

# POLITICAL SYMBOLISMS IN LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES

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## 1. General remarks: legitimacy and political symbolisms

Sustained obedience to rulers depends on the rulers being seen by their subjects as able and willing to defend the land, to impart justice and guarantee internal peace, and, to a point, to ensure a modicum of prosperity, at the very least to avoid prolonged misery. These are *grosso modo* the basic problems of the community, and substantive legitimacy is given to the rulers contingent on their solving, or managing, them. Hence, considerations of a political exchange may be common place between rulers and ruled; they need each other, and the ruled may understand they exchange obedience for a modicum of good governance, or governance tout court.

However, there are intrinsic limits to the human power that makes it unlikely to guarantee things beyond *hic et nunc*. Rulers may parade as gods, on occasion, but their knowledge and resources are limited to handling the *realissimum* of the immediate experience. They cannot control the external environment, and this is the reason to stress boundaries; enemies may come unforeseen. Even less so they control time. The future is beyond their reach.

So, in order to engage in, and make sense of, the experience of consent, acquiescence and obedience to ruling, rulers and subjects resort to a complicated array of cognitive and emotional mechanisms which go beyond observation of past recent behaviour and current experience, and beyond down to earth, rational arguments. They look to heaven, so to speak. They engage in myths and rituals: in narratives and religious and philosophical arguments as well as in prayer, magic and symbolic performances of many kinds.

Together, these symbolisms (or systems of symbols: Firth 1973: 66) imbue people of faith and hope to get along with the political system in the long run, and provide them meaning and emotional support to obey and eventually participate in the games of power. They work by adding up an element of sacredness to the matter of rulership; “authority”, *auctoritas*, means an extraordinary element is added up to mere, naked power, that makes power more than what it looks like under ordinary conditions. Not something that is exchanged for something else, or useful for some common purpose; but something that stands on its own and commands respect.<sup>1</sup> These symbolisms help to sustain rulership, and the concomitant idea of the sacredness attributed to the political community itself, by expressing visions, evoking sentiments and making exhortations. They express the vision of a well ordered society beyond the immediate experience, evoke a sentiment of awe and belonging, and exhort to behave properly in obedience to rulers and in solidarity with compatriots or friends against strangers or enemies, which may challenge the social moral order and the legitimate authority.

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<sup>1</sup> Whether this sacredness adopts the modality of personal charisma, of tradition or of the law which are imbued of a sacred or quasi-sacred character, the modalities of (formal) legitimacy Weber refers to (1976), is not at issue here.

This applies to ancient and modern polities, included the liberal democratic ones, which have their own brand of political symbolisms. In this essay, I will explore the ways in which some of these symbolisms work: those concerned with the difference between rulers and citizens, and the citizens' ambivalence towards the political class; those by which society tries to cope with the threat of civil war and social disintegration; and those which refer to the ambiguities of sovereign power, the omnipotence of politics and the limits of politics.

A key characteristic of political symbolisms is that, quite often, they are inherently ambiguous in that they are subject to different strategies of appropriation by different actors, and, therefore, they can be put to different, contradictory uses. These uses can be of a civil or an uncivil kind, that is, consistent with, or contrary to, the tenets of a civil society, or the modern blend of a liberal democracy, a market economy and a plural society. I will end with some considerations on the virtue of political civility including that of prudence, that may allow the citizens to manage, and see through, these symbolisms.

## **2. Rituals as ways of coping with the difference between rulers and citizens, and with citizens' ambivalence towards the political class**

Liberal democracies are political regimes in which sovereign power is endowed in the *demos*, which, in turn, allows it to be exercised in its name (and for the common good) by elected representatives, with a modicum of deliberation and participation in decision making and policy implementation by minorities of concerned citizens and, on occasion, of larger social aggregates. The crucial difference lies between (1) professional politicians, among whom permanent rulers are selected through processes that usually make the most for oligarchical decision-making (via parties, media, interest groups or leaders of social movements), and (2) the large body of citizens who exercise their power discontinuously, most often in situations carefully framed by professional politicians. This distinction is a hard fact of life that no amount of normative democratic theory can wash away. Discussions may go on forever suggesting that nothing will be done before it is thoroughly agreed on by the political body, from the leaders down to the *popolo minuto*; but since decisions *are made*, and made continuously and massively by a few and handed down through a hierarchy of subordinated layers to be implemented, we have to face the fact that the distinction between rulers and ruled holds fast, despite the appearance of "endless conversation" liberal democracies may give sometimes to unfriendly observers (Schmitt, 1985b: 36).

This contradiction of the ruled being simultaneously both (1) formally identical with, equal to the rulers, and yet (2) different and unequal *qua* inferior and subordinate to them, may be handled by performing a variety of rituals of dissimulation of political power.

*Praising the public by rhetorical devices, gestures and image making*

Rhetorical devices may include the use of words and manners of speech in reference to the dogmas of popular or national sovereignty as well as denunciations of elitism or avoidance of expressions such as "the political class", which give formal recognition to the difference in power between rulers and ruled. This rhetoric may express genuine sentiments of attachment to egalitarian and democratic ideals, or pay lip service to them, but in any case most democratic populist recitations are often cast as ritual exercises in the adulation of the public. Praising the people, and singing their virtues of sound instincts, decency and good behaviour, good sense and acumen is a traditional rhetorical device used by politicians to get the public to their side. That is usually contrasted with the patronizing, condescending and slightly contemptuous elitist attitude. Ritual tales about smart and stupid, good and bad politicians, may evolve around the appropriate uses of these rhetorical devices of systematic adulation, which, in order to be credible, should avoid the worst excesses.

