Let's talk about the Future

of Democracy

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The complexity deficit of current democracies

The primary threat to democracy is not violence or corruption or inefficiency but simplicity. Uniformity, simplification and clumsy antagonisms are very seductive to those who do not tolerate the world's ambiguity, heterogeneity and multiplicity of meanings, to those who are incapable of recognizing the constructive nature of social conflictivity. In its current form, political practice constitutes a capitulation to that which is complex, in logical accordance with the fact that today's conceptualization of political philosophy is unprepared to handle social complexity. If it still makes sense to aspire to a democracy that is compatible with the complex reality of our societies, we must find another way to think about democracy and another way to govern.

My book "A theory of complex democracy" is for those who do not believe in simple answers but who also reject despair as a response to the complexity of our problems. The commonplace expression that there is nothing more practical than a good theory may be a bit exaggerated, but we can be certain that there is nothing less practical than a bad theory or a lack of theory, i.e., the lack of comprehension about what is going on when social reality has changed to the extent that it is unintelligible if looked at from the vantage point of the old concepts. Since the "ideational turn" of political theory in the 1990s (Blyth), we can affirm that democracy is now living a "theoretical moment" that has come from the need to re-evaluate it because the situation today is notably different than it was when most of its categorial framework was established. It could be that things that were, at the time, "useful fictions" have now become "confusing simplifications", while the most promising revitalisation of our democracies takes place when we make them more complex (Rosanvallon), in accordance with a reality that no longer matches the old simplifications. Furthermore, when what we are theorizing about is democracy itself, it is not enough for the result to be true; it must also be intelligible, and it must respond to the normative expectations found in the democratic invention and the core values of this way of organizing human coexistence. Because it is possible that some of our political disengagement has something to do with the fact that we understand very little of our own time, how this society works and what our options for action within it may be.

The simplicity I am criticizing has two versions: simplicity as conceptual inadequacy and simplicity as an ideological instrument, in other words, as a theoretical matter and as a practical problem. On the one hand, it is a failure to adapt to the transformations of the modern world, while on the other, I am referring to a series of political practices that — perhaps given that they have not been preceded by a conceptual revitalisation — aggravate that failure by presenting the political struggle as a self-serving simplification. Renouncing theoretical sophistication leads to a political practice that benefits those who are most successful in the struggle for simplification, even if this does not provide any clarity and even makes it harder to understand what it truly in play.

In the first case, simplism stems from our out-dated political concepts, which were conceived at a time of relative social and political simplicity, before the large-scale social conflicts that inaugurated the contemporary world, with relatively homogeneous societies that were not familiar with the type of cultural and political pluralism that exists today, with technologies that were unsophisticated in comparison with the ones we currently employ, with relatively simple forms of governance, in autarchic and disconnected spaces.

Societies are no longer like that, but the categorial framework continues as if they were. This discrepancy in political theory has a lot to do with an evolution in society, in science, in the different social subsystems. This evolution has not been accompanied by a corresponding revamping of political categories. Let us take as an example the evolution of science over these years. Modern science and modern democracy were intimately related activities. The world calculated by Newton or Laplace was the same as the world whose government was formulated by Rousseau or Adam Smith. It was the age of a mechanical vision of the world, of modern science and its epistemological categories. It is not surprising, therefore, that basic concepts of political theory stem from a social physics elaborated with mechanistic categories of the natural world. This conception of the world has led, for example, to the realist vision of international relations, the functionalist interpretation of European integration or the practices of urban planners. It is also true that, while science has changed many of its paradigms, the central concepts of political theory have not engaged in a corresponding transformation. Our models of decision-making, foresight and governing continue to be based on criteria of verisimilitude that do not fulfil the conditions of intense complexity. It is increasingly evident that old instruments that were conceived for defined spaces and for slow-paced and synchronizable times have limited value.

