

The Epistemic Vices of Democracies in the Age of Populism

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Abstract

The subject of this paper is how the epistemic limitations of individuals and their biases in reasoning affect collective decisions and in particular the functioning of democracies. In fact, while the cognitive sciences have largely shown how the imperfections of human rationality shape individual decisions and behaviors, the implications of these imperfections for collective choice and mass behaviors have not yet been studied in such detail. In particular, the link between these imperfections and the emergence of contemporary populisms has not yet been thoroughly explored. This is done in this paper by considering both fundamental dimensions of the political space: the cultural-identitarian and the socio-economic one. As has been noted, reflections on these points induce to revise the picture of democracy as a regime producing collective decisions that come out from the interaction of independent individuals well aware of their values and interests, and rationally (in the sense of rational choice theory) pursuing them. This leads to a certain skepticism towards the idealization of democracy as human rationality in pursuit of the common good, which serves to provide cover for those who profit from the distortions and biases in the policy-making processes of actual democracies. A natural conclusion of the paper is that contemporary democracies are quite vulnerable in the face of populist leaders and parties, that are systematically trying to exploit to their advantage people's imperfect rationality (using "easy arguments", emotions, stereotypes...).

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Keywords: bounded rationality, Plato's political philosophy, cognitive sciences, social psychology, evolutionary psychology, social identity.

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The Epistemic Vices of Democracies in the Age of Populism

Luigi Bonatti*

“Democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried”

Winston Churchill

“The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter”

Winston Churchill

1) INTRODUCTION

The subject of this paper is how the epistemic limitations of individuals and their biases in reasoning affect collective decisions and in particular the functioning of democracies. In fact, while the cognitive sciences have largely shown how the imperfections of human rationality shape individual decisions and behaviors, the implications of these imperfections for collective choice and mass behaviors have not yet been studied in such detail. In particular, the link between these imperfections and the emergence of contemporary populisms has not yet been thoroughly explored. As has been noted, reflections on these points induce to revise the picture of democracy as a regime producing collective decisions that come out from the interaction of independent individuals well aware of their values and interests, and rationally (in the sense of rational choice theory) pursuing them. This leads to a certain skepticism towards the idealization of democracy as human rationality in pursuit of the common good, which serves to provide cover for those who profit from the distortions and biases in the policy-making processes of actual democracies. A natural conclusion of the paper is that contemporary democracies are quite vulnerable in the face of populist leaders and parties, that are systematically trying to exploit to their advantage people's imperfect rationality (using "easy arguments", emotions, stereotypes...).

The above issues are certainly not new, having already been—as I shall illustrate here—at the center of Plato's reflection. Instead, it goes beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in detail the correctives that could be introduced to make contemporary democracies less vulnerable, designing institutions that may better protect the quality of collective decision-making from people's imperfect rationality. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 elaborates on the ancient Greek antecedents of the debate on the relationship between cognitive competence and democracy; section 3 is devoted to political ignorance and behavioral approach to human decisions; section 4 focuses on how biased representations of reality have evolved to reinforce group identity; section 5 deals with contemporary populism and its socio-economic, cultural and epistemic roots; section 6 concludes by discussing reform proposals relevant to the functioning of contemporary democracies.

2) ANTECEDENTS

Some have argued that the history of Western metaphysics began with Plato's attempt to give an ontological foundation to his criticism of Athens' democracy. Plato's ontological dualism, distinguishing what Is but does not readily appear from what readily appears but is not what Is, is reflected at the epistemological level in the distinction between *epistêmê*, whose object is what Is, and *doxa*, whose object is what readily appears, such as the shadows that seem so real—although they are not—to the prisoners in the Cave (see, e.g. Moss 2021). Differently from what readily appears, what Is, the *Being*, is accessible to the human mind exclusively through the difficult intellectual work that only an elite, selected and trained from an early age, can undertake. The latter are the philosophers, who are the only ones suited to rule well the *polis*, since they alone have gained full knowledge of reality, which allows them to know what is virtuous and good for all their fellow citizens.

To the figure of the philosopher, Plato contrasts that of the sophist, that is viewed as a rhetorical manipulator who is not interested in accessing the true nature of things, but only in persuading others in assemblies and tribunals so as to turn them to his own ends, with a use of words that is completely indifferent to their truth content. Being the reign of sophism, democracy is the form of government in which opinion (*doxa*)—rather than well-founded knowledge (*epistêmê*)—rules human institutions. Hence, its foundations are shaky, since its epistemic quality is mediocre.

In Plato, the epistemic shortcomings of democracy is at the origin of its vulnerability to the demagogues: in a democratic context, it is the political discourse itself that is inherently demagogic. The tendency of democracy to degenerate into demagoguery is a topos that Plato shares—albeit with different nuances—with Aristotle and with the comedy-writer Aristophanes, and which will continue to the present day. To underline similarities and differences with modern mass democracies, it is worth following Moliterno (2016; 2019), so as to dwell on some of the observations that Plato and

his eminent contemporary scourgers of Athenian democracy devoted to demagoguery as a political practice.

