

The Democracy of Discontent : the dynamic of disorder

- According to March and Olsen (1989) politics is by nature conflictual.
- Social life is composed of multiple, often incompatible, interests, identities, and value systems.
- The primary function of institutions, therefore, is to transform conflicts into legitimate and recognizable forms – into elections, deliberations, procedures, and rituals that render coexistence possible.

- Institutions thus act as mechanisms of containment, converting raw antagonism into organized disagreement and stable expectations of behavior.
- What is the dynamic of organized disagreement?
- According to Schumpeter, democracy is essentially defined as
- "the institutional arrangement for making political decisions, whereby individuals acquire the power to decide through a competitive struggle for the people's vote"

- How the struggle can remain within the boundaries of democratic principles and constitutional rules ? What prevents the transformation of regulated struggle into uncontrolled conflict?
- Democracies have historically experienced significant setbacks, resulting in the rise of populist regimes, dictatorships, and other non-democratic forms. These developments have largely stemmed from internal failings.

- A well known condition of instability occurs when competition between parties become extreme and the space for dialogue between parties is drastically reduced because positions are radicalized (polarized).
- In such cases, one part of society—the one whose parties are in power—exerts dominance over the other, and the system fails to address the concerns of the minorities.

- Democracy becomes almost a form of autocracy, and can effectively transform into autocracy under the impetus of the leader in power.
- Thus polarization represents a risky condition for the stability of the structures of a representative democracy, and it is therefore important to try to understand the dynamics that lead to its emergence.

Polarization

- “Political polarization constitutes a threat to the extent that it induces alignment along multiple lines of potential conflict and organizes individuals and groups around exclusive identities, thus crystallizing interests into opposite factions.
- In this perspective, opinion alignment, rather than opinion radicalization, is the aspect of polarization that is more likely to have consequences on social integration and political stability.
- From a substantive viewpoint, if people aligned along multiple, potentially divisive issues, even if they did not take extreme positions on each of them, the end result would be a polarized society.
- Analytically, it can be shown that people's ideological distance and, thus, polarization depend not only on the level of radicalization of their opinions but also on the extent to which such opinions are correlated with each other [...]” .

Populism

- Populism is a political approach that champions the "common people" against a perceived corrupt or self-serving elite.
- It divides society into two opposing groups—the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite"—and frequently utilizes anti-establishment rhetoric.
- The term can apply to movements across the entire political spectrum.

Populism

- Anti-Establishment: Populists criticize established political parties, big business, traditional media, and intellectual institutions, claiming these entities ignore the needs of ordinary citizens.
- The "General Will": Populist leaders often present themselves as the only true voice of the unified populace, asserting that their agenda embodies the absolute will of the people.
- Simplicity and Urgency: Populist rhetoric generally offers simplified solutions to complex issues, creating a sense of urgency or crisis, and sometimes proposing a return to an imagined past "golden age"

- The persistence of polarization and populism over time may be interpreted as a symptom of a **pathological** regime of political competition.
- I will argue that the pathologies of the competition for power stem from the internal forces originated within the process of **political innovation**.
- To support this claim, I will first provide an overview of the process of political innovation, then I will examine the factors that hinder its physiological evolution.

Parties perform a fundamental transformative role: they convert diffuse social conflict into politically organized and institutionally regulated competition.

By selecting issues, framing conflicts, constructing coalitions, and articulating programs, parties give political form to social conflict and make it governable within democratic institutions.

A democracy works **physiologically** when parties can absorb social tensions before they accumulate into a crisis of representation.

- The conditions for political change
- Political change occurs when parties lose their capacity to politically solve social conflicts, and new political entrepreneurs introduce new combinations of issues, values, symbols.
- In this sense, political innovation resembles economic innovation: it disrupts established routines and may produce a form of creative destruction of old parties and ideological cleavages.

- New parties may originate through different evolutionary mechanisms.
- In some cases, they emerge from outside the established party system, when accumulated social problems are not adequately represented by existing parties.
- Here the new party performs a creative function: it politicizes a latent social conflict and transforms it into organized political competition.

