BOOK REVIEWS

Michele Sorice, Partecipazione democratica. Teorie e problemi [Democratic Participation. Theories and Problems], Mondadori, Milano, 2019, ISBN 978-88-6184-706-4, pp. 162.

Andrea Grippo
Guglielmo Marconi University, Rome

During 1990s democracy was the focus of an unprecedented volume of literature motivated by boundless faith in its expansion and progression. In the last decade academics proved to have the same verbosity about the current crisis of democracy. This demonstrates that democracy is a never-ending process, that requires a continuous analysis on both a theoretical and empirical level. These latter dimensions are closely intertwined in the analysis on political participation provided by Michele Sorice in *Partecipazione Democratica*. Published in the series *Lessico Democratico*, Sorice's volume aims to enlighten the experiences that break the anesthetized framework of the traditional participation in Western democracy. The work has the remarkable merit to highlight the plurality of forms of democratic involvement and the creative richness of participatory practices which lie outside the liberal participation's channel of election. Indeed, Sorice seeks to interpret the political participation beyond parties and institutions in the light of the deliberative-participatory paradigm, by which the whole book has to be read.

These experiences are examined within the solid theoretical framework developed in the first section of the book, "The Theories". The first two chapters define the core elements of direct, deliberative and participatory democracy, paying specific attention to their "rhetoric and practices of participation". Ample space is also given to the triadic relation between democracy, representation and participation, whose organic connections are considered by Sorice an historically determined outcome of the liberal model of democracy. In the third chapter the impact of "Depoliticization and technocracy" on political participation is in detail investigated. The second part "The Problems", consisting in two chapters, embody the main aim of the book, i.e. the participatory practices and democratic chances arising from disintermediation and depoliticization processes. In this section great significance is given to the democratic innovations, such as mini-publics, digital participation and active citizenship. In the last chapter Sorice examines the urban practices, the relation between media and participation, and the current phenomena of populisms.

As mentioned above, the roots of Sorice's study perspective can be traced in the debate on democracy of the past half century and in the delegitimization process identified by the Trilateral Commission in 1975, that challenges "not just the economic and military policies but also the political institutions inherited from the past" (Crozier, Huntington, Wakanuti 1975, p. 2)[1]. "Under the impetus of demands[…]for new areas of participation to be opened up and demands by various groups for the practical implementation of rights of participation" (Pateman 1970, p. 1), several critical attacks have been launched on modern liberal democracy by the supporters of participatory perspective of democracy, who proposed a society where "the political life would be based in several root principles: that decision-making of basic social consequences be carried on by public groupings [and] that politics be seen positively, as the art of collectively creating an acceptable pattern of social relations" (Port Huron Statement 1962, p. 7). Twenty years before Fukuyama defined Western liberal model "the final form of human government" (Fukuyama 1992, p. xi), in 1970s participationists claimed that "liberalism serves democracy badly if it all, and the survival of democracy therefore depends on findings for it institutional forms that loosen its connection with liberal theory" (Barber 1984, p. xiv). The radical rejection of representation, peculiar of this

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[1] In contrast to deliberative-participatory and Sorice's conceptions, trilaterists based their work on the idea that "the effective operation of a democratic political system usually requires some measure of apathy and noninvolvement on the part of some individuals and groups" (Crozier, Huntington, Wakanuti 1975, p. 114).

theoretical approach[2], progressively waned with the rise of the conservative revolution: "For many people in the 1980s 'participation' and 'participatory democracy' are merely echoes of a time past" (Hauptmann 2001, p. 397). In parallel, within the American constitutionalist thought, emerged a new paradigm: that of deliberative democracy. Introduced in the scholarly vernacular by Joseph M. Bessette (1980), deliberative-democracy theorists have drawn particular attention to the discursively nature of decision democratic process, within which citizens' preferences should be shaped and transformed by pluralist and inclusive deliberations. Notwithstanding the dissimilar and, in some respects, antithetical historical origins, participatory and deliberative paradigms have found a common path. Indeed, in the contemporary scholarship, of which Sorice's book is an epitome, the theoretical boundaries and distances between these views of democracy have been superseded by increasing intersections. Continuing in this line of thought, Sorice proposes that deliberative and participatory democracy should "hybridize the representative democracy in order to increase its potential of active participation" (p. 22). Through this key of reading the author focuses on the different democratic conceptions taking into account that "there is no single definition of democracy, because there are many elements to consider in order to identify its features" (p.3). Relying on both Robert Dahl's postulates, Sorice offers a *minimum definition* of democracy, which links election, party system and sources of information. Although, he doesn't omit that most of definitions reveal the centrality of election as the main form of citizen's participation and selection model for the political establishment. Historically, this centrality leads to a paradoxical effect: the predominance of the "method of election has in practice limited the importance of other forms of democratic participation" (p. 7). Thus, with the purpose of enlarging the study perspective Sorice suggests to ponder the Morlino's contribution on the *quality of democracy*, in which he "combines normative definitions of democracy and different acceptations of quality" (p. 11).