In Plato's Republic, Socrates asserts that the sophists instruct the crowd on the tenets that the crowd themselves manifest as their own, shouting, in political meetings: «...the highly paid individuals the public calls sophists, and thinks of as competitors, are teaching exactly the same opinions as those expressed by the general public in its gatherings. Those are what they call wisdom» (Plato, 2003: section 493a, p.197). Thus, circularity is constitutive of the demagogue's discourse: the demagogue is capable of mobilizing his audience by leveraging stereotypes drawn from prejudices that are widely shared among his listeners, in the expectation that by doing so he can elicit a positive response from his audience. In this way, beliefs taken for granted (*dogmata*) are validated even in those cases in which they are not true and conventional wisdom is reinforced without any serious scrutiny. As elaborated by Plato in book VI of the Republic, an effect of demagoguery is conformism, since it is problematic—especially for a young person—to resist the pressure of public opinion, that becomes formidable when dominant opinions and *dogmata* are never challenged.

Since scope of the demagogic discourse is to attract the largest number of fellow citizens to its side, it is often changeable and indeed chameleon-like: depending on the circumstances and the sentiments of the audience, the images evoked by demagogues change to influence citizens and stimulate certain reactions. Paradigmatic demagogues such as Cleon, depicted as corrupt and unscrupulous by Aristophanes and Thucydides, manage to arouse enthusiasm, on the one hand by ingratiating themselves with their audience through flattery, and on the other by soliciting the audience's worst instincts. Indeed, Plato emphasizes that the dedication to the pleasures of the body and the aggressive desire to self-affirmation prevail in most people: “homo democraticus” is governed by her/his “appetitive” soul rather than by her/his “rational” soul. As noticed by Vegetti, “Plato drastically rejected the implicit or explicit anthropological prerequisite of democracy, i.e. the natural availability to all human beings of the intellectual and moral endowment necessary for politics” (Vegetti, 2013: p.19; my translation).

The natural predisposition of most humans makes them responsive not only to the persuasive rhetoric of the demagogue, but also to his practice to "lure" the governed through the granting of material favors. In Plato's *Gorgias* and *Republic*, the demagogue is not only an effective rhetor, but he is also somehow a "corruptor". The demagogue usually promises benefits to be financed with public money, a recurring topos which is parodied by Aristophanes in *The Knights*, with a scene where two demagogues compete for the favor of the demos (a decrepit old man in the play) in a ramshackle crescendo, by pouring ever more astounding promises on him.

Demagoguery triggers a vicious circle from which it is difficult to escape, since "it espouses the masses to the flattery of the demagogues, who solicit their worst instincts, and forces the demagogues themselves to suffer the pressure of these instincts» (Vegetti, 2013: p.20; my translation). This raises the question of who is running the game and who is being driven by it: are the drives and inclinations of the crowd guiding the behavior of the demagogues? Or are the demagogues manipulating the clamoring and pounding masses? It is interesting to observe in this regard that, while remaining within the same paradigm, Thucydides and Plato reached opposite judgments about a giant of Athenian history such as Pericles: for Thucydides (II 65; 5-11), he is the anti-demagogue who leads and does not let himself be led, one who knows how to go against the tide and to counter people's impulses;¹ whereas for Plato (*Gorgias*) Pericles is the very incarnation of demagoguery, one of the great corrupters of the people, indulging their drives and inclinations, and therefore corrupt (see Canfora, 2021).

Even for Aristotle (IV book of his *Politics*), democracy degenerates into demagoguery whenever the power of the laws is replaced by the sovereignty of the masses, that is, whenever democracy does not maintain itself within the limits of the laws. Whenever this degeneration occurs, the demos is master of everything but demagogues are, in turn, master of the opinions of the demos that follows them. What is described by Aristotle is—again—a sort of vicious circle, in which formally sovereignty

¹ Thucydides writes that at the time of Pericles "nominally, democracy was in force: but in the reality of political practice, the arche was firm in the fist of the *protos aner*".

belongs to the people but, in fact, it is manipulated by demagogues. This is—in essence—the tyranny of the demos which, more than two thousand years after Aristotle, so feared Tocqueville in the name of his passion for freedom. Plato's response to the degenerative tendencies of democracy evolves in the opposite direction to that evoked by the liberal Tocqueville: in the Laws, a sapiential knowledge, even an astral theology, replaces the Socratic dialectic, and a nocturnal Council replaces the Republic's Philosopher Kings. Here we find what motivates Karl Popper's reading of Plato's political thought, considered the true intellectual father of twentieth-century totalitarianisms (Popper, 1966). Indeed, Popper contrasts the "utopian social engineering" of Plato, conducive to dogmatism and totalitarianism, with the fallibilism of the open society, where trial and error (social experiments) allows to eliminate the wrong policies, thus making possible an incremental progress.

3) PUBLIC OPINION & POLITICAL IGNORANCE

Jumping directly from ancient Greece to the dawn of our era, i.e. to those crucial years in which the ancient régime was coming to an end, modernity was divided on the principles that were to inspire the political institutions of the new era: at one extreme one had the enlightenment-contractualist concept of a society bounded together by a social contract that individuals subscribe on the basis of a pure rational calculus (in its more recent version, individuals are even supposed to ignore what will be their place in the social and economic fabric that is thus being established); at the other extreme, the reactionary-organicist idea of a society bounded together by myths, traditions and faith. The former concept implicitly requires that, for participating in the establishment of the political community (and *a fortiori* for being an active member of it), individuals must possess a sufficient level of epistemic rationality, namely they must be capable to avoid logical contradictions and deceptive arguments in reasoning, to form beliefs in truth-conducive ways (accepting them if well-supported by evidence, revising them in the light of new evidence and using the best and updated—or more reliable—available theories), and so on. This requirement was taken as a justification by the liberal democracies that emerged in the nineteenth century to restrict the suffrage, on the ground that

certain categories of people (among them the entire female population!) were too dominated by emotions and bodily impulses to be able to judge lucidly and thoughtfully on matters of public interest.

