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Taking Modernity to Extremes: On the Roots of Anti-Politics

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Abstract

The term anti-politics has been used in recent years as never before. However, the concept is used to describe political phenomena and actors that appear at first sight to be mutually exclusive. Starting from the difficulties in defining anti-politics, the main goal of the article is to elucidate its intellectual roots, showing that it is a kind of shadow of modern politics, mirroring its many forms. From an examination of Thomas Hobbes' political philosophy, it will be shown that anti-politics was born at a moment when politics was no longer seen as a natural condition of social life, but an artificial construct that can be dismantled and reassembled. By no means coincidentally, the main manifestations of anti-politics are nothing but the radical and destructive reinterpretation of what Max Weber identifies as the three "inner justifications" of political authority (i.e. tradition, charisma, competence). Although Weber lays down those principles as underpinning political authority in ancient and modern times, the contention of this article is that they can only be used to deny the legitimacy of politics once this comes to be seen as an artifice that can be taken to pieces and put together again: in short, in the modern era.

Keywords

anti-politics, modernity, populism, technocracy, tradition, Weber

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In recent years, anti-politics has enjoyed growing attention by political scientists and theorists (Boswell and Corbett, 2015; Clarke et al., 2018; Fawcett et al., 2017; Flinders, 2012; Hay, 2007; Lilla, 2017). But attention to the concept has had the effect of making it broader and less precise. Allegedly, anti-politics may range from insults hurled at "Washington DC" to a subtle neoliberal argument as to the futility of politics in a world dominated by market law (Wood, 2016) or systematic recourse to rhetoric lamenting that "politicians are all the same" (i.e. mendacious, incompetent, corrupt; Stoker, 2017: 270–272), that all the woes of a country are due to artificial divisions generated by party faction (Caramani, 2017: 60, 64), and that politics is an unwieldy obstacle to be replaced

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by competent technicians (Ferguson, 1994) or a leader right outside the ranks of pettifogging politicians (Fieschi and Heywood, 2004).

Similarly, the label of "anti-politician" has come to be applied to persons differing widely in their political ideas or the style in which they defend their positions. A range of movements and personages have been lumped together in a single category: Gandhi in India (Mehta, 2010), Pierre Poujade and Charles de Gaulle in France (Campus, 2010), Silvio Berlusconi and Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy (Alessiato, 2014), and Ronald Reagan (Lilla, 2017), Ross Perot, and Donald Trump (Lilla, 2017; Schneiker, 2019) in the United States. Then there are the populist leaders and military regimes of South America (Loveman and Davies, 1997) or the twentieth-century dictators like Mussolini and Hitler (Crick, 2013). Anti-politics is like a shifting target, hard to pin down in any coherent, precise definition.

Starting from the elusive nature of anti-politics, the main goal of the article is to clarify the intellectual roots of the phenomenon. Although anti-politics certainly belongs to what W.B. Gallie (1955-1956) called "essentially contested concepts," the contention of this article is that its conceptual ambiguity comes from its being a kind of shadow of modern politics: it springs up with and from the latter, mirroring its many forms. In particular, when politics is no longer viewed as a natural condition of social life, but an artificial construct—the transition is neatly captured by Thomas Hobbes transcending Aristotle and Aquinas—politics begins to need a conventional base upon which to ground its legitimacy. The gap that opens at that moment gives a foothold for something quite the reverse of it.

What we set out to do in what follows is thus a first attempt to anchor the roots of anti-politics in modern political thought. It may be significant that the main arguments designed to place politics on a legitimate footing have paradoxically been turned by anti-politics into sources from which to extrapolate arguments undermining the legitimacy of political rule. In particular, the principles Max Weber (1958: 78–79) detected as the "three legitimations" of political authority (i.e. tradition, charisma, competence) have been employed by anti-politics into conceptual nuclei serving to negate the very need for politics: tradition is turned into the possibility of self-regulating orders, charisma into the idea of a non-partisan and unmediated leadership, and competence into technocracy.

This article does not start out from recent events, still less intends to interpret them. Nor again does it try to account for why anti-political sentiments have become particularly virulent over the last decades.[1] The article, instead, focuses on the origins of some of the most important anti-political arguments and doctrine. In so doing, unlike most of the eminent writings now available on anti-politics, it tries to piece together the sequence of a set of arguments, ideas, and rhetorical ploys which, though disparate and even contradictory at times, nonetheless go to form a single, if ramified, strand of thought.