Under this introductory and theoretical umbrella, Sorice recognizes that the notions of direct, participatory and deliberative democracy are often overlapped in the public debate. Thus, re-elaborating the democracy classification proposed by Donatella Della Porta (2013), in the volume are extensively debated the dissimilarities between the different conceptions of democracy taking into account the variables of the method of decision-making (majority vote or deliberation) and the political process (mandate or participation). This approach to the study of democracies allows Sorice to provide an

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[2] An exception is Macpherson, who in *Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (1977) defines participatory democracy a liberal democracy models.

in-depth analysis of the decision-making processes within deliberative democracy. The author identifies their core concept in the "endogenous generation" of social preferences. In contrast with direct and representative democracy, in which they are predefined ("exogenous generation"), in a deliberative democracy the social preferences of actors may change during the interaction. The perspective study of Della Porta, which suggests that "the deliberative democracy is discursive", is, therefore, confirmed (Della Porta 2011, p. 83).

Analyzing the existing literature on the topic, in the book are identified four waves of studies on deliberative democracy. Milestone of the first one is undoubtedly Jurgen Habermas, whose works are focused on the role of communication and "the society engaged in critical public debate", namely the public sphere (Habermas 1989, p. 52). Due to the impact of globalization, in the nineties a larger number of researchers dissociate themselves from the mere theoretical approach tracing a realistic study perspective (Bohman 1996), in which the social inequalities have been considered a limitation to participation. On the basis of the idea that social actors have distinct interests and positions, in *Democracy and disagreement* Gutmann and Thompson theorize the impossibility to achieve an enduring agreement in the public deliberation, because "citizens differ not only about the right resolution but also about the reasons on which the conflict should be resolved". In fact, "the disagreement persists in the deliberative perspective itself" (Gutmann- Thompson 1998, pp. 73-74). The empirical approach has deepened in the third wave of study, in which the figure of Carolyn Hendriks stands out (Hendriks 2005, 2006). She underlines the need to integrate both the approaches that are focused on deliberative procedures in limited public space (micro dimension) and on communicative dynamics of the civil society (macro dimension). Developing suggestions of the previous school, the fourth wave finally focuses on the need to seek a coherent and systematic approach to deliberative democracy (Elstub - Ercan - Mendonça 2006; Chambers 2012). For this purpose, at the end of the 1990s, Mansbridge (1999) coined the term "deliberative system".

Considering the prevailing literature, participatory democracy is studied in depth. Sorice emphasizes the active role played by citizens within a participatory democracy. In line with the Pateman's findings (1970), he asserts that an "effective" participation is achievable only if decision-making power is equally distributed among citizens. This idea is supported in *Can democracy be saved?* by Donatella Della Porta, who indicates pluralism and inclusivity as core elements of the deliberative-participatory democracy. In her studies, this system is the only able to ensure that "every citizen should be included in the processes and may express his voice" (Della Porta 2013, p. 67).

In view of the foregoing, Sorice provides a comprehensive study of the triadic relation amongst participation, representation and election. The author addresses this analysis considering the "conceptual stretching" of linking the method of election to participation and representation, considered an historical heritage of the modern liberal democracy. In order to demonstrate that "the notion of representation exists apart from democracy" (p. 29), it is offered an historical overview of representation conceptions. For this purpose, Sorice underlines how representation was already present as a *delegate model* in the Roman Empire and as a *symbolic* or *mimetic model* during the High Middle Age within ecclesiastic practices. The Hobbesian conception of representation as *transformation*, on which the modern State is based upon, is the starting point for examining Hanna Pitkin's work on representation as *acting for* and *standing for* (Pitkin 1967). To conclude, the relation between representatives and represented is analyzed through the works of Philip Pettit (2009).

The synopsis of representation's notions allows Sorice to trace causes and consequences of the delegitimization process that has affected representative institutions and parties. Cleavages' decline, globalization and above all global economic crisis are considered concurrent causes of the raising of *partyless democracy* (Mair 2000). The so-called *crisis of democracy* (Kaase – Newton 1995) is for Sorice a critical situation of the representative liberal democracy and its traditional mechanism of electoral representation. For this reason, he assumes that "this crisis does not directly translate into a participation rejection but rather into a reconfiguration of it" (p.41). This observation is supported by many scholars (Keane 2013; De Blasio – Sorice 2018; Ceccarini – Diamanti 2018), who identify three possible citizens' reactions to systemic distrust: apathy, request for major control and new forms of participation.