Gestures and image-making should make clear, most notably in electoral campaigns, that politicians belong to, come from, talk like, share the common feelings, experiences, values and lifestyle of the people, so that it looks that "they" are just like "us". This may include displays of the politicians' *private* morality. These are not so much a test of character as a way of indicating that politicians share the mainstream petit bourgeois or middle-class morality and have the same sense of *decorum* than the bulk of the population (allowing for variations according to time and place). If not a strict sexual morality at least a moderate, conservative one has traditionally cast the middle classes, and segments of the working classes, apart from both the upper classes and the lower classes. Moral self-control has traditionally been part of the rationale for those social groupings to claim the right to a central position in the national moral community, as opposed to the corruption of the upper classes and the moral looseness of the lower ones (migrants, undeserving paupers, ethnic minorities, etc.); and their claim for the central locus in the moral community has been linked to that of a central position in the political system.

*Alternate rituals of exaltation and humiliation of the leaders, displays of cynicism and rituals of desecration*

One of the ways to live with a contradiction is to let every side of it be played out at different stages in a sequence or a cycle. In this case, a political cycle of eternal return, as the rulers of today are the ruled of tomorrow, and vice versa. This may take several forms. For instance, there may be a systematic alternation between, on the one hand, ordinary times, when rulers rule over their subjects, even if this is so under conditions that do not allow them to go beyond certain limits and make them accountable, in some degree, to public scrutiny, and subject to influence by pressure groups and opinion polls; and, on the other, extraordinary times, when the rulers ask for votes, or support, the tables are turned and the ruled (almost) rule, or, at least, are given the ruler treatment during the Saturnalia of elections and electoral campaigns.

But even in ordinary times, there are situations that ask for a show of leadership, and others that ask for a show of compromise, negotiations and deals with different segments of society. The style of rulership which is accepted varies from country to country. Quite often, it rules out shows of personal authority and strongmanship as indications of bad taste and offensive to the self-image of the country as a democratic one, and restricts the situations asking for shows of leadership to a minimum. In this case, most decisions are presented as consensual, arrived at through compromises and reflecting prevailing popular opinion. However, politicians should always be alert and know when to strike a different chord and act in a statesman like manner, taking responsibility, leading and not following popular opinion, standing up for their principles and defying mob rule. So complex transitions are played back and forth between rituals of political assertiveness and rituals of humility and accommodation with society. For the politicians, learning to live in a democracy means developing the practical knowledge of concrete situations (Gray, 1986: 36) needed to make these transitions in time, and smoothly enough to avoid looking arrogant, unprincipled or inconsistent.

At the bottom of this alternation lies a basic ambivalence of the ruled vis-a-vis the rulers or the political class. One of the ways of reducing this ambivalence and living with it is to indulge in various rituals of desecration or humiliation of the political class. Thus, the periodic show of popular distrust and cynicism with regard to politicians may become a fact of life in a democratic regime. People may reject the political class' claims to occupy the central location in the moral community. By putting politicians down and pushing them away to the moral periphery of society, as outcasts (unreliable because incompetent and self-serving, possibly corrupt), part of the population expresses its ambivalent feelings towards them: it recognizes their power but gives them no moral credit (or "authority"). Jokes, stereotypes and hostile moral judgements are easily activated by everyday incidents of political life. This reservoir of hostile feelings puts a premium on the opposition parties and candidates that campaign on anti-establishment platforms, and which can easily capitalize on a latent resentment of the people against any incumbents. Sometimes no more is needed to explain alternations in power, or the erosion of support for the government.

#### *Rituals of public exposure and destructions of political careers*

Rituals of political exposure may be a way of airing those feelings of cynicism or distrust towards politicians. The mass-media coverage of politics makes an enormous use of a rhetoric of praise and blame, by means of which the media displays the right and the wrong ways of politics, describes the characteristics of *il buono e il cattivo governo*, and exorcise the sources of public distrust: either because it restores the good name of (and the public confidence in) the political personnel or because it chastises the politicians while restoring public confidence in the political system.

Prominent among the rituals of public exposure are the rituals of destruction of political careers. They typically consist in the periodical re-enactment of a sequence of (1) triumph,

(2) hubris, and (3) fall from grace of chosen politicians, and are only occasionally followed by (4) a final act of redemption (Turner, 1969). The fall may come about because of abuse of power, greed or sexual misbehaviour, but the common denominator of all these sins is the politicians' attempt to defy or stand above public opinion or public judgment. The point is that somebody who was exalted above common ground should be humiliated and disgraced, as a ritual scapegoat and as an opportunity for a moral tale to be told. It may be just a matter of accident (personality, opportunity or chance) that this or that politician be chosen to play periodically a role that many in the media and the public may be expecting and looking forwards (and even giving a helping hand) for it to happen.

### *Political apathy and creedal politics*

The political game can be played in different circumstances depending on the degree in which the public is involved in it. First, in politics as usual, there is a nucleus of party politicians, leaders and cadres of interest groups, plus a social segment composed of journalists, entrepreneurs, liberal professionals, clergymen, teachers and the like, for whom politics is a significant, even important personal concern; then, a larger concentric circle of party affiliates, regular voters, and people only mildly interested in politics who keep themselves informed of the course of events. Beyond that, stands a part of the population which has dropped off the circle of public opinion altogether, and fallen into a state of political apathy. A second possibility, of minimal involvement, is one in which the apathetic segment has expanded, and the circle of public opinion of concerned citizens has been reduced to an extent which is considered threatening for the stability of the political system. Finally, in another situation, public opinion expands, because new social segments become activated, engage in public debates and get access to the political arena, through parties and interest groups, or through social movements and non-government organizations and social movements (these giving lieu to the "creedal politics" some authors refer to: Huntington, 1981).

Indications of political apathy are low rates of voting in electoral contests and of party affiliation, and minimal or no economic contributions to political causes and participation in political activities as well as responses showing low interest for political questions in opinion surveys, lack of information on political issues and lack of consistency in political judgements (interpreted as a sign of lack of attention given to political debates). Political apathy may be a widespread phenomenon, affecting large segments of the population in most liberal democratic societies most of the time. Politicians and concerned citizens usually talk about it in a tone of sanctimonious reproof. This talk may amount to a ritual of (self)differentiation for such public minded people from the rest of private-oriented and narrow minded individuals.

