Cultural and Ethical Turns: Interdisciplinary Reflections on Culture, Politics and Ethics

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New Politics, Media and Decline in Participation: Will Citizens Love Politics Again?

Giuliana Di Biase

Abstract

Politics has changed, and so too our way of conceiving public life: on the one hand, a competitive, individualistically oriented politics has become prevailing; on the other, public space is now inconceivable outside media space. Politicians today seem nearer to people and more human than fifty years ago, but politics itself appears not very near to people's real interests: political participation in western democracies is declining, and many people think politics is a bad affair. The concept of 'public' itself has become difficult for citizens to understand, because of the new, home-centred lifestyle which has affirmed itself with the widespread distribution of television: as Philip Howard argued, the way in which citizens today get political information increases their privacy and diminishes their capacity to understand the communitarian aspect of political problems. Citizens tend to behave like consumers, conceiving the political sphere as a market where decisions to engage or not are always egoistically motivated. Political scientists like Dahrendorf, Giddens and Beck argue that the way out of the many political problems, which affect western democracies nowadays, is a more engaged citizenship, animated by an active trustfulness, which doesn't depend on institutional behaviour, but is built on strong ties of solidarity. In this perspective, only the associative ties which bind the members of civil society could give again a concrete meaning to the concept of public; they would also work as an antidote to the uncertainty typical of our age. In this chapter I argue that an engaged civil society is surely fundamental in order to restore meaning to public life, but that we can't expect it to do all the work by itself. The role of the media is, in this sense, still crucial.

Key Words: Civic society, cynicism, democracy, electoral participation, media, negative reporting, personalisation, political parties, power, trust.

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1. The Decline in Electoral Participation

Electoral participation is declining in all western democracies, also in those traditionally more engaged in raising the education levels of their citizens and in increasing their respect for civil rights. In the United States of America, for instance, only half of the registered population vote in the presidential elections and more or less half of those having the right to vote do not register in the electoral lists.[1] In my country, Italy, only 25-30% of the electors do not vote; yet,

the Italians' level of civic culture is quite low (especially that of young people) and they generally do not have much trust in institutions.

In the United States, the decline in participation interests chiefly the presidential elections, while the local ones seem still to attract a high percentage of voters (although fragmentary evidence points to a sharp decline here as well); other more demanding forms of electoral participation, such as canvassing or paying careful attention to election news, have declined too. In Europe things are quite different, since it seems that the only way to encourage people to participate in the democratic process is to debate about the conduct of the central government.

The high percentage of voters in the American primaries in 2008 seems to confirm those who think that the decline in political participation is only a transitory phenomenon; yet, its trans-national extension requires a more cautious judgment: citizens of western democracies seem really not to care about politics too much.

2. The Media's Faults

The increasing number of non-voters can be a serious danger to democracy: citizens who are outside the electorate are less attached to the existing system, less attentive to politics and less informed about issues affecting them. Voting strengthens citizenship by deepening community involvement; so the less people vote, the more democratic life weakens.

Many are the reasons that can explain the apathetic behaviour of citizens nowadays. Perhaps many people do not vote simply because they do not believe that this can make a difference: they think that their vote can do nothing against a power which has become more and more ubiquitous, a financial global power which is sensible only to the markets suffrage.[2] And maybe they are right.

Some political scientists think that the media are also to blame, since they have dismissed their role of watchdog duty bound to keep an eye on power and have become instead the promoters of a commercial way of doing politics: this was precisely Jürgen Habermas' view when, at the beginning of the sixties, he analysed the concept of public sphere and its changes. Habermas thought that both the decline of the public sphere and the disintegration of the electorate were consequences of the consumer culture diffused by the media, which had radically transformed citizens' perception of politics. In a public sphere dominated by the media, said Habermas, political parties have been forced, in order to have a grip on the people, to adopt the language of commercials; party's activists have been dismissed and their places taken by the politically neutral figure of the professional man expert in political marketing.[3]

Recently, Thomas Patterson[4] has explained the decreasing attention to political themes in the United States attributing it to an excess of information: presidential campaigns are perceived by most of the American people as too long and boring, so they are widely ignored. 'In the 1960 - says Patterson - nearly 50% claimed to

have watched a 'good many' election programs. That figure has fallen to fewer than 30%. Attention to newspaper coverage of campaigns has decreased even more sharply'.[5] Besides, Patterson thinks that the harsh critical attitude of some American newspapers towards the government and the habit of denigrating the opposition candidate using negative spots during electoral campaigns have seriously damaged political participation: negative spots work like barriers for electors, while negative journalism results in a deeply sceptical reporting relentlessly criticising political leaders and institutions.[6]

Some years ago, a similar argument was used by Joseph Nye:[7] he attributed the loss of trust in government of many American people to the media insistence on cases of corruption involving politicians and observed that, although these cases were not more numerous than in the past, their resonance had been strongly empowered by the media.