The article divides as follows. The first section clarifies why the concept of anti-politics is confused conceptually and theoretically. The second part analyzes Thomas Hobbes' line of political philosophy and tries to show how anti-politics springs into being precisely when politics is no longer seen as a natural condition of social life, but an artificial construct. The third and last section will show why the three chief manifestations of anti-politics are nothing but the radical and destructive reinterpretation of the three bases of legitimate political power identified by Max Weber in his famous lecture *Politics as a Vocation* (1919).

On the Difficulty of Defining Anti-Politics

At different times in history, anti-politics has worn the face of anti-parliamentarism, rejection and denigration of democracy, anti-party mechanisms, demonization of the

welfare state, anti-Europeanism, and neo-traditional localism. The difference among these positions prevents anti-politics from being simplistically identified with any one such movement or even the whole set of them. In this sense, anti-politics fits what Peter Wiles (1969) 50 years ago affirmed of populism, when he called it a "syndrome" and not a "doctrine" since it can match up with the most wide-ranging ideas and political programs. And it is true that the reasoning behind anti-politics has picked its way not only through the aforementioned positions but also some of the main lines of modern and contemporary political thought: liberal anti-statism (Stoker, 2006), totalitarianism (Crick, 2013), populism (Fieschi and Heywood, 2004), and even the dissident forms of anti-totalitarianism of eastern Europe which embraced anti-politics as an idea under which to fight communist regimes (Konrád, 1984). This welter of heterogeneous ideologies and movements shows the importance the notion has taken on in contemporary thinking. But it also accounts for the scholar's difficulty in reducing the idea of anti-politics to one consistent definition.

The same destiny actually links anti-politics to many other basic concepts in modern political vocabulary. It is known that many central tenets of political thought have taken on such different meanings over time that it is often doubtful whether they can be reduced to a single employment (Gallie, 1955–1956: 168). Nonetheless, anti-politics does seem to pose special complications. For one thing, the connotations given to anti-politics vary with the multiple meanings given to politics. The nature, functions, and qualities attributed to politics change how one can label anti-politics. Thus, in the academic literature, one often finds opposite definitions of what comprises anti-politics (Gamble, 2000). Moreover, the very meaning of the prefix "anti" before politics can be read in contrary ways. To some, the "decisive characteristic of all anti-politics" is "rejection on principle, contempt or indeed hostility towards politics" (Mandt in Portinaro, 1988: 123); to others it does not necessarily imply opposition to all possible types of politics. Anti-politics may be seen as a stance towards one particular brand of politics, which is felt to be corrupt and harmful to society.

For this reason, Andreas Schedler (1997: 2) discerns two different perspectives within anti-political thinking: "pretensions to dethrone and banish politics" as being a useless constriction, and "pretensions to conquest and colonize politics" since it fails to favor individual or collective interests. Although Schedler's distinction is analytically valuable, the two positions are more of a logical distinction that is based on actual practice. For politics is unlikely to be branded as superfluous and pernicious, and hence to be swept away, without some valid alternative being suggested to the way of regulating communal living that it is proposed to overthrow.

The forces that style themselves anti-political thus stand toward politics as at once related and extraneous. They consider themselves opposed to politics as such but somehow end up being inside it. This explains how some politicians may pose as upholders of an anti-political line without falling foul of the contradiction of identity inherent in an "anti-political politician."[2] Such leaders proclaim themselves "redeeming heroes" or "nonpolitical actors," taking the public stage simply to set things right and free the people from the yoke of an incompetent, corrupt, mendacious ruling class. They too are hence victims of politicians' malpractices, just as much as the people themselves. This was Pierre Poujade's line immediately after his electoral success in 1956 when he insisted that "politics is not the truth" (in Shields, 2004: 48) and continued to claim there was a plot against his movement (Souillac, 2007). More recently, in Italy Movimento 5 Stelle took the same line: by loudly protesting against a corrupt parasitical political class, they swept

to one-third of the national vote in 2018, only a few years after appearing on the scene. And finally, it was basically what Donald Trump did in presenting himself as "sometimes [. . .] too honest" and describing his presidential rival as "the exact opposite," a corrupt and lying member of the Washington elite who "betrayed the American people at great danger to them" (in Blake, 2016).

With such a large difference between these political examples, one ought to speak of many brands of anti-politics and not just one (Clarke et al., 2018: 21–24). But for all their disparities, the anti-political movements seem to have one point in common. They consider politics as a foreign body illegitimately imposing itself on individuals and civil society to whose interests it is harmful or at best useless. By anti-politics one can thus mean radical delegitimation of the existing political authority—contempt for it not on individual counts but as a whole. Thus, anti-politics is not simply mere distrust and disengagement with politics,[3] but rather an absolute delegitimation of politics and existing political authority. Anti-parliamentarism, anti-partitism, anti-establishment sentiment, and hostility to the inevitable slow decision-making process of democracy are all positions which share the view of politics as something that needs to be discarded in order to build a healthy society and economy.

