**



## Pathologies of the Public Sphere

**The second discourse on the crisis of democracy comes from the anti-minimalist rendering of democratic proceduralism, namely deliberative democracy**, a branch of critical theory and, for this very reason, naturally keen to make the concept of crisis a learning tool. **"Crisis is at the basis of social and critical theory insofar as it signifies the dissonance between morality and progress, knowledge and interests, and the limits of intelligibility.... Thus crisis serves the practice of unveiling latencies; it is a distinction that transcends oppositions and dichotomies"** (Roitman 2011).

Once applied to the analysis of democracy, critical theory presents us with an ideal vision of the democratic society that metabolizes the crisis insofar as it effects a transition toward a progressively more integrated society. Indeed, if democracy is defined, as in Jürgen Habermas's language, as a rule of good reasons, whereby good reasons are contingent upon how the justification process is structured, and if this requires an institutionalized basic structure of justification in which reasons can be

assessed amongst free and equal beings through the criteria of reciprocity and generality in light of a formal-pragmatic basis, **then one may infer that democracy is permanently in a state of crisis or actualization of its ideal of a perfect integration of citizens as good reasoners, who are capable of and willing to transcend their partial views and correct their biases.** Defining integration and rationalization in terms of two contradicting modes, instrumental and communicative, the crisis of politics acquires the character of a crisis of legitimacy as crisis of the communicative way of interaction and mediation between citizens' interests (for a comprehensive reconstruction of Habermas's political thought, see Specter [2010: 87–132]).

Whereas overloaded participation by the claimant citizens and the expansion of social programs by the state were the Commission's main concerns, **for Jürgen Habermas's recent analysis, the concern is precisely the withdrawal of citizens from reasoned deliberative participation and of the state from its commitment to take care of the social conditions of political deliberation.** Factions, on the one hand, and particular interests such as partisanship and classist policies, on the other, are the main expressions of a crisis because they are the symptom of a very divided and unequal society in which impartial deliberation becomes a utopia at best and elections remain the only formal expression of autonomy. A crisis of rationality as an integrating force of society is the diagnosis of an imperfect democracy.<sup>9</sup> Because, according to Habermas, the communicative theory of society provides an account of **collective learning** processes within discourses and a corresponding theory of **social evolution**, the **gaps in social coordination** translate into a **gap in social learning**, and thus into a **regressive development in all social structures**, from economic to social to political.<sup>10</sup> **Crisis of democracy is, properly speaking, a crisis of social integration and rationalization of claims and interests that takes place in the domains in which social discourses occur.** Social **conflicts**, forms of intolerance or, more simply, social tensions between classes are the **signs of the crisis**.

Of course, the decline of the welfare state, or what Offe designated as the asymmetry paradigm between the forum and the market, is the most significant factor in this critical regression. This decline signifies indeed that the rationalized form of state action – through the legal and the bureaucratic system – **is less and less capable of containing the expansion of inequality and the pressures of partial interests.** Both at the level of the European Union and at the level of the member-states, with the end of 1970s, democracies faced the **growth of anti-generalist interests and large privatization of state programs** while politics became slowly more in tune with a purely instrumental rationality that penalizes the weak-

est strata of the population and reveals a society less inclusive and more balkanized.

Habermas writes in his *Between Facts and Norms* that when actualized in the state of rights, or the government of the law, legitimacy is conceived according to a discursive theory of the law that renounces a personification of popular sovereignty. Popular sovereignty drops out from the state and becomes an informal discourse in the communicative circuits represented by deliberative forms of participation, external to legislative bodies (Habermas 1996: appendix 1). But partisan discourses, along with organized interests, prove that social and political groups take up the game of politics in order to make their view win the state: block-parties correspond to a battlefield-like politics in which the counting of votes only gives legitimacy to the institutions. The success of the liberal-pluralism model looks like the picture of the failure of deliberative democracy.<sup>11</sup>

As an overturned minimalism, Habermas's theory presents us with a hierarchy of two models: a superior one that corresponds to deliberative democracy; and a second best one that narrows legitimacy to the electoral method and the rule of majority (Malkopoulou 2014). "This is not to say that a deliberative democrat would not be interested in what the majority thinks and votes for; she would. Yet, when seen from a deliberative democratic perspective, unless the decision of the majority is coupled with prior debate and deliberation on the issue at stake, it can hardly claim a collective democratic legitimacy" (Ercan and Gagnon 2014: 6).

