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## EDITORIAL

### THE CONCEPT OF DE-POLITICIZATION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

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**ABSTRACT:** This Issue collects contributions on the theme of the *De-Politicization of [representative] politics in the era of neoliberalism*. We consider De-politicization as a set of changes in the ways power is exercised. These modes downgrade the political nature of decision-making and, through representation, give legitimacy to actors apparently less able to bear witness to the presence of the "political". Politics appears less responsible for the decisions that affect the regulation of society and the impact of their costs and failures on economic and cultural processes. Political choices conditioned by the market acquire the character of necessity and inevitability. The attempts to legitimize the investigation of public choices through deliberative arenas governed by non-political parameters, based on information and knowledge, are not external to this aspect of de-politicization. A discursive de-politicization determines the convergence of preferences into a single, albeit diverse, cognitive construction of reality (frame for public actions). It is no coincidence that the prevailing paradigm in the contemporary liberal political economy has been narrated in the form of a "single thought" demonstrating a clear cultural hegemony of the trans-nationalized and financialized capitalism. Policies become inevitable responses lacking rational alternatives to the limits of development set by previous responses, with which contradictions and conflicts had previously been appeased. De-politicization is probably one of the causes of the growing distance between institutional politics and civil society in Western countries and, unavoidably, it determines certain consequences. We think that, on the social side, some of the consequences can be found in the political indifference on the part of citizens (political apathy) and, by contrast, in growing forms of non-institutional social and political participation through the practices of social resilience and resistance; on the political side, we think that one of the consequences is the birth, everywhere in Europe, of populist parties and movements that, in their rhetoric, emphasize the intention to give back sovereignty to the people. The aim of this issue is to highlight these phenomena which, also in a critical, provocative way, can contribute to the description of the many aspects of this process through both theoretical and empirical work.

## 1. The concept of de-politicization

If the twentieth century has gone down in history as the century of the triumph of liberal democracy, according to many authors, the twenty-first century is that of its failure or at least of its crisis. The distance between citizens and institutions is growing, along with levels of intolerance and mistrust towards political classes. There are new populist political players that alter the logic of political representation. The same social movements, which formerly acted conflictingly by identifying an interlocutor in the political class, today produce conflict regardless of the structure of political opportunities. In this overall picture, we have decided to devote thought to the key concept of depoliticization.

Depoliticization has become a topic of growing interest among scholars of governance and public policies. As noted by Buller and Flinders (2005; 2006), the relationship between depoliticization and context, agency, structure and its impact on the general framework of representative democracy needs to be investigated. The two scholars propose an interesting conceptualization of this already well-studied process. In fact, many scholars (Ranciere 1995; Gounari 2004; Boggs 2000; Douglas 1999; Pettit 2004) have put depoliticization at the core of their analysis. Burnham offers the most synthetic definition when describing depoliticization as "the process of placing at one remove the political character of decision-making" (Burnham 2001: 128; 2017).

Through a synthesis of the copious literature on the subject, we could say, quoting Flinder and Buller, that depoliticization is "the range of tools, mechanisms and institutions through which politicians can attempt to move to an indirect governing relationship and / or seek to persuade the demos that they can no longer be reasonably held responsible for a particular issue, policy field or specific decision" (Flinder and Buller 2006: 295-296).

In fact, even in this context, politics remains central, but the processes and arenas through which decisions are taken are in some sense altered. In this case, one can speak of a kind of arena-shifting within which politicians seek to reduce the costs of some political transactions: from the point of view of public policies, by reducing the direct control of politicians, they are sheltered from the possible negative consequences that they (public policies) can generate. Political depoliticization creates a sort of buffer zone between politicians and some policy fields (Buller and Flinders 2006: 297).

Following Flinders and Buller (ib.), we could say that depoliticization takes shape through three tactical elements. So we can speak about an "institutional depoliticization", a "rule-based depoliticization" and a "preference shaping depoliticization".

a) Institutional depoliticization is the most widespread tactic because it is based on a formalized relationship between the elected politician, dealing with the general policy, and the appointed official who enjoys a certain operational and managerial freedom, often within independent agencies in the broader parameters established by the ministries.

b) Rule-based depoliticization is based on the adoption of specific policies that constrain political discretion in decision-making. In fact, in this way, politicians are isolated from social pressures through a seemingly neutral and universal rule system. In this way, policy implementation is reduced to a purely technical issue that does not require political negotiation. Almost all the economic policies in Western governments, and in particular in European ones, are now involved in these dynamics.

c) The last form of depoliticization we are discussing concerns the shaping preference mechanisms by resorting to communicative, discursive, rhetorical, ideological strategies with the aim of justifying a political position and making it acceptable. As Flinders and Buller say ...

