



Pulling democracy up by its national bootstraps? Contemporary societal order in Italy, Europe and the West

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1. Nation, State, Democracy: The Threefold Root of Modern Societies

This essay seeks to address the debate on the conflictual relations between democracy and the nation-state. It sharpens the range of structural interdependencies within national statehood and political regime¹ by updating the classic notions of political theory and political sociology in light of three recently published volumes by Italian scholars, who have dedicated their researches to the stratification of democratic life, inherited by modern statehood. The aim is, therefore, to situate the seemingly "old" categories of nation, statehood and institutional morphology² at the proscenium of any analytical attempt to understand the ways in which European (and other) societies engage in keeping the triadic structure of contemporary politics in balance; or at least, in some sort of institutionalised dialectics³. The question mark of whether a supposed triadic structure still represent our, - hence Western-inspired liberal social order-, has concerned scholarship before the apparent "end of history" and the illusionary triumph of democracy (and capitalism) over authoritarianism (under communism and its nationalised forms). One of the most authoritative scholars was Easton who dissected political life, according to the lines of a determined "political community" (polis, civitas, commonwealth, nation, and so forth) not merely as the inclusive association of human beings but as the identification with the goals and interests of one's own bearings, aggregated and collectivised by ruling classes (Easton 1965a, 1965b, 1971). Easton's teachings framed the regime as a technical notion, re-

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¹ As succinctly asserted by Schmitter (2020, 1146): "[I]n the real world of politics, democracy in the singular does not exist." Democracy, after all, is also permeated by values such as personal freedoms, civil rights, equality, tolerance and pluralism that model society. That said, "[T]he formal practice of democracy may have become increasingly standardized, but its meaning remains 'essentially contested.'" (*ibid*, 1148), as it is not democracy per se which moulds any societal model, but its procedural capacity, ethos of popular participation, availability of knowledge and inter-relational involvement between institutions and citizens which translate seemingly abstract values and ideals into concrete political forms. On the definitory variety and variability of the democratic rule, see Tilly (2007).

² The debate over the nation-state and its institutions keeps busy a wide range of scholarship. Nevertheless, one element seems rather constant: the "institutional crystallizations of nationhood and nationality" (Brubaker, 1996) combined different ethnocultural and territorial-political aspects that influenced the organisational articulation of modern statehood (Malešević, 2013).

³ The threefold structure of the nation-state model and contemporary democracy has been discussed by several scholars from different perspectives. On the question of the extent to which it is possible to invest democratic political principles and procedures with a sentiment of national loyalty, see Linklater and Waller (2003); on the discursive derivations of the 'national' and democracy, see Machin (2015), and on the attempt to (re)negotiate their traditional conceptions, see Keating (2001).

ardless of ideological prejudice, whilst keeping in mind that the national features of society are hard to eradicate. The nation is innate, inborn, connatural to the state and to the morphology of governing institutions for political society to dismantle the former's hold. Hence, national statehood becomes a kind of dyadic structure (nation + state) whose spectrum of action can easily mobilise *ethnos*, *populus* but also *demos*, - the foundational ideal of power-sharing by the people-, simultaneously. This capacity is due to the trivialisation or banalisation of the 'national' in collective state-grounded routine (Billig, 1995; Skey and Antonsich, 2017; and Hearn and Antonsich, 2018). According to Easton, therefore, any change in political life goes beyond the technical decision-making process of the governing elite, namely administrative procedures and codified norms, but also implies the somewhat arbitrary postulate of national collective identities⁴. The functionality of the triad nation-state-regime also received attention from political scholars who were interested in the development of economic structures and the interrelations between cultural and structural change processes (Eisenstadt & Rokkan 1973 and 1974). Similarly, were those who attempted to overcome the intrinsic (and automatic) symbiosis between nation and state, emphasising the nature of nonlinear transformations. Nonetheless, even the rise of tensions, contention and antinomies show how different social movements, revolutions, strike waves, nationalism, democratization, and more result from similar mechanisms and processes (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). Moreover, in spite of noticeable differences, scholars such as Tilly (1975) and Breuilly (1982) traced general lines of state-building and nation-building, articulated around the power monopoly by a dominant centre over territory and population, - regardless of the direct influence of ideology-, whilst the growth and diversification of state action results in the disconnection between policy and politics; hence becoming almost two separate domains (Poggi 2013). Yet, one aspect remains constant. The nation serves as a unifier for statehood to obtain, produce and reproduce effective control. In this sense, the nation-state surpasses its morphological features, as it is consolidated into a political unity characterised by the quasi-overlapping attribution of citizenship and nationhood.

For instance, according to Bourdieu (2012), the State, in its capacity to use public power, "de-privatized, de-feudalised, and de-personalised" its structures in favour of legalised, officialised and universalised form of authority (Bourdieu 2012: 461). Hence, modern statehood drew legitimacy from channelling different kinds of capitals, including symbolic capital. By consequence, the nation became predominant in state domination, since the former permitted the latter to combine its juridico-administrative apparatus with geographical, linguistic and cultural structures that, otherwise, could not have been transversally unified under the same bureaucratised system. Additionally, the Bourdieusian framework suggests that each field of power, - despite its own governmental logic -, is placed in obedience to the centralised na-

⁴ This is not to say crises and countertendencies cannot occur and even change the course of identity-formation. As suggested by Dobry (2025), even the gravest political crises, namely revolutions in which social and institutional orders radically change direction, societal structures still feature plasticity of properties in relation to "fluid conjunctures", aimed to overcome the uncertainty and the de-objectification of the social world. See Dobry (2025).

tion-State. In other words, the nation-state constitutes a “meta-field” concentrating a “meta-capital” and exercising a “meta-power” over the other fields (*ibidem*: 488-489). After all, warfare and military conscription, national languages and education, national holidays and memorial days, public registries, and so forth, are all instruments of the unifying standardisation of society under the aegis of the state.