With the enlargement of the suffrage and the involvement of the popular classes in the political life, the belief was also spreading that the masses pretending to participate in the democratic process are dominated by those same emotional and impressionable traits of the human psyche that Le Bon (1895) had identified in the behavior of the crowds. However, it is after World War II that systematic evidence was available to support a pessimistic assessment of citizens' political capabilities in mass democracies: the advent of survey research in the 1940s showed in the United States that voters are politically ignorant and their opinions are erratic, confuse, malleable and often inconsistent (see Converse, 1964; Converse et al., 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Althaus, 2003; Somin, 2010). The ignorance of voters even about elementary facts of political life was rationalized by the economic theory of democracy (Downs, 1957), which stresses that people can choose to remain ignorant whenever the costs of collecting information are greater than the expected value of information, with the consequence that—in elections where the probability of any one voter changing the outcome is practically zero—is rational for voters to not spend time and other resources in the collection of political information. The evidence on US citizens' political competences led Larry Bartels to conclude that “the very idea of ‘popular rule’ is starkly inconsistent with the understanding of political psychology provided by the past half-century of research by psychologists and political scientists. That research offers no reason to doubt that citizens have meaningful values and beliefs, but ample reason to doubt that those values and beliefs are sufficiently complete and coherent to serve as a satisfactory starting point for democratic theory.” (Bartel, 2003: p.12).

Beginning in the 1980s, the behavioral approach to human decision making has emerged (Kahneman et al., 1982; Kahneman and Tversky, 2000; Gilovich et al., 2002; Ariely, 2009), showing that individuals do not operate in accordance with the rules prescribed by rational choice theory but make decisions by using a small set of “heuristics”, i.e., relatively efficient, low-information, cognitive

shortcuts. This approach has important implications for people's judgements on social and political issues (see, e.g., Althaus, 2003; Achen and Bartels, 2016). It has also induced some scholars to look more positively at the citizens' political competence (see, e.g., Popkin, 1991; Sniderman et al., 1991): it is true that people are ignorant of politics—the argument goes—but large percentages of them use heuristics made available by virtue of their partisan identification or their ideology, which are conducive (on average) to reliable political choices, i.e. choices consistent with their predispositions, with the use of very little information. Hence, by assuming that errors are independently distributed across individuals, these scholars could conclude that public opinion is rational in the aggregate, although individuals are prone to error (the “miracle of aggregation”).

However, the evidence is that people take their heuristics off-the-shelf, use them automatically even they are not specifically tailored for each kind of political, and rarely worry about their accuracy (Kuklinski and Quirk, 1998). Furthermore, social psychologists have convincingly shown in the last decades that most people participating in the political process tend to be subject to serious biases and persistent distortions in their representations of the social reality (see, e.g., Nisbett and Ross, 1980). In particular, a source of distortions that has significant implications for people's political judgements is related to the so-called “framing effect”, namely to the fact that individuals' attitudes and perceptions regarding the same situation or problem are not invariant across different but equivalent representations or formulations of it (see, e.g., Kelly, 2012). Some of these systematic distortions are also ascribed to the fact that people are cognitively and/or emotionally anchored to their convictions, and are inclined to discard relevant information at odds with the beliefs supporting these convictions, i.e., they suffer from “confirmation bias” and do not act as rational Bayesian agents.² According to Caplan's rational irrationality theory (Caplan, 2001, 2007), this attitude is not at odds with rational choice: people often hold clearly biased and irrational beliefs because the cost of eliminating them exceeds the benefit of having beliefs that appear to be more consistent with reality. This especially

² The confirmation bias is at the origin of the most-documented violation of Bayesian rationality, namely the overweighting of prior beliefs when updating (e.g., Edwards 1982). This “cognitive conservatism” holds generally for political beliefs (see Peffley et al., 1987; Steenbergen, 2002; Tetlock, 2005).

applies to any context where individuals feel negative emotions whenever they should discard as incorrect beliefs that support the political or religious worldviews with which they identify, or that best fit with the images of themselves they want to adopt or to project to others. In these contexts, as it is the case in mass democracies where a single vote has no effect on outcomes, individuals can rationally indulge their irrationalities because the personal benefit they expect to obtain by discarding them is negligible.

As a matter of fact, the cognitive weaknesses described above—and others having similar implications—are hardly reconcilable with that level of people’s competencies for reasoning, critical thinking, making inferences and self-reflection which is required by an idealized view of what democracy ought to be. What makes matters worse is that errors are not independently distributed across individuals and therefore do not cancel each other:³ biases and distortions induce many people to make the same mistakes in their judgments on social and political matters, thus generating collective biases and herd behaviors that may easily give rise to cumulative and self-reinforcing processes such as information cascades and similar.⁴ Under these conditions, collective error correction mechanisms perform quite poorly.