Preference-shaping depoliticization tactics involve the construction of a new 'reality' in which the role of national politicians [...] is presented as having been, to some extent, eviscerated by external forces or broad societal factors. These forces [...] reduce their role to managing and enforcing rule-based tactics or policy stances which are designed to alleviate the negative consequences of trends for which national politicians cannot reasonably be held responsible. (Flinders and Buller 2006:308)

## **2) Depoliticization in Western Countries**

To examine the concept of depoliticization in greater depth, we will try to go beyond the interesting and useful conceptualization of Flinders and Buller. De-politicization has been defined in many ways (Foster et al. 2014). In short, we consider it to be a set of changes in the ways power is exercised. These modes downgrade the political nature of decision-making (Burnham 2001) and, through representation, give legitimacy to actors apparently less able to bear witness to the presence of the "political" (Wood, Flinders

2014; Hay 2007). Politics appears less responsible for the decisions that affect the regulation of society and the impact of their costs and failures on economic and cultural processes. Political choices conditioned by the market acquire the character of necessity and inevitability. De-politicization has been consolidated in various ways. In the European context, a "government", a "discourse", and a "social" de-politicization have, in particular, been observed (Hay 2007).

The de-politicization of government in turn has different facets, concerning the polity (Jessop 2014) and the relationship between government and governance. It consists of the displacements of the decision-making powers from elective offices to arenas presented as neutral, objective and remote from - or "above" - institutional politics (Flinders 2008): central banks, independent regulatory authorities, agencies of various types (Burnham 1999 ; Hay 2007; Kettel 2008), public utilities privatized and made dependent on the market rather than on the interference of politicians and their short term visions dictated by electoral rhythms (Flinders, Bullers 2006a). These shifts define de-politicization as one of the effects of the meta-governance which re-regulates governance (Jessop 2011; Fawcett, Marsh 2014).

Another shift of powers, implemented through decisions of governments and national parliaments, benefits non-elected and of higher scale actors, such as strong (intergovernmental) bodies and procedures of the European Union (e.g. the 2012 Fiscal Compact) and the so-called Troika (Council, European Commission, IMF, ECB), and produces various forms of compliance with the international agreements and rules, whose enforcement is handed over to actors and technical tools. To give some examples: the obligation for EU governments to have their public finance decisions approved by the Commission before presenting them to national parliaments; for other regions of the world, the conditionality of IMF and WB, the constraints coming from the WTO agreements (Flinders, Buller 2006b), as well as from other sources of legal regulation arising from bi- and multi-lateral forms of international agreement, often implemented through expertise (Huggins 2015); the technocratic imposition of normative models of good governance on the states; sanctions imposed indirectly by rating agencies and operators of global financial speculation against public finance policies. These shifts accumulate powers outside of state policy, but also call for a de-accountability of political actors (Burnham 2001; Kettel 2008; Wood, Flinders 2014). This mechanism also operates at the local and territorial level.

Another side of this phenomenon is the use of meta-decisions that make it impossible to make other decisions later, tying the hands of policymakers (Flinders, Buller 2006b). For example, constitutionalizing the obligation of a balanced budget depoliticizes the

national economic policy. Its task is reduced to monitoring and adjusting the process with measures that fall within pre-set standards.

Technicization of processes is also an important part of de-politicization, with the assignment of regulatory effects and resources allocation to technologies such as evaluation, with the primacy it gives to "the numbers" (de Leonardis 2013; Giancola 2015), or technical procedures in support of political decision-making. Choices become evidence-based and free from ideologies and social pressures. Or, again, expert systems, algorithms, rating and benchmarking.

