BOOK REVIEWS

Political participation between consumerism and new media

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Review on: Antonio Tursi (2015), *Partecipiamo. Tra autorappresentazione dei media e rappresentazione dei partiti*, Milano, Mimesis

1. Political participation: it's hard to find a more abused definition (except perhaps "sharing") in the vocabulary of current politics 2.0; both terms, however, have made the traditional concepts of "political militancy" or "political engagement" obsolete. These are words which are "too challenging" for those who believe that to participate, it suffices to tap on a smartphone or tablet and share information, praising with a "like" statements and official stances, or publishing indignant comments of 140 characters including spaces.

But this ocean of bits of political participation is offset by higher levels of abstention on the election day, a sharp drop in membership of mass parties and trade unions, referendums which almost never reach the necessary quorum and the spread in the communication landscape of a word which is the total opposite of participation: "disaffection".

How is it possible that the relationship linking citizens to the public sphere and institutions can be described by two words so radically at odds? How can you go from participation to indifference or even rejection of politics with a click?

There is a need to make things clear. And this is precisely the goal of Antonio Tursi who decided to devote an entire book to the significance of political participation in the age of Facebook and Twitter (*Partecipiamo. Tra autorappresentazione dei media e rappresentazione dei partiti*, Milano, Mimesis, 2015).

 Tursi's work is very useful for several reasons: first of all because he manages to avoid the classic contrast between apocalyptic and integrated concepts that still characterizes many of the scholars who deal with the relationship between new media and political participation. Secondly, and correctly so, because he does not consider this relationship as radically new, as an absolute which goes beyond the previous situation. Tursi, who adopts an approach based on Mcluhan's theories, clearly shows that even in the domain of political participation, a new media environment does not only destroy but contains and remediates previous environments. And therefore it is impossible to understand the way social networks and social media are changing our relationships with space, time, economy and politics without accepting that they are present in a world that is already multimedia (electrical and mechanical media) based on social relations, types of behaviour, desires and emotions consolidated during the twentieth century. These old elements do not simply disappear with the advent of Web 2.0: in some cases they are absorbed into the new environment, in others they come into violent conflict; in all cases they are key factors that contribute to shaping the new digital era, and to establishing new habits and perceptions.

So, the idea that it is quite possible to pass from the agora of Athens to the new electronic agora, while forgetting what happened in the meantime, is based on a simplistic and dangerous technological determinism especially if it is applied to political discourse. For example, when we talk about politics 2.0, how can we leave out the fact that over the last two centuries consumerism has become a model which has greatly influenced our behaviour, identity and social and political relationships? When analyzed from this point of view, might the same social networks be considered as another area where the old "spirit of modern consumerism"[1] takes on completely new forms?

2.During the 80s and 90s, libraries all over the world were invaded by publications that considered consumerism as the unique dimension of existence, able to reshape environments, habits and social relations. But since the 90s, with the introduction of new digital media, this approach magically disappeared. The new generation of digital consumers was no longer nihilistic, disenchanted, individualistic, narcissistic. On the

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[1] Campbell C, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1987

contrary: suddenly people began to spend their lives building communities, sharing and swapping content and information for free, self-organizing, producing collective and connective intelligences, destroying with a click the old institutional mediations based on hierarchies and unfair power relations. Let's focus on this last point: the idea that it was only the advent of digital media that caused a sharp weakening of traditional and institutional mediations (parties, unions, schools, universities, family, representative assemblies, politics) is totally wrong. In fact until the 90s, consumerism was considered the main culprit for the end of these mediations. Consumer practices were accused of destroying the traditional institutions of socialization, of replacing them with shopping centers, amusement parks, sports stadiums or discos. It's hard to believe that this force which has been shaping our identity and social relations for more than a century, magically disappears when it comes into contact with the web. Similarly, it's absurd to think that the old, bad consumer (often considered as passive and nihilistic) suddenly becomes the holy "prosumer" (active and creative) simply because he is now connected to the web. Internet, in this sense, does nothing but strengthen enormously the capacity of consumerism to hybridize traditional places and languages and make them all ever more contiguous domains of existence thus complicating the formation of any real political autonomy. How is it possible to create a hierarchy of values when you scroll through your Facebook or Twitter notifications where everything is mixed up? A Lady Gaga video, photos of your niece's baptism, a campaign of solidarity with the victims of some terroristic attack, a vegan recipe made with tofu and seitan, a brawl in a reality show, a parody of the last ungrammatical statement of the prime minister, a morning meditation by some budding philosopher friend, a review of a videogame created by some pimply teenager, etc.