- If social conflict is not politicized, it may become apathy, resentment, conspiracy, violence, or anti-system alienation.
- When established parties lose this capacity – that is, when they fail to interpret, represent, or govern emerging social problems – a political space opens for new political entrepreneurs.

- Parties may fail when new problems emerge that do not fit existing cleavages: immigration, globalization, climate transition, technological displacement, territorial resentment, cultural identity, or distrust of elites.
- If established parties cannot interpret these problems, a political space opens for new movements.
- In other cases, new parties arise from internal conflicts within existing parties or coalitions.
- Here the conflict is already political, but the old organizational form can no longer contain it. The birth of the new party is therefore less a process of politicization than a process of organizational differentiation.

- The first mechanism can be associated with political entrepreneurship, charisma, and the construction of new identities; the second with factional conflict, ideological clarification, leadership rivalry, or strategic disagreement.
- In what follows I will pay particular attention to the first mechanism, because it better helps to understand how the parties transform social conflicts into an institutionalized political competition, and the conditions under which this process become pathological.

Phase	Political space	Dominant figure	Main capacity
Crisis / unrepresented problem	Existing parties fail to solve or name an issue	Charismatic-demagogic leader	Mobilization, framing, value articulation
Movement formation	Dispersed discontent becomes collective identity	Political entrepreneur	Coalition-building, agenda creation
Electoral success	The new force enters institutions	Responsible leader	Translation of protest into policy
Government / implementation	Promises must become administrative action	Administrator / bureaucratic organizer	Competence, coordination, institutionalization
Stabilization or decline	The party becomes routine or loses energy	Party professional / oligarch / technocrat	Maintenance, adaptation, control

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- A nascent political movement must gain visibility, define the problem that existing parties have neglected, identify the values at stake, and construct a direct relation with those citizens who feel unrepresented.
- This requires a charismatic leadership capable of creating identity around a shared vision and attracting consensus in many forms.

- Polarization allows the new actor to give political form to social dissatisfaction.
- Populism, understood as the direct appeal from leader to people against established mediations, helps create a collective identity.

- In this sense, polarization and populism do not necessarily signal democratic pathology.
- They may be part of the ordinary evolutionary process through which political systems renew themselves.

- The critical question is whether this conflictual energy is later transformed into institutionalized competition.
- A new political reality reaches maturity only if, after the transformation from movement to party, it successfully passes through successive phases of organization, bureaucratization, institutionalization, and routinization.
- During this process, the movement must gradually convert mobilization into programmatic action,
- charismatic leadership into responsible leadership,
- and antagonistic conflict into negotiation.

- If the cycle succeeds, the new party becomes one actor among others within the existing democratic landscape.
- In that case, polarization and populist mobilization, which were functional during the expansion of the movement, tend to decline as the party enters the normal competitive regime because are no more functional to the party maturation. (if party maintains his identity)
- Conversely, if the cycle fails, polarization and populism may persist beyond their physiological phase.

- This occurs for many reasons:
- when the movement does not accept the constraints of institutionalization,
- when leaders and followers refuse to internalize the externalities of their political action, or
- when compromise is interpreted as betrayal.
- In such cases, the movement may remain trapped in permanent mobilization, delegitimize opponents, weaken mediating institutions, and seek monopolistic power rather than stable competition.
- Polarization then ceases to be a temporary mechanism of political innovation and becomes a self-reinforcing source of democratic instability.

- Charisma is unstable if it is not the symbol of a deep utopianistic values or an ideology. Therefore, if the movement succeeds, and charisma is not solidly based on a system of values it must undergo what Weber called the routinization of charisma.
- In any case, the original leader must transform personal appeal into organization, rules, offices, procedures, cadres, programs, and administrative capacity. In other words, charisma must be converted into something closer to legal-rational authority.

- The central part of the cycle is the passage from mobilization to implementation. The qualities that make a leader successful in the first phase may become obstacles in the second.
- In the first phase, the leader needs simplification, emotional resonance, opposition to existing elites, and a sharp distinction between "us" and "them."
- In the second phase, he needs administrative competence, compromise, coalition management, legal knowledge, budgeting, bureaucratic coordination, and responsibility for consequences.
- This creates a structural tension: the demagogic-charismatic leader wins by dramatizing the problem, but governs successfully only if he can partially de-dramatize it.