As for the origins of this phenomenon, both common opinion and academic scholarship tend to believe that anti-politics can basically be explained as a result of defects within politics. In particular, by promising yet failing to deliver, democracy seems bound to fuel anti-political feeling (Mastropaolo, 2012).[4] From this viewpoint, anti-politics and the shortcomings of democracy have become two sides of the same coin: as though where there is anti-politics, there are deficiencies in the democratic regime. Clearly, the failure to achieve concrete results, the promises that democracy makes and then can't keep (Dalton, 2004), growing public expectations (Norris, 2011), and the failings of contemporary political parties (Mair, 2013) play a decisive role in arousing indifference, disengagement, and resentment. Scholars writing on depoliticization have also added that the growing hostility toward formal politics results from neoliberal governance and ideology (Fawcett et al., 2017), which has removed certain issues from the traditional realm of politics.

Doubtless, the ruling class' self-referential aloofness or its abandoning the helm in areas that are vital to the lives of individuals can certainly explain the intensity of anti-political sentiments over the last decades. But what is still missing in this remarkable scholarly literature is an account of the origins of anti-politics which makes this phenomenon a latent and ever-present threat—in other words, a shadow of modern politics. While anti-political sentiments have intensified over recent decades (Mair, 2013)—that is, during what can be described as the neoliberal period (Humphrys, 2018)—as we show below anti-political doctrines have emerged with the birth of modern politics. Indeed, anti-politics is not just a result of politics in crisis—or the "end of politics" (Boggs, 2000)—so much as an intrinsic and peculiar aspect of politics, the fruit of thinking, and historical processes that shaped the modern era. We have to seek the roots of anti-politics much deeper, much further back than the shortcomings of politics over the last few decades.

Politics as Artifice: The Invention of Modern Politics and Anti-Politics

From a long-term perspective, it seems to us that the source of anti-politics lies at the roots of the modern era in which it can be seen as somehow an intrinsic aspect, albeit not

consciously perceived and still less explicitly formulated. It draws, paradoxically, on certain thinkers who delineated the basic character of the modern epoch: it extrapolates their arguments to bolster its own conclusions. Anti-politics arose at the same time as modern politics: a breakthrough from the Aristotelian-Thomist paradigm whereby politics was a natural dimension necessary to social life.[5] When civil coexistence ceased to be seen as the only possible ground for fulfillment of human nature and became an artificial construct, politics began to need some conventional basis for its own legitimacy. At that moment, it became conceptually possible to posit an absolutely antithetical opposition to politics, a counterpoint to politics in itself, and likewise the prospect of it being regenerated as something radically different.

In the complex historical transition that marked the end of a united Christendom, the outbreak of wars of religion, and the maturing of revolution under the Stuart reign, thinkers like Hobbes and Locke tried to find a new rationale for modern politics. They conceived politics as the only dimension within which peaceful, just, and free coexistence could be achieved. However, introducing a hiatus between the "state of nature" and "political or civil society" established by social contract meant that politics as a whole must be conceived as something artificial. It was that hiatus which left room to think of politics as an essentially spurious realm based simply on convention: a latter-day afterthought superimposed on an original condition.

Politics thus becomes a "machine"—one thinks of Hobbes' clock image in *De cive* (Hobbes, 1998: 10) or the comparison between *Heart* and *Spring, Nerves* and *Strings*, and *Ioynts* and *Wheeles* with which *Leviathan* opens (Hobbes, 2012: 16). The machine is created artificially to supply the limitations of human nature. While such a prospect enabled politics to be seen as a product of human creativity which was open to improvement, it also made it seem essentially external, extraneous, even opposed to the natural life of individuals and society.

Politics could thus begin to be seen as something dismantlable and reassemblable, something one could get rid of if one thought its gears were not working properly. That judgment applied above all to the prime mechanism adopted by modern politics: political representation. As Adriana Cavarero (1987: 188–190) has remarked,[6] this gives rise to a "mechanism" of "separation between the natural person and the artificial person," namely, the representative. The mechanism was bound to break down whenever the "natural person" made his or her inexorable reappearance among the "agents of representation, men in flesh and blood inevitably endowed with passions and hence interests and a private will." Hobbes was well aware of the lurking danger:

> Whosoever beareth the Person of the people, or is one of that Assembly that bears it, beareth also his own naturall Person. And though he be carefull in his politique Person to procure the common interest; yet he is more, or no lesse carefull to procure the private good of himselfe, his family, kindred and friends; and for the most part, if the publique interest chance to crosse the private, he prefers the private (Hobbes, 2012: 288)

The insurmountable tension between the representative's public and private person feeds anti-politics with a crucial factor responsible for the whole political machine inevitably degenerating. Representation, and more generally politics, can thus easily be viewed as a counterproductive artifact when it comes to achieving individual interests or collective goals which are deemed to arise spontaneously. It seems no accident that anti-politics tends to vent its spleen on political parties—those artificial cogs in the representative

machinery which are most cumbersome (if necessary) accessories.[7] For since parties are designed as partisan tools, they are unlikely to receive the recognition they need to legitimize their own collective political action, except by part of the electorate.