4) **BIASED REPRESENTATIONS OF REALITY, NATURAL EVOLUTION AND GROUP IDENTITY**

The recognition that individuals have distorted perceptions of the social world and may systematically form beliefs that are inconsistent with factual evidence seems at odds with the idea that natural evolution selects organisms whose behavior is based on beliefs that are formed in truth-conducive ways.⁵ Functional explanations of this evolutionary puzzle assume that the cognitive processes

³ Condorcet’s jury theorem (asserting that, if we aggregate the judgements of a group whose members have more than 50% probability to be right, then the group’s overall reliability increases with the number of group’s members) requires that members’ judgements are statistically independent of one another (Estlund, 1994; Goodin and Estlund, 2004).

⁴ An information cascade occurs when a person makes a decision based solely on the decisions of other people, while ignoring their own personal knowledge to the contrary.

⁵ Naturalistic epistemologists share this idea: for instance, Willard Quine writes that “creatures inveterately wrong in their inductions have a pathetic but praiseworthy tendency to die out before reproducing their kind” (Quine, 1969: p.126), and similarly Daniel Dennett states that “natural selection guarantees that *most* of an organism’s beliefs will be true, *most* of

generating systematically false beliefs tend to promote certain kinds of behavior that are instrumental to the adaptive success of individuals and of the group to which they belong. This has led to the identification of a vast array of attitudes and behaviors—believed to be evolutionarily advantageous—which are favored by representations of reality that are distorted or are not supported by any evidence. Among these is the tendency to overestimate one’s abilities in order to motivate individuals to act, or to believe in religious or ideological systems that give them a sense of meaning and protect them from the paralyzing anxiety generated by the experience of insignificance and nonsense. Above all, collective biases and distorted perceptions are deemed functional to sustain the basic ingroup-outgroup opposition, which is a fundamental component of that process of social categorization whereby individuals find comfort and meaning in the groups they place themselves in. Such categorization, that may include aspects of prejudice and stereotyping, is a mental shortcut to differentiate the social world into more or less stable categories, and to infer (sometimes incorrectly) properties about a person based on the properties attributed to others classified in the same category. The pervasiveness of ingroup-outgroup categorizations makes plausible that they are emerged in evolutionary contexts where individual survival and success depended more on the competition for scarce resources between two or more groups than on the competition among individuals within each group. In these contexts, altruistic and prosocial traits favoring cooperation amidst non-kin group members and strengthening group cohesion can be evolutionarily advantageous.⁶ Research has also emphasized how social-control mechanisms, such as moral systems, can give an essential contribution to the maintenance of cohesion and cooperation in human groups (see, e.g., Wilson et al., 2008).⁷ More in general, in-group altruism is reinforced by shared narratives such as cosmologies

its strategies rational” (Dennett, 1987: p.96). In contrast, according to Alvin Plantinga (1993), evolution by natural selection does not care about truth but only about fitness (on this, however, see—among others—Boudry and Vlerick, 2014).

⁶ Group selection and the emergence of sociality in humans has been the subject of a vast literature inspired by the idea that natural selection operates at multiple levels, and that a major evolutionary transition occurs when between-group selection dominates within-group selection (see, e.g., Bowles, 2006; Boyd, 2006; Wilson et al., 2008).

⁷ Examples of social-control mechanisms are those that, according to Boehm (1999), characterize all the small bands of hunter-gatherers, who act as a “moral community” that reinforces strict egalitarianism by preventing any one individual from attaining too much power and influence.

and myths of the origin, symbolic codes and rituals, religious beliefs, ideologies, common values, stereotypes exacerbating differences with outgroup members while minimizing within group differences, and by social norms supporting group identity and rewarding behaviors that conform to the group's formal and informal guidelines.⁸

Language evolved in humans as a result and a facilitator of the increasingly intense social interactions that accompanied the formation of groups of growing complexity. In the course of this process, even the human capacity for deception emerged. Indeed, “the projection, to one's own advantage, of an inaccurate or false image of knowledge, intentions, or motivations” (Waal, 2005: p. 86)⁹ is part of that strategic use of language in social interactions which is inherent to it since its origin. Hence, the normative ideal of a public sphere in which the usage of the language is purified of any manipulative intention—as in Habermas' communicative action—lacks a solid anthropological basis. This undermines the idea of a deliberative democracy, where issues of common interest are critically examined and discussed by unbiased individuals who voluntarily give up the possibility of strategically using language to arrive at conclusions and decisions closer to their convictions and interests.

Even on facts that concern the public sphere it is not at all obvious that individuals with different backgrounds and political affiliations will be able to agree. Evidence on the role of group identity in shaping assessments and judgments in questions of fact having political implications has been reported and discussed by a series of studies (e.g., Cohen, 2003; Kahan, 2016a, 2016b). In particular, the “Politically Motivated Reasoning Paradigm” (PMRP) refers to the tendency of individuals to unconsciously conform the processing of factual information to some goal collateral to assessing its truth, namely to identity protection, or more precisely to “maintain a person's status in affinity group united by shared values” (Kahan, 2016a: p.3). Hence, one can use subjects' group identities to predict differences in assessments of evidence, thus explaining the phenomenon of fact polarization—

⁸ The social psychology of identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987) has given rise to a strand of studies inspired by the idea that identification with a group anchors people's perceptions of self, others, and behavior.

