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Democracy and political participation

A contemporary critique

By Valerio Siciliano

Abstract

“Democracy” – literally the *power of the people* and, in its emancipatory promise, *for the people* – has been a vast and controversial subject since Plato, who already denounced its limitations, precisely because of its central implication: popular participation.

A first obstacle to a rigorous discussion of political participation, especially in modern times, is semantic: “democracy” functions in public discourse as a moral and abstract label, not as a precise analytic category. In this sense it resembles the specific way the term “communism” often circulates: as a utopian signifier (a theoretical horizon of promises, e.g. equality, emancipation, community) whose historical realizations (i.e. “deviations” such as Stalinism, Maoism, etc.) must be differentiated. The same caution applies to “democracy”, which is not a transhistorical entity or a single institutional design; it may exist “in part” or be absent within very different political forms (liberal-parliamentary, presidential, oligarchic-pluralistic, imperially embedded, etc.).

That is precisely why it makes sense to treat “democracy” as an ideological concept: as a word that creates legitimacy, not as neutral category. And when a term has this elastic status, it can be monopolized and weaponized. In Luciano Canfora’s *Democracy in Europe: A history of an ideology*, he notes that, in the Cold War:

«[it] was an enormous propaganda gain for Western governments: to be able to appropriate that whole word for themselves. Meanwhile, they were [...] restoring the most uncontrolled free-market economy, and were [...] making use of state bodies (some of them illegal!) [...] in opposing “communism”.»¹

¹ Luciano Canfora, *Democracy in Europe: A history of an ideology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 250.



As a consequence, if the word “democracy” already comes pre-loaded with moral innocence, it will hide rather than reveal the mechanisms of power.

So, the aim here is not to define “democracy” as a timeless ideal, but to treat democracy as ideology: a system of representations that connects legitimacy to a specific, governable image of participation. This shift of perspective makes it possible to ask: *what forms of political participation are allowed, produced, and simulated under the name of democracy – and why?*

In the dominant public narrative, “democracy” is often represented as a universal and neutral ideal, the natural end point of any society that aspires to freedom and progress. Yet, in the strategic documents of global elites, “democracy” takes on a very different interpretation. Far from being a universal emancipatory value to liberate people, it is seen as a tool to administer consensus, and at the same time a risk to be contained when it exceeds the boundaries of systemic compatibility.

As early as of 1975, the report *The crisis of democracy*, written by Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki for the Trilateral Commission, addressed the problem of the awakening of the politicized masses within Western societies with surprising frankness:

«[T]he effective operation of a democratic political system usually requires some measure of apathy and noninvolvement on the part of some individuals and groups. In the past, every democratic society has had a marginal population, of greater or lesser size, which has not actively participated in politics. In itself, this marginality on the part of some groups is inherently undemocratic, but it has also been one of the factors which has enabled democracy to function effectively.»²

While in theory, the document was intended to analyse the “tensions” of modern democracies in the 1970s, it turns out to be programmatic manual for the containment of dissent. It argued that the expansion of democracy in the 1960s and 1970s had led to a crisis of governability in many Western countries. Too many demands for participation, too much political awareness among students, unions, women, workers – all this was presented not as progress, but as a crisis of governability. The problem, in other words, was real democracy.

Since the “diagnosis” is that too much democratic participation is the “problem”, the “cure” is to re-domesticate the Western citizen who is too politicized, who strikes, who protests, who participates, who demands rights, justice and truth – and thus threatens

² Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, Joji Watanuki, *The crisis of democracy: Report on the governability of democracies to the Trilateral Commission* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), p. 114.



the internal legitimacy of the system. The essay argued that this crisis of democracy could be addressed by limiting the scope of democratic decision-making and increasing the influence of experts and elites in policymaking. Strengthening the autonomy of institutions from popular pressure, limiting participation and depoliticizing the masses are the policy recommendations contained in the document – in short: controlling democracy to save the system. It is important to underline that the “problem” identified by the authors is not violent dissent: it is free, organized, informed thought. Democracy, representation and transparency are fine as long as they do not threaten systemic interests; beyond a certain limit, they become problems to be contained. And in fact, today in the West, we see these effects: a people educated not to disturb, to choose “between options” but not to ask radical questions. In other words, freedom is tolerated as long as it is sterile; conscience, on the other hand, is a problem to be managed. Behind the lexicon of “stability” and “effective governance” lies the idea that only an enlightened minority has the right and ability to govern, while the masses – too emotional, too ignorant, too active – must be managed, distracted, or neutralized. What they call the “crisis of democracy” is actually the crisis of hierarchy. What clearly emerges is that:

- “participation” is only good if it does not touch the real issues of power (economy, war, public narrative);
- “representation” is acceptable only if it remains within the confines of systemic consensus;
- “plurality” is decorative, not transformative.

It is “democracy as theatre”, where the audience does not have to go on stage. Democracy, in their thinking, was only good as long as it was controlled, contained, representative but not participatory. When democracy becomes consciousness, protest, organization from below – it ceases to be useful, it becomes dysfunctional, it must be reformed, sterilized. In this sense, Western ruling classes have never been truly democratic: they have only tolerated democracy as long as it didn’t challenge the dominant economic and geopolitical order.

The introductory note to *The crisis of democracy* was written by Zbigniew Brzezinski, the influential former US-national security advisor, co-founder and director of the Trilateral Commission, and member of the Council on Foreign Relations. During the conclusion of the first *State of the World Forum*, at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, he coined the word the concept of “tittytainment”³ which he described as a mix of superficial

³ Hans-Peter Martin, Harald Schumann, *The global trap: Globalization and the assault on democracy and prosperity* (London: Zed Books, 1997), pp. 3-5.



entertainment and material gratification (sex, food, spectacle) to sedate the masses and prevent them from engaging in meaningful political action. Brzeziński believed that the spread of consumer culture, combined with the proliferation of entertainment media, was creating a society that was increasingly focused on satisfying its immediate desires and less interested in challenging the status quo, since – in line with *The crisis of democracy* – he saw an engaged and informed citizenry as a “threat to democratic governance”. In a further book of his own, *Between two ages: America’s role in the technetronic era*, he already argued that this strategy could be used to maintain control over populations in the face of growing discontent and dissatisfaction, while a minority governs through technocratic control:

«In the technetronic society the trend seems to be toward aggregating the individual support of millions of unorganized citizens, who are easily within the reach of magnetic and attractive personalities, and effectively exploiting the latest communication techniques to manipulate emotions and control reason.»⁴

By this, Brzeziński anticipates modern conditions: mass politics is no longer organized primarily through parties and associations, but through aggregated, atomized individuals reachable by communication technologies and “magnetic” personalities – enabling manipulation of emotion and control of reason. This is precisely the environment in which participation can be reduced to episodic consent (voting, polling, brand-like identification), while the strategic centres of decision remain insulated.

If elites treat democracy as governability, the next step is practical: how do you produce the feeling of participation without transferring real power? Here the genealogy matters. Long before mass media, in the Republic of Venice of the 1600s, Paolo Sarpi already treated printed narratives and “manifestos” as strategic instruments: whoever shapes the first public impression can steer interpretation, and therefore political alignment.⁵ This is not yet “democratic participation” in the modern sense, but it is a foundational move: politics becomes inseparable from the management of perception, and legitimacy becomes partially manufactured in the public sphere.

Thomas Wagner describes contemporary “participation” procedures (consultations, citizen dialogues, stakeholder formats) as a trap: participation becomes a tool to generate acceptance, neutralize conflict, and produce legitimacy for decisions already structured elsewhere. The key point is not that participation is always fake, but that it can be

⁴ Zbigniew Brzeziński, *Between two ages: America’s role in the technetronic era* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), p. 13.

⁵ Paolo Sarpi, *Scritti giurisdizionalistici* (Bari: Laterza, 1958), p. 228.



designed to be non-transformative: it invites speech, not power; expression, not decision; inclusion, not sovereignty.⁶

In more recent times, “social engineers” have thought about how participation can be redesigned not only culturally but mathematically. Mechanism design and voting-system engineering promise “fairness” and “stability”, but they can embed normative filters into the procedure itself. Electoral reforms, such as those proposed by Eric Maskin, can become a technocratic continuation of the same project of *The crisis of democracy*, stabilizing outcomes by structurally favouring centrism and filtering-out “disruptive” choices under the guise of “depolarization”.⁷ The broader issue is that, when democracy is reduced to procedure, the core political struggle shifts from who decides to how the choice architecture is designed. Participation remains, but its range of possible effects is narrowed in advance.