It may be helpful to consider the evolution of the metaphors we use to explain the functioning of societies: in the eighteenth century, the political system was imagined according to the logic of mechanical equipment such as watches and scales; in the nineteenth, with organisms, and in the twentieth century, with functions and structures (with cybernetic systems). Do we have a political theory today that matches the complexity that the most advanced sciences describe? Neurology, for example, is furnishing us with visions and concepts that make our current forms of government

seem like inadequate simplifications. It does not seem possible that human beings who enjoy such neuronal subtlety would have such rudimentary political organizations. There are simplistic interpretations of reality that offer linear, binary or moralizing explanations and overestimate our ability to affect reality. Other interpretations ignore the tragic and comic side of things, in other words, the interference of principles and values that overlap and displace each other, struggling among themselves or making peace in an inevitably precarious fashion. Simple solutions tend to produce a temporary easing of perplexity and conflicts, but they end up making things worse in the arenas of both knowledge and action, decreasing our cognitive ability and our practical options. When an excessively normative political philosophy places moral categories above analytical subtlety, when the collective unit stops paying attention to the logic of pluralization and exclusion, when historical teleology is assumed without registering the phenomena of dispersion and pseudo-movement, then what we have is a theory with little to no observation, a normativism that is confronting a world it does not understand and compensating its dearth of analysis with prescription.

One could frame this drama, that is first and foremost theoretical, in terms of an unsettling question about whether political philosophy is able to understand the complexity of the world today and provide some type of guidance for governing it. Are our institutions able to "govern a world of incredibly growing complexity" (Skolnikoff)? Can democracy survive the complexity of climate change, artificial intelligence, financial algorithms and products? Or must we resign ourselves to concluding that this complexity constitutes a true threat to democracy (Dahl)? If we cannot comprehend and govern these new realities democratically, we will lack arguments to counter those who make promises about the benefits that will supposedly result if we dispense with democratic requirements.

If we move from theory to practice, we find that the inability to conceive of a complex political system corresponds to the inability to handle that complex system in a way that does not simplify and impoverish it. This second category of simplism is pragmatic and obeys an intentional strategy to schematise the political field for one's own benefit. Our political systems have not been capable of managing the growing complexity of the world and are powerless before those who offer a reassuring simplification, before those "*terribles simplificateurs*" described by the historian Jacob Burckhardt, even if it is at the price of a crude falsification of reality and does not represent more than short-term relief. There are many practical examples of this inappropriate reduction of complexity. Those who speak today of limits, responsibility, shared interests have everything to lose in the face of those who, for example, establish categorical limits between us and them or an unsophisticated contrast between the elite and the people, in such a way that responsibility and innocence are pinpointed in a reassuring fashion. The emphasis on the personal characteristics of political leaders is a useful simplification that seems to recover the intelligibility of that which is political and accentuate its entertainment value. The growing significance of charisma (and its corresponding transience) is an indication that the personal moment represents an escape from the complexity of things. Another very attractive capitulation in the face of complexity is to maximize the category of the political system's effectiveness, generally in regards to economics,

even if there is a corresponding refusal to apply a principle of justice to the question of the criteria that should be used to determine whether a particular result is effective. One of the things that makes uncertainty most bearable is finding a guilty party to blame since that exonerates us from the difficult task of creating collective responsibility. It does not matter that many candidates propose ineffective solutions for poorly identified problems provided that everything is as clear as a wall, a guilty party has been designated and we are able to recognize ourselves as part of an unquestionable "we".

From the ideological point of view, the principal consequence of this rejection of complexity is the establishment of a great rupture, an unsustainable division of labour between the principle of reality and the pleasure principle, between the description of reality and the normative plane, between technocracy and populism, between those who make sure things work and those who only seem interested in how they should work. The schism between technocratic reasons and populist reasons, which contrasts effectiveness and democracy, is the great divide that characterises our democratic societies and shapes the principal axis of political antagonism today. It is a framework that not only forces choices that are tragic from the point of view of our democratic convictions but also for the effectiveness of our systems of government: those who ignore complexity end up governing ineffectively, but those who only let themselves be guided by technical criteria forget the obligations of legitimacy, and in both cases, the demands for effectiveness and the demands for democracy are impaired.