- **The central contradiction of the cycle**

- The crucial point is that the qualities that produce success in the first phase may obstruct success in the second. The leader wins by intensifying political conflict, but governs by reducing or regulating it.
- He wins by simplifying, but governs by recognizing complexity.
- He wins by attacking institutions, but governs by using institutions.
- He wins by mobilizing resentment, but governs by transforming resentment into rules.
- He wins by promising a decisive solution, but governs through partial, gradual, constrained implementation.
- This gives to the cycle a strong internal tension. The successful political entrepreneur must change his own mode of action. If he cannot do so, the movement remains trapped in permanent mobilization.

- In the statu nascendi phase, the emerging leader must temporarily increase political conflict in order to reduce the social conflict; in the institutionalization phase, he must instead reduce political conflict in order to make implementation possible.
- The danger arises when this transformation fails in either direction.
- If social conflict is not politicized, it may become apathy, resentment, conspiracy, violence, or anti-system alienation. If political conflict is not institutionalized, it may become permanent polarization, delegitimation, or authoritarian temptation.
- Thus the democratic process moves between Scilla and Cariddi : it must tolerate enough conflict to represent real alternatives; enough institutionalization to prevent conflict from destroying cooperation and to allow a real political debate.

- The cycle could have several endings.
- First, the success: Charisma is transferred to institutions, cadres, procedures, and a recognizable political culture.
- Second, personalistic degeneration: the party remains dependent on the founder. It cannot survive succession, and internal dissent is treated as betrayal.
- Third, bureaucratic normalization: the party becomes one more actor in the established system. It survives, but loses its original transformative energy.
- Fourth, populist permanent mobilization: the leader avoids institutionalization because routinization would destroy his charismatic appeal. He therefore governs as if he were still in opposition.
- Fifth, fragmentation: once the initial issue loses salience or implementation disappoints, the coalition breaks apart.

- Therefore political roles are “selected” by institutional phases:
- the founder, the demagogue, the political entrepreneur, the statesman, the administrator, the party professional, and the bureaucrat are not merely psychological types;
- they are figures that become adaptive or maladaptive depending on the phase of institutional development.

Ideologies

- Despite some negative characteristics, ideologies (understood as partially coherent value systems) served as guides for action and a basis for interpreting society: citizens who embraced an ideology, while subject to the biases implicit in that ideology, could be intellectually stimulated by the contrasts between ideologies and between alternative viewpoints.
- The weakening of ideologies has paved the way for the emergence of a single new ideology, the neoliberal one .
- This has meant that the clash between economic and social interests—which is cyclically reignited by innovation—is no longer “decoded” by citizens through the filter of differing viewpoints and thus is not translated into normal political debate, preventing critical engagement by citizens (Fitoussi 2022).

- The decline of ideologies has forced political parties to develop new ways to maintain citizen loyalty, leading to a dramatic increase in the use of propaganda and advertising.
 - The role of advertising and propaganda as elements of social persuasion and political manipulation, and their widespread use, is not a novelty.
 - But in the past, the impact of political propaganda was tempered by the explicit competition of ideas generated by the clash of opposing political ideologies.
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- With the decline of ideologies, (and the survival only of the neo-liberal ideology) much of the debate has been replaced by political marketing, aimed not at reason but at the emotions of the citizen, geared toward fostering a sense of belonging and loyalty to the political "product";

- Polarization and populism should not be understood as intrinsically pathological phenomena.
- In the *statu nascendi* phase of political innovation, they may perform a physiological function.
- Polarization gives visibility to conflicts that established parties have failed to represent; populism, understood as the direct appeal from leader to people, may help transform dispersed dissatisfaction into a collective political identity.
- In this early phase, both phenomena may serve the emergence of new political ideas, even utopian ones, aimed at giving form to unresolved social tensions.