Surely a representation of political life emphasising its negative aspects can generate a 'spiral of cynicism'[8] that erodes citizens' perception of politics as a public good; but maybe the most serious media responsibilities in disaffecting people from politics are others. Citizens need exhaustive information in order to enhance their political competence, but today political news has to contend for space with soft news, or adapt themselves to the rapidity of a few sound bites.[9] Many are the reasons for this fact: surely themes and arguments have rapidly become more numerous with the emerging of new social subjects claiming attention, so the media agenda is really overcrowded. Yet, the contraction of the spaces reserved to political news is more the result of another process: the representation of events has been progressively simplified by the media, in order to adapt to the tastes of a no longer elitist public whose attention is easier captured by an image of political life constructed with the help of narrative artifices (the agonistic scheme is the most common) and visual artifices (a great amount of photographic material).

How much confidence can be put in these representations? How much does this simplification help people to understand events and how much, instead, does it contribute to creating the image of a fragmented reality? Simplification can make it more difficult for citizens to understand the real life of institutions; as a consequence, they lose interest in politics.

Of course, if we consider not only the old media but also the new ones, we have a larger amount of political information than in the past. This is a very important fact because, as many political scientists argue, the diffusion of political knowledge promotes the practice of civic virtues and increases citizens' participation in the public debate. But can we take this for granted? Are we really certain that a more refined political knowledge brings about a democratic advancement and an increased awareness of civic duties? Maybe a solitary exposition to the information flux can have the opposite effect: according to Philip Howard,[10] the increasing use of Internet as a source of political information is bringing about a way of

participating individualistically in political life, without grasping the social dimension of politicai problems. In front of political information the solitary citizen behaves, according to Howard, like a consumer in a supermarket, thinking only about his own interests.

According to Robert Putnam,[11] this argument can be applied also to the more numerous public who prefer television as a source of political information: their natural tendency to create associative ties has been declining in recent years also because of the widespread diffusion of television, which has caused a significant reduction in the amount of social interactions. And of course a home-centred, individualistic lifestyle does not encourage confrontation on political opinions.

The increasing fragmentation of the target due to a more and more specialised informative offering and to the great number of available informative sources contributes to isolating citizens one from the other: as a result, they lack homogeneous political culture, so it is very difficult for them to find a common pattern on which to debate.

3. The New Image of Power

Personalisation in political life is increasing: candidates are no longer conceived as representing a party but as direct guarantees of a certain political idea. The causes of this phenomenon can be traced back into the decline of political parties and ideologies, but surely the media have played an important part in it: abstract political plans do not catch public attention easily, while a single person does, arousing emotional reactions in those who see and hear her. So as a matter of fact, giving more space to single candidates helps the media to get what they need, that is people's attention.

This also explains the care, which is taken by candidates and politicians in building their images, especially at the higher levels of the political hierarchy. The new leaders are often charismatic seducers that participate in infotainment shows, smile in a friendly way and do not hesitate to open the door of their house, in order to let people know something about their private life. But a political leadership that becomes a media celebrity represents a risk: popular appeal can be used by leaders in order to enlarge their consensus among the people, bypassing the parliament's mediation. This is exactly what the 'populist leaders' described by Taguieff do; as a result, parliaments are deprived of their representative power, and citizens loose the possibility to exert control on their governors.

Nye[12] argues that the new media are able to exert an efficacious control on political leaders, pressing them to adopt a more consultation-oriented style of leadership. According to him, a way of using the soft power of communication intended to promote mutual listening and dialogue would appear to leaders to be the right choice in the long run, because of the negotiating power acquired by citizens with the diffusion of new media.

Perhaps what Nye says is right: an emerging feature of contemporary leadership is its attention to the ethical dimension of some social and environmental problems; nonetheless, the strength intrinsic to political leadership could still be used by leaders in order to put themselves above the moral principles of common people. Surely the Web has revealed an enormous potential for mobilisation, creating new spaces for the dialogue between citizens and institutions, or between citizens themselves; but the Web has revealed a powerful tool also in the hands of political leaders, who are more and more interested in its communicative and propagandist potential. In a very short time the blogosphere has became a land of conquest for spin doctors in search of fame; the anarchical appearance of this game has the flavour of truth, but a lack of control on the sources of information means there is no guarantee that what they say is the truth.[13]

4. Will Citizens Love Politics Again?

Let us go back now to our starting point. Political participation is declining in western democracies. Maybe the fault lies with the media, maybe with politicians, maybe with both; but maybe it lies also with our individualistic and strongly competitive lifestyles. 'To have one's own life' - says Ulrich Beck - 'represents for the western world inhabitants the highest aspiration':[14] this means that self determination is perceived nowadays by western people as the most important value, while a morals of duty is viewed as less motivating. Now, political participation is a right but also a duty: citizens are required to vote because there's a public good that has to be preserved. If they do not vote, probably they do not perceive this good as something to take care of: maybe they do not have time to do this, just because in an individualistic lifestyle we haven't any time for what is not our own.