And yet those facts of low rates of voting, party affiliation, political participation and the like are relatively ambiguous and open to various interpretations. An alternative interpretation could consider these facts as indicators of a deliberate or semi-deliberate strategy of

resistance (Edelman, 1988: 33) on the part of (some segments of) society to the attempt made by politicians (and leaders of interest groups, intellectuals, etc.) to shape and monopolise the public sphere, where public debate concerning collective problems takes place. Withdrawal from politics could be not so much an indication of narrow private mindedness as of a kind of public mindedness different from that of state officials and party politicians (Ellul, 1965: 28, 198). To the extent this might be true, no voting and no participating in politics could be reconstructed as counter-rituals of protest and refusal to political submission, much in the way the peasants' abstaining from the Sunday Mass in traditional Catholic societies could be interpreted (for instance, by the clerics) either as an indication of the peasants' ignorance (to be lamented) or as an act of defiance (to be resented).

At the other extreme we observe the phenomenon of creedal politics, that is, of intense popular movements using non-conventional forms of political participation (seat-ins, marches, mass-rallies, participation in political debates, signature of political manifestos, political strikes, etc.), employing an intensely emotional and moral exhortatory discourse and, initially at least, showing distrust and distaste vis-a-vis the political establishment.

*The "right/left" division of the symbolic space as an expression of ambivalence towards the political class*

The ambivalence towards the political class may find its way through other even more important rituals of desecration: those of party politics and, most particularly, of the rituals associated with the division of the political space in left and right. Of course, there are other reasonable and realistic arguments to explain the contests between parties, as well as between left and right. These divisions should be traced back to complex historical origins, and, in modern times, we would have to follow the highly specific historical paths of this division in England and France, the United States and Germany, Italy and Spain, and so on.<sup>2</sup> My point here is to see this division from a rather particular angle.

It is usually understood that pushing the electorate into the mould of the party system along a right to left continuum stabilises the political system by attaching blocs of voters to different parties in a more or less permanent manner. But it is hard to understand the resilience of the *moral and emotional* attachments many people still have to these symbolic political spaces if we consider (1) the lack of credible sanctions politicians usually have at their disposal to enforce this objective, (2) the subtleties, changes and confusions in the ideological history of the left and the right (not to speak of the centre) political configurations of different countries, as well as (3) the looseness of the links between those collective identities so described and the positions they may have taken on any set of issues over any significant period of time, that blur the connection between collective memories, present issues and party identifications.

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<sup>2</sup> On the division between right and left in England and France, and on the civil and uncivil uses of this division: Pérez-Díaz, 1999.

*Part* of the answer to this puzzle lies in the way in which left/right politics (and party politics) is (are) linked with the phenomenon of popular ambivalence towards the political class. Because one of the ways out of the uneasiness of ambivalence is to project the two feelings to the external world, in this case the world of the politicians, and attach *each* of them to a *different* segment of this world: in this case, the good feelings to the good party or the good symbolic space; and the bad feelings just to the opposite. People may find a way to be *consistently* both loyal and aggressive to the political class, by being loyal to one part of it and hostile to the other, taking the issues and the characters as helping devices to identify their attachments and argue their preferences. By the way, I do not dismiss these arguments as mere rationalisations; I am only pointing out that whatever the contents of these arguments, the emotions, and therefore the commitments, of hostility and loyalty people feel towards the parties are not explained by the arguments. Thus, the outbursts of moral indignation, of denunciation of "liberals" or "conservatives", "reactionaries" or "radicals", become a game through which public passions are ritually incensed and calmed down, the rulers or the party leaders becoming the main officiants of these rituals of denunciation in mass rallies, public debates or television shows.

To a point, the rituals of left/right or political partisanship may reinforce the commitment of the public to the political system, at least in the short run, in a paradoxical manner: by allowing people to miss the details of politics. As long as the public keeps an eye on this symbolic political game and finds it meaningful, hoping that choosing between left and right politicians will bring the country significantly closer to solving its basic problems, other (backstage: Goffman, 1959) games of party politicians can go on; that is, those of influencing policy, getting compliance, support, taxes and other resources out of the public and sharing in the political spoils. Yet it also may happen that after a point these rituals become repetitious, boring, easy to anticipate and unable of entertaining, enticing or interesting the public; or, alternatively, that they are discredited and seen as (say, ideological) covers for the real thing.

### **3. Rituals as ways of coping with the threat of civil war and social disintegration.**

In the left and right division, people's ambivalence towards the political class considered as a group external to them comes hand in hand with a division within the people themselves. Here, an escalation of aggressive feelings and symbolic violence may blur the line between the political opponent and the enemy. In fact, only a small, easy step goes from one to another, with potentially extraordinary consequences.

Virtue is an acquired human quality the possession of which enable us to achieve the goods which are internal to practices (MacIntyre, 1984: 191); hence, political civility, or political virtue in a civil society (and therefore, in a liberal democracy) may be understood to be a human quality the possession of which enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to the practice of politics in *that kind* of society. This includes the practice of the best possible

collective deliberation in order to reach the best possible decision for the common good. For this purpose, everybody should be encouraged to participate in the discussion to the best of his/her ability, and protected to do so. Therefore, every citizen should consider to be his/her civic duty to protect, and not only to tolerate, his/her political opponent (Smith, 2002). This view of a virtuous civil polity is, of course, challenged by those who define the political community as one which is defined by the rapport between political friends and political enemies (Schmitt, 1976: 46). The fact is, this definition easily drifts into a politics of exclusion of the enemy, and hence, into some form of violent strife. (In Sophocle's tragedy, Creon's words "we cannot treat friends and enemies the same way" meets somehow Antigone's response: "we don't know if this is what the gods really want of us": Girard, 1978: 331.)

