

THE SOURCES OF DEMOCRATIC DISSENT: A SKETCH¹

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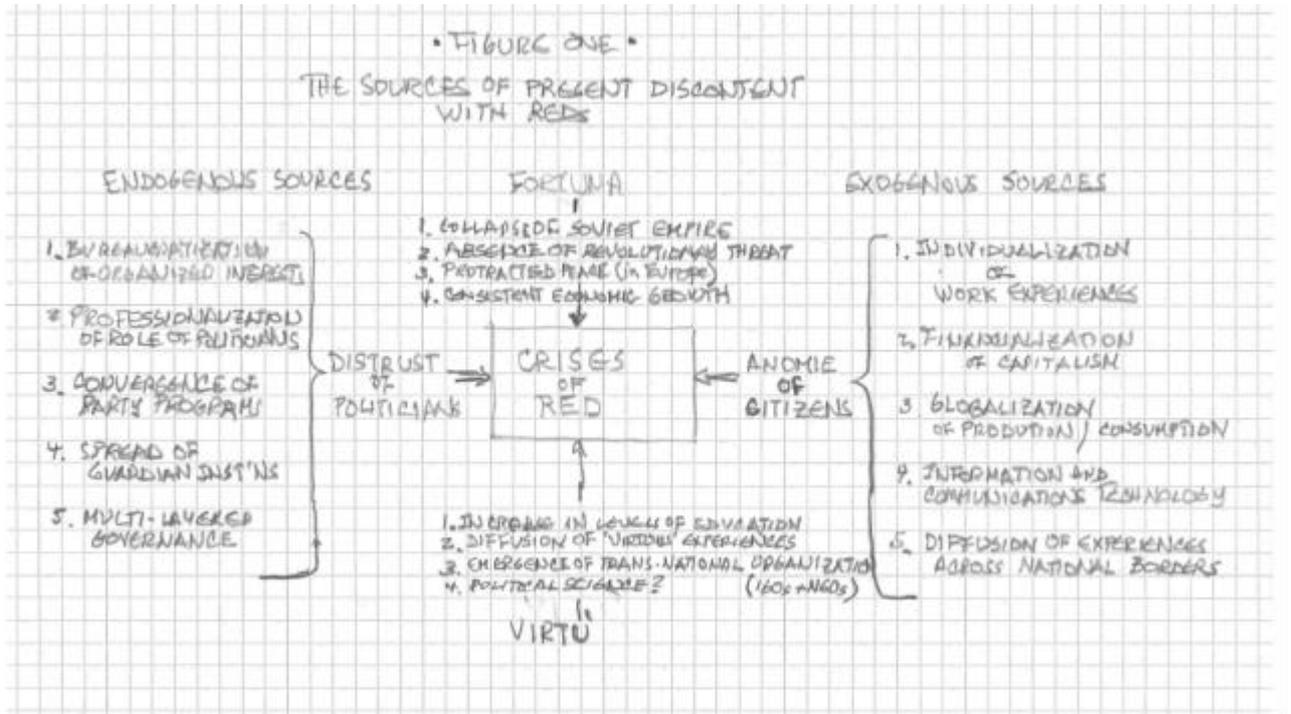
No student of politics can doubt that democracy as we have known it – liberal, constitutional, representative, capitalist – is in crisis.² Its citizens in increasing numbers and with growing intensity are dissatisfied with both its institutions, its protagonists and its performance. Moreover, the crisis or, better, these crises are exceptionally widespread. They are affecting established as well as new democracies, presidential and parliamentary ones, unitary and federal ones, Anglo-Saxon and Continental ones, central and peripheral ones – regardless of cultural values or geographic location.

In this essay, I will present a depiction – a visual representation – of what I think are the sources of this dissent. *Nota bene*, I said “sources,” not “causes.” The former are antecedent conditions (“structures”) that may or may not be translated into the more proximate factors that produce observable and consequential behaviors. The difference is due to something called “agency.” This process of translation is contingent upon two generic factors that were identified by Machiavelli long ago: *virtù* and *fortuna*. First, actors affected by the diverse sources have to identify them, come up with an appropriate strategic response, and convince others to act in concert with them – i.e. they have to become effective politicians. Second, any such response is bound to be uncertain -- to contain significant risks -- and therefore to be subject to unforeseen events and unexpected coincidences. This presents a second major paradox which has been dogging the disciplined study of politics forever. John Stuart Mill identified the first one, namely, that similar outcomes could be produced by different causes – a condition subsequently baptized as “equifinality.” Here, the paradox involves the inverse: Polities with identical or similar sources of regime frustration, disappointment and rejection can produce different outcomes – a condition I propose to call “plurifinality.” This implies that even if the scholar researching the present crisis is capable of converting the sources into causal variables, measuring them validly, and correlating them significantly, the resulting behavior may be unpredictable, due to those two intervening conditions: *virtù e fortuna*.