Habermas's theory's normative assumption is that in a government based on consent, legitimacy must be identified with unanimity in order not to succumb to the government of the majority: "For if the course of action which needs justification is collective in nature, the members of the collectivity must reach a common decision ... Faced with a pluralism of ultimate value orientations, which seems to support the skeptic's position, the cognitivist has to try to demonstrate the existence of a bridging principle that makes consensus possible" (Habermas 1993: 71, 76; for more on this point, see also Manin 1987).

To be sure, Habermas clarified that unanimity as consensus does not need to refer to all single decisions but only to some basic principles and the procedural mode of justification and action. Yet the dualism between foundational consensus and ordinary pluralism shows itself at its best precisely when and if deliberative democracy is in decline. That is to say when the clash of interests seems to define the form of public interactions among citizens who are more unequal and less capable of transcending their social conditions and partial interests. Although Habermas argued on several occasions against the dualism between "ideal" and "real" and

claimed that the ideal is actually a norm operating in our public behavior when we act as citizens – this is the pragmatic view, not dualistic – **the discourse of the crisis that his theory of democracy suggests invites us to think that electoral and party democracy belongs to a non-ideal democracy, although it is a functional mechanism that sustains democratic institutions.** The normative or ideal state of democracy is one of a well-integrated society in which justification of claims is a duty toward others to be performed according to impartiality of judgment, freedom from influence, or autonomy of will formation.

### ***Crisis as Catastrophe***

**The third discourse about crisis is external to proceduralism as such and presumes a substantive conception of the national community that sustains a democracy.** It is thus catastrophic as it rests on an interpretation of democracy that has no procedure at its core – whether minimal or deliberative – **but cultural identity of some kind instead**, in relation to which procedures are essentially a technical method at most. Predictably, thus, a crisis of the core identity can hardly be remedied. To paraphrase Koselleck's taxonomy, **we may say that this rendering of the crisis corresponds to the monotheistic appropriation of the classical meaning of crisis as judgment**, wherein judgment acquires the further meaning of the final judgment that projects history toward the eschatology of either salvation or damnation. **Samuel Huntington's theory of a clash of civilizations is representative of this rhetoric, which is ideological and assumes democracy depends on some measure of cultural homogeneity that give meaning and strength to the political community and its government.** Neither class issues as with the Trilateral, nor organized interests as with Habermas, are responsible for the crisis **but rather the growth of tribalism and cultural division of the national body.**

According to Huntington's (1993) narrative, nations are still the protagonists of world politics, yet within a scenario that is no longer inhabited by nations operating according to the state grammar – its army, laws, economic exchange, and so on – **but by nations operating according to non-state grammar like religious fundamentalism.** This is primed to inaugurate a global scenario of catastrophe and apocalyptic ruins. **The crisis of democracy is thus a chapter in the crisis of Western civilization**, which coincides with the end of the world order based on the state and comprised in the centuries between the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) and the end of the cold war (1989). **The crisis of that international order is also a crisis of democracy, which has been the political form consistent with it and under threat in this new global scenario marked by strong anti-Western forces.**

With the growth of Islamic fundamentalism, religion has become an internationalizing force that unifies large areas of the world into one civilization that is an alternative to the West's. The globe is the theater in which this clash occurs. Humanity is thus divided into two parts and the foreseeable scenario appears to be tragic and with no room for mediation. **Catastrophe is the name of this diagnosis more than crisis.** It reminds us of the literature on the decline of European civilization at the beginning of the twentieth century (Koselleck 2006: 397–400). Whereas then the risk came from within Europe, since Europe was the main theater of world politics and culture, today it comes from outside Europe and the West. (**An overloaded level of immigration and the technological revolution of the means of communication has transported this risk fatally inside of the West and subjected it to changes it is no longer able to govern.**)

The perverse effect of this movement beyond and against borders is the **exporting of the clash of civilizations** to the international domain, since religious fundamentalist ideologies and groups look for their representative peers wherever they are, that is outside of the West. The clash of civilization is fatal and primed to erode both domestic solidarity, state unity and international stability. **The “crisis” of democracy is here the same thing as the crisis of a world order and cannot be dealt with since it pertains to the “substance” of democracy. It is a catastrophe.** The clash of civilization is fatal as it rests on a view of **democracy that has a single cultural lineage**, the ethos of right for instance, which is also its unique and only environ – born in the West it cannot but conflict with the rest of the world. Huntington obtained this result by smuggling in cultural baggage a concept of democracy that he proclaimed to be only procedural.