Many liberal democracies have emerged out of experiences of violent strife between large or significant segments of the population pitted against each other for a long period of time. Such was blatantly the case of the British political system way back to the 17th century, and the same has applied to many other countries since then. In the more recent past of Continental Europe the restoration of democracy in Germany, Austria, France and Italy in the 1940's, and in Greece and Spain in the 1970's has taken place against the background of bloody memories of, at times, even catastrophic dimensions: street fights, guerrilla warfare or open prolonged civil war, political purges, deprivation of political rights, concentration camps for political dissidents, if not popular and military summary trials and mass assassinations (Hertz, 1982). These haunting memories, even though repressed or gradually weakened with the elapse of time, have never been totally forgotten, together with the corresponding feelings of anger, sadness, shame or guilt associated to the events. These have been the mixed emotional foundations on which the new regimes have been built.

The point here is, the transition and the consolidation of a liberal democracy entails an intense commitment to produce and reproduce some sort of social agreement among the rulers, between rulers and ruled, and among the ruled themselves, partly because they need to deal with these memories of past disagreement but also partly because the tenets of democracy, of government by discussion and consent, requires people to air their disagreements and to look closely at (and therefore to magnify) their conflicts. So, civil war is not just an original sin but an extreme possibility and, in a sense, a permanent temptation of democracies, intensified by the need to state, and deal with, conflicts in an open way (which, in turn, can activate the memories of past conflicts). Therefore the threat of civil war, of tearing apart the social fabric, may be omnipresent and seems coterminous with the everyday workings of this regime, even if it is in the relatively milder ways of conflicts of interest among economic classes, debates on moral issues, or competing assertions of the groups' identities and their rank in the status system.

As a consequence, institutions intended to shape the interactions of individuals and groups in these societies (particularly if those interactions take place in a public or political scenario) tend to be so designed as to allow for ritual performances that meet the conflicting needs of

(1) expressing those conflicts and (2) watering them down, channelling them, and making them compatible with some underlying source of unity and commonality. But if the institutions and the rituals are designed with an in-built ambiguity, this means that they can be appropriated and used by both politicians and citizens in quite different ways.

*Elections*, for instance, are dramatic contests which may be played out in two registers: that of civil contests between political opponents, and that of uncivil fighting between friends and enemies. In elections, the clash of opinions, interests, values and personalities is to be displayed. At the same time, the challengers are supposed to agree on the proceedings and display their agreement on the values of the democratic process itself. They make rhetorical appeals to the people: the Italian people, the Spanish people, the American people, the French people, etc. They may even show their willingness to talk to each other and give an indication that they belong to the same grand political family (such as, for instance, the group of democratic politicians as opposed to that of the authoritarian ones).

The occasion may serve to enhance their commitment to national interests and values and show their distance from factional politics (hence the ambiguity of partisan appeals in electoral campaigns). When the time comes, they may all appeal to the citizens to fulfill their civic duties and enact the largely ceremonial performance of going to the polls, with the final results being received with the due mixture of expectation, joy, desolation and respect that almost sacred celebrations get: *vox populi, vox dei*. Then, rulers and ruled become temporarily identical in these unique events that blur the difference between the two, united in an experience of ritual communion. This performance is to be repeated again and again, in local, regional, state or national elections, always staged as a spectacle for all to see and participate, with the due intervention of producers, script scenarists and other theatrical assistants, that is, the politicians and the media who take care of framing the spectacle: for the lights, sounds, timing and special effects that enhance the dramatic effectiveness of the performance and, by so doing, the people's feelings of commitment, respect and moral obligation to the proceedings.

These moral emotions can be fully grasped and understood only when contrasted with those emotions that arise when contrary rituals of desecration or disruption of the process of democratic elections take place: when ballot boxes or urns are broken, polls closed, voters killed, soldiers or guerrillas intervene, etc. These are the premonitory signs of the fear and trembling of civil wars, when the social contract is broken, and people are left out with precarious and unstable compromises linking some of them to some others, tenuous islands of predictability and solidarity in a much wider ocean of uncertainty and danger. Quite often both sets of moral emotions, those evoked by memories of desecration of the electoral rituals and those evoked by the peaceful performing of them, come together in the public mind as corresponding to stages in a dramatic sequence. The sequence may encompass the life of one generation or a longer period; either way the experience is compressed in a theatrical time that focuses in a few crucial events. So memories of broken urns, smashed ballot boxes and civil unrest or civil war may be kept alive and stay in the background of present day electoral

celebrations, while these very celebrations act like a magic incantation of the evil spirits that prevailed in the past, and are performed as a sort of exorcism, and in defiance against them.

What I have said about elections may be repeated for other performances; for instance, *parliamentary debates*. These can be seen, also, as double games in which there is a back and forth between a scene of civil contests between political opponents, and one of uncivil fighting between friends and enemies. At times, the debates are performed as rituals of party life: making clear the party identification of the various members of parliament, displaying signs of loyalty to the party and its leaders, reciting the official line, repeating well-known litanies of fiery or accommodating speeches vis-a-vis other parties, and so on. Sometimes, the debates drift into bitter and violent contests. As a compensation for this, other rituals of a wider and more general appeal may come into being, and peaceful feelings as well as a mood of self-celebration seem to pervade the place. In this case, for a while, the parliament becomes the impersonation of a quasi-Hegelian mind or quasi-Rousseauian general will shaping itself through by the meeting of contrary opinions into a harmonious synthesis. These positive moral sentiments may be helped by the memories of the very disruptions of parliamentary proceedings in the past.

One of the ways of getting over memories of disruption of parliamentary debates and electoral contests, lastly of civil war, is to play the sequence of events as a drama of (1) sin, (2) deserved suffering and (3) final triumph of virtue; so that the rituals are reinforced by their association with a mythical narrative: a tragic myth. The tragic schema avoids stressing too much the guilt of any particular part, since the original sin can be ambiguously interpreted as some breakdown or rupture of the social contract for which everybody was partly responsible.