¹ With thanks to the participants in the “Southern Europe – German Dialogue” conference, University of Frankfurt, 11-13 November 2016 who provided the initial impetus for this sketch.

² For brevity’s sake, I will refer to this type of democracy as “real-existing democracy” or RED.

[Place Figure One Here]



The central theme of Figure One is that RED is being assailed from two directions: a set of changes that are **endogenous** to the practice of ‘real-existing democracy’ and a set of changes that are **exogenous** to it, but affect the environment in which RED is embedded and from which it derives its resources. I have listed five “candidates” for inclusion in the two sets of changes, but they are merely approximations that deserve further elaboration and, perhaps, supplementation:

Endogenous Sources:

1. Permanent organization of interest groups (and, to a lesser extent, social movements).
2. Professionalization of the role of politician (including those surrounding him or her).
3. Convergence of party programs making increasingly difficult to distinguish the classical distinction between Left and Right.
4. Spread of guardian institutions staffed by technocrats and deliberately chartered to be independent of the competitive political process.
5. Emergence of multi-layered governance arrangements that confound the distinctions between national, sub-national and supra-national authority.

Exogenous Sources:

1. Individualization of work experience due to increased dominance of the service sector, smaller and smaller units of production, and “ambiguous class relations” within the units.
2. Shift of center of accumulation within capitalism from industry to financial services.
3. Globalization of systems of production, trade and consumption (with decline in capacity of national governments to regulate and re-distribute)
4. New information and communication technologies that facilitate direct but virtual exchanges at little or no cost.
5. Enhanced diffusion of knowledge about political experiences and outcomes across national borders.

Intermediate Conditions

The endogenous sources combine to produce and reproduce **mistrust** in the politicians and institutions of RED.³ The exogenous sources contribute to the spread of **anomie** in the population.⁴

³ The study of political **mistrust** has become a growth industry – and for good reason. Almost everywhere, public opinion data show it increasing. Conceptually, it is important to differentiate between skepticism and mistrust. That citizens are skeptical about the claims and promises of their politicians is healthy for RED, especially when it is combined with an abiding trust in existing institutions. When they are mistrustful of both the persons who rule and the offices they occupy this is particularly threatening to one of the core practices of RED, namely, representation. The notion that citizens do not participate directly in the making of decisions, but only indirectly through their territorial and/or functional representatives is legitimating only if the former trust that the latter are reliable and competent in re-presenting the opinions and demands of their respective constituencies. The embarrassing fact that this connection has always been mythological since, objectively speaking, the task is impossible to accomplish, which makes trust all the more important for the viability of RED. Not surprisingly, much of the present discontent focuses on political parties, elections and the politicians they jointly produce.

The core hypothesis of this sketch is that the peculiar intensity, endurance and potential threat of the present crisis of RED are rooted in the interaction between these two “intermediate conditions.” Mistrust alone would most likely result only in sporadic outbursts of resistance by citizens, usually in the form of reactions to revelations of scandalous malfeasance in office. Anomie alone only provides an incentive to withdraw passively from politics or to express personal dissatisfaction which, however, is incapable of motivating others due to his or her social isolation. Together, mistrust and anomie are capable of sustaining a movement of opposition that could threaten “democracy as we have known it.”

Confounding Factors of Agency:

As we have discussed above, the translation of sources into causes and eventually into outcomes is contingent upon how (and even if) agents react to the challenges and opportunities posed by endogenous and exogenous sources. We have grouped them into two categories, derived from the work of Machiavelli, the first political theorist to deal systematically with what became known as the “agency problem.”

Fortuna

Here, where *structure* becomes *conjuncture*, the list of probable conditions is almost inexhaustible. I have selected four of them for illustrative purposes:

1. The collapse of the Soviet Empire

⁴ Elsewhere, I have defined ***amonie*** as a condition in which individuals feel alienated and purposeless because they lack shared standards, values and/or ideals. To put it into political terms, it is a condition in which citizens have lost their sense of belonging to a specific and meaningful political group and gained the impression of being exploited by privileged groups that impose their own – self-serving – rules and values. In short, the anomic citizens of REDs are both rootless and resentful. When they act politically (if they do at all), it will be due to a sense of momentary allegiance or a confluence of disparate factors. Anomic individuals have much weaker incentives to respond in conformity to established norms and much greater difficulty in doing so collectively. They tend to retreat to a strictly private sphere. What is especially disconcerting about this situation is that established political elites (and those who benefit from them) have a good reason in the short run to welcome this state of affairs, namely, *divide et impera*. The best that one can expect from *anomie* are sporadic rebellions or revolts. They raise the cost of ruling, but not enough to provoke a significant change in the rules of the game.