 **The trilateral, the deliberative, and the cultural discourses have this in common: they interpret the “crisis” as the failure of empirical democracies to adhere to, or match with, or impersonate, an ideal model of perfect equilibrium, rationality, or unity.**

None of them are content with accepting a conception of democracy as a government of crisis: **the first**, because its monoarchic proceduralism rests on a view of politics whose Archimedean point is within the institutions so that **any movement from outside appears fatally as a hazard and an attack on stability and governability.** **The second**, because it cultivates an unsolved **mistrust in conflicts of interests, basic disagreement and instrumental reasoning, majority rule and party politics**, which are the structural conditions of representative democracy as diarchy, whose goal is to regulate yet preserve a kind of social integration that is non-consensual and not even based on the promise of sincerity that citizens make to each other (giving and taking reasons with no rhetorical intent of persu-

sion). Finally, **the third** because it **connects democracy with some strong substantive values and views of the political community**, which nullify democratic proceduralism altogether and result in an ideological catastrophism with no way out.

## The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy

As I said at the beginning of this article, **today's discourse on the crisis of democracy** refers to a specific form of democratic polity, the one that took off in Europe after World War II in reaction to the despotic and totalitarian mass regimes that destroyed domestic liberty and an international peaceful coexistence. It is a crisis of the **parliamentary democracy built on elections and political parties**.<sup>12</sup> Since the European continent was the home of parliamentary democracy, it is predictably the place in which **the discourse about crisis is more intense**: "Burn it down! Burn it down!" cried Greek demonstrators, referring to their national parliament, on May 5, 2010. Of course Greek citizens had good reason to voice their criticism against their elected politicians and doubt the power of their voting right.<sup>13</sup> **As for our analysis, they confirm that when we talk about "crisis of democracy" we point to the citizens' disaffection with the representative system and its core institution – parliament. The implications of this criticism can be understood whenever we interpret democratic procedures from a diarchic perspective.**

Since its inception in the eighteenth century, the **parliamentary model was able to realize the promise of political autonomy**. The crisis of democracy has been since then a crisis of this model: "The battle, which was waged against autocracy at the end of the eighteenth and at the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, was essentially a battle for parliamentarism" (Kelsen 2013: 47). According to one of its early theorists, Hans Kelsen, **this is a system of political liberty that rests on free mandate representation which implies, on the one hand, that collective decisions are to be taken by a specialized body of government whose components are chosen through free election by those to whom the decisions are supposed to apply; and, on the other hand, that the majority principle is a decision-making rule that this elected body must employ. This system is ingrained in a political sphere made of parties, wherein the political party is an association of citizens "which brings like-minded individuals together in order to secure them actual influence in shaping political affairs"** (Kelsen 2013: 38). **Any effort to discredit the parties or make them the power of few notables represents a resistance to the actualization of democracy.**

Thus, Colin Crouch (2000) has argued, in giving today's crisis the name of "post-democracy," that the changes we witness call into question the centrality of both the lawmaking power and of the party system. To Peter Mair, the transformation of political parties is actually the locus of the crisis since the latter have gradually changed from means of associations of citizens to notabilate organizations that perfectly meet with the increasing power of the executive branch and an oligarchic turn in society (Mair 2013). Yet according to Bernard Manin, the word "crisis" does not convey the sense of an impasse diagnosis since it presumes party democracy is a model of good democracy, which is unwarranted and idealistic. Manin thus prefers the term "metamorphosis" or a change in the representative system, a government that can bear several forms without changing its basic structure. Historically, starting with the eighteenth century, government based on elections passed from a notabilate to a party democracy and also adopted universal suffrage. Focusing on parties as if their crisis were the cause of a decline of democracy thus makes no sense also because parties are, as Robert Michels and his followers argued, oligarchic in their own right. Today, Manin concludes, a metamorphosis of representative government is an action that is beyond party democracy yet not beyond being democratic: this is "audience democracy" (1997: 221).

The term metamorphosis refers to a body that changes its original form from within. The Greek root μεταμόρφωσις is composed of two words, μετα (change) and μορφή (form). The form is paramount in order to detect changes. Manin does not define the "form" of representative democracy, but proposes four principles that make it possible: a) those in charge of government are appointed by elections at regular intervals; b) the elected retain a degree of independence from the wishes of the electors; c) those who are governed are free to give expression if they want to express their opinions and political wishes; and d) political decisions are public and undergo a trial of judgment and debate.