Not only has the interlink between nation and state been so solid in domestic processes but it also reveals its ineluctable (and unparalleled) relevance on the transnational level. As asserted by Heiskanen (2024), the processual advancement of the modern nation-state over the centuries-old empires exported the contingent product of 'ethnicity' beyond state borders. The twentieth-century transition from a world of multicultural empires to a world of national statehood engendered both kinship-based citizenship (in most countries) as well as reshuffled the governance of human cultural diversity towards global racial and civilisational hierarchies. Furthermore, current geopolitics seems to have shifted from polycentric, - thus more horizontal-, multilateralism back to a somewhat polarised vertical bilateralism between nation-states (Wu, Gaenssmantel and Giumelli 2023). This is true even when war is concerned (namely, the Russian invasion in the Ukraine, the regional violence and instability in Middle East and the Sudanese civil war and many other regional conflicts), or when presumed economic self-sufficiency (autarky) increasingly attracts major countries and other global stakeholders (Prasad 2023). Faced with such overreaching phenomena, no one can overemphasise the centrality of nation, statehood and regime as being the main bricks of contemporary polities. Nor can political and social sciences exempt themselves from dealing with the interdependencies of local, national and transnational changes, as anchored to the multifaceted nation-state-regime triad.

2. The Mosaic of the Triadic Nexus? An Analysis from State to the European and Western Nation-State Model

In a recent book Alessandro Campi (2023) examines the intellectual history of the Italian right through its articulations and the elaboration of the so-called sovereignty (*sovranismo*). Inevitably, the author detects the nationalistic stances, rooted in the Italian Risorgimento and uncovers its intellectual origins. His analysis, focused on a single case-study, clearly shows how the nation-centred mentality of the Italian right shaped, remodelled and, to some extent, even abandoned its original identification to current politics⁵. Though the book unpacks the strong rhetorical-idealistic component in the fathers-prophets of the Risorgimento and the paternalistic pedagogy later imperialistically adopted by Mussolini's fascism, and its increasingly aggressive war-mongering, Campi also traces the contradictory projection of the nation as togetherness, aimed at the future and which should be declined in a pragmatic political key. Neither the First Italian Republic, nor the Second invested much thought

⁵ Campi's book reconstructs the political fortune of Italian nationalism up to the 68th government of the Italian Republic, formed on 22nd of October 2022, headed by Giorgia Meloni.

in the “Italian nation” as a communitarian project, due to inner contradictions and electoral opportunisms. Even the apparently neo-patriotic and sovereignty-convinced Meloni’s government, the current Prime Minister, whose political beliefs are closely intertwined with religious-cultural (Christian) conservatism and populist declinations, does not seem to find a clear and decisive bond between the “nation-will” and the “nation-destiny” (citing Campi’s own distinction)⁶. According to Campi, the nationalist political offer is purely defensive and reactive in its nature. Consequently, it can only embody “sovereignism, [which] in other words, is a doctrine of decadence, it is the nationalism of tired peoples” (p.156). The author thus invites us to rethink a nation-project, and no longer a nation-cultural myth. Similar political developments can, of course, be found in other countries which have known acerbated forms of nationalism in their past and whose democratic regimes experience far-right-inspired governments, the incremental rise of the far-right as political alternative, usually impacting public discourse and civil society, and even undergo processes of autocratisation (Tomini & Cassani 2019; Hien & Norman 2023; Gerő, Fejős, Kerényi, & Szikra 2023).

Notwithstanding, one must bear in mind that nation-building is an operation of conceptual and pragmatic rigour that seeks to rationalise the sociopolitical artifact by generating an authentic reflection amongst scholars and practitioners, alike. This point is made crystal clear by Campi’s analytical vantagepoint. For any concrete and realistic political planning, the “connection between democracy and nation is often underestimated by critics of the latter, while instead, it represents an interesting bet for the future [...]” such as the formulas, summarised as “civic-political nation” or “liberal-democratic nation” (Campi 2023:170)⁷. This further strengthens the point that the end of nations and of history, triumphantly declared by Francis Fukuyama (1992) was, indeed, premature, given the national-populistic stands brimming in Western “advanced” democracies. Each and every time media and experts are surprised by the resistance capacity that national sentiment demonstrates especially in the difficult hairpin bends of history. However, most attempts to renew the national appeal are motivated by purely tactical and instrumental political tricks which devoid of conceptual breadth and political potential of the “nation”. The issue remains somewhat ideologically ambiguous, though transversally taken for granted. As discussed elsewhere, the nation-state model is intimately grounded into modernity (Malešević 2019) and what we retain as societal order (Helled 2020). Notwithstanding, the intrinsic tensions between the civic structures of statehood and the emotional and mythic-moteur character of the nation dynamically reveal salient features of resilience that encompasses different types of politically collectivizing survival units and morphologies of polities (Helled & Pala 2024).