In the absence of all other possible grounding, in short, the only quality of power could and must be efficacy. One can then envisage denying politics all legitimacy if it performs inefficiently. Gershon Weiler remarked about the way of conceiving politics that emerges from the Hobbesian perspective:

> The individual stands in a calculatory relationship to the state; the rational subject is expected to calculate how far it is worthwhile to obey his (or her) Sovereign. By thinking this way Hobbes decisively rejected aristocratic-heroic virtue in favour of calculatory and commercial attitudes. And although this sort of attitude has gone in history, as a matter of fact, hand in hand with the institutions of more or less liberal democracies, there is an ineradicable element of anti-politics in it all at the same. If the state is but an artifice created solely for the sake of its beneficiaries but without having any intrinsic value of its own then, again politics becomes problematic, perhaps unjustified, as an autonomous activity (Weiler, 1997: 50–51).

Weiler's interpretation of Hobbes' political philosophy is paradoxical in some respects. The absolutist structure of his thinking led Hobbes to conclusions that were incompatible not only with the style of anti-political arguments but also with their central hub, which is their lack of acknowledgment or respect for political authority. Let us not forget that from among the key points of the "instruction of the people in the Essentiall Rights of [. . .] Soveraignty" (and such instruction he deemed a precise duty of anyone wielding political power), Hobbes singled out one as especially significant:

> They [People] ought to be informed, how great fault it is, to speak evill of the Soveraign Representative, (whether One man, or an Assembly of men;) or to argue and dispute his Power, or any way to use his Name irreverently, whereby he may be brought into Contempt with his People, and their Obedience (in which the safety of the Commonwealth consisteth) slackened. Which doctrine the third Commandement by resemblance pointeth to (Hobbes, 2012: 526).

Nonetheless, among the folds of Hobbes' political doctrine, one can detect ideas that underlie anti-political thinking. Not just the already mentioned artifice of the "Body Politique," but also a plan for regulating coexistence among individuals that ended by denying the utility and even the legitimacy of all exercise of politics by members of the *civitas*. For in Hobbes' political philosophy, the existence of a pacific sphere of civil coexistence entailed relinquishing all will and judgment to the "Mortall god." Hobbes' monism thus came to be an important point of reference for a radically negative interpretation of politics: to an anti-political standpoint it was a place of artificial division generated by partisan interest, the outcome of a clash of passions and opinions, not based on technical and scientific knowledge or skill.

Hobbes considered the conducting of politics as an exclusive prerogative of that sovereign, "*Man*, or *Assembly of men*" who "shall be given by the major part, the *Right* to *Present* the Person of them all, (that is to say, to be their *Representative*;)" (Hobbes, 2012: 264). Such a scheme left no room for division, and not even for judgment of public affairs: they should be handled with science—meaning the typical features of the mechanistic scientific culture in which the English philosopher was steeped—and not by passion.

To Hobbes, then, politics became a technical and even scientific business: knowledge and application of "certain Rules, as doth Arithmetique and Geometry" (Hobbes, 2012:

322), not a question of opinion or experience in which anyone might take part. This technical and scientific view of politics is Hobbes' proposed solution to the inherent conflict embedded in human society. But, as Roberto Esposito suggests, such a view leads to an increasing depoliticization of the public sphere:

> In his head-on opposition to Machiavelli's paradigm of fruitful political conflict, [Hobbes] harks back to the idea of a society of low political engagement since power was concentrated in the hands of the sovereign; in other words, to the notion of entirely technical politics measuring its ability to create order by the way it neutralized all political drive outside the central power. Ultimately, then, to a form of politics that we could paradoxically call depoliticization (Esposito, 1991: 159–160).[8]