As we can see, the first two principles pertain to the arrangements internal to state institutions, while the last two pertain to the political action of the citizens. The correlation of the two is what I call "diarchy."

Detecting a crisis of party democracy and the parliamentary system is not a platitude as it means that a change has occurred in the second set of principles that compose representative government, the broad system of opinion formation and expression that activates the communication between state institutions and the citizens. Parties no longer operate along this line, and although they are still in place as electoral machines, they no longer represent citizens' judgment and claims as the surveys prove when they point to people's overt disbelief and mistrust in the entire po-

litical system. Indices of democracy constructed by scholars confirm this trend as they show that citizens' **"trust in political parties, parliaments, and governments is lower than in the police or the legal system"** (Merkel 2014: 23). Namely, it is not the democratic state that is in crisis but the representative form of its politics. This is the meaning of what I anticipated at the start as a crisis of consent, not of the constitutional order.

Thus, regardless its solely analytical intention, Manin's diagnosis is more than merely descriptive. It argues that the decline of party democracy and the growth of the democracy of the public correspond to a political order in which trust in the leader and the acceptance of an increasing call for more power by the executive meet with a change in the organization of political elections from parties and militants to experts in communication. "Audience democracy is the rule of the *media expert*" (Manin 1997: 221).

To Jeffrey Green, who gives an evaluative twist to Manin's diagnosis, this represents a celebration of the ocular power. While party-democracy elections were heavily based on the vocal and the volitional aspect of politics – participation was its central marker – appearance in public now defines the art of politics instead. Words, discussion, and conflicts between ideas and interests were central in the one case, while candor and transparency – public exposure of the leader and his government – are central in the other case, in which the organ of popular power is "the gaze rather than the decision, and the critical ideal of popular power [is] candor rather than autonomy" (Green 2013: 15; see also Avramenko et al. 2015). Audience democracy is a remarkable step toward a reactive participation whereby democratic politics is not so much associated with autonomy as with spectatorship. This corresponds to a detour from representation as advocacy to a representation that is, in Thomas Hobbes's apt words, a form of authority creation divesting the authorizing citizens of all power (Friedrich 1968: 273).

Manin achieves an important score against all previous discourses about crisis that in one way or another proposed a dual scenario of ideal and real. He understands that democracy is a matter of process, which makes difficult any discourse of crisis that is not itself the indication of a desideratum. Somehow, he brings to the floor the dissatisfying nature of both the trilateral and the Habermasian visions, which did not succeed in keeping their diagnosis within a purely procedural approach as we explained above. However, Manin achieves this result by means of a radical restyling of democracy that wants to be non-evaluative. He identifies it categorically with the procedures in action in ancient democracy: direct presence and, when selection was needed, rotation. But modern democracy uses only election, a mechanism of selection, although based on a

particular form of equality. Democracy employs not a mathematically equal probability to be chosen – as with lottery – but as equal weight of a political unit of measurement (voting) and the equal possibility citizens have to take part in the debating process (Manin 1997: 39–41).

Thus, it is not on the side of procedures that representative government is democratic. What makes it democratic is not participation anyway, but opinion and discussion on the proposals and the behavior of the lawmakers. If this is the case, how can we speak of a “crisis of democracy” if today’s changes translate into an increasing power of opinion over parties and parliaments? Is not “audience democracy” a perfection of the democracy of the moderns?

However, democracy’s diarchic authority presumes that consent and discussion, although essential to legitimacy, are not self-standing marks of self-government. Consent and discussion acquire power through political associations and groups. The latter contribute in making representation play a participatory function, not only an authorizing one. Parties are thus not optional. Indeed, voting for disassociated individuals (without party, program, and policy commitment) would undermine the purpose of electoral representation: “if election were truly a selection between and of single candidates – between and of individual names rather than political groups’ names – representation would vanish because each person would run for him or herself alone and would in fact become a party of his or her own interests.” The legislature would become an “aggregation of individual will,” rather than a place for deliberating about proposals that have a collective backing (Urbinati 2006: 39).<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, political representation is not identical with representation as an embodiment of the people or the making of the citizens as a total unity under the person of the leader. Elections make the representative carry two functions at once: that of unifying a constituency and that of giving voice to or advocating its claims. The representative advances the opinions she shares with her constituency so that she does not simplistically rule instead of the citizens, but makes laws or decisions in a relationship of interdependence with them, thus activating a medium of communication with them, which includes contestation, control, and finally dismissal if needed.