⁶ The fortunes and misfortunes of the Italian right have recently also received attention from another ‘insider’ of this political culture, namely Marco Tarchi. According to the Tarchi (2024), the post-WWII right in Italy has lived through different seasons: the first season of substantial marginalisation, - despite some attempts by the Italian Social Movement to integrate itself into the constitutional, republican, democratic system; the second season which was characterised by the subordination of the National Alliance to Silvio Berlusconi, (with Gianfranco Fini trying in vain to subvert); and the third, nowadays, which witnesses the parablelike transformation of the right and its protagonists into a national-conservative and “a-Fascist” force. See Tarchi (2024).

⁷ All citations from the works discussed in this essay were translated from the original Italian by the author.

It is therefore the adaptability of the “nation”, as a political topic (and especially as a mediatic issue), to be clay in the hands of contemporary politics. Whereas, the abovementioned work by Campi, focuses on Italy and indirectly relates to the developments of Western Europe, the national question, applied to political identities, arises much deeper doubts in respect to European integration and the role this geopolitical conglomerate might play inside and outside the “democratic West” (a label, which is by itself as heterogenous as complex, but whose meaning draws upon the factuality of the multipolar world in which we live).

In respect to the above-mentioned, some valuable observations are offered by historian Guido Crainz (2022) who traces the historical roots of the the perilous clouds and shadows of European nationalisms. Crainz shows that nationalism still plays the same music that accompanied Stefan Zweig's reflections almost a century ago. The latter considered the patriotic sentiment of belonging to a people a primary social need. Faced with the “decivilising” Europe in the early 1930s, while National-Socialism and Fascism were seizing the state-based collective sentiment of citizens in Central Europe (whose majority were subjects to Empires until 1918) and whose nationalistic ideology expropriated any sort of civic patriotism. In fact, Zweig wrote about a collective European sentiment, so desired, which cannot be either primal or instinctive as the patriotic one, but rather a fruit of reflection, hence analogous to the act of imagining. Put differently, operationalise such a sentiment society required to engender a certain fantasy that enables to project a future in which Europe would have the capacity to integrate the nation-state within an intellectually richer supranational identification (Crainz, 2022: 176-177)⁸. Crainz catches Zweig's pan-Europeanist call for the moral dis-intoxication of Europe, particularly through its cultural heritage⁹, and concentrates his efforts on explaining the importance of history's critical production and learning in order to really appease Europe but also accomplish greater democratic freedom. The sociopolitical breadth of Crainz's analysis demonstrates how divergent paths in European society had been conditioned by previous history's “mortgages”, present till this day (*Ibidem*: 6). For instance, Europe's thirty years of glory of industrial development and economic growth provided a stupefying illusion that concealed tensions and unresolved national conflicts. Once Western Europe's own periphery was thrown into unimaginable violence, - such as the cases of the Yugoslav Wars and the current situation in the Ukrain-, it seems that the last century meagrely offered structural solutions to inequality in development, civil rights and political integration. Additionally, the historicisation method, present in Crainz, sheds light on the untraceable knots and contradictions which were destined to grow until implosion, soon after the extraordinary explosion of post-1989 euphoria (the context which the abovementioned

⁶ Zweig's observations are not dissimilar of those of another German-speaking Jew, sociologist Norbert Elias who first published his most influential work “*The Civilizing Process*” in two volumes in 1939 as “*Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*” (Basel, Basel: Verlag Haus zum Falken). Like Zweig, Elias outlines the necessity to overcome the nation-state as a “survival unit”, and engage in a greater form of human interdependencies under a universalizing figuration. See Elias (2000).

⁹ As a convinced pan-Europeanist, Zweig anchored much of Europe's identity to literature and science (e.g., Rainer Maria Rilke, Marcel Proust, Sigmund Freud, Maxim Gorky, Arturo Toscanini etc.). An example of this is found in his remastered collection of essays (2020).

Fukuyama regarded to be the end of history). Moreover, European reality continues to emphasise that the old world, inspired by the hegemony of the new one, actually consists in two Europes that experienced spatiotemporal diversity, and whose political translation surrounded the dilemma of how and to what extent delegate/cede sovereignty to international/transnational governance (the European Union to begin with).

That being said, an apparent post-nationalism progressively attested the shortcomings of capitalistic liberalism (a creation of the 1989 international order rather than a factual cause). Societies underwent the collision between democratic liberalism and neocon economic liberalism. Both Western and Eastern European countries began revealing the precariousness of institutional stability and intrinsic democratic weaknesses, thus oscillating between populism of egalitarian delusions. While EU impositions in the West were translated into the adversity of bureaucratic technocracy, accused of oligarchic temptations, Europe's central and eastern countries began fearing a Soviet-like expansionism through economic and legal means (the "annexation to Western Europe"). Crainz links the latter to long-term "partisan memories" (*memorie di parte*)¹⁰. The two parts of the European continent experienced the 20th century very differently. Whereas the Western part of Europe embraced democracy and peace in 1945, the East had to rush up its historical course and break out of state-based Communism. As one of the responses to Communist authoritarianism in the Central and Eastern parts of Europe (e.g., Poland, Hungary, the Baltics, Yugoslavia and other Balkan countries, Romania etc.) was national resistance, nationalism became a rather attractive political recipe, much more than post-nationalism. Consequently, the lessons learnt from past traumas, namely WWII and the Shoah for the West and the Soviet Gulag for the East, kept influencing the identification with European integration (viewed as a distant bureaucratised technocracy by its vocal opponents).