According to Esposito, another great pillar of modern politics, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, would come to the same result. Although the French philosopher is usually viewed as antagonistic to Hobbes and was indeed severely critical of modern individualism, he would end by developing "the anti-conflictualist paradigm in a still more extreme form" (Esposito, 1996: 3), thereby whittling down the scope of politics. Indeed, "the total alienation of each associate with all of his rights to the whole community," proposed by Rousseau (2019: 52) in the *Social Contract*, is meant to create an organic, "perfect" unity where the possibility of division, competition, and negotiation on public affairs ceases to exist. By no means coincidentally, in his book *In Defence of Politics* Bernard Crick bracketed Hobbes with Rousseau: different though they were, the two thinkers were "the two great anti-politicians" (Crick, 2013: 140). In this sense, the modern era is not just the time of politics, but the time of anti-politics as well. As we shall see in the next section, it is no coincidence that the different anti-political movements base some of their strongest arguments on a kind of extreme and negative reinterpretation of the three principles (i.e. tradition, charisma, competence) that Max Weber pinpointed as pillars of political authority.[9]

Taking Modernity to Extremes

In his famous lecture *Politics as a Vocation* (Weber, 1958: 78–79), given at Munich in January 1919, and more extensively in the later unfinished work *Economy and Society*, Weber (1968: 212–301) traced the three "inner justifications, hence basic *legitimations* of domination" to tradition ("the authority of '*eternal yesterday*', i.e. of the mores sanctified through the unimaginably ancient recognition and habitual orientation to conform"), charisma ("the extraordinary and personal *gift of grace*"), and competence ("based on rationally created *rules*"). Starting from these "three pure types of authority," Weber formulated a sociological theory of power.

His theory of political action based on passion and responsibility made Weber implicitly critical of politics in his period—a peculiarly delicate phase in European, and especially in German, history. Weber's was an attempt to point the way to regeneration of modern politics based on the witting acceptance of its basic features. Yet seen from a quite different viewpoint than Weber's, the principles underlying *Politics as a Vocation* lend themselves to a paradoxical reinterpretation: those selfsame cornerstones on which political power seems to find legitimation can be enlisted as reasons for denying the need for, and utility of, politics. Anti-politics paradoxically turns the tables on Weber's argument: the linchpins—tradition, charisma, competence—are taken to extremes and become levers in the critique and indeed the complete delegitimation of modern politics. In short, anti-politics appears as a kind of shadow projected by modern politics, born at the same

moment the latter was born—a "dark side of politics" which negatively reverses some of the founding principles of politics itself.

Tradition, charisma, and competence are not always literally stood upon their heads but are given a more general reinterpretation: society's capacity for self-government, the need for leadership *super partes* (non-partisan and non-mediated in its relation to the people), and the efficacy of a technical approach to political affairs.

Anti-Politics I: Tradition as a Self-Regulating Order

Emphasis on harking back to tradition, the existence of principles, social structure, customary rules, and procedures rooted in a cultural, economic, and value-based matrix provides the idea of a bedrock on which society can govern itself unaided by politics, without the hindrance of which it can be more productive, just, and united. When compared to the alleged self-sufficiency of equilibriums and codes of behavior generated by a set of common interests, values, customs, and practices, politics may come to be seen as a redundant artificial constriction with its binding contract and state-run institutions and regulatory bodies—an instrument "offering solutions to non-existent problems" (Schedler, 1997: 5) as opposed to (depending on the version) the local community, the market's invisible hand, the network of civic solidarity, or quite simply the individual. In a world capable of regulating itself, politics appears a useless, even harmful, business: a factor of disruption contrasting with the dream of peaceful coexistence on the part of a community that can look after and foster the common weal as well as individual interest.

A hint of such ideas can be found as early as the second half of the eighteenth century in the well-known declaration with which Thomas Paine in 1776 opened his revolutionary pamphlet *Common Sense*:

> Society is produced by our wants, and government by wickedness; the former promotes our happiness positively by uniting our affections, the latter negatively by restraining our vices. The one encourages intercourse, the other creates distinctions. The first is patron, the last a punisher. Society in every state is a blessing, but Government, even in its best states, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one [. . .] Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence (Paine, 1995: 5).

Quite apart from the revolutionary background in which those ideas were formed, one can well see how anti-political leanings would respond to the terms Paine uses to describe politics: at best a "necessary" evil, but always verging on an "intolerable" one. Some interpreters, including Tocqueville (2000: 194; see also Jaffe, 1997: 64–70), see the legacy of that approach to politics as an integral part of American democratic culture. Perhaps it is no accident that an echo of Paine's reference to the "evil" of government versus the "lost innocence" of society should have been heard in the much-quoted formula used by President Ronal Reagan in his inaugural speech: "Government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem." While that neatly captured the Americans' widespread distrust of "Washington DC"—where the capital stands for political maneuvering and a central power that has no respect for autonomous civil society and territorial administration—it went rather further than the traditional American fear of political power becoming over-concentrated and degenerate, and smacked rather of some "philosophy of suspicion" with regard to politics.