The latter are the main focus of Sorice, whose analysis is inspired by the *counter-democracy* conception theorized by Pierre Rosanvallon. In this regard, the research perspective of Sorice is supplemented by that of the French sociologist, who identifies in the counter-democracy "not the opposite of democracy but rather a form of democracy that reinforces the usual electoral democracy as a kind of buttress, a democracy of indirect powers disseminated throughout society" (Rosanvallon 2008, p. 8). The reaction to systemic distrust would therefore be a "durable democracy of distrust, which complements the episodic democracy of the usual electoral-representative system" (*Ibidem*). This perspective has been in part traced by Dalton in the 1980s, who affirmed that the *Cognitive mobilization and partisan dealignment in advanced industrial democracies* (1988) leaded to an increase of distrust towards parties without however questioning democracy. By no coincidence, Sorice remarks the raise of a "post-representative democracy", in which citizens experience forms of creative activism of-

ten outside of the traditional channels of political representation. In accordance with Colin Crounch (2004), the most well-known researcher of this approach, Sorice identifies in the contradiction of principle between democracy's tendency to equality and free opportunities of liberalism the cause that has greatly contributed to a post-representative scenario. Notwithstanding the growing role played by interest groups and social movements among the currently active actors of the post-representative democracy, parties "are yet the framework of the representative democracies" (p. 64). Because of their centrality, it is provided a detailed analysis of parties' functions and organization models by basing them on the works of disparate traditional scholars (Downs 1957; Sartori 1974; Raniolo 2013; Duverger 1951; Kirchheimer 1966; Katz-Mair 1992; Prospero 2012; Bardi *et al* 2014). The following party classification highlights the different participatory modalities within the various types of party, which allows Sorice to affirm that "the collective conception of participation […] of mass parties is replaced by an individualistic conception" within the platform parties (p. 72).

Depoliticization and technocracy are pointed out as main causes of the phenomena described above. Sorice associates the transition of the *government* to *governance model* with the raise of the so-called "post-politics", whose characteristics are rejection of representative institutions and "reduction of politics to economics" (Fawcett et al. 2017; Wilson - Swyngedouw 2015). This perspective is in line with the findings of Søronsen and Torfing (2017), who consider the establishment of the governance model a catalyzing factor for depoliticization. The effects of these processes on participation are summarized by Sorice in two paradoxes: on the one hand the depoliticized claim of participation leads to hyper-representation or empty rhetoric of governability; on the other the governance model induces a marginalization of citizens' decision-making power to peripheral issues. Whatever the explanation for these processes may be, the "significant participation" of citizens is subject to a radical contraction.

Despite their propagation being relatively limited, there are important exceptions. Advanced participatory forms of democratic innovation and social involvement can be diffusely registered; although marginal, these forms remain "vital and creative" (p. 91). Among these experiences the most prominent are democratic innovations, for which Sorice provides a solid theoretical explanation and an overview of the most common case studies (such as mini-publics, digital participation and active citizenship). Relying on contributions of various scholars (Beetham 1999; Saward 2000; Smith 2009; Elstub - Escobar 2017), it is proposed an analytical framework strictly based upon "specific and tangible results": to be defined as such, as widely assert in this part of the book, a democratic innovation ought to seek increase of participation (cultural objective), implementation of concrete policies (functional objective) and should cure "the *demo-*

cratic malaise, [namely] the criticalities of the representative democracy" (strategic objective) (p. 95-96). The participation may develop *bottom-up* as well as *top-down* through specific institutions created for this purpose. In accordance with this approach, Geissel and Joas proposed an analytical tool for the evaluation of participatory innovation based upon the variables of *inclusion* and *significance*. This tool can be applied to the mini-publics, democratic innovation experiences proposed by Robert Dahl at the end of the eighties and flourished in the last decades. "Mini-publics are made up of randomly selected citizens, for instance, chosen by lot from […] a source that may function as a proxy for the relevant population" (Escobar-Elstub 2017, p. 1) in order "to reason together about an issue of public concern" (Smith – Setälä 2018, p.1). The main types of mini-publics here examined are citizens' juries, planning cells, consensus conferences, deliberative polls, deliberative mapping and citizens' assemblies. These hybridized forms of participative, deliberative and representative democracy are pointed out as the way to reduce the risk to drift towards social apathy.