Furthermore, the 'mechanical imitation' of the West in terms of life-styles and the consumption of goods was not followed by the implementation of thorough measures to guarantee the transition from authoritarian regime to liberal democracy. Hence, any democratic acquis had to be built from scratch. What might be referred to as the absence of democratic habitus in these societies left them with a 'political public sphere' whose dominant juridical and moral discourses remained inimical to democracy (Mouffe 2005)¹¹.

¹⁰ Similar to the spirit with which Crainz unpacks the difficulties of a shared memory-construction on the European level, the journalist and writer Paolo Rumiz, - another intellectual from the Italian border-region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia-, deals with the Italian historical cleavage around WWI. Whereas the 'Great War' has always been narrated in Italian national history (originated in Fascist historiography) as the War of 1915-1918, the Triest-born Rumiz claims the historical memory of the approx. 100,000 "Italians in the wrong uniform" (p.81; my translation from the Italian "*gli italiani con la divisa sbagliata*") who had been sent into battle under the Imperial Austro-Hungarian flag already in 1914 on the Eastern Front. Like in Crainz, there is a plea for a pluralistic order, in memory, stories and histories, of which unified Europe "has not been capable of being" (p.19; my translation). See Rumiz (2014).

¹¹ The concept "habitus" denotes the creation, interiorisation and reproduction of behavioural norms, patterns and identity-defining elements by individuals (the Eliasian "psycho-social makeup") who are socialised into a specific collectivity. Not only does the habitus explain attitudes, representations and practices, but it also traces the dynamic construction of norms and rules, socio-political strategies, which vacillate between interest and rationality, *illusio* and 'practical sense' (*sens pratique*), applied to cultural manifested preferences (the Bourdieusian taste), as well as to the transcendental and symbolic and to the concreteness of reason and political participation. See Bourdieu 1998; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Elias 2000, 2001; Roodenburg, 2004; Sapiro 2015).

The difference, between West and East, results in what Craiz asserts to be: “tendencies and impulses to which intellectual and civil energies of different signs are opposed [...] a ground of competition rather than a comparison between the contrasting narratives and the different histories [*vissuti*]” (Crainz 2022 : 119). Here one finds the key-point, the sociopolitical and sociocultural distinction. The diverse readings of the past have been crystallised, whether we like or not, and whose major direct consequence is the way Western and Eastern societies grasp and nurture citizenry. Crainz also exemplifies that “[C]ountries where there is a strong link between new nationalisms, authoritarian impulses and “politics of history”: starting with Poland [...]” (*ibid*: 133)¹². History writing, its framing and its dissemination are essential to democracy. Nonetheless, the latter often fall into manipulation by politics, particularly in contexts where institutional democratic practices are only partially established (institutional mechanics do not suffice). Therefore, there are important and meaningful reasons to fight trends of history *ad usum populi*. Since, Crainz's perspective calls for politics to transcend its cynicism and national-based logics, the fostering of a polyphonic memory of Europe becomes essential. Only the sharing of memories would weave reciprocal democratic influences. By “reading” nations and European identity in reference to the pluralistic communities inhabiting the continent, equal dignity would be given to memory and commemoration rites without flattening inherent differences and the multitude of historical experiences¹³.

Since memory is, undoubtedly, the present envisagement of the past, its democraticness, its sharing and the mutual respect it would require, on a transnational and/or European level, largely depend on the ‘sociogenetic’ heritage of state-building and the capacity of the collective edifice to cultivate integrational interdependencies (Elias 2000). According to Mastropaolo (2023) - whose conclusions are similar to Crainz's-, the battles for democracy, over democracy and by democracy pass through the sociopolitical and sociological construction of statehood, but always with the latter's taken-for-granted national constant as a tool of political representation. Once again, the Bourdieusian sense of fields coopted by the state seems highly relevant. Statehood, representation, political parties and the market interact which one another, impact and stratify democratic rule, due to the structural incorporation of interests, goals and social conflict carried on by social agents. Although national specificities are significant, Mastropaolo's analysis, corroborated by the processual generality of democracy in the West (Europe and the United States of America), overcomes the modern statehood in its well-oiled and differentiated apparatus of domin-

¹² Crainz dedicates several chapters to case-studies about the “politics of history” in several countries: the Baltics (*i.e.*, Lithuania, Latvia Estonia), Poland, Hungary as well as Slovakia, Romania and North Macedonia; see p. 125 onwards.