It is here that the distinction between society and politics gets turned by anti-politics into an unbridgeable rift: between governors and governed, spectators and the puppet

show of politics, right-minded folk and shifty politicians, citizens and institutions, electors and the elected, spontaneous formations and party power. The rift becomes a banner of protest brandished by the anti-political leaders and used to foment discontent and gain consensus. It happened unexpectedly to the well-known French comedian Coluche in 1981 when, half in earnest and half surreally, he stood for President of the Republic under the slogan "Together with Coluche we'll stick it to them [the politicians]." Overnight he gained a large following (Collovald, 1999).[10] It was far more deliberate in the case of another Frenchman, Poujade, who addressed the electorate in much more explicit tones:

> Trading on old principles of the bourgeois conscience, a worthless minority of individuals, dishing out perks or services at our expense, managed to keep an immense mass of good people under their thumbs. One big mafia, a gang under various colors, placed those men in the vital ganglia of the nation (Poujade, 1955: 42).

From such premises, Poujade claimed they should replace not just the professional politicians but technocrats, *grand commis*, and associated bureaucrats with people who truly represented the common people: "better for us to be governed by a genuine tradesman, a good metalworker, a good pork butcher. They may not be scientists, but healthy folk in body and mind" (in Collovald, 1999: 113). In present-day Italy, the same position is summed up by Movimento 5 Stelle's slogan *one is worth one*: as if to say, all citizens are equally able to take part in governing society, whatever their knowledge or experience. One recent variant of this anti-political position seems embodied in the Tea Party movement with its "misarchist" ideology, which combines a strong-state attitude with opposition to government intervention in society and in the life of individuals (Havercroft and Murphy, 2018).

When contrasted with the "healthy body" of a society capable of running itself along common principles and behavior, politics may come to seem counterproductive, unable to interpret interests, rules, and values anchored in day-to-day coexistence. Such arguments explicitly fill the rhetoric of many anti-political forces who describe the people as victims of political skullduggery and any government intervention in the life of society as radically evil.

Anti-Politics II: Charisma as Unmediated Super Partes *Leadership*

Weber's original celebration of the *charismatic leader* was meant to denote the politician "by vocation," he who acts through "passion, responsibility, and proportion" (Weber, 1958: 116). This can easily be turned rhetorically into delegitimation of politics especially in its liberal-democratic forms of representative democracy and competing parties. For the leader with his alleged higher qualities stands out from the squalid milieu of politics run by "professional politicians without a calling," as Weber himself sketched them (Weber, 1958: 113). The leader is also assigned the role of interpreting and guiding the popular will; he or she can rise above political division—based on biased values, ideas, and passions—and restore unity in the common interest.[11]

It is in some ways a return to the "idea of a Patriot King," advocated in the early eighteen century by Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, as an alternative to the monarch of his days whom he deemed to be actively involved in political faction and hence remote from his role as "common father of his people" (Bolingbroke (Henry St. John), 2001: 401), a superior bulwark, *super partes*, aloof from trafficking politicians:

> Instead of abetting the divisions of his people, he will endeavor to unite them, and to be himself the centre of the union: instead of putting himself at the head of one party in order to govern his

> people, he will put himself at the head of his people in order to govern, or more properly to subdue, all parties (Bolingbroke (Henry St. John), 2001: 402).

Bolingbroke was an ardent upholder of the traditional constitutional set-up against the gradually emerging form of a parliamentary regime. He considered the figure of the King an alternative to a political system in which there was no "false and immoral measure," but it ended up "avowed and recommended" (Bolingbroke (Henry St. John), 2001: 411–412).[12] In his pamphlet he presented politics as a place of trickery and subterfuge, dominated by factions out for their own interests. Against suchlike, Bolingbroke proposed the "sort of standing miracle" (2001: 397) that a *Patriot King* might be: that was the target to whose education and formation the *Idea* was addressed. The idea hinged on a radical opposition between "Court"—a place of corruption governed by a political clique—and "Country," the real depository of the nation's permanent interests, the nation's healthy body which was extraneous to power.

Like all essentially negative concepts, that antithesis contained within it a self-contradictory and ultimately utopian feature: on the one hand, it condemned all one-sidedness as occurs in warring political faction, but then, on the other, it upheld the exceptional need to legitimate one side (*sanior pars*) so as to combat political schemers in power and replace them. But this fulfilled a condition that ought to have made any further government–opposition dialectic superfluous—in other words, made *politics* superfluous. Bolingbroke added one specific factor to this conception: the safeguarding principle was personalized and belonged exclusively to the potential future sovereign, who accordingly must be endowed with uncommon skills and moral gifts, as well as embodying the most absolute loyalty to the constitution.