Something similar can be seen in our principal ideological constructions: the distinctions between right-left, conservative-progressive, the elite-the people, transformation-preservation present the world as a more orderly place than an actual description of the world's complexity and contradictions provides. One could say that they do not explain enough because they explain too much, because they order, categorize and simplify more than the complexity of things allows. These are distinctions that obey a need for direction that gives in to a complex and differentiated society.

The groups that are most important in configuring our political landscape — the socialist left, the conservative right and individualist liberals — generally maintain an ideological scaffolding that does not align with social complexity or the way they conceive of society and the individual, transformation and preservation. It does not agree with their objectives nor with their methods of intervention. The left makes use of the metaphor of transformation to overcome the crisis of capitalism. Capitalism would correspond to society as a whole, understood as an identifiable and accessible object that can be controlled by the political power. The left tends to assume that the world can be described objectively and that our interventions upon it are governed by causalities that connect actions directly to effects. The conservative perspective is more realistic in the sense that it relies upon the system's own dynamics which — in their opinion — we can only effect modestly. In a context that is as dynamic as society today, passivity is a way of acting, an ideology that is presented as lacking an ideology, but it implies resignation in the face of the problems that can only get worse when nothing is done. Culturally, conservatives call for a type of social homogeneity

and values that do not correspond to the heterogeneity and pluralism of present-day societies. And liberals have a concept of the individual, of the market and of rational choice that seems to disregard dimensions of social complexity such as the insertion of people into systems, the structural constraints of our decisions or the large number of interventions that must be carried out so that this market institution of which they have a reductionist conception will work.

If we want these ideologies to represent useful options when it comes to governing today's society, they must be conceived in a more sophisticated fashion and other means of intervention that are more in line with the new social reality must be envisioned. A complex society must refuse to configure something as a hub from which to organize the operation of different rationales that intervene in society. The world cannot be governed by a Central Committee, by Google, by experts or the People's Liberation Army, not because they are evil or have perverse intentions but basically because the structure they have to process information and govern does not correspond with the richness of the elements, values, information and distributed intelligence of a complex society. In spite of this, most diagnostics and political proposals do not renounce this idea: the right continues to think about the community and the cohesion of a homogeneous people, liberals think about the sovereignty of the individual and the infallibility of experts, and the left contemplates a political transformation of society. These are politicized descriptions that overestimate the possibilities of collective action by means of central interventions. Some people have excessive confidence in the ability of the state to intervene from the outside, and others have too much trust in individual behaviours and the system's ability for self-correction. The liberal program of addressing all problems through austerity is as inadequate as the belief that they can be resolved through participation or moralizing. The first thing this focus on complexity teaches us is that an intervention in society must be realized through a combination of procedures that are more subtle. It is true that complex systems are continually organizing themselves and this process is not compatible with the attempt to control them. The liberals are right on this point, but they are not taking into consideration the other side of reality, the inefficiencies of self-regulation or the undesired results of aggregation. Socialism is more ambitious in its intervention, but often less conscious of its limits. The politics of complexity points toward a combination of both focuses, to the extent that it accepts the complexity of the system, but at the same time, it knows that its interventions will have an influence on the emerging reality of societies.

The idea of democracy I am presenting in my book attempts to overcome the contrast between democracy and complexity without weakening democratic aspirations or the effectiveness of governments. How should we view this compatibility? There will undoubtedly always be unresolved tensions between ideals that are not easily compatible, as well as ideological preferences for one ideal or another, but what we currently have is more like an incompatibility of principles, and that is what we should be capable of overcoming. My hypothesis is that this rupture is produced by a lack of complexity in our institutions (in contrast with the complexity of the problems that need to be addressed) that can only be adequately resolved by grafting democracy and complexity together. A theory of complex democracy could constitute

the conceptual framework that is best suited to articulating demands that only seem contradictory because our idea of democracy and our practices of government have not been open to the perspective of complexity. Democracy is not incompatible with complexity, quite the opposite. Democracy's internal dynamism and its capacity for self-transformation make it the system of government that is best prepared to manage complexity.