⁹ For a survey on deception as a function of language, see Oesch (2016).

intense, persistent partisan contestation over facts that admit of scientific evidence—which characterizes contemporary Western democracies in reference to issues such as climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic and others. What is peculiar to PMRP is that it attributes perfect rationality to individuals. Indeed, they are supposed to trade off identity-expressive beliefs against factual-accurate ones, in a manner that may promote beliefs that express one's identity correctly, regardless of their factual correctness (Kahan, 2016b).¹⁰ However, this psychological mechanism may reinforce social cohesion in an ancestral or very homogenous society, but in an articulated societal environment where many identity-based social, cultural and political groups coexist, it can possibly impede the common recognition of factual evidence, thus exacerbating the fragmentation of society among mutually non-communicating or even hostile groups.¹¹

5) THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC, CULTURAL AND EPISTEMIC ROOTS OF CONTEMPORARY POPULISM

5.1 It's NOT the economy, stupid!

The rise of identity politics has been a recent trend common to many democracies. As Fukuyama writes, “For the most part, twentieth-century politics was defined by economic issues. On the left, politics centered on workers, trade unions, social welfare programs, and redistributive policies. The right, by contrast, was primarily interested in reducing the size of government and promoting the private sector. Politics today, however, is defined less by economic or ideological concerns than by questions of identity. Now, in many democracies, the left focuses less on creating broad economic equality and more on promoting the interests of a wide variety of marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities, immigrants and refugees, women, and LGBT people. The right, meanwhile, has redefined

¹⁰ Under this respect, the PMRP is similar to Caplan's rational irrationality, according to which individuals optimally trade-off costs and benefits of holding irrational beliefs.

¹¹ Boyer et al. (2022) notice that, with the rise of identity-based grass-roots movements in contemporary democracies, other social groups, like gender, race, or religious groups, can cause similar motivated reasoning effects as political groups.

its core mission as the patriotic protection of traditional national identity, which is often explicitly connected to race, ethnicity, or religion” (Fukuyama, 2018: p.91).

The rise of identity politics appears to be positively correlated to the growing political polarization that is going on in the United States and other democracies (see Carothers and O’Donohue, 2019; Klein, 2021). In its turn, this polarization is generally associated with the worldwide populist surge that has taken place in the last decades. This association derives from the fact that populist movements and leaders are highly divisive: they represent society—through a Manichean outlook—as polarized into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, “the good people” and “the corrupt elite” (see, e.g., Mudde, 2004; Wirth et al., 2016). Together with the friend-foe logic underlying the good people against corrupt elite narrative, a common trait of populisms around the world is their illiberal conception of democracy: the good people deserves unrestricted sovereignty, and no constitutional constraints, checks & balances, independent judiciary & central bank or expert committee should limit its sovereignty once in power. One may distinguish between right-wing and left-wing populism: the latter defines the people as a class or as the “poor” (in the non-Marxian & catholic versions of it) and sees them opposed to an economic elite; the former, by contrast, defines the people as an ethnos and sees them opposed to a political and cultural elite (Wirth et al., 2016). Cleavages created by populists regard both fundamental dimensions of the political space: the cultural-identitarian and the socio-economic one, and probably in some countries the former is more salient than the latter (and often not closely correlated to it).

The fact that income is not anymore a good predictor of voting behavior in the United States, since lower income whites—especially those living in rural areas—are more likely to vote Republicans, despite the economic policies of the latter are not particularly favorable to them, is a symptom of the growing role played in American politics by racial, religious, ideological and cultural identities. Actually, the white low-middle class complains not so much about its economic conditions, but about how it feels treated by the urban elites, who in its eyes only care about minorities and immigrants.

Similarly, there is some evidence that it was mostly values and identity, not economic considerations, that motivated the British voters in the 2016 referendum on the EU: age, education, national identity and ethnicity were more relevant than income or occupation as predictors of voters' choice (see, e.g., Kaufmann, 2016).

The rise of identity politics is not a phenomenon that concerns only the United States or Western Europe. Under this respect, democracies as diverse as India and Poland are paradigmatic. Indeed, both countries have populist & nationalist parties that are in power after having won democratic elections: in India the “Bharatiya Janata Party” under the charismatic leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi since 2014, and in Poland the party “Law and Justice” under the leadership of Jarosław Kaczyński since 2015. After being liberalised in the early 1990s, both economies have been quite successful, with their GDP per capita growth being on average higher than in neighboring countries and poverty being reduced, although economic inequality has been on the rise. In particular, with its average annual GDP growth rate reaching 6.1% during 2011–2012, India was one of the world's fastest growing economy, while in the case of Poland, the accession to the EU in 2004 led to further improvements in key indices.¹² Therefore, it is hard to argue that both in Poland and India the success of populist parties in the mid-2010s was the result of a deterioration of social and economic conditions. It seems plausible to look for other explanations. And among them, identity politics should be taken into account. As a matter of fact, in both countries the parties in power have heavily used religion as an identitarian and highly divisive instrument to mobilize their constituency against secularized elites and (in the case of India) religious minorities. This was probably important for convincing relatively poor Hindus, resentful of Muslims, and relatively poor Polish peasants to vote—respectively—for Modi and for Kaczyński.

5.2 It's the economy, stupid!

¹² In Poland, nominal average yearly earnings nearly doubled between 2004 and 2016 (60% when adjusted for inflation), the minimum wage more than doubled nominally (80%, inflation-adjusted), unemployment decreased by over 12 percentage points, relative poverty dropped by nearly four percentage points and extreme poverty dropped by over five percentage points.

