Prospects

The point of view

The great legitimacy crisis

We must not deceive ourselves about the nature of the political crisis in Western democracies: anti-establishment parties are first and foremost symptoms rather than causes. Populism surfaces – and resurfaces – to fill the political vacuum that's left when traditional parties and political institutions lose their legitimacy. It fills the void created by distrust.

The mechanics of negative solidarity according to Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt analysed the mechanics of this void in the 1930s[1]. She pointed out that, in a democracy where political institutions are seen as legitimate, we vote, consciously or not, for parties that more or less reflect our social class – those that best "represent" us. They frame and stabilise the political playing field, heading off breakdowns and negotiating compromises. However, when a society is in the grip of a crisis of political legitimacy and traditional parties have ceased to be representative, organised political expression vanishes. The electorate becomes a shapeless, volatile mass susceptible to being captured by various forms of populism. This can give rise to what Hannah Arendt called "negative solidarity" between the traditional populist electorate – the hard ideological core – and a mass of people who have little in common, sociologically and economically speaking, apart from their desire to do away with the prevailing order.

Attempts by anti-establishment parties to gain power are not based, then, on a stated ideology but rather on this mechanism of negative solidarity, which they try to whip up in connection with various issues such as immigration, tax and/or the rejection of the established elite. The aim is to create a focal point for political grievances and form majorities based around the rejection of the status quo. Societal values are obviously a godsend for such parties, especially in divided societies where political adversaries have come to be seen as existential enemies that must be destroyed. In the United States, issues like abortion rights, gender and race, where compromise is not possible, pave the way for negative solidarity.

How can elites vote for extremist parties?

It's easy enough to understand why increasingly impoverished middle classes and the most disadvantaged populations[2] might vote to do away with the prevailing system. But what about elites that benefit from that very system? To answer this question, we need to go back to the nature of democracy and try to understand its weaknesses. D. Acemoglu and J.A. Robinson[3] show that our attachment to democracy is not predicated solely on our values: democracy is, rather, a compromise between the underlying – and often unconscious – interests of the elites, the middle classes and de facto political power, which is to say the power of the street. If this compromise were to be called into question, particularly by street protests, the elite might feel threatened and some of its members might opt to break with the political status quo. This isn't about values: it's about maintaining one's position.

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[1] H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1951

[2] T. Sollogoub, "The causes of anger", in *Perspectives*, Crédit Agricole, December 2016

[3] D. Acemoglu and J.A. Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, 2006

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Moreover, excessive government debt[4] also encourages people to vote for disruptive parties because it shatters the institutional compromise as each social class blames the others for "not paying their due" or "benefiting excessively" from the largesse of a spendthrift government. One hears this argument in the German state of Thuringia, where the far-right AFD recently made historic gains. One also hears it in France. Generally speaking, fiscal trade-offs always call into question the social contract between government and the people. They are one of the most powerful links between economics and politics. The same goes for credit, which is often a response to the unequal distribution of income, masking – for a time – inequality[5]. This phenomenon was observed in the United States in 1929: the crisis was preceded by growing inequality in income and wealth and by an increase in the debt ratios of middle-income households[6]. During the subprime crisis, household debt and real estate bubbles were also part and parcel of the major imbalances highlighted by M. Obstfeld and K. Rogoff[7]; those imbalances prepared the way for the financial risk of that time to culminate in the political crisis of today.

Lastly, the impact of taxation on the political behaviour of elites is also tied to the development of public administration in its present form. Driven by the needs of a society that places more and more demands on public services, current forms of administration have contributed to a heavier tax burden. According to Hannah Arendt, this is one of the drivers – identified by her as long ago as the 1970s – of the loss of political legitimacy: bloated government creates a "tyranny of the invisible"[8] where citizens start to feel powerless and might feel compelled to take "seditious action".

Democracy is thus a much less stable and more hybrid system than many democrats tend to think. And signals of a democratic crisis in the West are nothing new: in 2007, the United Nations published a report on the decline in political confidence in Western democracies since 1960[9]. This phenomenon would come to be known as "democratic malaise". This crisis of confidence resulted first in a lack of interest in political parties and trade unions and subsequently in anti-establishment voting. Above all, it has resulted in an accelerating vicious cycle in which distrust of institutions fuels distrust of individuals and vice versa[10]. These two phenomena are, unfortunately, linked: social fragmentation, polarisation and societal violence will persist as long as the crisis of political legitimacy continues to deepen, and vice versa.