But if democracy is ideology, it still has a material precondition: some people must actually experience rights, welfare, and political voice – otherwise the ideology collapses. Losurdo’s counter-history of liberalism⁸ provides a powerful analytic key: historically, “liberty” for the *inside* often depended on unfreedom *outside*, i.e. slavery, colonial coercion, racialized exclusion, or the violent management of “non-citizens”, aimed at generating wealth to be distributed and converted into internal liberties. This is not only a moral accusation, it is a structural point about participation. A “democratic” republic can afford internal compromise precisely when extraction and coercion are displaced to peripheral spaces of the “empire” or subordinated populations. Losurdo emphasizes how the “community of the free” historically defines itself by drawing a boundary: who counts as fully political, and who does not. Even the Athenian democracy is an early example: free political participation built on the labour of the unfree. The contradiction became particularly pronounced in ancient Rome, where the Republican liberties were sustained (in part) by the oppression and exploitation of the provinces of the Empire. Modern liberal orders reproduce the pattern through imperial peripheries, colonial administrations, and later through geopolitical architectures that externalize violence while preserving domestic normality. The United States have historically reproduced a comparable tension

⁶ Thomas Wagner, *Die Mitmachfalle: Bürgerbeteiligung als Herrschaftsinstrument* (Cologne: PapyRossa, 2014), pp. 11-15.

⁷ Valerio Siciliano, “A critical analysis of ‘Election methods and strategic voting’ by Eric Maskin”, 41st World Conference on Business Management Studies (Rome: URUA, 2025), pp. 44-48, 50.

⁸ Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A counter-history* (London: Verso, 2011), pp. 49-50, 225-227, 309-311.



between *Republic* – prosperity and (pseudo-)democracy⁹ at home – and *Empire* – imperial domination and vassalage¹⁰ abroad.

This is why “democracy” cannot be assessed only nationally. To evaluate a state’s democratic character solely in terms of the political rights and freedoms enjoyed by its own citizens, is to disregard the forms of power it may exercise over populations beyond its territory. A regime’s internal participation is often financed and stabilized by what it does outside: military projection, unequal exchange, sanctions regimes, resource control, or the political policing of “zones” where democracy is not meant to apply. Even in strictly conceptual terms, this shows how political participation is conditioned by geopolitical power rather than guaranteed by constitutional rhetoric. A critical assessment of whether a country is democratic or not should therefore extend beyond its domestic politics, to encompass the state’s global conduct in the international order.

Moreover, at the ideological level, one of the most effective ways to sterilize participation is to replace the emancipatory horizon, from which democracy arose – that is an environment deeply linked to class struggle, somehow even in ancient Greece and ancient Rome – with a private one: enrichment, consumption and individual success as the primary meaning of “freedom”. But freedom defeats democracy, if it becomes the freedom of the strongest in competition rather than “freedom” as collective self-rule. Here lies a central contradiction: if political participation is supposed to control rulers, then the glorification of private accumulation serves as a way to co-opt ordinary citizens as fragments of the larger system, since it turns them into imitators of the very logic that should be politically constrained. With regard to “totalitarianism”, the dictator is condemned when he turns the state into a means of gathering personal wealth; but when enrichment is generalized as the meaning of success, oligarchic rule can present itself as “democratic”, even philanthropic – because the name “oligarchy” is politically unusable, while “democracy” is the universally legitimate costume – and the ideology works precisely because it moralizes the label and depoliticizes the structure.

This also explains why elite discourse can demand “faith” in democracy as a civic religion: not to empower citizens, but to immunize institutions from scrutiny. But to put it with the words of Michael Parenti:

⁹ Michael Parenti, *Democracy for the few*, 9th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2011), pp. 5-16, 27-46, 268-286.

¹⁰ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American primacy and its geostrategic imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), pp. 22, 40, 59.