¹³ The first step to fight the mythical and mystifying role of nationalism in politics is to set objectives in the teaching of history to the youth (European students in the case of Craiz himself). Many differences, possibilities and similarities are yet to be fully examined and juxtaposed before Europe finds “neutral” historiographical grounds. Neither the simple annexation of the East to the vision of the West, nor pessimistic self-denunciation would achieve such a goal. In this respect, Craiz cites the work coordinated by sociologist Alessandro Cavalli, whilst drawing on the latter's publications: Cavalli (2005): *Insegnare la storia contemporanea in Europa*, Bologna, Il Mulino; and Cavalli (2008): *Un Manuale di storia franco-tedesca*, in “Mundus”, vol.1. See Crainz 2022 (p. 164n,173n,174 and footnote).

ation, as it also considers the historical and sociological foundations which got deeper into people's mindset (hence, beyond Weber's theorisation of the state as the monopolistic and legitimised holder of violence). Even in a solidly democratic West, the social contract, - or interplay-, between the governing elite and the mass of governed undergoes continuous negotiations and moments of verification by both sides. By aligning individuals and making visible their participation in collectivity, government has always simplified social reality in order to obtain some degree of coherence. It has been the political and administrative engineering of the state for centuries. Maintaining the perimeter that forms limits of a territory and its population is, therefore, the constant element of complexity, even before addressing the basics of democratic rule and jurisdiction¹⁴. This makes the democratic game a mosaic of tensions which are inherently linked to statehood and sovereignty.

The triadic edifice, as all other games, divides structural competences, aimed at keeping societal order consistent. While democracy validates itself via the formalisation of rites and procedures, - tangible expressions of its popular-based existence -, state sovereignty disciplines and securitises institutional supremacy, whereas nationalism ornamentally urges individuals to incorporate and organise themselves beyond legal norms. Therefore, the threefold construction anchors collective destiny to predestined roots, those of the invented organicity of peoples and nations¹⁵.

Despite differences in typologies (either secular or theocratic, democratic or authoritarian etcetera.), all states are morphologically susceptible to internal and external changes. Yet, democratic rule is the most demanding in keeping structural integrity¹⁶. In addition to the complicated bargaining over party-led representation and the different stakes and identity of stakeholders, Western democracy has faced the competition of another field of forces, namely the global and globalizing financial market in its omnivorous hyper-capitalistic form. The match field of the political and economic domains takes adaptable shape around the standardisation of individuals, as consumers. This means constant bricolage and hybridisation of politico-institutional and sociocultural alchemies. The capacity of embedment, homologation and homogenisation of the market has simplified the seemingly coherent and modernist ambitions of progress, trading active citizenship for a sort of commodity. Visibility,

¹⁴ Hans Kelsen (2013) theorised the practical reasons for the constitution of democratic rule. He regarded the unified totalizing edifice of the 'demos' as a false pretence, which facilitated government controlling the governed, without securing Individual freedoms beyond the formal, procedural, material exercise of power (which also characterised Fascism and Communism).

¹⁵ Mastropaolo summarises that: "[T]he state can centralise or decentralise. It can cultivate the national and symbolic dimension, but it can leave it out [...] not all states being states in the same way. They do not understand law in the same way: the difference between the rule of law and state of law is considerable" (Mastropaolo, 2023: 38).

¹⁶ This is in comparison with the mediaeval top-down governance of either theocratical or monarchical power. The conception of feudal allegiance or local self-government were based on consociation, rather than on the modern idea of representation by delegates. However, recent studies show how the mediaeval Catholic church not only engaged in early modern warfare and contracts between the rulers and the ruled but also competed with mediaeval monarchs and provided critical templates for governing institutions, the rule of law, and parliaments; hence, laid the foundations of democracy almost *ante litteram*. On the state-formation in the Middle Ages and the first signs of modern democracy, see Møller (2015), Zack (2023), Grzymała-Busse (2023), and Dalarun (2023).

rates and trademarks have taken over the, often tedious, confrontation of traditional ideologies (which had lost much of their original appeal). The cogent authority of the state largely depends on the trust of private players, namely, stockholders, investors and credit rating agencies. Nonetheless, despite its conciliatory attitude, the state, via its democratic negotiation, attempts to resist to the omnipresent market.

While seeking to persist in a refractory global order, the democratic state (as all states) avoids, or at least minimises, hysteretic crises in which the norms and rules of the game fall through because of unforeseeable radical transformation (Bourdieu 1990)¹⁷. Consequently, the identification between citizens and their polity of reference is paramount. Drawing from Mastropaolo (2023), in order to vitalise democratic rule, one must endorse citizens to foster their own critical reflexes and rethink democracy; without necessarily break it, - but rather polish it out of its marketised, mediated and cartel-like forms.

All concern the question of why democratic governance finds itself in an inferior position nowadays. Luckily, people who care tend not only to participate, but to critically look at their reality and consequently understand that the conventional localistic democratic game is simply not enough. The latter becomes even clearer, once faced with the damages of the "Anthropocene", and the illusory claims by contemporary nationalists (Conversi 2022). By consequence, the idyllic equilibrium between democracy and national statehood, - as claimed by political agents-, provides little empirical evidence; once measured through the terms of representation, participation and identification. That said, the democratic nation-state is still the model on which political and social life (and sciences) are built upon. The edifice is imperfect, inasmuch as politics is less about utopia and more about the concrete articulation of power relations, either material or symbolic. Nonetheless, there might be ways to amend and bridge over these imperfections in terms of collective identification. Parsi (2024), for instance, proposes to begin with studying (and being part of) the 'polity' as a requalification of the homeland ('patria'). Though conditioned by nationalistic stances and geopolitical pressures (hence, not dissimilarly than democracy as a regime morphology), each and every contribution and reflection would do well, once engaged perceiving contemporary national and international politics as contiguous, rather than separated domains.