2. The unprecedented absence of any plausible threat of revolution or alternative regime type
3. The financial crash of 2008 and the ensuing 'Great Recession' (following a lengthy period of persistent economic growth)
4. The crisis of mass emigration triggered by declining living standards and increasing violence in the (non-democratic) countries of origin.

Virtü

Here the problem is not the sheer number of potentially relevant conditions, but the fact that *virtü* is a more elusive and personal property that is more difficult to predict from objective/structural conditions.⁵ I have again limited my selections to four – and they are all dubious:

1. General increase in the level of education of the population
2. Greater diffusion of knowledge about 'virtuous' political experiences from country to country
3. Emergence of trans-national, governmental and non-governmental, organizations promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law
4. The institutionalization of the academic discipline of political science and its global spread (????)

The Box of Crises

What is inside it? Again, we are faced with an *embarras de choix*. Students of the present crisis have compiled long lists of well-documented "**morbidity symptoms**" to substantiate the existence and serious nature of the current crisis. The following are but a selection of them:

1. Increase in electoral abstention
2. Decline in party membership and identification
3. Rise in electoral volatility

⁵ Here, I would have referred the reader to the immense literature on "leadership" if I thought it would be useful. I have not found it so.

4. Decline in voter support for traditional Left-Right centrist parties and rise in support for fringe parties.
5. Weakening role of parliaments and strengthening of executive authority
6. Decline in membership and support for class-based associations
7. Greater difficulty in forming and stabilizing governments
8. Increased direct intervention of business firms – especially financial ones – in the policy-making process
9. Finally, that catch-all symptom, **populism** – the number and success of populist candidates and, eventually, their acquiring responsibility for forming governments.⁶

Peter Mair's shorthand way of describing the contents of the box of crises was "the hollowing out of Western Democracy." Unfortunately, he died before speculating

⁶ This has proven to be an exceedingly difficult concept to define.

Elsewhere, I have tried to do so: "*Populism is a political strategy that draws support across or with disregard for the lines of cleavage that are embodied in existing political formations and does so by focusing on the antagonism between the "people" and the "elite" and by extolling the personality of its leader who claims to be able to resolve issues previously believed to be unattainable, incompatible or excluded*".

about what might subsequently be filling this vacated space. Presumably, politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum and, therefore, some new configuration of institutions is bound to rush in to take the place of RED.

The most obvious candidate in the contemporary period for this role is “populist” democracy – at least for the immediate future. Whether this type of democracy will be capable of consolidating its institutions and practices, and whether the regime will be successful in legitimating itself seems very dubious to me. The historical pattern of populist governments has not been one of change in regime type or even sub-type, but of relatively rapid disintegration due to their incapability to satisfy the contradictory promises made to the populous and the inflated expectations of their own followers. In Latin America, populist regimes only survived for a longer period if they could rely on military support (and usually their *jefe supremo* was a general). When they collapsed, they did not leave many institutional accomplishments in their wake.

There may be another lesson to learn from Latin America. Populism is notoriously difficult to classify in terms of the usual Left-Right continuum; nevertheless, it is possible *gross modo* to distinguish two generic types, based on an astute observation of Gino Germani, drawing on the prototypic case of Peron. He described the supporters of Peronismo as persons suffering from “status incongruence.” In the Argentine case (call it the leftist version), the incongruence came from social groups that had risen in material wealth and economic security, but continued to be looked down upon culturally and marginalized politically by the traditional (land-owning) elites of the country. Following Germani’s logic, in the rightist version (the dominant one today), the incongruence is inverted. The followers of populism tend to come from downwardly mobile social groups that resent the emergence and dominance of *nouveaux riches* and better educated elites. Especially in the latter case, foreigners are conveniently assigned part of the responsibility for the newly acquired inferior status and sense of vulnerability of authentic national peoples.

Whatever follows from the present crisis, I am convinced that it will call itself “(some type)” of (new and better) democracy.” As Robert Dahl observed, the practice of democracy has gone through many “revolutions” and different adjectives, but the noun has somehow always survived. My own suspicion is that populism – if and where it succeeds in coming to power – will prove to be an unstable and intermediate sub-type of regime. Its primary function has been to undermine and even to eliminate key institutions of previously well-entrenched (often highly oligarchic) REDs – especially their party systems – without replacing them by creating distinctive ones of its own.