Bruce Ackerman (1991: 81), for instance, argued that: “If we mistake Congress for People Assembled, and give it supreme power, it will act in a way that belies its populist rhetoric,” that is, like an elective despot. Elections do not designate delegation as transfer of power, though they do initiate a division of labor within the polity. Moreover, elections are not a plebiscite that crowns a leader under whose person the masses are unified and acquire an identity, although elections do produce a political class (Urbinati 2014: 171–227).

If elections alone constituted representative democracy it would be hard to make sense of the discourse of crisis and Schumpeter would be right. Elections contribute to the formulation of the country's political direction in the sense that they initiate the representative process the **citizens activate and sustain through time by means of multiple forms of political presence, neither just as electors nor through permanent mobilization** (Morgan 1988: 189–197). On this ground, it is correct to say **what democratization and the representative process share in genealogy and destiny: they arise together and decline together** (Kishlansky 1986: 21). This is, in short, the repercussion of the idea of democracy as diarchy. Its heuristic value consists in allowing us to employ the term “crisis” without making us guilty of thoughtlessness.

We can thus evaluate the transition from party democracy to an indistinct public or an audience democracy in terms of a decline of the sovereign power of the people because a disempowerment of the decision-making role of the citizens – the decline of politics as autonomy – though the constitutional order is still in place and the right to vote is not questioned. When citizens vote for parties with a platform **they exercise their judgment on future politics**; they do not make a plebiscite of leaders because their vote does not contain simply their trust in the person, as it used to happen in pre-democratic representative government in which the candidate-notable was the figure of representation. **In party democracy, the image of the candidate does not substitute for the future expectation of the voters as in an audience democracy, which is essentially plebiscitarian in that it regards reference to programs and platforms as irrelevant in electoral campaigns.** Rather, it is the voting power itself that changes its character when it becomes an investiture or plebiscite of a leader.

One consequence of this is that accountability becomes **truly meaningless since electors do not express claims that ask for retrospective verification and prospective policies**; they simply confer trust (Mansbridge 2013). This change proves to be so significant that **even Manin, who resists all “evaluative” readings of democracy, judges the transition from debating-and-participating to attending-and-gazing as a sign of “malaise,” not a neutral mutation.** Maning concluded his 1997 book with discomforting words: “representative government appears to have ceased its progress towards popular self-government” (233).

Manin’s evaluative judgment of the transition from party democracy to audience democracy can be read as an invitation to detect a change in the **normative structure of democratic diarchy**. Indeed, what a consistent audience perspective propels is the overcoming of the “status of the vocal model,” of the idea of peoples’ participation as “an active, autonomous,

decision-making force” (Green 2013: 111–112). The plebiscitarian project sweeps away all vestiges of **deliberative procedural democracy**, which holds plebiscitarian democracy a “profanity,” as it celebrates a **passive role of the people**.<sup>15</sup> Yet it also nullifies any interpretation of democracy that grounds procedures in political liberty. Proceduralism, no matter the form it takes, **retains a normative perspective either in the name of the universalizability of rational arguments or in the name of preference aggregation and the periodical change of the elected as the only pragmatic way to resolve the lack of rationality that government by opinion contains**. It conceives of democracy as a political order that is based on autonomy and voting, a view of political activity that is centered on decision and voice. **This is what a plebiscitary of the audience invalidates when it opposes the intermediation of judgment with visual reaction to images. The reasons for why this decline has occurred would require another paper.** Yet as public evaluation of politics and government testifies: the “attachment to political parties has eroded, electorates have become more volatile and skeptical,” while lawmaking institutions have become more exposed to decline of confidence (see Pharr and Putnam 2000).

## Concluding Remarks

To bring these reflections to an end, I would say that **speculating on the crisis of democracy is not a thoughtless exercise**. Once read through the lenses of **diarchy**, the crisis points to a rearrangement of the relationship between **democracy's two authorities – active participation and participation in the form of opinion**. Ultimately, a decline of a particular type of democracy – parliamentary and party democracy.

**Crisis** pertains to the form of citizenship participation itself as it becomes less propositional and vocal and more reactive and visual. It designates an exhaustion of citizens’ empowerment insofar as an audience and plebiscitary democracy **makes the reactive public more important than suffrage**, the judgment of a destructured audience more influential than the citizens’ as individual or associated actors.

This change does not come without cost as it contributes in strengthening the voice of the delegated power, and in particular the executive, at the expense of representation and lawmaking. Thus, even though the constitutional order of democracy and its formal legitimacy go unquestioned, the detection of a crisis is not unwarranted – **it points to a decline of citizens’ power in determining the agenda and shaping the public affairs of their country**.