For instance, in a tragic narrative, it may be argued that the fascists and military rebelled in Spain in the 1930's and therefore did something wrong, but they did it because they counted on the support by peasants, church-goers and middle classes genuinely alarmed by the radical threat of some segments of working class organizations and the lack of decision and competence of the left or moderate political leadership; and that the whole process was compounded by the imminent clash between German and Italian fascisms, Soviet communism and French and Anglo-Saxon democracies, all of them standing like Olympian gods, or demons, over the puzzle of Spanish domestic politics and playing with it (Pérez-Díaz, 1993). That was in fact the argument which prevailed in Spain during the last twenty years before the democratic transition. It prevailed against alternative Manichean narratives of the war as a fight between good and evil (for the republicans, between a legitimate regime and a handful of military rebels; for the nationalists, between social order and respect for religion, and the spectre of social chaos and antireligious fanaticism). Now, the tragic argument gave an aura of inevitability to the civil war, with deep and lasting moral implications. The moral implications of such a tragic account were: (1) the share of guilt and responsibility was more or less evenly distributed among the contenders: they were all to blame; (2) the total amount of guilt and responsibility was reduced: they were not that guilty

since they were responding to each other's threats, and they were pawns in a larger game; (3) the guilt they still had was reduced through suffering (the losers by being repressed during one generation, the winners by losing control of the state one generation later). In this way the rituals of democratic politics were reinforced by their association with the myth of the civil war as a tragedy.

#### **4. Rituals as ways of coping with the ambiguities of sovereign power: rituals of the omnipotence of politics, and of the limits of politics**

In Hocart's suggestive hypothesis (Hocart, 1970: 30 ff.) the state started as a ritual apparatus for "the quest of life", that is, for the abundance of all desirable things in life, this apparatus implying the existence of an order of symbolic preeminence and social deference. Somehow the states, or many of them, once developed into systems of political domination proper where obedience (and not mere deference) to authority was required, have managed to hold the bold ambitions they had in their ritual origins. They tend to parade as if they were the main sources of that abundance of all desirable things in life through effective or symbolic performances, these providing the basis of their extraordinary claims to power and preeminence. Through complex metamorphoses, modern democratic states have kept the extraordinary pretenses of their predecessors. In international issues as in the extreme case of war, the state claims unconditional power of life-and-death over their subjects, as if the fatherland could only survive and prosper by its subjects running the risk of death in battle. Similar claims have been made in the arena of domestic politics.

The modern state, both democratic and undemocratic, is predicated on the assumption it has sovereign power; not just a lot of power, or more power than others. It is supposed to rule on exceptions as Schmitt would put it: to decide whether or not, and when, to suspend all established legality (Schmitt, 1985a: 5). However, even if granted that exceptional power, still it is to be seen to what extent and under what conditions the state has such ultimate power in fact. Because if and when the state of exception (or the suspension of established legality) has been decided by the state, this can only be *maintained* in so far as the state has enough social support for a significant period of time. Otherwise the exceptional power becomes the power for "lightning and thundering", for frightening the subjects. These effects may prove ephemeral. We should not confuse Jupiter with an organizer of fireworks' displays.

Time is the crucial dimension that discriminates between more or less relevant decisions, and to be sovereign means to make very relevant, not short-lived, decisions. The point is, these decisions will be relevant only if they last, and they will last only if they are accepted by significant sectors of society. This requires a drastic redefinition of the concept of sovereignty. We can only accept the theory of state sovereignty as a metaphor, a *tropo* which inflates both normatively and descriptively the reality of political life (to fit the intellectual or material interests of politicians, civil servants, legal professionals and intellectuals of various

kinds). The difficulties of a full-blooded theory of state sovereignty are particularly intense and visible in liberal democracies.

*The narratives of social contracts and founding constitutions*

In liberal democracies there is a strong need for rituals to be played in order to handle the ambivalence between rulers and ruled and the threats of social disintegration, these rituals being ways of playing out and defusing intense political and social conflicts which could culminate in a civil war. Now, the counterpart of the tragic myth of civil war is the theory of a social contract. As is well known the two classical analytical components of social contract are the pact of association (by which the members of the society decide to come together to provide for a set of basic rules concerning their reciprocal rights and obligations) and the pact of domination (by which they decide on the rules of the political regime with respect to the reciprocal rights and obligations between rulers and ruled) (Baker, 1960: XII). If taken as a descriptive theory accounting for the real genesis of most liberal democracies, the social contract theory would be but a pious myth silencing the role of violence, economic and social influences by strategic minorities, and of symbolic manipulation of various sorts being exercised on the populace. However, the strength of the theory lies, first, in its normative character and, second, in its capacity to serve as an analytical tool for understanding liberal democracies once they have been established. First, the normative theory of the social contract provides an account for what can be seen as a moral argument for a political regime, a liberal democracy, as a well ordered political system. Thus, the theory provides a yardstick for political reform: either the political institutions are arranged and shaped as if they were based on a social contract between rulers and ruled, and among the ruled themselves, or the political institutions should be changed in order to be so arranged. Second, there is the analytical importance of the theory for understanding how liberal democracies work once they have been established. Whatever may be the real genesis of (and the complicated steps of the transitional period to) liberal democracies, most of them manage to refer to a founding moment of the highest symbolic significance: the making, with popular approval, of a constitution, usually together with a series of complementary institutional settlements, arrangements, understandings or compromises of a quasi-constitutional character (which may involve the church, the army, the regional elites, the business community, the unions, etc.). To that founding moment and these constitutional or basic arrangements rulers and citizens can subsequently point out as providing the legal and conventional reference point for all the political life to come later, and as providing, therefore, with a repertoire of rewards and punishments for those behaviours which are compatible with, or depart from, them.