In the socio-economic domain, both kinds of populism are mainly statist and interventionist rather than pro-market: within this domain, differences in the policy platforms of right- and left-wing populist parties & movements are quite limited. Some explanations of the populist surge that has taken place in the advanced economies emphasize the increase in economic inequality and insecurity of the last decades for large portions of the working class and the middle class, that has been accompanied in some countries by anaemic GDP growth (it is significant that, in a country such as Italy, where the average per capita income has remained stagnant over the last 25 years, the populist wave has been more accentuated than elsewhere). In two classic papers on economic populism in 1980s' Latin America, both Sachs (1989) and Dornbusch and Edwards (1991) recognized that the populist economic cycles occurring in different Latin American countries had a fundamental common origin in the fact that populist regimes had improperly tried to deal with income inequality through the use of overly expansive macroeconomic policies. One could argue that in recent years, even in some advanced economies policy makers have tried to respond through ultra-expansionary monetary policies and government over-indebtedness to the problems and the discontent created by disappointingly uneven and anemic long-term growth. In addition, in continental Europe, the creation of the euro has created ideal conditions for the affirmation of populist parties and movements. Indeed, the euro removes the immediate and self-evident link which, in the absence of a single currency, connects unsustainable domestic macroeconomic policies to the subsequent sharp rise in inflation and depreciation of the national currency (and possible financial crisis), with a consequent sharp worsening of the life conditions of large portions of the population.

Hence, it is an easy game for Southern European populists to depict EU institutions as a technocratic oligarchy enemy of the people they allegedly represent. This is what they regularly do when they attack the European Commission because it tries enforcing the "stupid" rules limiting government indebtedness, or the European Central Bank because it refuses to unconditionally support the sovereign debt of member countries facing troubles to place their debt on the market or to provide unlimited liquidity to their banks. Once in power, populists can just as easily use the European

institution as scapegoats for justifying their failures to enhance sustainable economic growth, in the absence of those reforms that could possibly revive it but which are not implemented because they are unpopular among their constituencies and hit some vested interests. Specularly, in Central and Northern Europe, populists blame the EU institutions for being too accommodative towards the profligate Southern European countries, to the detriment of their own constituency.

The economic policies advocated by populists are typically oriented towards obtaining immediate benefits for their constituencies, neglecting their long-term implications and the likely costs that the latter will incur in the future as a result of such policies. This peculiar short-termism has more than one explanation. The decline of the twentieth century all-encompassing ideologies (and of the mass parties connected to them), with their narratives that promised a bright future in exchange for sacrifices in the present, makes it more problematic than in the past to persuade large numbers of individuals to accept some current cost in the name of larger but uncertain future benefits for oneself and for the whole community, as well as to keep in check the temptation of individuals to free ride on the efforts of others (Egidi, 2023). Related to this, there has been a fall in trust in the political institutions and elites, which thus lose the authoritativeness and credibility necessary to ensure compliance with the implicit pacts that underlie the intertemporal trade-off between present sacrifices and future benefits. Moreover, there has been a shift in mass psychology throughout the West: those who have become adults in recent decades, being permeated by consumerist values, have not internalized—to the extent of previous cohorts—the propensity to give up immediate gratifications in order to get more enjoyment in the future for themselves and their loved ones.

5.3 Cognitive limits and political communication

An important role in the success of populist arguments is also played by people's cognitive limits: while the benefits that a monetary transfer, tax cut or regulatory measure bring to this or that group of citizens are easily and immediately perceivable by the direct beneficiaries, the costs that these policy measures spread over a large number of tax payers and/or over future years come to light only thanks to reasoning and analysis of some complexity. In general, the gap between the increasing

complexity of the social environment (the world is increasingly interconnected and interdependent) and people's limited cognitive resources has been widening. People are exposed to an overwhelming abundance of information of any kind coming from a myriad of heterogeneous sources, that need to be filtered, selected and interpreted, since it is typically sketchy, misleading, or manipulative. Thus, most people are disoriented and lack of incentives to make efforts for understanding complex social phenomena or policy issues: they are attracted by simplistic solutions to complex problems and respond disproportionately to what Kuklinski and Quirk (1998) call "easy arguments", i.e., simplifying statements on the effects and consequences of policies that are not supported by evidence or reasoning, but are easily understandable and emotionally appealing. The appearance on the scene of parties and leaders who promote easy solutions to complex problems tends to displace those who, to address the same problems, present to the electorate proposals based on articulated reasoning that is not immediately intuitive or emotionally appealing: the experience of many democracies shows how political competition is irreversibly altered by the massive entry of populist leaders and forces into the electoral arena, which negatively affects the quality of public debate and political decisions. Paraphrasing the Gresham's law, one could say that "bad policies drive out good policies". As a matter of fact, "Politicians are not in the business of educating the public. Instead, they use rhetoric to trigger the psychological mechanisms that distort judgment. They present isolated, unrepresentative facts; they frame issues tendentiously; and they seek to evoke an emotional response rather than encourage rational deliberation" (Kuklinski and Quirk, 1998: p.24). Under these circumstances, public opinion can be manipulable by unscrupulous political entrepreneurs and mass democracies become vulnerable to demagoguery.