«Democracy is not about trust; it is about distrust. It is about accountability, exposure, open debate, critical challenge, and popular input and feedback from the citizenry. It is about responsible government.»¹¹

So, to treat democracy as belief is to treat rulers as priests. Democratic participation, by contrast, is built on control and the practical ability to remove those who do not serve the public interest.

Artificial intelligence may represent a new stage in the management of democracy already articulated in 1975 in *The crisis of democracy*. We still have elections, and we still have some means of influencing their outcomes. But perhaps this is only a transitional period. While electoral mechanisms can be designed in such a way to produce an outcome *B* even when citizens vote for *A*, AI may increasingly allow those controlling information and persuasion to influence voters before they even reach the ballot, so that they arrive already intending to vote *B*. Thus, if this influence gets sufficiently effective, even the engineering of electoral procedures could become redundant. This possibility acquires particular significance in light of a statement made by Peter Thiel at the *Libertopia Conference* in 2010:

«We could never win an election on getting certain things because we were in such a small minority, but maybe you actually could unilaterally change the world without having to constantly convince people and beg people and plead with people who are never going to agree with you through technological means, and this is where I think technology is this incredible alternative to politics.»¹²

Artificial intelligence now offers unprecedented possibilities for influencing what citizens see, know, believe and ultimately choose, potentially reducing democratic participation to the expression of preferences already shaped elsewhere. Yet for a conscious citizenship, recognising this threat and discussing it openly is already the first step towards changing it.

To conclude, a critical theory of democracy and political participation therefore cannot stop at institutional forms (elections, parliaments). It must also include the social and geopolitical boundaries that define who may participate and at what cost, the historical appropriation of “democracy” as an ideological label, and the technical and cultural production of participation-as-illusion (media control, procedural participation, algorithmic governance).

¹¹ Michael Parenti, *Superpatriotism* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2004), p. 81.

¹² Peter Thiel, “*Peter Thiel at Libertopia 2010*”, Libertopia Conference (Hollywood: Libertopia, 2010), 04:31-04:55.



At this point, the distinction introduced in the opening lines gains deeper political significance, focusing on the two dimensions of “democracy”: its literal meaning as the *power of the people* and its emancipatory promise of power exercised *for the people*. The former demands transparent institutions and participation capable of shaping decisions, not merely formal procedures. Yet even when citizens genuinely exercise power, its consequences may extend beyond them: the people of one country may support policies that dominate or exploit people elsewhere. Thus, democratic participation concerns the exercise of collective power, it does not by itself determine whether the ends pursued are humane: Power exercised *by one people* is not necessarily intended *for all people* affected by it. And that’s why another contested concept becomes essential for an intimate understanding of the much-debated idea of “democracy”: that is the idea of “civilisation”. Like “democracy” itself, “civilisation” is a contested category, whose meaning can be appropriated and instrumentalised for political purposes that contradict the very principles it is supposed to represent. Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis, for instance, exemplifies this political appropriation: it transforms cultural differences into geopolitical fault lines and explicitly advocates «to maintain Western technological and military superiority over other civilizations». ¹³ Yet civilisation, intended here in its humanist sense, denotes neither the superiority of any culture nor the entitlement of any nation to dominate others. It refers instead to the ethical ideal of human coexistence grounded in dignity, justice, freedom and peace. Its measure is not geopolitical supremacy, but the quality of human relations. The expropriation of this category through the technical, mass media-driven and “democratic” production of “opinions”, ¹⁴ presented as conscious knowledge of truth, risks turning participation itself into an illusion, incapable of identifying the ends and means necessary to pursue the interests of a genuinely civilised society. Such a society would have no place for the privileged interests of oligarchies, pursued through weapons and wars that have nothing to do with the essence of civil coexistence.

Only by re-centring participation as effective power from below in the service of human dignity, justice and peaceful coexistence – and refusing the replacement of politics with entertainment, technocracy, or “faith” – can democracy regain its intended emancipatory function, and this on a *global* scale that has now become indispensable, in the mutual interest of the inhabitants of this Planet. Civilization is the end, democracy is only the means.

¹³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 312.

¹⁴ Noam Chomsky/Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), pp. 1-35.



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