This being so, it follows that the question whether the democratic state does have sovereign or limited power has no easy and unambiguous answer. In fact the usual answer in democratic politics has been, not uncharacteristically, both. The power of the state, based on the will and the power of the *demos* should have no limits, *and* should have the limits of the constitutional arrangements of the original social contract (this involving the respect for minority rights). Hence, the two competing claims: the state is in principle omnipotent; and,

also in principle, the state's power has stringent limits on it, since the state has to bargain continuously with society (majorities and minorities) on any significant revision of the original social contract. Therefore, we can expect both rituals of state sovereign power and rituals of the limits of the state power (in other words, of negotiations between the state and society) in all kinds of matters. Let me just focus on domestic issues.

### *Rituals in the arena of economic policy*

Rituals of state sovereign power in the arena of economic policies are more frequent when the state intends to transform the market economy, or the capitalist system, through reforms designed and implemented by state officials, than when the state tries to keep up with the continuous and, so to speak, almost endogenous transformations of the economy by itself and through its interplay with courts of law, consumers, unions or international markets. However, these differences (between, say, socialdemocratic and neoliberal policies), despite their being openly displayed, may be muted by the fact that, quite often, the manifest goals or intentions of the state are far from being matched by its actual policies, either because the state oscillates between two different policies or because it oscillates between doing something (in any direction) and just making people believe it does something or intends to do something.

These mismatches are premised on three facts. (1) The diverse segments of the political class, in order to rule, *need support* by a variety of organized economic actors, particularly business and unions but also tax payers, individual investors, consumers and many others. (2) Politicians are present oriented: they want exercise political office and they want it now, and to keep it, or attain it, in the short run; this implies the permanent possibility for them to *shift their alliances* with those key actors depending on ever changing circumstances. Finally (3) if the state has the unchanging goal to *be seen* as a solver of economic (and social) problems, this can always be attained in two ways: by claiming responsibility for the success of the economy or by avoiding (or sharing it with society) responsibility for the failures of the economy if and when these failures prove resistant to state action.

This being so, there can be only a loose link between the rituals of state power and the contents of state actual policies. Depending on circumstances, we find interventionist, corporatist or laissez-faire types of economic policies which amount to rituals of state power or rituals of negotiations between state and society (under the guise of market forces or of interest groups). These rituals are compatible with different understandings between state officials, party leaders, business and unions as well as with different policies. Rituals of state intervention may go hand in hand with a *de facto* colonisation of the state apparatus by interest groups, rituals of liberalism can cover very decisive state interventions at the micro level, and corporatist rituals can frame social compromises of the most diverse kinds.

Thus, the practices of social pacts in a number of European countries, during the 1980s, associated political rulers and social leaders in a common ceremony of fate control, and

calmed down anxieties regarding inflation, declining wages, unemployment, industrial restructuring, trade deficits and difficult adjustments to the volatility of the capital markets. By so doing, the performance of these rituals presumably reduced the level of domestic conflict and reinforced the social consensus around the acceptance of a hybrid of the core institutions of a market economy and those of the welfare state. In this peculiar manner, interest group representatives and politicians found a way to handle the ambiguities of rulership as domination over and as negotiation with society, since the pacts were the expression of a process of bargaining between almost equal partners while at the same time, by giving formal recognition to the pacts and backing the implementation of them with state power, the state gave to the pacts the final blessing of their being in the general interest and capitalized on their eventual success. These rituals were performed by the representatives of business and unions with the state playing a central role or watching over the proceedings from the sidelines. At the other extreme, looking just the opposite but, in a paradoxical way, pointing in a similar direction, we find the rituals of state humility of the 1980s and 1990s, which were implicit in the *laissez faire* deregulatory brand of economic policies, whereby the rituals of competitive markets were encouraged to be played out in the most ostensive manner in the public arena.

### *Rituals of welfare*

In regard to non-economic activities, modern societies can only work through pervasive and continuous enactments of rituals of social cooperation, which are played out in all sorts of private or social public spaces, often with little or no state intervention. In fact, most of what is taken as everyday urban life or street scene (as was the case, also, with the village scene of rural communities) is to large extent a display of rituals of cooperation and competition in a public (but not a political) scenario. Yet, there has been a tendency for the state to adopt and get hold of those rituals. The development of the welfare state clearly illustrates this tendency. For an extended period of time, in many countries since the mid-nineteenth century to the present, the rituals of the schoolroom, of the medical practitioner's office and of the hospital ward have been traditionally played out in such private or public social spaces. But at some point, usually around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most states tended to appropriate these rituals for themselves, to make them be performed in public political spaces and, thereby, to capitalize on their success.

This they did by getting the population to become used to associating (1) the very strong moral emotions linked to experiences of learning and being cured or cared of as well as the corresponding professional services and the educational and health institutions in which these services are delivered, with (2) state institutions, state officials and state symbolisms. In this way, the democratic state linked the micro-rituals of state power to basic experiences of the ruled. This way, the modern, contemporary state undermined the fundamental distrust the ruled have had towards it, authoritarian or democratic, from the start; that is, towards states which had taxed them, policed them and sent them to war at an immensely larger scale than any other kind of states, or their equivalent, had been able to do in the past.

Here, incidentally, we may find the key to understanding the withering away of the Anarchist utopia. The modern state won its long-lasting battle against Anarchist myths, rituals and sentiments, so pervasive among rural and industrial workers and middle classes well into the 20th century, by making clear that the state provided the solutions to basic everyday needs of the masses, such as primary schools, health facilities and a minimum of social assistance, all seemingly provided for by state money and in state institutions, and manned by state salaried professionals and bureaucrats; so that it seemed as if all these services would be lost were the state to lose resources, not to say to disappear from the scene. Anarchism was defeated neither by its brotherly enemies of socialism and communism, nor by capitalism, but by these micro-rituals of the welfare state that shaped the everyday experience of ever larger masses of the population, thus destroying for them the plausibility of any belief in a stateless society, or even, possibly, in a minimal state.