The "technicians" become the protagonists, sometimes called on to directly perform the function of "depoliticized politics", as in governments of national unity, legitimized in the name of emergencies and exceptional circumstances. For these governments, representation and consent have no value. They are chosen for their professional skills and their reliability for the markets and the supra-national institutions. The attempts to legitimize the investigation of public choices through deliberative arenas governed by non-political parameters, based on information and knowledge, are not external to this aspect of de-politicization. Again, matters subject to public choice are excluded from the process of discussion, conflict and compromise between partisan points of view.

A discursive de-politicization determines the convergence of preferences (Flinders, Buller 2006b) into a single, albeit diverse, cognitive construction of reality (frame for public actions). It is no coincidence that the prevailing paradigm in the contemporary liberal political economy has been narrated in the form of a "single thought" [There is no alternative] demonstrating a clear cultural hegemony of trans-nationalized and financialized capitalism.

Policies become inevitable responses lacking rational alternatives to the limits of development set by previous responses (such as the Keynesian compromise), with which contradictions and conflicts had previously been appeased. Especially in Europe the tarnishing of values and blurring of programmatic differences between left and right - both give priority to growth and the market - is a consequence and evidence of this kind of de-politicization. Convergence is helped by the communication of imagery and knowledge brands (Jessop 2009; Sum, Jessop 2013) of great power (the influence of pre-rational emotional states involving individuals, political decision-makers and epistemic communities on the acceptance or rejection of an idea of policy) and by seductiveness, i.e. a specific normative force, which is exercised by indicating what to aspire to and how to strive for it. These are forms of communication and construction of meaning based on appeals or slogans (Wood 2015), referring to a shared sense imbued with moral values. The consensus is mobilized around the assumptions that social acceptance cannot be doubted and this therefore legitimizes unquestionable paradigms.

These paradigms highlight various aspects of the primacy of control by means of the market, for instance, everything that is narrated as efficient, flexible, innovative and "smart". These reminders can guide, encourage and legitimize public actions as well as individual and social behavior, such as lifestyles and sustainable consumption, which are configured as social responses to depoliticized collective challenges of development (Hay 2007). Conversely, this also applies to what is unacceptable and subject to stigma: today primarily what is public, namely debt, spending, government, and territorial social demands.

### **3. The actors in de-politicized politics**

With de-politicization, the contradictions of regulation become policy problems managed by experts and by participatory processes with predefined outcomes (Swyngedouw 2011; Wilson, Swyngedouw 2014). The actions are addressed through the setting of horizons and an indication of collective goals presented in the form of "public truth" (also) by non-political actors, reconfirming Gramsci's lesson about the role played by civil society in state and politics (Jessop 2011, 2014). The emerging figures in de-politicization are not only creators and disseminators of expert knowledge (gurus, international technical organizations, think tanks, consultants). In addition to them, and often in close connection with them, we find the beneficiaries of these changes: those who are favorably located in the contemporary distribution asymmetries (Hay 2014, 302) and, in particular, corporations. They enjoy a more direct benefit from specific social de-politicization (Flinders, Wood 2014), from a redefinition of the boundary between the political and the non-political, in this case made by the states (Jessop 2014, 217). This consists of transferring the power to address issues of collective interest to the private sphere of individuals and/or the market. This shift not only reduces public budgets, but also political potential of demands and social conflicts (especially where rights are being claimed), labeled as traditionalist, old fashioned, ideological or fundamentalist (Swyngedouw 2011), through a reframing of what is at stake in terms of issues that can be solved through innovation. The market is the sphere in which firms and consultants (the champions of innovation) act.

Economic actors are concerned to influence the decisions which affect the characteristics of their environment – the extra-economic conditions of accumulation – and this is nothing new. Practices of consultation, lobbying, campaigning, funding policy have always been analyzed by sociology and political science, which have theorized - also with normative intentions – the concepts of neo-corporatism and governance.

The season of governance launched at the same time as the market orientation of public policies has seen the formal inclusion of enterprises in the cooperation and partnership between public and private sectors. These phenomena have produced both business friendly regulations and isomorphism of the de-politicized public action with the market and its actors. This can be clearly seen by looking at local situations. The representation of cities as actors having a system of collective decision-making, common interests perceived as such, integration mechanisms, an internal and external representation of the collective actor and ability to innovate, which translates operationally into the framework of regulations underlying the reforms of metropolitan governance designed to shape accumulation-friendly urban environments, is modeled on the firm. The city's strategic planning seeks vision and leadership that can calculate costs and benefits, assess risks and opportunities, strengths and weaknesses, in order to be guided towards competition and partnership.

