Preface

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These are uncertain times for democracies. Or rather, while some democracies maintain or improve on Freedom House standards, others are in decline. Illiberal democracies are on the rise, and various autocracies are taking hold. It is not too far-fetched to think that among the factors that have expanded the spread of democracies and economic prosperity in alternating phases over time has been the ability of liberal systems to value their scientific and technical heritage filtered through the scientific method. In such an uncertain context, it makes sense to ask what reforms democracies would need to introduce to make themselves more reliable in terms of decision-making, i.e. ways in which democratic systems can function well.

Giovanni Molteni Tagliabue's (GMT) book is part of an ongoing theoretical discussion in some Western academic ecosystems that is rooted in historically relevant issues for the evolution of modern political thought: in particular, how to recruit the use of the best expertise into decisions involving technical problems, and at the same time to avoid the prejudices or incompetence of citizen-voters jeopardising the ability of the democratic experiment to find and use scientifically validated information and advances to innovate or change practices, i.e. to amplify the economic-social conditions necessary to exercise individual freedoms. The author is currently interested in the relationship between democratic decision-making logic and science or innovation's role in this framework. Perhaps the book neglects a broader historical perspective. Still, it compensates with an almost exhaustive survey of the discussion that has been ongoing for several decades in the Western world on ensuring that technical knowledge and skills are used appropriately or effectively and without overriding the principle of representation.

The book analytically examines, mainly on a theoretical level, the main flaws of liberal democracies. These stand out in the difficulty or inability of these political systems, at least after the 1960s, to make rational use of the best scientific knowledge in decision-making processes, an inability that paradoxically has increased with the rising socio-economic complexity of these systems, i.e. the fact that there is a tendency to take decisions on a political-populist basis or by applying ideological prejudices or under the sway of corruption, etc. Italy is a school case, with dysfunctional events that can affect liberal democracy. For instance, quite a few Italian politicians have endorsed the quack 'Di Bella' and 'Stamina' pseudo-cures for serious illnesses; or they have followed the dogmatic and arbitrary rejection of certain agri-food biotech advances (the 'GMO' bugbear); or they have too long hesitated in following the scientific evidence regarding the Xylella bacterial epidemic which is destroying olive tree plantations in Apulia; etcetera. The author's reasoning, both in the *pars destruens*, and in the *pars construes*, is strongly influenced by the Italian situation.

The author thinks these defects can be corrected with institutional grafts and injections of direct participation. The REDemo model, which, he suggests, would serve to overcome the current limitations of democratic decision-making processes by endowing them with features that facilitate the embedding and evaluation of scientific expertise and openness to proposals from civil society, is speculative. His idea is that it is possible to rationalise the functioning of democracy through the support of a chamber composed of scientists/experts and an extension of the democratic model by providing a direct role for the electorate and social partners through petitions, referendums, etc.

He compares the characteristics and potential of his model with proposals to adapt the epistemology of democracy to the challenges of research and innovation. The measures he proposes are relevant, and he discusses or defends them with a falsificationist approach. As I mentioned in my online review, the book is an academic exercise, but in a good way. I have been following the topics covered by GMT for years. I have read few essays on the relationship between democracy and science or knowledge that are as well-documented and inclusive. In the abstract, the author's thesis makes sense and, like all models, contains simplifications that force him to perform somersaults to counter the positions of those who, starting from analyses of the limits of liberal democracies, arrive at different conclusions. The theories that already address the problems of the inefficiency of the democracies discussed are considered by him to be unworkable in principle or fact. His model of democracy is always suggestive in the abstract and somewhat idealistic. However, the arguments used by GMT to show that his thesis resolves the limitations of different ideas and models are logically adequate. The author is a healthy enthusiast. And he derives from his enthusiasm the best that can be produced in research when he focusses on a comprehensive collection of critical reading in the bibliography, which then provides stimuli for reflections beyond the arguments developed in the text.

Western democracies, i.e. open societies implementing the principle of representation, universal suffrage expressed through free elections and the rule of

law, do not function in optimal ways. Some democracies suffer more than others from the seven flaws illustrated in GMT's essay, and each in forms that, given the boundary conditions and public ethics at work, can fluctuate over time. The solutions GMT suggests are, in theory, relevant measures.

The essay reminded me, at some junctures, of Federalist Paper 51, published in 1788. Not so much for its 'angels' and ambition, where James Madison wrote: 'ambition must be made to counteract ambition'. Above all, human imperfection is recurrently recalled in the Federalist Papers regarding how to build, through the Constitution, a republican institutional architecture capable of recruiting social diversity and transforming it into welfare and civil and individual freedom. That paper, and the subsequent ones in the series, reasoned on how to imagine a transformation of the rules of representation and the balance of powers from defects into even positive qualities, creating institutional relations that, through the competition of interests, spontaneously bring about a better social order for all, which is difficult or impossible to see emerge from intentions and planning.

GMT's academic exercise – much more educational, in a positive sense, than many essays written by actual academics, but with some lack of clarity due to the vastness of topics/viewpoints covered, which waters down the taste for novelty – is striking in the quantity and quality of erudition. Other scholars maintain that citizens should undergo an aptitude test or argue that some votes may weigh more than others for more competent citizens. Among other reasons, it is also because humans are still closer to their primate relatives than to imaginary angels, including scientists and experts, as seen all too clearly during the recent pandemic. Yet, according to GMT, «if elected scientists were actual decision-makers – although constantly in the public eye and balanced by party-political counterparts – they would feel much less compelled to scream, looking for attention from politicians who are frequently biased».