### *Ceremonies of confusion*

On the other hand, if doubtful about the extent of its resources to solve a problem or meet the needs of a segment of society, the state may engage in a discrete pantomime as an external observer of what is going on in the economic or social life, as in many variants of a laissez-faire type of policy. It may also engage in a *theatre of the invisible*, ruling out as non existing entire fragments of the social experience. What we may call an underground economy or a hidden society are invisible only from the viewpoint of the state, otherwise they are all plain to see.

When the state does not want to be tested by its performance in certain arenas, it may refuse them official recognition. Official statistics may omit them and social science, depending on the state's resources or on the state's direct or indirect support, may follow suit by giving scarce attention to them, or by starting to give attention to them only when the politicians begin to think they can do something about them. The fact is, black markets or markets of drugs and prostitution, gambling and terrorism as well as anti-system subversive activities and marginal religious sects continue to exist and may prosper, and, at any time, burst forth on stage. Then, the theatre of the shadow society which had been played out in private for so long is reenacted in the public eye.

Up to now, I may have been conceding too much to the capacity of the state, and political and social actors in general, to make consistent choices of substantive policies and public rituals, depending on purpose and circumstance. But consistency is a rare event everywhere, and particularly so in the field of state activities. More often than not, the contents of the state's real policies and rituals are mixed, adding up to a sort of *ceremony of confusion*, where words are far from matching facts. In fact, most states (1) have different rituals going on in different policy areas at any given moment of time, (2) combine them in various ways, and (3) relate them to policies which are implemented often in a very inconsistent manner. Let me just illustrate my point by referring to the record of the long tenure of the Spanish socialists in

power, between 1982 and 1996.<sup>3</sup> It has been shown that the socialist government engaged in: (1) a double ritualism of Atlantism and quasi-neutralism in foreign policy; (2) ritualistic discourses of radical change, of moderate social-democracy and of pro-market almost neoliberal economic orthodoxy referring to economic issues; (3) a rhetoric of high profile for the state (upholding the values of the welfare state and the state responsibility according to the confluence of Jacobin and Socialist traditions) going hand-in-hand with a policy of weakening the state apparatus (decentralization and recruitment and remuneration policies that reduced the incentives for competent and ambitious personnel to join or stay in the state bureaucracy); (4) almost simultaneous rituals of assertion of state power and of accommodation with society (praising the virtues of social pacts with unions, business, the church, students, etc.), and last but not least (5) an emotionally charged defence of the rule of law and a silent but eloquent transgression of this rule in the terrain of counter-terrorist activities (for which it had to pay a bitter price) (Pérez-Díaz, 2003).

There are, of course, continuous attempts to cover up these or similar amalgams of rituals and deeds with labels, slogans, principles and ideologies, and all the sophistries the distinction between strategies and tactics may allow, in order to produce the illusion of consistency. These ritual justifications enable politicians, state officials, journalists, intellectuals and others to make sense of the confusion and help them to live with it. Part of the reason why political discourse in liberal democracies comes back again and again to the spacial metaphor of the left, centre and right imaginary lies not only in the emotional needs already referred to but also in this cognitive need to make sense of those confused and perplexing amalgams.

#### *Rituals of state rationality and state stravaganza*

But other more general political rituals for the cover-up of the confusion are those consisting in the ritual assertion of the state's formal rationality together with the ritual practice of a permanent revolution, or restructuring, of the state apparatus. It seems paradoxical that both contradictory positions, that the state is the embodiment of reason and, yet, it has to be re-structured once and again, may coexist without embarrassment. In this respect, liberal democracies are not significantly different from the authoritarian versions of the modern state.

On the one hand, politicians, jurists, civil servants, social scientists and enlightened citizens indulge in a ritual discourse about the state's spirited goals, if not the state's higher morality, as well as the formal rationality of its bureaucratic and legal systems, the internal

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<sup>3</sup> To avoid misunderstandings: I am not trying to make a case here for or against this particular record. By the way, those in favour could argue that (1) Spanish socialists were less inconsistent than other European socialists (for instance, the French at the time) and than other non-Socialist Spanish parties (for instance, the Centre party of the previous government), and (2) their very inconsistency allowed them to score some successes in foreign and domestic issues.

coordination of the state apparatus and the unity of government. On the other hand, and at the same time, they all engage in, and we are all witness to, the unending ritual performance of the reorganization and shifting directions of the state, the overflowing of its legislative acts and administrative decisions with changing and *ad hoc* decisions in most areas, and particularly its periodical internal restructuring and administrative reform.

This is not only a matter of real politics, whereby political leaders reinforce their power bases, bureaucratic infightings are resolved, specific policies are pushed forward or abandoned, etc., but also of political symbolism, whereby politicians and bureaucrats try to impress upon the public the image (and to convince themselves) that they are in control of the state, or to put it in more metaphysical language, that the state is in control of itself. This they do as if, in order to prevent a feeling of confusion from spreading, the state had to exercise itself in a continuous display of its capacity to straighten itself out and of pretending to be in good order.

Similar doubts about whether or not we are dealing half of the time with nothing more than mere pretenses could apply to the continuous display of astute political calculations both the government and the leadership of the opposition parties convey to the public. This they do with the complicity of the media, which seems to make so much of the political spectacle the public consume under the label of political information. This is, indeed, partly, information and, partly, an exercise in persuasion. Instead of the public being under the impression that the state is made up to a large extent of a semi-discontinuous series of agencies and cliques, each facing different problems at their own *tempo*, and using rituals, ideas and policy instruments of all kinds quite often *ad hoc* in a sort of improvisational *stravaganza*, the public is persuaded into believing it deals with a unified rational actor, maybe arcane but thoughtful and fairly systematic. That seems to be extremely important, since, otherwise, people might feel that they are not governed, and that where power should be there is in fact an empty space: a most disturbing feeling, to be avoided at all costs.