In the construction of the city as an environment and a strategic actor in the context of globalization and crisis, what is therefore crucial are the cognitive and normative models produced by knowledge and skills, nested within firms. The instruments of market-oriented policies since the 90s – city marketing, branding, strategic planning, etc. – have more recently been updated by reference to imaginary business scenarios that are already making the metamorphosis from innovative ground-breaking ideas to models in the initial phase of institutionalization. For example: the Smart City paradigm; the economy of the function or service, which aims to replace the sale of goods with the sale of their use, such as car sharing; in some ways even the narratives and practices of Social Investment, Social Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation (Dey, Steyaert 2010). These models - at the same time economic, cultural and political – are implemented through the relationships between society, the market and politics that go beyond the old public governance.

Companies, in seeking and cultivating new markets, seek to drive collective action through a specific ideational ability. The pro-business regulations are aimed at acquiring consent and legitimacy by presenting themselves as able to use the market and technologies to determine patented solutions for collective problems (environment, quality of life, economic development, participation, mobility, social inclusion, etc.). These are placed within broader systems of meaning, often designed by world-renowned gurus and processed in transnational enterprises, adapted to the local retail markets and recognized and institutionalized through policies on a transnational and national scale. The inevitability of these technical solutions and their naturalization lies in their being rational and preferable to ineffective models that are sources of waste and of individual and collective malaise.

Messages are transmitted through seductive advertising representations of a desirable society (smart, sustainable, inclusive, happy ...). The hegemonic function of these images translates into preference-shaping where the interests of business permit the construction of general, environmental and social goals, sometimes presented in the form of common good or general interest, often reclassified as "community". This enables the reformulation of rights bitterly championed in the past by the civil society to be brought within market horizons. The scenario tends to overlap and mutually reinforce that on a European scale: the issues are of general interest as defined by factors such as productivity, competitiveness, social cohesion, and resilience in crisis.

Reducing the complexity through these imaginary "win-win" situations is an original mediation between general and private interests, citizenship and profits. It will feed the de-politicization of government with new forms of de-politicization of market players. They are presented as being able to solve social problems. Companies are politicized, because they perform not only a supporting and complementary role for politics, but also a function of replacement. For example, in "Smart Cities", companies not only provide ways to decide how to deal with individual and collective needs, but also managerial models of strategic management to coordinate the optimization of local resources and allocation of community funds.

#### **4. Risks of de-politicization**

With de-politicization, political functions and state intervention do not vanish. The processes of government, however, become less transparent (Foster et al. 2014) and at the same time faster and less expensive for the elite. If science or technology say that there are no alternatives, negotiations in parliaments and local governments no longer make sense. In this way, in the public sphere, the processes of de-politicization become naturalized, presented by many institutional actors as forms of rationalization partly inevitable and desirable (Hay 2007; Flinders, Wood 2014), especially in times of crisis, because they are associated with the reduction of political and social conflict.

Eliminating the political nature of actions does not mean reducing the need for regulation but producing it in new ways. The effects of actions do not cease to be political, because they involve the selective allocation of material and immaterial values. Considering these effects, we can suggest an answer to the question of why contemporary forms of de-politicization have been successful. It would be hard to understand why it



has become a dominant model, without linking it with the concomitant neo-liberalization and with the hegemony achieved by economic elites through the belief system of the neoliberal paradigm (Foster et al. 2014).

De-politicization is in fact the outcome of a meta-governance consistent and functional to a political strategy (Jessop 2014). The market-oriented public action uses it as a specific institutional and discursive resource that helps to create strategies of accumulation of wealth in the form of a hegemonic political project (Moini 2015, 37 et seq.). This process occurs especially in times of roll-out (Peck, Tickell 2002) and of consolidation of neoliberalism, where the task is not just to cut and dismantle the public sector but to build and adapt the non-economic conditions of accumulation (Jessop 1997; Burnham 1999). As well as facilitating the functioning of markets, the reduction of the "political" to the "economic" is a component of political rationality and neoliberal governmentality (Foster et al. 2014). De-politicization is useful for the elite, but finds consensus with the growing lack of interest, popular disaffection and distrust in institutional politics.