The use in political communication of simple slogans, designed to stir up basic emotions like anger, fear, resentment or envy, has spread in parallel with the diffusion of technologies, such as the Internet and social media, which have democratized the access to public discourse in the twenty-first century. It has been noticed that populists were early adopters and quickly became the most enthusiastic users of social media for political communication. More than one reason have been given to explain why

populists have seen platforms like Twitter and Facebook as the privileged channel for their communication (Hendrickson and Galston, 2017). The first reason is that a highly simplified and often Manichean narrative like the populist one is particularly suitable for being translated into tweets and posts. The second reason is that these platforms make it possible to skip any intermediation in communication between party leaders and their constituencies, in line with the populist ideology according to which the people must have their voice returned, hitherto suffocated and distorted by traditional media, controlled by vicious powers and at the service of the ruling elites. The third reason is that anyone on the Internet can express itself on an equal footing, bypassing those epistemic hierarchies which in traditional media allow pundits and experts to speak from an elevated pulpit. In the eyes of populists, indeed, these hierarchies lack legitimacy, because technocrats and experts are not elected by the people, but selected on the basis of opaque procedures that are only apparently meritocratic.

5.4 Postmodernism, epistemic populism and conspiracy theories

The open hostility that populists show towards the technocratic elites and the scientific establishment has been strongly influenced by the postmodern intellectual and cultural climate of the late twentieth century. As effectively summarized by Lucas Bergkamp, “Rejecting the ‘fact-value’ and ‘reality-perception’ distinctions, postmodernism reached two devastating conclusions about modern science: First, science is unable to produce any objective or truthful statements about the physical reality, and therefore cannot claim universal applicability. Second, scientific enquiry is not a value- or interest-free pursuit of truth that is independent of local cultural constraints; rather, it is driven or inspired by hidden ideological or moral motivations” (Bergkamp, 2016). The epistemic relativism characterizing postmodernism, combined with its propensity—typical of the “culture of suspicion” that distinguishes it¹³—to attribute hidden (and malevolent) intentions to scientists and scientific institutions, underlies the “post-truth politics” that is endemic to contemporary populism. “Post-truth” is defined by the

¹³ “Culture of suspicion” refers to the postmodern attitude that—inspired by Paul Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion” and the three “masters of suspicion” (Freud, Marx and Nietzsche)—systematically seeks to unmask what the apparent order disguises.

Oxford Dictionaries which proclaimed it “Word of the Year 2016” (the year in which the UK voted to leave the EU and Trump was elected US president) as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Languages, 2016). This is particularly remarkable considering that emotionally charged content has a better chance of being liked and shared by Internet users, making emotionally strong online content more viral than others (Berger and Milkman, 2012).

Postmodern cultural dominance promotes the notion that truth is a cultural construction and dismisses the idea that one can critically and honestly scrutinize the available evidence, so as to conclude that certain statements about the world are very likely to be false, unlike others that are consistent with the evidence. According to Origgi (2021), there are two forms of “epistemic populism”. On the one hand, epistemic populists believe that pundits and experts describe the world in unnecessarily complex terms, given that reality is perfectly decipherable thanks to the common sense that everyone has in equal measure. The illusion of self-sufficiency that derives from this naïve realism is reinforced by the conviction that through the Internet one can access any information one needs to arrive at certain knowledge on any subject. On the other hand, epistemic populism refers to allegedly alternative truths, which are kept intentionally hidden by the ruling elites to better deceive the people. In unveiling these supposed alternative truths, populists resort to a wide variety of fake news and conspiracy theories, as well as adopt a paranoid style in their political communication.

Conspiracies are framed in populist actors’ communication because both tend to base their claims on Manichean narratives (Oliver and Wood, 2014): similarly to the populist claims that contrast a corrupted, “evil” elite with the “good” people, conspiracies represent a way in which some evil agents secretly plot against the common good to promote their own interests (e.g., Hameleers, 2021). According to both these narratives, identifying and fighting the conspirators/the elites becomes a way in which the Good can beat the Evil. Social media and the Internet have facilitated the diffusion of these narrative by favouring the polarization of the public space and its fragmentation in self-referential niches, functioning as “echo chambers” that reinforce people’s prejudices and paranoia

(see, e.g., Sunstein 2018). This has contributed to the emergence of self-contained communities, walled off not by physical barriers but by shared identities (Fukuyama, 2018).

6) CONCLUSIONS

As stated in the Introduction, it goes beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in detail the possible correctives that can be introduced to make contemporary democracies less vulnerable to people's cognitive imperfections and less exposed to the risk that unscrupulous politicians or oligarchies may take advantage of weak human rationality. One can even argue that in any case this discussion is of limited usefulness, given that, exactly in those countries where reforms aimed at protecting the quality of collective decision from epistemic populism are most needed, there is a lack of consensus to implement them, precisely because of the prevalence of populist-inspired leaders and political forces. However, any discussion of how the deviations from cognitive rationality can weaken contemporary mass democracies and how to remedy them should realistically start from the recognition that humans have no natural disposition to face the world with rationally critical eyes and unprejudiced lucidity: as discussed in sections 3 and 4, biased beliefs, illusions, distorted representations of reality, misperceptions, religious or ideological worldviews are often functional to allow individuals to motivate them, orient themselves in complex environments and boost group identity, thus playing an irreplaceable role in shaping political organisms and strengthening their institutions. At the same time, these deviations are at the origin of the emergence of mental habits and routines that lock-in individuals and groups in courses of action that are clearly inefficient or even (in extreme cases) destructive; of the imposition of rigid identities and group memberships that tightly restrict individual freedom and critical thinking; of the segmentation of societies into groups that are mutually hostile; of the waste of large resources in activities aimed primarily at reproducing and reinforcing group identity & worldview. In other words, there is an ineliminable dialectic that creates trade-offs and makes the impact of human cognitive limits on the social fabric ambivalent.