► Nadia Urbinati is the Kyriakos Tsakopoulos Professor of Political Theory and Hellenic Studies at Columbia University. Her most recent book is *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People* (Harvard University Press, 2014).

## ► NOTES

1. “The question ‘Can democracy be saved?’ became central in the recent political debate faced with a most serious financial crisis, as well as apparent institutional incapacity to address it” (della Porta 2013: 1). See also the pioneering research and surveys on the perceptions and opinions of the citizens of a large number of democracies around the world inaugurated by Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino (2005).
2. The social-democratic project presumed the centrality of citizenship (thus the asymmetry of power between the forum and the market so that the former is “allowed, in fact intended, to have an impact” on the latter), and the liberal-pluralist one presumed a symmetrical relation between market and politics which translates into the latter’s forbearance to intervene in the organization of the former. While the first project of blocking the translation of social inequality into politics was stopped, the myth that bargaining political groups might play the game of re-equilibrating economic forces without state intervention failed.
3. The bibliography on the doctrine and political history of the democratic state is immense; an excellent critical overview has been recently proposed by Kalyvas (2016). As for the theory of a compatibility of democracy and capitalism I recall the peremptory statement by Schumpeter (1942: 297) “modern democracy is a product of the capitalist process.”
4. But not all changes of regime count as revolutionary according to Condorcet: “**Thus, the word *revolutionary* applies only to those revolutions whose purpose is freedom**” (2012: 190).
5. The first document describing this modern notion of the constitution is Condorcet’s ***Plan of Constitution*, written between September 1792 and February 1793, and proposed to the National Assembly** for approval at the end of February 1793. His plan was never discussed by the Assembly as it was substituted with the Jacobins’ plan. See Urbinati (2006: 176–222).
6. **Most scholars have argued for instance that representation has been the most ingenious invention constitutional designers have created to neutralize political participation by making the people a legitimizing force at the instant they renounce their ruling power. “Pure” democracy would thus be only direct participation while representative democracy would be an oxymoron.**
7. Schumpeter reached this conclusion by stating a relation of causality between capitalism and democracy and moreover assuming a realist conception of capitalist economy that excluded ***a priori any moral evaluation on its outcomes – inequality and poverty***. Hence, he criticized Karl Marx of wavering from a realistic analysis of capitalism to an emotional evaluation that placed emphasis on the growth of misery and exploitation and concluded



that the capitalist logic was “essentially prosperity-less and depression-less” (Schumpeter 1942: 5, 40).

8. This finds confirmation in the survey by Democracy Barometer on the status of democracy in the two decades spanning 1990 to 2010. Indicators show that democratic institutions in consolidated countries are not in acute crises. What is in crisis is the quality of participation – above all in relation to the needs of citizens belonging to the lower classes (Merkel and Petring 2011 name this a “two-thirds democracy”; see also Offe 2014) – and the trust in political parties and the media.
9. In his *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas pivoted his critical analysis on the crisis by stressing the “endemic” inability of liberal-capitalist societies to solve the contradictions produced by the process of economic growth at “more or less regular interval,” and “as such endanger social integration” (1975: 25).
10. For Habermas’s theory of postmetaphysical rationality as “reflective competence,” see Habermas (1981: 2).
11. Within deliberative theory we witness the growing of an anti-electoral mentality and practice, as for instance the deliberative fora, the assemblies of sorted or selected citizens, and the appointed experts in ad hoc committees for the sake of problem solving or the critical assessment of controversial issues. For a discussion of this issue, see Urbinati (2010).
12. This is a de facto crisis also in the sense that some European democracies are moving toward less pluralistic and more majoritarian forms, as for instance in the case of Hungary, whose new constitution of 2013 looks like a burial of parliamentary democracy in its classical form.
13. Very telling is the comment of the current Minister of administrative reform, Mr. Georgos Katraugalos, relative to the subjection of the Greek government to its European creditors: “If we cannot change economic policy through elections, then elections are irrelevant ... Elections are irrelevant and it is useless to vote” (cited in Yardley 2015).
14. According to Muirhead (2014, specifically chs. 3–5), political parties play an educational function since they motivate citizens to act in public and to acquire some cognitive competence.
15. On the plebiscitary transformation of political opinion in representative democracy, see the original analysis by Habermas (1991, especially ch. 4).

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