One may wonder, in particular, if an antidote does exist: in what conditions can we reverse these processes (e.g. Fawcett, Marsh 2014)? In the current crisis, forms or moments of re-politicization can be empowered and can in turn help democratic processes, such as mobilizations, social conflicts and forms of resistance within non-institutional political participation practices.

## **5) Overview of this Special Issue**

Peter Burnham, one of the scholars that have most effectively conceptualized depoliticization, in his paper develops a political economy analysis of process in the broader context of the crisis of neo-liberalism in Western Europe. He follows the discussion of the theoretical aspects of the concept focusing on the fact that depoliticization strategies are usually associated with neo-liberalism. Then the article through the evidence of the English case, details the several forms taken by depoliticisation within neo-liberal governing regimes focusing on the reorganisation of civil society and the state from the late 1970s to the present. What the author shows is a significant degree of continuity in the form of economic management followed before, during and after the recent financial crisis.

What clearly emerges in the paper is that the attempt to depoliticize public policy did not prevent the economic crisis from exploding at state level, even though there is no direct correlation between the two phenomena (economic crisis and political crisis). The

author then challenges some critiques of depoliticisation which have removed much of the political contingency of the moment of crisis itself (Hay 2014, 303).

Ernesto d'Albergo and Giulio Moini try to answer some important questions: what is meant today by depoliticization and how does this phenomenon impact upon the forms taken by political functions in contemporary complex societies? Starting from this point they propose a research-based analysis of the specific role played in depoliticization processes by the use of resilience as a concept and set of practices with a particular focus on the "Resilient Communities" program of the Cariplo Foundation in Italy. They argue that an intertwined and complementary movement between the depoliticization of public action and politicization of collective action carried out by non-political actors exists. This does not eradicate the political component from social processes, but alters its qualities, characteristics and borders.

Sandro Busso in his work argues that de-politicization is the outcome of the interaction between three mechanisms: the shift of emphasis from justice to effectiveness and the model of "governance by numbers"; the process of individualization of social intervention that marginalized collective responsibilities; the inclusive model of governance that co-opts civil society organizations reducing their role as conflicting actors. These mechanisms give substance to a new model of de-politicization distinguished by the narrowing of the political debate about solutions and models of intervention based on inclusion rather than delegation and in which political actors are an active component. For the author, depoliticization as a process is independent from the trend of retrenchment that begins with the political success of neoliberalism.

Tom Willems, Wouter Van Dooren, and Martijn van den Hurktry sum up the controversial relationship between depoliticization and anti-politics in «public-private partnership» (PPP) policies and practices. By the use of the interdisciplinary literature on the topic, they identify three main social mechanisms that underlie the dynamics of depoliticisation in PPPs: consultocracy, yield bias, and complex contracting. The article argues the imbalance between depoliticization and politicization is increasing with negative implications for democratic governance. The depoliticized dynamics in PPPs feeds broad sentiments of political distrust because political decision-makers usually use PPPs as general solutions for the delivery of public infrastructure, without bearing the long-term budgetary consequences of their decisions. This produces a sort of expectations gap: the difference between «what is promised or expected» by politicians on the one hand, and «what they can actually deliver» on the other. So, in the longer term, the rationales and incentives of political decision-makers collide with the wider public interest.

Diego Giannone in his paper starts from the consideration that global indicators of the state's performance have exponentially grown over the last three decades. Several issues such as economic freedom, competitiveness, property rights, business environment, creditworthiness, democracy, governance, transparency and media freedom have become central aspects of many global benchmarks focused on the evaluation of the state. He analyzes the reasons behind this phenomenon by investigating the role of global indicators in world politics and the shaping of an "ideal state". Giannone emphasizes that the global diffusion of rankings and ratings is linked to the rise of neoliberalism. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, global indicators are conceived as specific apparatuses of neoliberal rationality that help to conform states' politics and policies to the twin neoliberal principles of competitiveness and entrepreneurship. In a second section the author describes the contradictory construction of the neoliberal competition state.