One can mention here three aspects of this dialectic that have been the subject of reform proposals relevant to the functioning of contemporary democracies.

The first one has to do with the phenomenon of “bad policies drive out good policies”, as I labeled in section 5 the process through which, with the massive advent of populist leaders and parties, articulated policy proposals based on reasoning that is not immediately intuitive and emotionally appealing, or implying intertemporal trade-offs between current costs and long-term benefits, are crowded out by seeming simple solutions to complex problems, or promises entailing short-term gains for some fraction of voters that typically play down their hidden costs for others. Under these circumstances, “It is safer to stick to slogans and empty rhetoric, or to play on people’s fear and prejudices. It pays to fight myth with myth” (Burnheim, 1985: p. 97). In other words, bidding for votes becomes destructive competition, since the likely outcome is the implementation of policies that are unsustainable and lead in the medium-to-long-term to a worsening of the standard of living of most people. Indeed, this dynamics could even trigger a “populist cycle”, i.e. a typical alternation of phases in which populist policies are implemented and some economic benefits are perceived by certain sections of the population, followed by phases of painful adjustment made necessary by the unsustainable policies of the previous period. It is with this scenario in mind, and the adverse selection of political leadership it entails, that some have proposed that policy makers be selected through some mechanism of lot, rather than through electoral competition (see, e.g., Burnheim, 1985).

The second aspect refers to the political ignorance due to the lack of incentives by individuals to devote time, efforts and money in order to get informed about politics. It follows from this—as seen in section 3—the incompetence of most voters in matters of politics, which is the main cause—according to some scholars—of the low quality of political decisions. According to Jason Brennan (2016), this makes democracy based on universal suffrage profoundly unjust, as it places the fate of innocent people in the hands of ignorant and incompetent voters called to decide issues that affect everyone. It is therefore counterproductive to push for a higher electoral turnout, because a large part of those who tend not to vote are people not interested in politics and therefore little or not at all

informed. Therefore, their greater participation in the vote would only further lower the quality of political decisions. Consistently with this logic, the most obvious remedy for political ignorance is to restrict “electoral power to a subset of the population that has greater than average knowledge. Possible options include limiting the franchise to voters with a relatively high level of education or requiring voters to take and pass a political knowledge exam before being allowed to vote” (Somin, 2016: p. 211).¹⁴ In this line, Brennan (2016) instead proposes the establishment of an epistocratic council,¹⁵ i.e. a body to which only those who pass rigorous tests of competence in social sciences and political philosophy can have access, with veto power over decisions taken by bodies whose members are elected by universal suffrage. However, a general objection to empowering those who are most politically informed is that they also tend to be the ones who are most committed to their ideological identity (Brennan calls them the political hooligans). As seen in section 4, the latter are often strongly attached to their beliefs and unwilling to subject them to critical scrutiny and to review them in the light of the facts. The many committed intellectuals who enthusiastically adhered to the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century are a paradigmatic example of this human type. George Orwell's well-known quote applies to them: "Some ideas are so stupid that only intellectuals believe them."

The third aspect concerns the limits on the size and scope of the government, and in particular on the size and scope of those government activities which are under the direct control of people's elected representatives. On the one hand, there are those for whom the ignorance and irrationality of voters constitute strong arguments in favor of a small state (see, e.g., Somin, 2016). On the opposite side, there are populist leaders and parties, which in various countries—in the name of full and unchallenged popular sovereignty—do not hide their hostility towards policymaking authorities

¹⁴ Alternatively, according to Somin, one could follow what John Stuart Mill proposed in *Considerations on Representative Government*, namely to preserve the universal franchise, granting extra votes to citizens with higher knowledge levels.

¹⁵ Epistocratic derives from epistocracy, which is Greek for government by citizens with knowledge, or more precisely a political system that distributes political power among citizens based on their political knowledge.

insulated from the democratic process, such as independent central banks, constitutional courts, judiciaries (and—in the European Union—the European Commission). Without necessarily wishing for a minimal state, those who are concerned with protecting particularly delicate areas of government action from voters' myopia and irrationality propose not only to defend the already existing independent authorities from the attack of the populists, but also to extend the role of independent bodies in decisions regarding fiscal and environmental policy. By giving greater decision-making weight in these fields to experts and technocrats,¹⁶ it is believed that more farsighted and wiser policies can be approved, thus better protecting the interests of future generations and other groups that the universal franchise tends to under-represent. However, in the presence of populists who ride on identity impulses, moral traditionalisms and religious fundamentalisms, what strongly held by thinkers such as Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill is more relevant than ever today, namely the intransigent defense of individual freedom and self-determination against majorities that can easily be tyrannical, unreasonable and stupid.

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¹⁶ The fact that the judgment of experts and technocrats is sharper and more reliable than that of ordinary people has been questioned. For example, Tetlock (2005) looks at why experts are often no better at making predictions than most other people.

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