These state formalities and party manoeuvres are embedded in larger symbolic constructs, namely political ideologies (nationalism or socialism, for instance), that is, clusters of cognitive views, moral arguments, rituals and other (referential and condensation) symbolisms. Now, if we may say that from the viewpoint of symbolic politics the displays of state formalities and party manoeuvres should be considered, in part at least, as covers for the politicians' often erratic and opportunistic behaviour, the same can be said also of these political ideologies: that they should be considered, in part at least, as covers for erratic and opportunistic behaviour at an even larger scale, both of the politicians and their followers.

### *Language games*

Democratic politics has a political language that people in many countries both sides of the Atlantic, and others, have learnt for several generations already. Thinking in a particular, key sector of this language, Bobbio (1995) has suggested that people who use the conceptual

schema of left and right understand well each other. This schema would simplify a complicated universe in a way that makes political debate manageable.

The problem, however, is that languages are there to be appropriated (Chartier, 1989), used, spoken by different actors, who may do so in ways that make the situation extremely confuse. Some observers have pointed out that for a long while some Italian politicians, for instance, became masters in a creative use of the political language that emphasized ambiguity and double entendre. Aldo Moro's image of "parallel convergences" was apparently intended to justify the rapprochement between Christian Democrats and the Communist party (La Palombara, 1987: 105). Those who use this language tend to cross the invisible line between *sfumato* or ambiguity (a difficult language for the uninitiated to understand, open to several interpretations) and *doppiezza* or duplicity (which involves a disjunction between words and reality). It has been said of *sfumato* that it is typical of the curia (in the Catholic Church) who have an interest in using arcane language which is incomprehensible to lay people (La Palombara, 1987: 103). It has been said of the *doppiezza* that it was the defining characteristic of Palmiro Togliatti and the Italian Communist Party from the Salerno declaration in 1944 on; and that the disjunction between doctrine and practice was "a structural characteristic inherent to the party,... a kind of institutionalized schizophrenia" (Spotts and Wieser, 1986: 43).

Maybe *sfumato* and *doppiezza* were related to a certain blockage of political decisions when, after a while, the rapport of forces did not allow for an alternation in power, so that, in order to initiate change, people felt they had to use lateral openings in the discourse (though a similar lack of alternation in power did not produce the same results in Japan or Sweden, for instance). Maybe this was a reflection of the fact that (1) the simplicities of the left and right discourses did not match the increasing complexities of social and economic life, (2) particularly in a society whose members were accustomed to living their own lives, making their own decisions and pursuing their own interests (as suggests Oakeshott, 1966: 65), and (3) more particularly in a society in which the idea that right and left may be treated in an anthropomorphic way seemed less and less plausible; that is, treated as if they were historical subjects with an identity rooted in a shared memory and backed by a long consistent narrative, and with a different vision of the future.

All this suggests that the *sfumato* and the *doppiezza* in the uses of the right and left schema are hardly to be expected to be a local and temporary phenomenon. In fact, on the whole, the contemporary trend has been for right and left to share the common ground of a commitment to a market economy, a liberal polity and a plural society. We can take as a symptom of the relative blurring of their difference the fact that such a thoughtful observer as Bobbio could offer little more than a difference in emphasis, degree and nuance between right and left in regard to the relative importance of equality. Thus it should come as no surprise the periodic return of the *sfumato* of the political rhetoric of the "third way", once and again.

In the end, the important part of that use of language games lies not in their denotative contents, but in their illocutionary force (Austin, 1963). They provide labels for people's practical engagement in politics: to develop a sense of involvement in political action, of belonging to a group, of inflating their own sense of power, and, also, of increasing their dependence on those politicians who play an outstanding role in pronouncing the ritual words in the appropriate ritual settings. This way, the ground may be prepared for other political symbolisms to be played out with greater efficacy.

## **5. Concluding remarks: political civility and political symbolisms**

Political civility is an acquired human quality the possession of which allows us to do well in the practice of politics in a liberal democracy, or a civil society of our times, and this includes prudence and courage in political deliberation that makes for the best possible decision in regard to the common good of that kind of city, that is, a decision in view of the goals of liberty, justice, peace and prosperity, and, then, for this decision to be carried on with determination. This includes, in turn, among other things, the ability to be part in, and understand and see through, the narratives and symbolic performances of the polity.

Seeing through the political symbolisms of liberal democracies may be a complicated undertaking, given the intrinsic ambiguity of those symbolisms, which lay them open to quite different uses and strategies of appropriation. Thus, if every political regime has a legitimacy problem, trying to justify the political domination of the rulers over the ruled, the problem is compounded in liberal democracies by the fact that these regimes are premised on the systematic dissimulation of the difference between rulers and ruled. There are of course very difficult problems for any political system to cope with problems of civil war and social disintegration, but these problems may be made more acute in liberal democracies by the fact that these regimes put a premium on political contests, frequent turnovers of political personnel and systemic conflicts between parties, interest groups and social movements, lastly between right and left. Also, in liberal democracies, expectations tend to be very high about the ability of the system to solve the basic problems of the community in a lasting, definitive manner, while at the same time final responsibility for solving them lies ambiguously between the state and society.

There is no in built tendency in the institutions of liberal democracies or in their political symbolisms to work well. They are open to uncivil uses as well as to civil ones. There is no reason why the uncivil uses of these political symbolisms could not prevail: they did in the past. In that case, the dissimulation of power may proceed forwards, people's ambivalence may deepen and give lieu to supporting a politics of resentment, political opponents may become enemies, and a liberal polity may drift into a pathological oscillation between hubris and feelings of powerlessness and frustration. This state of affairs may be useful in the short run for the immediate interests of an unholy alliance of oligarches, demagogues and hysterical multitudes, left or right; but it may spell the end of a liberal democracy.

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