But it is only by analyzing this scenario that, in Tursi's opinion, is it possible to rethink and renew the concept of political participation and not by trying to artificially and forcefully transfer the old elitist public spheres dear to Habermas and Arendt into an environment that rejects them.

3. First of all to affirm that the creative consumer has existed only since the introduction of Internet and social networks and that before he was just a poor idiot who passively swallowed mass produced industrial ware, is evidently false. Fifty years of youth subcultures and countercultures from punk to rockers, through rave and hip-hop, pirate radio stations, independent publishing, should always remind us that a large portion of consumers reused goods and information in a creative way, rejecting the meanings suggested by the cultural industry; they manipulated them and played with them, producing UGC (user generated content) without needing a computer. In-

ternet has simply provided a potentially infinite space and tools which are accessible to everybody, thanks to which the process of re-appropriation and manipulation of existence is more easily achievable. Today making a video and posting it on YouTube or scheduling a flash mob using Facebook are less difficulty to do than organizing an illegal rave or a street parade twenty years ago; similarly, publishing a parody of a politician on Facebook is easier than drawing a picture on a subway train or on the wall of a town hall at night.

But at the end of the millennium many sociologists and political commentators finally managed to consider as acts of political participation even what was produced within the consumerist domain (a writer's tag , self-produced and indie music, fanzines, etc.), then why shouldn't we accept in the same way a tweet, a like, a blog, a video on YouTube, a fake or a parody that all become an internet meme? Just because they are created while sitting in front of a computer and not in public spaces? We thus forget that cyberspace is now a fundamental and maybe even the main space in which to

discuss the current social conflict where everything can be reified (ideas, desires, emotions, identities, lifestyles) and immediately shared. Tursi writes: "In this new order of things, keywords that modern political thought had devalued or even collocated beyond the political arena, regain positive connotations: daily life, nomadism, corporeality, dreams, magic, "détournement", dissimulation, parties, games". He then adds: "Limiting the concept of political participation in order to exclude forms and languages that prima facie do not fall into the traditional political sphere (consumerism for example) does not help to understand political dynamics."

4. Having established that even the new forms of communication which use the new web tools can potentially become acts of political participation, the questions remain the same as twenty or thirty years ago when sociologists analyzed the old subcultures and countercultures. How is it possible to make sure that these often improvised forms of participation, based on the emotion of the moment or on short lived contingent political objectives, become stable political commitment? And further more: how can we ensure "that any eventual commitment to what we can be described as political opinion has implications in political decisions that, at least in democratic regimes, for convenience sake we can relate to electoral participation?". It is the old problem of the function and necessity of any political organization, in a consumer, globalized and now digital society. Tursi does not give us an answer to these questions (after all who would be able to do so today?) and, in the final part of the book, only describes how Italian political parties (both old and new) have reacted to the explosive spread of new media. The conclusion is that, apart from some unrealistic and largely unsuccessful at-

tempts at direct democracy such as the Democratic Party primaries or the online voting organized by M5S, the training and the selection of the political class remains an un-solved problem. So much so that, in the last decade all Italian parties, to prevent inter-nal anarchy and a continuing deadlock in decisions, have decided to bet on strong, post-ideological leaders who gradually devour the complex organization of the old par-ties and know how to intercept without mediation the contingency of an ever more individualized and changing public opinion. The dark side of these leaders is that they are obliged to accept the daily changes in public opinion, and lobbies that bring secure votes on election day.

Therefore, rather than direct democracy the new digital media sphere is likely to produce "an ochlocracy, an arbitrary government of a shouting mob. An indirect partic-ipation through political leaders".

It is unlikely that the situation will change in the near future. We should develop a new theory of this conflict which would be able to translate social relations and indi-vidual and collective interests of the post-industrial age into a new political organiza-tion.