A recent example of such dynamics, often contradictory yet instrumental for either internal or external reasons, is the rhetoric articulated by the Italian right-centre coalition. The dispositional reference to "God, Homeland and Family" (*Dio, patria, famiglia*) reveals the triadic essence of Italian conservatism which mixes the heritage of the Italian Social Movement (Msi) with the most traditional version of Italian Catholicism. Not only is it a political unilinear development, but it also shapes trans-

¹⁷ The French sociologist frames the hysteresis as "[T]he presence of the past in this kind of false anticipation of the future performed by the habitus is, paradoxically, most clearly seen when the sense of the probable future is belied and when dispositions ill-adjusted to the objective chances because of a hysteresis effect (Marx's favourite example of this was Don Quixote) are negatively sanctioned because the environment they actually encounter is too different from the one to which they are objectively adjusted." (Bourdieu 1990: 62) [Brackets are in the original].

formative frameworks impacting other parties. Motivated by inner-competition, or by the opportunity of strategic discourse, simplistic strategies, as shown in the case of the repolished Salvini League, dialectically influenced post-Berlusconi's Forza Italia, which renewed emphasis of further Europeanisation (in light of the war in the Ukraine). What can be easily labelled a "vacuuming effect", namely the combination of a grab-it-all populist communicative line (Tarchi 2014) and the dislocation of critical moments of political tension into black or white, winners versus losers' identifications, shows similar signs also in other European contests. The French legislative elections with the republican Ciotti aligned with Marie Le Pen and the socialist party strategically shifting towards Jean-Luc Mélenchon's radical leftism. Additionally, the reappearance of Nigel Farage on the British electoral scene, after Brexit and despite the debacle of the Tories, exemplifies that every part devours what has remained out of the classic ideological divisions of right/left cleavage in European political history. However, the Italian specificity is precisely the historically controversial politicisation of the concept of 'Patria'. The latter, only unified in late modernity, has produced a thin patriotism that could not compete with the exclusivist sense of nationalism, - even though constitutionally anti-Fascist Italy institutionally repudiates war and imperial manifestations of power. Nevertheless, the seemingly folkloristic leftovers of fascism still attract so-called 'nostalgists' at the limits of democratic participation, at least in its full capacity. A fact that several media investigations, mainly the *Fanpage* reportages, have uncovered amongst the youth of Meloni's party *Fratelli d'Italia*. The weight, breadth and depth of the phenomena is fairly debatable (and yearly ruminated on around Italy's 25 April Liberation Day).

3. Ideology and Nostalgia: The Collective Individual and the Individualised Collectivity

In this regard, another variable must be added to the democracy-nation-state equation, namely the role of 'inherited' ideologies and the mental admixture they engender collectively¹⁸. This is especially relevant to nation-states that have been divided and witnessed violent conflicts, such as the dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation in the early 1990s, followed by bloody civil wars and mass killings. Even the swift 1990 reunification of Germany and the peaceful 'velvet divorce' between Czechs and Slovaks on January 1st, 1993, did not transversally appease the entire population. Hence, these societies did not harmonise their (inter)societal polarisation. In Germany, for instance, social, political and cultural crises were soon directed into 'niches of compensation', witnessing the German tendency towards '*Nischengesellschaft*', rather than on structural rethinking of national identity. The latter came out of the debate over the so-called *Ostpolitik* and the nostalgic *Ostalgie* in Germany; without

¹⁸ Either interpreted, and operationalised, in their "weak" or "strong" variants (Stoppino, 2001), ideologies are defined as distinctive political worldviews of individuals, groups, and organisations, which provide interpretive, evaluative and normative infrastructures guiding political thought and action (Leader Maynard, 2022). By "inherited" ideologies, we make reference to the ideological sets handed down by the 20th century, varying from liberalism to communism, and so forth, which influenced political choices and shaped the foundations of post-WWII statehood.

which very little can be understood regarding the electoral success of Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Thuringia and Saxony, as well as the novel nationalist and Euro-sceptic left-wing party 'Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance – Reason and Justice' (in German: *Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht – Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit* [BSW])¹⁹. In the Czech Republic, the minority of Moravians increasingly thematised self-determination claims, similarly to the Hungarian minority in Romania and Slovakia; all anchored to nostalgic stances and delusions from current state of affairs²⁰. The presence of competing, if not mutually excluding, "truths", reveals a negative reservoir. The latter is temporally connected to the ineptitudes of the past, whilst it is used as the explicative reality of the present and as the visionary desiderata of the future. This emotionally loaded reservoir thus provides interpretative ethical and strategic foundations for action that can be placed in converse relation to another powerful social disposition, namely nostalgia (in which the past is a positive reservoir).