Max Weber's categories of political legitimacy

But how can political legitimacy be rebuilt? To address this question, we must explore the concept of legitimacy itself. Drawing on historical comparisons, Max Weber wrote a foundational text between 1917 and 1919 that set out a typology of various forms of legitimacy: "The three pure types of legitimate domination"[11]. These three categories are what he called "ideal types". In reality, they don't exist as distinct forms: political systems tend to adopt a mix of different types of legitimacy. This typology can help us interpret how our political systems are changing. It can help us name the crisis by identifying the deep undercurrents that drive the crashing waves of events. Indeed, this is something Weber himself encouraged us to do: keep an eye on structures, dominant trends and what's happening behind them.

The first category of legitimacy derives from what Weber called rational-legal domination, rooted in "belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands"[12]. In other words, citizens believe in the supremacy of the law. This is the type of legitimacy on which our modern forms of democracy are built. The civil service derives from this principle, being underpinned not by individuals but by technical and procedural norms and hierarchical principles. But the civil service is not unique in this respect: the modern large corporation is also based on this type of legitimacy. In fact, according to Weber, bureaucratic forms of domination are on the rise everywhere, and this has contributed to the current political crisis, which he called the "cage of steel" – a disenchantment with the world rooted in a loss of both freedom and meaning: in this type of system, belief in law and normative standards prevails over belief in people. While this type of legitimacy is obviously essential to all democracies, it is especially so in the United States, whose unity rests not on a nation-state tradition but on a written document: the Constitution, seen by Americans as the nation's sacred founding text. This makes the historical decline

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[4] M. Funke, M. Schularick and C. Trebesch, *Going to Extremes: Politics after Financial Crisis, 1870-2014*, CESifo Working Paper No. 5553, Center for Economic Studies and ifo Institute (CESifo), Munich

[5] R. Rajan, *Fault Lines: How Hidden Fractures Still Threaten the World Economy*, Princeton University Press, 2010

[6] M. Kumhof and R. Rancière, *Inequality, Leverage and Crises*, IMF Working Paper WP/10/268, 2010

[7] M. Obstfeld and K. Rogoff, *Global Imbalances and the Financial Crisis: Products of Common Causes*, CEPR Discussion Paper No. 7606, CEPR Press, Paris and London, 2009

[8] H. Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972

[9] P.K. Blind, *Building Trust in Government in the Twenty-First Century: Review of Literature*, United Nations University Press, 2007

[10] *Democracy in an Age of Anxiety*, Democracy Index 2015, Economist Intelligence Unit

[11] M. Weber, *The Three Pure Types of Legitimate Domination* (posthumously published essay)

[12] M. Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, New York, Bedminster Press, 1968

in trust in America's legal institutions particularly alarming: behind the sound and fury of the electoral battle lies a regime crisis. That is the reality of the crisis in America today.

The second category of legitimate domination defined by Weber is what he called traditional domination. Here, citizens accept a political system based on "daily belief in the sanctity of time-honoured traditions and the legitimacy of those who are called to exercise authority by these means"[13]. This is the type of legitimacy on which the systems of traditional and patriarchal societies (where authority rests with fathers, clan chiefs, etc.) are based. Modi's message of an ethnic nation and Hindu regeneration clearly reflects this idea.

The third and final category of domination identified by Weber is charismatic domination. This more emotionally driven type of domination is based on submission to an individual seen as heroic, whether he or she be, in the words of Weber, a prophet, a war hero or a great demagogue (not ethically comparable categories!). This charismatic legitimacy can lead to not only the most authoritarian but also the most unstable types of domination: the leader's legitimacy is precarious, deriving solely from his or her person, and must be proved anew each day. Donald Trump's second attempt to gain power falls into this category. The battle for power becomes a kind of narrative warfare, backed up by the image of Trump with a bloodied ear and a raised fist. The trap for the opposition would be to merely offer an alternative narrative rather than giving the electorate what it really wants: a tangible response to the societal crisis.

The survival of democracy is not just a matter of winning elections. It is always tied to the legitimacy of political institutions, the reconstruction of democracy, where possible, or, failing that, a more or less visible and abrupt transition from one type of regime to another – which would lead the world towards more authoritarian types of systems. This shift is likely to be exacerbated by citizens' legitimate expectations: disappointed by the unfulfilled promises of globalisation, people are sensitive to the siren song of traditional and charismatic forms of legitimacy. Finally, the Western world's reputation – and its ability to offer something more than double standards, which in turn undermine democratic legitimacy – also depends on how our political systems evolve. Everything is related: domestic political transitions and external geopolitical transitions will not cease until the legitimacy of politics in the broadest sense has been restored, whatever its nature. ∎

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[13] *Ibid.*

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