In Bolingbroke's work, the idea of the Patriot King became idealized into a kind of archetype. Yet, making allowance for obvious differences between political systems belonging to different epochs, traditions, and political cultures, the ideal of a personality above partisan interests and hence able to restore unity and lead the people lent itself to impersonation in quite different historical and political situations, such as Mussolini in Italy and De Gaulle in France: two antithetical figures, sharing the ideal of standing above squabbling partisan interests.

This idea continues to sound attractive in contemporary democracies in which the urge to find and elect a leader produces an aspiration to set up a populist democracy based on leadership that is capable of restoring control of the country to the people (Müller, 2017). President Trump's inaugural speech is an example of such anti-political rhetoric:

> Today, we are not merely transferring power from one Administration to another, or from one party to another—but we are transferring power from Washington DC and giving it back to you, the American People [. . .] What really matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people.[13]

The possibility of bypassing political institutions and the media—likened to a clinging diaphragm thwarting direct rapport between leader and people—is nowadays made possible by use of the social networks, enabling the representative and the represented to communicate directly without mediation (Schneiker, 2019).

Anti-Politics III: Competence as Technocracy

Negative transposition of Weber's "inner justifications" of political rule helps us focus on a third root of anti-politics, connected and often interweaving with the former two. Absolutizing

the value of "competence" produces a sense of opposition between the complexity of decision-making via political representation—inevitably marred by partisan interest, ideas, and values—and the prospect of technical government whereby it is hoped that technical know-how, expertise, and professional competence will oust and replace politics.

On such a view, social issues are merely technical problems that can easily be solved: "crawl under the car hood, see what's wrong, and repair it" (Jaffe, 1997: 80). On the Italian political scene, such an ideal was voiced, for example, by Guglielmo Giannini, founder of the Common Man's Front (*Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque*). Coming in the wake of fascism, the provocative proposal was that government be entrusted to "a good accountant taking office on January 1st and departing on December 31st, and on no account re-eligible" (Giannini, 1944: 6). The view was that what all peaceful fruitful coexistence needs is a government of competent neutrals acting upon administrative and managerial criteria. Grossly simplistic as it was, the position was prepared, accompanied, and followed by sophisticated theoretical, philosophical, and sociological arguments, all pointing to the need to entrust government to technically trained experts.

In the scientistic version of this anti-political argument, decisions should be taken according to the know-how of non-partisan experts (e.g. scientists, engineers, economists, sociologists, political scientists), the privileged possessors of skills that are impermeable to the self-interest and feelings of specific social groups. This technocratic perspective is founded on old and important political ideas. According to Nadia Urbinati (2006: 143), one finds as early as the French Revolution—especially in the famous text by Sieyès *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers état*—that politics was beginning to be viewed "as a realm of competence," which "was envisioned as a 'large political machine' managed by the professional few with the confidence of and for the good of the passive political [. . .] many."

This view has taken on a mixed bag of contents in different periods, situations, and political cultures. But it was Henri de Saint-Simon who provided the clearest and most radical argument in support of technocracy when he proposed his new idea of politics as "administration of things" managed by the industrial class and based on a parliament of technical experts. As he maintained, "Today he who shows most capacity in administration, he who will best know how to combine the efforts of diverse classes, he who will give most activity to production—it is he who will conduct public affairs" (in Carlisle, 1974: 448–449).[14]

In this perspective, the faults of politics had to be replaced by the application of the knowledge of experts. In the United States, the idea of expertise in power during the early decades of the twentieth century would generate a proper technocratic movement around a group of so-called progressive intellectuals (Akin, 1977). Although it might be pointed out that the movement played a marginal role in that period's society, technocratic leanings were also found in the early works of Charles Merriam (1926: 9–13), one of the fathers of behaviorism, who argued a close connection between science and democracy. This view still persists in American academe as "technocratic assistance democracy" which, with due caution, the eminent political scientist Philip Tetlock (2010: 476) calls quite interestingly the main defense against "populist democrats,"[15] and in the more extreme idea of epistocracy (i.e. the rule of the knowledgeable) which Jason Brennan (2016)[16] recently put forward.

In past history and contemporary politics, technocracy has taken different and contrary forms: from the Soviet social planners (Fischer, 1990) to European Eurocracy (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2017), from the lead role played by experts in the military regimes of Brazil and Chile, to the economic technocracts under democracy in other Latin American (Dargent, 2015) and European (Giannetti, 2013) countries, down to the mode of

operating by certain international development agencies, whose economic projects have turned highly political issues such as poverty and the reallocation of land into mere technical problems (Ferguson, 1994).