Both nostalgia and ideology share, though differently, a reference to should be / should have been universes. The two interact with a utopian dimension which then motivates and fosters their emergence. It is noteworthy to emphasise that the term 'utopia' contemporaneously means 'a good place' and 'no place', while referring to a perfect future, yet to be constructed and fulfilled. The latter is thus dialectical in relation to ideology but quite different from nostalgia (the idealised vision of the past). Whereas nostalgia is "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed [...]" (Boym 2001: XIII), ideology demands shift and change. Its roots can be either revolutionary or reactionary, retrospective or prospective, unifying or divisive, in time present; yet, always anchored to the past, its wrongdoings or glories. In one way or another, both derive from "a sentiment of loss and displacement [...], but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy" (*Ibidem*). That is not to say that the past is the sole motivation of these phenomena. On the contrary, the idealised certainties of the "hads" and "dids" flow and float on a scale of predictability and unpredictability of the future, and easily ideologise the elusive alloy of modernity against "the conventional confines of time and reality" (Boym 2001: XIII). According to Boym (2001: XVI):

[I]t is the promise to rebuild the ideal home that lies at the core of many powerful ideologies of today, tempting us to relinquish critical thinking for emotional bonding. The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the

¹⁹ On the complexities of the phenomenon, see Gaus, G. (1983). *Wo Deutschland liegt. Eine Ortsbestimmung*, Hamburg, Hoffmann und Campe. On "Ostalgie" and its cultural, linguistic, and anthropological aspects, see Banchelli, E. [ed.] (2006): "*Taste the East: Linguaggi e forme dell'Ostalgie*", Bergamo, Sestante-collana Bergamo University Press; and Gislimberti, T. (2007): "*Ostalgie, Ovvero Nostalgia del Passato Perduto. A Proposito dell'Identità Tedesca Orientale*", *Metábasis.it*, rivista semestrale di filosofia e comunicazione (online), Anno II, N.4, Sesto San Giovanni (Milano), pp.1-20 (both in Italian).

²⁰ Since the 1990s, that socio-cultural reality also presents a political movement of Moravian linguistic separatism which is active as a national claim out of the three historical "Czech lands", alongside the bigger Bohemia and the much smaller Czech Silesia (the 2011 census recorded 62,908 native speakers of Moravian, a number in constant decrease, since the first census of 1991). This self-determination entered the political agenda, with little electoral success, when the *Moravané* party was founded in 2005 as a merger of two older local parties: *Hnutí samosprávné Moravy a Slezska – Moravské národní sjednocení*, "The Movement of Autonomous Moravia and Silesia - Moravian National Union" and *Moravská demokratická strana*, "the Moravian Democratic Party". For other examples, see Csergő (2007). *Talk of the Nation: Language and Conflict in Romania and Slovakia*; and Kamusella (2009). *The Politics of Language and Nationalism in Modern Central Europe*.

imaginary one. In extreme cases it can create a phantom homeland, for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill. Unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters. Yet the sentiment itself, the mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility, is at the very core of the modern condition

The idealised mental pictures are intimately link to the nation. The fantastical projections, therefore, intercross those of the nation-state model or, at least, the original simplicity of society, as depicted by the former. By consequence, nostalgia and ideology alike echo the much-discussed national populism. The intersection of ideological agendas, nostalgic sentiments and the fantastical power of the nation is a crucial foundation in taking action and in transforming one's reality.

This observation is not novel. The centripetal power of the state and its hold on the masses, has been known since ancient philosophy (the Aristotelian *politeia*, theorised as a political determination of institutional structures and competences, oriented by the interpretation of the public good). However, the 'modern' aggregational state reached its apex in the mid-1800s with Michelet's personification of the masses under the aegis of the French nation ("France is a person", Michlet, 1967). By consequence, individual characteristics were attributed to fatherlands, nations and civilisations, endowed with faculties and wills like those of humans. Yet, it was an ideological camouflage, since the nation was incorporated into existent state-mechanisms and power-structures, mainly the military, the administration (taxation), channels of communication (the printed press), and so forth. The collective 'individual of nation-statehood' thus camouflages the masses, it distinguishes them by sociological treats and separate jurisdictions (the ABC of international law). Notwithstanding, according to Bauman (2000), the individualised collectivity of the economic global order also means that individuality meets the liquidity of identification. In tandem with the privatisation of services to citizens who become consumers, and therefore indirectly justify the decrease in public government expenditure, social inequality deepens and, consequently, contribute to the demise of the Western welfare state²¹. This transformation has indelibly impacted social cleavages. Difficult owner-worker and centre-periphery relations have revealed the structural inadequacy of politics to govern the outcomes of capital-relocation from the global 'rich West' to the 'poor South', as well as other global phenomena, namely migration flows, pandemics, climate change and regional belligerence and many others. The lacks of both national government and international governance, - UN, NATO and EU to begin with -, aliment ideological stances enhancing nostalgic claims. The commonplace of "things were better when they were worse" is, indeed, commonly uttered by disillusioned citizens throughout the wealthy, yet unequal, West. Moreover, challenged by the material and immaterial transformations in state territoriality and institutionalised spatiality (Mazzoleni, 2024), nostalgia for the enchanted simple world of the 'heartland' keeps alighting populism (Taggart, 2000), re-ideologises borders, and thus increases syn-

²¹ Bauman (2000: 145), writes: "The welfare state, a state dedicated to doing just that, was for that reason genuinely 'beyond left and right', a prop without which neither capital nor labour could stay alive and healthy; let alone grow." This stagnation of progress is, of course, one of the fertile conditions for the national-populistic rise in the West.

dromes of democratic dissatisfaction. Daily grievances merge with 'illutio', thus engendering "orientation towards things in the world" (Threadgold 2020: 29); and consequently, nurture peoples' claims in a seemingly never-ending story²². It is, metaphorically, a dog chasing its own tail. Noteworthy is the out-of-time prediction by Arendt, who, in her 1972 collection of essays, foresaw the critical subtractions of modern politics and their influence on state-citizenry relations²³. For Arendt (1972), the key ethical issue was neither the existence of statehood, nor the divide between different peoples, but rather peoplehood's claim to realise itself through sovereignty, hence, the endless ambition towards power and its misuse. This totalising claim makes war the ultimate arbiter on the international level and allows state repression within its borders. Arendt, therefore, considered pursuable a novel political model (inspired by USA made federalism), in which the international community would be articulated in various republican organs whose authority would be divided horizontally, whilst keeping out any governmental emotional attachment (what fuels both ideology and nostalgia). The model's aim was, of course, to exclude dictatorship and over-bureaucratisation, since both considered to be detached from the needs of the people. For the time being, the issue remains theoretical but highly substantial.

