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Introductory Note on the Concept of Democracy

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Any discussion of the term "democracy" today is distorted by a preliminary ambiguity that condemns those who use it to misunderstanding. Of what do we speak when we speak about democracy? To what form of rationality does this term actually pertain? A slightly more attentive observation would show that those who discuss democracy today understand this term sometimes as a form of the body politic's constitution, sometimes as a technique of government. The term thus refers both to the conceptuality of public law and to that of administrative practice: it designates power's form of legitimation as well as the modalities of its exercise. Since it is obvious to everybody that, in contemporary political discourse, this term is more often related to a technique of government - which, as such, has nothing especially reassuring about it - one understands the malaise of those who continue to use it in the first sense in entirely good faith.

That the interlacing of these two conceptualities - juridico-political on the one hand, economico-managerial on the other - has deep roots and is not easily disentangled will appear clearly in the following example. When we find the word *politeia* in the classics of Greek political thought (often within the context of a discussion about the different forms of *politeia*: monarchy, oligarchy, democracy, as well as their *parekbaseis* or deviations), we see the translators render this word sometimes as "constitution," sometimes as "government." Thus, in the passage of *The Athenian Constitution* (§ 27) where Aristotle describes the 'demagogy' of Pericles, the English translator renders *demotikoteran synebe genesthai ten politeian* as "the constitution became still more democratic."¹ Immediately thereafter, Aristotle adds that the multitude *apasan ten politeian mallon agein eis hautons*, which the same translator renders by "brought all the government more into their hands"² (obviously, to translate by "brought all the constitution", as consistency would have demanded, would be problematic).

Where does this veritable 'amphiboly' come from, this ambiguity of the fundamental political concept, by virtue of which it appears now as constitution, now as government? Here it will suffice to indicate two passages in the history of Western political thought in which this ambiguity appears with particular evidence. The first is to be found in the *Politics* (1279a 25-27) when Aristotle declares his intention to enumerate and study the different forms of constitution (*politeiai*): "Since *politeia* and *politeuma* mean the same thing, and *politeuma* is the supreme power (*kyrion*) of cities, it is necessary that the supreme power be in the hands of one, of the few, or of the many [...]." The standard translations give here: "Since constitution and government mean the same thing, and government is the supreme power of the State [...]." Although a more faithful translation would have had to preserve the proximity of the two terms *politeia* (political activity) and *politeuma* (the political entity that results from this), it is clear that Aristotle's attempt to mitigate ambiguity by means of this figure he calls the *kyrion* constitutes the essential problem of this passage. To employ modern terminology - not without somewhat forcing the link - constituent power (*politeia*) and constituted power (*politeuma*) come together here in the form of a sovereign power (*kyrion*), which appears as that which holds the two faces of politics together. But why is the political divided, and on what basis does the *kyrion* articulate this split, while stitching it together?

The second passage is to be found in *The Social Contract*. In his 1977-78 lecture course, *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault had already demonstrated that Rousseau posed precisely here the problem of reconciling a juridico-constitutional terminology ("contract," "general will," "sovereignty") with an "art of government."³ But, from the perspective that interests us, it is the distinction and the articulation between sovereignty and government, which is the basis of Rousseau's political thought, which is decisive. "I ask my readers," he writes in his *Discourse on Political Economy*, "to distinguish clearly also the public economy of which I shall be speaking, and which I call *government*, from the supreme authority, which I call *sovereignty*; the distinction is that the latter has the right to legislate [...] while the former has the power only to execute [...]." ⁴ In *The Social Contract*, the distinction is reaffirmed as an articulation between general will and legislative power on the one hand, and government and executive power on the other. Now precisely what is at issue for Rousseau is simultaneously distinguishing and tying the two elements together (this is why at the very moment in which he formulates the distinction he must vigorously deny that it constitutes a division of the sovereign).⁵ As for Aristotle, sovereignty - the *kyrion* - is at once one of the terms in the distinction and that which binds constitution and government together in an indissoluble knot.

If today we witness the overwhelming domination of the government and the economy over a popular sovereignty that has been progressively emptied of any sense, it may be that Western democracies are paying the price for a philosophical legacy they have

assumed without reservations. The misunderstanding that consists in conceiving of government as a simple executive power is one of the errors most fraught with consequences in the history of Western politics. It succeeded in ensuring that the political reflection of modernity got lost behind empty abstractions like the Law, the general will and popular sovereignty, while leaving without response the problem which is from every point of view decisive: that of government and its articulation with the sovereign. In a recent book, I have attempted to demonstrate that the central mystery of politics is not sovereignty, but government, not God, but the angels, not the King, but the ministers, not law, but the police - or, more precisely, the double governmental machine which they form and keep in motion.⁶

The Western political system results from the knotting together of two heterogeneous elements, which legitimate one another and which give one another mutual consistency: a politico-juridical rationality and an economico-governmental rationality, a "form of constitution" and a "form of government." Why is the *politeia* caught in this ambiguity? What grants the sovereign (the *kyrion*) the power to ensure and to guarantee their legitimate union? Is it not a question of a fiction designed to conceal the fact that the centre of the machine is empty, that between the two elements and the two rationalities there is no possible articulation? And that it is from their disarticulation that it is a question of making that ungovernable emerge, which is at once the source and the vanishing point of every politics?

It is probable that as long as thought does not resolve to confront this knot and its amphibology, every discussion about democracy - as a form of constitution and as a technique of government - risks lapsing into chatter.

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Notes

1. *Aristotle in Twenty-Three Volumes, XX: The Athenian Constitution; The Eudemian Ethics; On Virtues and Vices*, trans. H. Rackham (London: William Heinemann, 1952), 79.

2. *Aristotle in Twenty-Three Volumes, XX*, 81.

3. Cf. Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population, Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 106-107.

4. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy and The Social Contract*, trans. Christopher Betts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6.

5. Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy and The Social Contract*, 64-65.

6. Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Il Regno e la Gloria. Per una genealogia teologica dell'economia e del governo* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2007), 303.

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