Political scientists like Anthony Giddens and Ralph Dahrendorf[15] argue that the way out of this apathy is a citizenship animated by an 'active trustfulness': this means that citizens should not expect everything from institutions but instead they should become more actively involved in social affairs in order to create strong ties of solidarity. According to this view, the associative ties between the members of a civil society give a more concrete meaning to the concept of *public* and work as an antidote to the uncertainty typical of an age of risk.[16] But is this enough?

Maybe we have to be more realistic on this point. We cannot expect that a civil society do all the work by itself: the role of the media is, I think, crucial in this regard. They have had a fundamental part in constructing our knowledge of and understanding of political issues and political process, and they can still have an important role in reminding us of the real meaning of politics. The media can be an important ally for an active citizenship, but they can do this only if they give a positive value to public life in all its aspects. This means giving more space and visibility to the many local activities promoted by citizens, especially where a deep and long lasting climate of distrust of political institutions prevails; this means also

assuming a crucial role in the confrontation among citizens and power. In order to perform actively this role the media have to be independent 'watchdogs', that is they have to act as the critical eyes and ears of the civil society, but of course they can do this only if they *can choose* between being or not being tools of the ruling class. Especially in times of economic crisis, this choice can be very difficult: this is why an alliance between the media and the civic society becomes crucial. It can assure to independent, reliable media a survival and these, in turn, can help citizens to understand the real meaning of a public good that has to be preserved. People can trust politics again and the media can be a fundamental ally in this process, but of course much depends on a general change of attitude: individualism is not favourable to an enhanced perception of the importance of participating in political life. The media are only a mirror, which reflects our image: if we do not like it, the only reasonable thing we can do is try to change ourselves.

5. The Importance of Mediation

Many political scientists affirm that contemporary politics in western democracies has been 'media-ised', that is it refers increasingly to the way in which professional communicators script the performances and appearance of politicians. According to Eric Louw,[17] a media-ised politics uses public relations to create a public: 'professional 'public builders' now use the mass media to assemble publics out of isolated individuals.' The result would be a mediated approach to politics, which does not help the people to get actively involved: 'politics has become a second hand mediated reality for most people because they do not encounter politics in a direct (firsthand) manner'.[18] In this perspective, decline in political participation would be a direct consequence of the fact that passive mass audiences encounter mediated politics via the media.

Is media-isation of politics a bad thing? This is the question with which Eric Louw ends his book and I will close my chapter with a possible answer: no, media-isation is not necessarily a bad thing. The word 'media' means 'something that mediates', and actually this should be the main purpose of the media as one of the three actors of political communication: the media should provide a space where citizens can meet power and engage in dialogue with it, reminding it of its democratic legitimacy. The importance of this mediation grows in times, like ours, when democracies seem to be at stake: the representative mechanism, which constitutes the heart itself of the democratic system, has lost its strength and its reliability in the minds of citizens. Now, where parliaments seem no longer able to represent citizens' interests, an alliance with the media becomes crucial, since it is the only way in which citizens can have their interests represented to those in power. But, of course, we cannot expect the media working as trusty mediators if they are oppressed by the problem of surviving in a dying market.

Notes

[1] T.E. Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in Age of Uncertainty*, Vintage Books, New York, 2002.
[2] L. Canfora, *La natura del potere*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2009.
[3] J. Habermas, *Struckturwandeln der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellshaft*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1962. In the preface to the new edition of this book (1990), Habermas admits that new electronic media can have a democratic potential, nonetheless he thinks that this potential would not make a real difference because of the increasing selective pressures to which it would be subject.
[4] Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter*, op. cit., pp. 99.
[5] Ibid., p. 14.
[6] L.L. Kaid, 'Political Advertising', *Handbook of Political Communication Research*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, 2004, pp. 155-202. Kaid demonstrates here that negative spots in the American presidential campaigns of the last fifty years have increased in number.
[7] J. Nye, P. Zelikov and D. King (eds), *Why People don't Trust Government*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.
[8] J.N. Cappella and K.H. Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1997.
[9] M.X. Delli Carpini & S. Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*, Yale University Press, New Heaven, 1996.
[10] P.N. Howard, *New Media Campaigns and the Managed Citizen*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006.
[11] R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2000.
[12] J.S. Nye, *The Power to Lead*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009.
[13] S. Bentivegna, *Rethinking Politics in the World of ICTs*, *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 2006, pp. 331-342.
[14] U. Beck, *Eineges Leben, Eineges Leben. Ausflüge in die unbekannte Gesellshaft, in der wir leben*, U. Beck, T. Rautert and U.E. Ziegler, München, 1997.
[15] See for example R. Dahrendorf, *Dopo la democrazia*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2001.
[16] A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Polity Publisher, Cambridge, 1990.
[17] E. Louw, *The Media and Political Process*, Sage, London, 2005, p. 292.

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