While it might be overly critical to consider technology the cure for the *democratic malaise*, Sorice remarks how digital participation could enhance the civic commitment of citizens. Among the digital experiences of participation, the most prominent is the *e-government*, whose interaction with logics of *e-democracy* may develop a democracy model with significant participation. Notwithstanding the threat of standardization, Sorice considers the flourishing of digital platforms within e-democracy a demonstration of the participatory potential of such experiences if framed in deliberative and participatory procedures (Coleman – Blumer 2009; De Blasio 2018).

The same reasoning has been applied to the active citizenship. Traditionally conceived as *status* linked to the membership of a territorial community, the requisite for citizenship is even more rethought as "set of civic knowledge", in other words independent from the spatial dimension. This kind of participation is attributed to new social actors, who act in the "cultural public sphere" (Habermas 1989) adopting counter-democratic practices of vigilance, control and political exposure. Defining the actors of the active citizenship is a difficult task because of the very wide variety of initiatives and participatory forms that it can entail. For this reason, in line with the research findings of Giovanni Moro (2013), Sorice suggests six macro-variables to define the active citizenship, whose main characteristic trait remains "the capacity to activate citizens participation frequently beyond not only the political representation space of parties but also the areas of intervention and traditional commitment of *no-profit*" (p. 118).

In the book is also given particular emphasis to the participatory landscape developed beyond traditional institutions, namely "urban practices, social conflict and political innovation". In contrast with the recent evolution of citizenship, the relation with

the territory is defined as a diriment feature for urban practices. On account of the plethora of experiences attributable to this "social universe", Sorice names the social bonds as additional property of this kind of participation. Relying on the reconfiguration of Hall's concept of diaspora provided by De Blasio (2009), Sorice frames the urban practices in the more general logic of the social conflict. He relates the appearance of urban participation with "the inseparable relation of precariousness and resilience" (p. 125). Notwithstanding insecurity and "moral panic" are often considered the only patrimony of the urban contexts, in the book is well underlined how this precariousness "has the potential to establish new defensive aggregations" (Cohen 1985; Blockland 2017).

A similar capacity in triggering political engagement is recognized to media, to whose complex relation with participation ample space is dedicated. Notwithstanding forms of oligopolistic control, great significance is ascribed to the "interstices of autonomy" of the media, that may assume the role of political vehicle and forum of discussion outside institutions. The emphasis of the author is on the participatory possibilities provided by radio-television and, more recently, digital media. Examining the impact of broadcasted political debates, such as *access programmes*, Mcnair, Hibberd and Schlesinger (2003) add two further strategic advantages to media functions: the chance to influence the political agenda and the importance of forms of access as prodrome of political participation. In this regard, social media can generally boast a greater role in triggering political mobilization, civic commitment and, not rarely, participation. Furthermore, specific attention is drawn to the identification dynamic arising from the spectacularization of the information, that only apparently mitigates the distance among politician and citizen-spectators. The public legitimization of this emotional dimension (Hartley 1996; Higgins 2008) would create the space for "forms of political participation that dodge the institutional rules of the liberal democracies" (p. 130). Amongst them, Sorice identifies the anti-politics and the populist tendencies. These latter are examined in order to discern whether populisms are new forms of participation. Depoliticization and dominant neoliberal thought are identified as main causes of this phenomena. Party delegitimization is also considered a catalyst for populisms, which meets the claim of participation of disenchanted citizens through the rhetoric of the bottom-up participation and the emphasis on direct democracy. This rhetoric would be moreover strengthened through "keywords successfully used by populist leaders, technocracy élites and neo-liberal political leaders […] such as efficiency, privatization, short-termism, newism, meritocracy" and governability (De Blasio – Sorice 2018, p. 1). This scenario gives rise to logics of hyper-representation and emboldens the authoritarian tendency of populist leaders, who impede citizens' participation to the decision-

making process. Relying on some academic contributions (Anselmi 2017; Mudde *et al* 2017; Müller 2017), Sorice asserts that "the re-emerging populisms do not constitute a real modality of participation" (p.138) but rather a form of political agitation "at the bottom" used by "who stays at the top, without apparent contradiction" (Ravelli 2017, p. 154).

In conclusion, Sorice's book can be considered a great contribution towards enhancing the understanding of the current status of democratic participation. Notwithstanding the increasing spread of depoliticization and disenchantment towards institutions and parties, there are important pockets of resistance beyond the traditional channels of the modern liberal democracy. Social movements, active citizenship and all participatory experiences that lead to a re-politicization are the main focus of the analytical analysis provided in the volume. The greatest merit of *Partecipazione democratica* is to enlighten all the forms of political participation that are able to reconnect the social fabric and revitalize the democratic process. The dynamic nature of democracy and its participatory forms urges us to consider this volume an ongoing investigation and a great contribution to the avenue of research on the democratic practices arising from "the need for a greater participation of women and men of our time" (p. 18).

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