- The pathology begins when polarization and populism lose this transitional function.
- Instead of serving the formation and institutionalization of a new political actor, instead of being guided by systems of universal values, they become permanent instruments of mobilization.
- The movement no longer seeks to transform social conflict into organized political competition, nor to convert charismatic energy into party organization, negotiation, and responsible leadership. Rather, it continues to reproduce antagonism because antagonism itself becomes the source of legitimacy.
- In this case, polarization ceases to be a mechanism of democratic renewal and becomes a mechanism of democratic erosion.

- Under these conditions, the competitive struggle for the popular vote – which Schumpeter identified as the core method of democracy – no longer operates as an open contest among alternative strategies for addressing economic and social problems.
- Parties and leaders no longer help citizens organize their political judgments around coherent programs and feasible solutions. Instead, competition becomes increasingly centered on identity, resentment, fear, and the delegitimation of opponents. Citizens are not offered alternative interpretations of common problems so much as mutually hostile representations of the political community itself.

- This produces a dangerous gap between social conflict and political representation. Social tensions continue to accumulate, but parties become less capable of translating them into institutionalized debate, negotiation, and policy.
- The result is a growing uncertainty among citizens about their future and a weakening of trust in democratic mediation.
- When this distance becomes too large, social conflict may return in more radical forms, while political competition may shift from the contest for government to the contest for control over the rules of the game.

- The final risk is that populism and polarization cease to be instruments for building a broad and durable consensus around a new political project and become instruments for the accumulation of power for its own sake.
- The direct relation between leader and people then bypasses parties, parliaments, expertise, and intermediate institutions; opponents are no longer treated as legitimate competitors, but as enemies or obstacles. The physiological cycle of political innovation is interrupted.
- Instead of producing a new party capable of entering the normal democratic regime of competition, the movement may generate a pathological trajectory toward monopolistic power, populist democracy, or even autocratic rule.

Rational

- Can we consider the strategies of the charismatic leader and the political entrepreneur rational?
- both pursue their goals by using the means that are best fitting to their goals.
- But, to pursue their goals, they must necessarily take into account the reactions of the other subjects of the scene, because they are essential for the success of the process.
- Their actions in statu nascendi can hurt the interests of the competitors, while in the phase of institutionalization, where responsibility and compromise are requested, it is necessary to avoid negative externalities.

- In *Rational Fools* (1977) Amartya Sen challenges the standard economic model of the agent as a purely self-interested utility maximizer and argues that such a model cannot account for a large class of human actions involving morality, social norms, and commitment.
- Sen shows that despite “Homo economicus” model treats individuals as isolated preference-maximizers, real agents often act on principles that override self-interest, such as promise-keeping, fairness, or civic duty.
- These actions involve choices that knowingly reduce personal welfare in order to respect a norm or uphold a commitment.

- But also the reverse situation can arise: the charismatic leader must in fact dramatize, identify adversaries and make visible the tensions that existing parties have failed to organize.
- His action will often damage competitors because the birth of a new political subject normally occurs by delegitimizing the old parties' claim to representation.
- The point is that in this phase, some degree of political injury to competitors is almost unavoidable because innovation disrupts the existing structure of representation.

The charismatic leader and the political entrepreneur

- The distinction between the charismatic leader and the political entrepreneur may therefore be framed in terms of ecological rationality.
- Both actors are rational, but their rationality is adapted to different political environments. In the statu nascendi phase, the charismatic leader faces radical uncertainty: the movement is not yet stabilized, the constituency is dispersed, and the political opportunity is still undefined. His rationality is therefore performative and conflictual.
- By naming the problem, dramatizing the conflict, and challenging established parties, he contributes to creating the political subject that he seeks to lead.
- In this phase, his actions may inevitably damage competitors, because political innovation disrupts existing patterns of representation

- In the phase of institutionalization, however, the ecology changes. The political entrepreneur faces a more structured but more complex environment, in which organization, negotiation, alliances, and programmatic credibility become central.
- Rationality now requires the capacity to internalize the externalities of political action: to avoid unnecessary harm, to recognize legitimate competitors, and to transform conflict into negotiated order.