The theorists of liberal democracy can roughly be divided into two groups. On the one hand, some defend an 'epistemic' conception of it, whereby the government of the many would always be superior to that of the few in finding the correct solution to problems, in the general interest and without damaging individual freedom; this happens only if democratic institutions manage to make the most of the cognitive diversity distributed among the population, relying on deliberative processes. Conversely, some think that cognitive and moral biases prevail in voters' choices, which are more likely to lead them to make the wrong decisions, so measures are needed to reduce the impact of epistemic deficits. GMT's proposals aim to enrich the political system's decision-making architecture. He correctly explains that one has to abandon Condorcet's theorem and the postulate of the 'wisdom of the crowd' when trying to imagine empirically how the preconception that the greater the number of participants, the closer one gets to correct judgement would work. The phenomenon of the crowd's wisdom has been studied extensively and been seen to work only when estimating quantitative values or geographical information.

Regarding more complex issues, bias tends to prevail, and the decision is more likely to be wrong than if experts had made it. In complex societies, the

relevant or appropriate use of knowledge would require processes that are less dispersed and disturbed by innate social inclinations in the context of the dysfunctional post-industrial world. However, it is difficult to believe that the grafting of a chamber of expertise could ever take root at this stage of the development of democratic systems, especially in the face of a political culture refractory to scientific rationality.

Since historical times, technical figures have been present on decision-making levels in human communities. Still, technocracies, i.e. communities where decisions in the collective interest are taken based on technical expertise, do not express the same dynamism as liberal democracies, where free and independent scientific research renews knowledge, encourages the improvement of technical expertise and allows or expands the room for self-determination of the people as a better condition for civil coexistence. Science and the scientific community have been contributing to the solution of political problems for centuries, and without the scientific and technological revolutions that have taken place since the 17th century, the level of political and economic freedom would have remained at the low level allowed in autocracies; in recent decades some Western governments have even created offices to support decision-making on issues that call for scientific knowledge. But GMT correctly believes these are not institutionally structural measures.

Would the REDemo model be able to cure democracies in crisis? We do not know. Where democracies are more solid and transparent, there is no need to rationalise and extend democracy. At the same time, technical knowledge and a variety of innovative ideas have more difficulty circulating; it must be something other than an idea that comes to the mind of political elites. GMT underestimates the weight of functional illiteracy, and in countries where this prevails, citizens could send poor scientists/experts and even several pseudo-scientists to parliament. Yet, according to GMT, «if many academics run for office in scientific legislative bodies, the small percentage of pseudo-scientists, unfortunately present in university and research institutions, will be skimmed off, or at any rate will be a minority among their elected colleagues».

No liberal democracy was born like Minerva from the head of Jupiter. Every democratic country has historically evolved defined relationships between the politically elected institutions, where selection is based on intuition and self-deception, and the system of institutions where scientists and experts work. They are co-opted through competitions that screen competencies. Several vital ideas underpinning democratic architecture derive from the writings of authors with an in-depth knowledge of science, particularly Newtonian science. The political elites of the democratic world, for a long time, saw science and technology as the basis of innovation and thus of the prosperity that made that world appreciable. Moreover, until the Second World War, overall, in the Western World, political elites and theoretical discussions on the foundations of liberalism and democracy recognised science and scientific thought as constitutive elements for well-functioning democratic societies, or 'open' as Popper called them. In the last half-century, science has increasingly been taken for granted as if it were an

integral part of the socio-cultural landscape or grew spontaneously and luxuriantly in any socio-political context. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

As societies became more complex and innovations more pervasive, governing democratically and at the same time efficiently increasingly required the use of science and technology to enhance the results. In the meantime, science and technology were compulsorily learnt in schools for extended periods. In this way, the socio-cultural fabric became more receptive to considered and rational, rather than impulsive, decisions. Nonetheless, science and politics ceased to interact, seeking to improve society and culture's ethical values and from the 1960s onwards entered into conflict, as in the case of culture wars, and thus with the widespread affirmation in political doctrines of constructivist instances and theories critical of liberal democracies which see science as a form of culture like any other, with the scientific community engaged in a competition to gain power.

Science and technology evolve rapidly because of the relative efficiency of the procedures for selecting the best ideas. In countries lacking social mobility and traditionally ruled by older people, society and elites tend, due to slow political processes and an ageing population, and thus a more significant cultural weight of conservative instances, to restrain the utilisation of scientific skills and innovations because choices are influenced not by rationality but rather by intuition and self-deception. In short, more developed societies may become more risk-averse over time, more traditionalist and thus more suspicious of science and scientists. This divide differs everywhere and depends on countries' sociocultural characteristics and economic-productive set-up. In countries where political institutions are more efficient or economic and civil liberties are more pronounced, parliaments and government access expertise and knowledge differently without recruiting a community of researchers and specialists at political level, i.e. without giving them legislative-governmental power. At the same time, citizens distrust political institutions and perceive of them as corrupt, and decisions and laws become more improvised.