4. An endless Paradox, then?

Tackling the threefold structure of contemporary political life, forged by the dialectical relations between nation, state and democratic regime is a continuous effort of elucidation. The dissemination and interaction of sociopolitical phenomena in both domestic and international politics are all shaped by past events and interiorised dispositions. The latter find expression in government and representation. This point is undoubtedly as characteristic and characterising of Italian, European and Western politics. The difficulties of postmodern, seemingly globalised, democracy requires politico-historical analysis that unpacks the institutional strata of the particularities of Western democracy and the contours of the nation-state. Existent scholarship, despite very different disciplinary sensibilities, seems to concord about the analytical complementarity of long-term processes, linked to the dilemmas of contemporary democratic revitalisation in Europe and elsewhere. Tensions, controversies and structural downfalls belong to each and every part of the triadic nation-state-regime edifice.

What escapes most analyses is the direct assessment of the weight of ideology and nostalgia as dispositional interpretative channels through which both collectivities and individuals perceive and express their mental pictures; not to say, attitudes in relation to material discontent and missed promises regarding welfare and peace

²² In Bourdieusian theory, the concept of 'illutio' refers to whatever is "to be invested, [and] taken in by [a given social] game [and] that what happens in it matters, that its stakes are important and worth pursuing" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, 116), hence, a sort of "social magic" (*ibid*: 17).

²³ In a previous work *On Revolution* (1963), Arendt had compared the American and French Revolutions and focused on the origins and failures of modern democracy. For Arendt, the trigger for 'public freedom' is to be found in revolution, and therefore, democracy is fruit of a collective action fuelling a new political order, which institutionalises public spaces of action, namely direct participation and deliberation (the 'polis') opposite individual liberty and private interests.

(given the different wars on the outskirts of Europe). Even a "descriptive narration" of facts²⁴ seems to contribute to decipher the hybridised weavings and the great symbolic match between state and governance, namely the *fil rouge* of our own societal order. While aiming to do just that, the essay juxtaposed different approaches to the ever-lasting role of nation, state and regime. The triadic construction was skimmed over, delineated and exemplified on national, continental and transregional levels. Not only do national statehood and democracy, - (some would insist on the processual (de)democratization)-, shape collective political life, but also sharpen the salient vantagepoints of collectivised individualities, of whatever scale they might be.

Paradoxically, neither ideology nor nostalgia can ever be uprooted. They stratify their hold in society with the advancement of societal processes that could never entirely accommodate individual's differentiated interests. Additionally, both are based on systems of beliefs, hence providing determined visions of a world and for a world to be. Therefore, as emphatically theorised by several classical political thinkers, - among which one must cite Giovanni Sartori (1962) and Norberto Bobbio (1995), the salt and pepper of any healthy democracy requires the acknowledgment of free, pluralistic competition in which all adversaries respect the rules of the game. With a specific attention paid to Italian and European societies, the democratic rule of law, sovereignty, nationalism, populism etc., are scrutinised, whilst using processual analysis that indicates lacks and excesses in the Western model of nation-state-based collectivity. This essay briefly introduced and juxtaposed the main theses of the three authors in order to further elucidate the topicality of their observations vis-à-vis social and political theories, whose barycentre seems to be anchored in the pactual relationship between individuals becoming a community, and then society, first under the aegis of the modern state and, later on, under the multidimensional roof of globalisation. Undoubtedly, the non-linearity of the processual value of nationalised democracy in a postmodern societal order preoccupies liberal and centre-left intellectuals, as well as political figures. With different scholarly sensibilities, diverse, yet analogous, experiences in the democratic West provide useful criteria to assess trends and forms of any transnational and regional (dis)integration, - often intertwined with old or new nationalisms. This makes the threefold-structured nation-state-regime figuration a valuable litmus test. The latter cannot be ignored, neither theoretically, nor empirically. In light of changes in society, priority must be given to the debate about the classical concepts of political phenomena, whilst aligning diverse observations on a constellation from which novel research and policy-making can surely find enriching stimuli. The present must bridge the gaps between yesterday and tomorrow. Political revision of societal structures is desperately needed. Hope is yet to vanish.

²⁴ This point is inspired by the juxtaposition of sociology and history with literature as an explanatory discourse of social life. Whereas literature, and the inherent imagination it encompasses, needs no measures of verifiability (since it is a legitimate product of fantasy and verisimilitude), both historiography and sociology follow scientific ground rules as well as a somewhat attempt to delineate the universal, the general, out of the particular. On the differences and similarities of sociology and literature, see Turnaturi (2003), especially pp. 11-18; on history-writing, its national limitations and academic and nonacademic contours, see Maza (2017).

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