Thinking about democracy today requires examining the congruence between the complexity of the system and the complexity of its problems. There is a general principle of the theory of organizations that warns that when there is greater uncertainty in the environment, there must be an increase in complexity in the system in terms of its capacity for anticipation and response. Complex systems need a corresponding complex design of government for their self-organisation. Cybernetics presented it as "the law of requisite variety" (Ashby) because only complexity can reduce complexity. The more internal complexity there is, the more the external complexity can be reduced, the broader the radius of perception and the greater the range of decision-making. Flexibility, for example, would be a factor of that ability in the face of an undesirable stability; simplification (of the thing itself and of the environment) could be understood, on the other hand, as a consequence of the lack of internal complexity.

A democracy that governs the contingencies produced by its autonomous functional systems, its interactions and risks cannot be maintained in the simple structures of early democracy. The design of classical politics is infra-complex and inadequate for the problems generated by contemporary society; it does not have the corresponding level of internal complexity when it comes to elaborating information, nor the cognitive competencies, nor sophisticated decision-making processes. Complexity is, for democracy, something more than being effective or accepting realism; it represents an opportunity for completing democracy by enforcing some facets of it that tend to be neglected in the unilateral celebration of other facets.

One example of the ability to handle complexity is provided for us by the economic historian Joel Mokyr with his idea that there was a time when the British Parliament represented the greatest concentration of intelligence of all the European institutions. Because it possessed such a large number of dossiers about the world, England had much more information than the rest of the European monarchies. That allowed better laws about property and industry, which led to economic growth and the industrial revolution. Are our current political systems capable of handling a similar amount of complexity?

The problem we are confronting demands more than simple political reforms would require. A generalized reconsideration of our ways of organizing ourselves demands a full transformation of the habitual ways of governing. We come from a model of organization befitting an industrial society with a Fordist economic structure, the formation of political will within a state framework, with more or less well-defined paths forward, stable social stratification and clear rules for social advancement. Gender and generational roles were also clear. It was a model structured by

a state administration and the integration of experts, a combination of capitalism, welfare state and techno-scientific progress. The new management of complexity, on the other hand, has to confront its own more intense dynamic of different rationales disaggregated from society, with globalized spaces whose economy is difficult to regulate, where political autonomy collides with interdependence, as well as the different velocities of social subsystems.

The political system that is currently in place in areas of elevated complexity has not yet found its democratic theory. We must re-describe the present-day world with categories of globalization, knowledge and complexity. Politics should no longer be confronting nineteenth or twentieth century problems, but the problems of the twenty-first century, which demand the ability to manage social complexity, interdependence and negative externalities, under conditions of insurmountable ignorance, developing a special strategic capacity and taking advantage of the distributed competencies of civil society. If democracy has transformed the *polis* to the national State and direct democracy to representative democracy, there is no reason to assume it cannot handle new challenges, as long as it is equipped with an appropriate political design. If the industrial age's liberal democracy allowed us to talk about the "intelligence of democracy" (Lindblom), its usefulness and effectiveness for a global knowledge society is still an open question. A theory of complex democracy such as the one I am proposing is not the solution to all our problems, but it is a first step toward exploring and organizing a labyrinth that is largely unknown to us.

Robert Musil said that "the difference between a normal person and an insane one is precisely that the normal person has all the diseases of the mind, while the madman has only one". Following this analogy, we could affirm that the difference between a complex democracy and a simplified one is that the first tries to balance diverse values, facets and procedures, which often do not match, even at the cost of instability or contradiction, while the second exalts one of its procedures — whether it is the instantaneous will of the people, the promise of the effectiveness of experts or the stability of the legal order — and scorns everything else. If human beings do not go crazy, it is only because we compensate one excess with another. It is similar with democracy, which improves as it becomes more complex, in other words, as it articulates its elements in such a way that the potential deformity of everything that is not counterbalanced and limited is corrected. A complex democracy is one that is able to orchestrate every facet in a balanced manner.

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