Although all these positions differ greatly over their conception of politics, they all still share a notion of politics as the realm of irrationality and parochial interests. For even in these sophisticated versions, politics is seen as an obsolete encumbrance, a rusty mechanism designed to pursue partisan interests but sterile and even counterproductive for the common weal, since it fails to manage the concrete daily problems of individuals, let alone the broader social and economic processes. To anti-political thinking, such a vision suggests the ideal of objective, neutral, professional know-how at the helm of public affairs: government reduced to a technical business.

Nowadays such technocratic leanings are accentuated by progress in scientific knowledge which appears to have shrunk the room for public deliberation in many areas. Add to this the growing complexity of the social and economic sphere and neoliberal ideology, which call for technical expertise in governmental functions. All in all, we have reached a point where not only are participation and representation being devalued, but democratic processes are in danger of being subordinated to the skills of an elite of *savants positivistes*.

Conclusion

To consider politics as a specious, unwarranted shackle prompts the idea that nonpolitical regulatory processes are enough to ensure effective government. Such a conclusion is fraught with ambiguity and danger, but has taken hold in the political life of some contemporary societies, and makes it necessary to analyze its conceptual origins. As we have labored to demonstrate, anti-politics is neither just a product of the present-day world nor a phenomenon linked to certain contexts in particular. Anti-political doctrines and movements have appeared at all stages of modern political history and in a variety of social, cultural, and political settings. Tracing the origins of anti-politics is not only an important endeavor for the history of political thought. Indeed, by providing a new (Weberian) framework for analysis, this inquiry can broaden and enrich our understanding of a variety of anti-political movements.

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Notes

1. On this important question, see, for example, the different analyses by Mair (2013) and Humphrys (2018).
2. On anti-political establishment parties, see Abedi (2004).
3. For a view of anti-politics as distrust and disengagement with politics, see, for example, Fawcett et al. (2017).

4. For the classical study on disaffected democracies, see Crozier et al. (1975) and the more recent Pharr and Putnam (2000).
5. The reference is, on the one hand, to the Aristotelian conception of "man" as a *zoon politikon*: "by nature a political animal" (*Politics*, I, 2, 1253aI; Aristotle, 1996) or "political creature [. . .] whose nature is to live with others" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, IX.9, 1169b15; Aristotle, 1988); on the other, to a connected view of politics as the natural outcome of human congregation in families and villages, down to a "state or political community, which is the highest of all" (*Politics*, I, 1, 1252aI; Aristotle, 1996).
6. In this passage Cavarero is referring to Locke, but her remarks may be extended to much of the modern view of representation.
7. On the necessity of political parties for democracy, see Schattschneider (1960). For a recent defense of parties and partisanship, see Rosenblum (2008).
8. Although, as mentioned before, we conceive anti-politics not merely as distrust and disengagement with politics, we agree with those scholars (i.e. Buller et al., 2019; Fawcett et al., 2017; Wood, 2016) who suggest that depoliticization fosters anti-political sentiment.
9. Weber lays down the three principles underpinning political rule in ancient and modern times. However, we argue that the possibility of turning them upside down occurs only in the modern era, when politics comes to be seen as an "artifice."
10. Coluche abandoned the presidential race when polls showed his rapid rise in popularity among French voters.
11. This type of anti-political stance clearly shares the anti-pluralist ethos of populism emphasized by Müller (2017).
12. Bolingbroke's judgment was clearly swayed by a personal motive. The political situation in 1740s England had forced him into a long exile and decades of opposition to the Whig governments under whom there was taking place the "invisible revolution" of a constitutional monarchy turning into a parliamentary monarchy and entailing a juridical strengthening of the Cabinet and Premier, as well as the structuring of a party system.
13. *The Inaugural Address*, January 20, 2017. https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/.
14. Hayek (1955: 105–116) argued that scientism and technocracy had their birth at the École Polytecnique, whose intellectual environment strongly influenced Saint-Simon and the Saint-Simonians.
15. We say "quite interestingly" since according to Tetlock, the main defense against populism is a moderate form of technocracy—a view that seems further proof of the anti-political era we live in, since the defense of democracy seems only to require a nonpolitical means like technocracy.
16. Brennan's epistocracy is based on the "competence principle," which should not be mistaken with the principle underlying technocracy. However, as we argued at the beginning of this section, absolutizing the value of competence inevitably leads to thinking of a technocratic kind.

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