The paper by Onofrio Romano aims to demonstrate that the process of de-politicization does not only affect political institutions but also the narrative of grassroots and anti-systemic movements engaged against neoliberalism. It is no coincidence that, despite the persistent crisis of neoliberalism, a real hegemonic shift is not on the horizon, and politics continues to be a marginal component of social life. According to Romano, de-politicization is the main effect of the descriptive and normative belief that social order is and has to be the *ex post* result of the interaction dynamics between social actors (ideology of horizontalism). The social order becomes much more desirable insofar as it leaves out the subject "as is", promoting a process of self-revelation. The author's thesis is that both neoliberalism and large part of anti-systemic movements share this basic framework. The narrative of "commons" represents a special case of what we call "conformist alternatives". It in fact develops an ambivalent tension: on the one side the search for pre-symbolic spontaneity and, on the other, the unmentionable search for hyper-symbolism.

Enrico Padoan in his paper tries to propose a categorization of the populist phenomena, by using a distinction between *electoral-delegative* and *participative-mobilising* populisms. According to him, populist phenomena usually share some common aspects, such as a tendency to polarize and divide society into a "People" and some "elites" or privileged sectors, the reliance on a strong leadership, the pretension to be majoritarian and to achieve power at the national level in order to restore the people's sovereignty. The strategies for achieving these goals vary according to the specific diagnoses that would correct the perceived deficiencies of the representative democracies in terms of *accountability* of representatives. Populisms stress the *symbolic* dimension of the concept of representation with a strong leader able to "truly interpret" a sort of *general will*.

The author provides a discussion on four participative-mobilising populist experiences, i.e. MAS-IPSP, Kirchnerism, M5S and Podemos, focusing on their internal organizations and relying on an extensive fieldwork (consisting of one hundred in-depth interviews with country experts and party representatives at regional and national levels).

Mariafrancesca D'Agostino explores the evolution of the global governance of refugees. She emphasizes the centrality of depoliticization, examining the narratives and practices implemented to establish an extraterritorial asylum system of humanitarian containment, detached from any ideals of inclusion and rehabilitation. At the same time, she presents empirical evidence in order to stress the divergent effects of depoliticization in geographically and culturally distant contexts. A survey in Calabria, Italy, presents the political attempt in its internal areas to foster autonomous practices of inclusion that counteract the securitarian shift of the global asylum system, as well as its national implications, recognising refugees as a strategic factor of economic growth and social innovation.

Sabino Di Chio focuses on the liberalization of gambling, which is a measure implemented by both sides within the bipolar system. It typified Italian politics over the years 1990-2000. The growing number of operators, players and betting opportunities has been blessed as a "necessity" that does not respect the values represented by the political forces. The assumption of the paper is that the process of financial and regulatory consolidation of "lawful gaming" provides a privileged indicator to describe the depoliticization in Italy. From the government viewpoint, the elected institutions renounced the political management of the sector in support of neo-liberal axioms.

Fikret Adaman, in his theoretical paper, focuses on the increasing interest in Karl Polanyi's framework and method of analysis in understanding today's problems of neoliberalism. Actually, in *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi took nation-states, and to some extent the global monetary system, as his units of analysis, neglecting the local-level issues. To shed light on this lack of focus, the paper aims at contributing to the efforts to extend and widen Polanyi's vision in order to incorporate different scales (local-national-global) in today's world. The paper acknowledges and highlights the local as a separate unit in contrast to national and global units; then it unpacks the concept of scale, the way the local-national-global dimensions interact with each other, and the importance of scaling up and down in looking at societal issues.

Luigi Bobbio offers a different perspective on the issue of depoliticization starting from a specific question: Do deliberative arenas depoliticize democracy, as a vast amount of literature suggests? Bobbio tries to challenge this point of view, by looking at two cases of democratic experimentation. An analysis of what actually happens shows that such arenas appear to display both unpolitical and political features. On one hand,

they are non-majoritarian bodies, just like other depoliticized venues, but on the other, they deal with conflicts and discuss goals, and thus perform typical political activities. According to the author, it would be possible to assert that they are neither completely political nor completely unpolitical. Instead they have a «hybrid nature» that can counteract the continuous fluctuations between (hyper)politicization and (hyper) depoliticization that are so typical of our times.

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