

Estoril Political Forum 2022 - Luigi Einaudi Memorial Luncheon

Giandomenica Becchio

“The Light that Fails? The present debate in Italy on the war in Ukraine”

Two years ago, Krastev and Holmes published their book, *The Light that Failed: Why the West is Losing the Fight for Democracy*, a book about the fate of liberal democracy after the collapse of the Soviet Union especially by considering the consequences of the eastward spread of liberal democracy. Authors suggested that in thirty years since the end of Communism, the process of transforming former dictatorships into liberal democracies failed: a new age of autocracy started in those countries along with a wave of populism which involved western countries as well. Authors claimed that one of the main feature of this failure has been the resentment against the post-1989 process of ‘Westernization’. This resentment had especially involved old generations, either nostalgic of a never-ending dream (which actually was a nightmare) or stuck in a traditional anti-Americanism, as well as new generations who did not grow up during the communist regimes and actually cannot make any comparison between the two systems unless they would have been educated to understand and elaborate the complexity of concepts like freedom, individualism, and responsibility of being citizen in a political framework embedded in the system of the Rule of Law, in other words unless they have been educated to liberal democracy.

The present debate in Italy on the current war in Ukraine may shed some light on this disillusionment about the fate of Western civilization. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion, national press, social media, and public debates in inner circles inside and outside academia have been frantically set up in order to discuss the military and political situation as well as any possible future scenario which will be hugely impacting European

countries in the immediate future, not to mention the worrisome expectations about a possible worldwide military escalation.

The possibility of debating is always a good thing; freedom of speech is a fundamental liberty in our liberal democratic Western systems: hooligans are never welcome and a balance of opinions, especially when provided by experts such as historians and political thinkers, is useful indeed. So, I'm not blaming the discussion per se, neither I am going to talk about negotiations, compromises, criminal acts perpetuated by Russians, Zelensky's attitude, prophecies of victory, and so forth. Neither I am willing to discuss what many commentators rightly began to wonder: what is the goal of Europe? In fact, it is evident that our governments, in the name of the unity of the West, are compact in following Biden and Johnson in their anti-Putin crusade, although our interests are different: sanctions inflicted on Russia might be catastrophic for us; any widening of the military conflict (including nuclear risks) as well as the duration of the war would dramatically affect us and hardly jeopardize Americans.

Nonetheless, I want to point out the fact that the debate which is occurring in Italy reveals a massive attitude of anti-Americanism often mixed with an inexplicable fashion for leaders like Putin, albeit we have been warned by several publications (think about Anna Politkovskaja's book) as well as testimonies about Putin and his inner circle's attitude and their way of operating: we are talking about former KGB agents previously in medium-lower positions who seized the power and exploited Russian people for twenty years and started wars, in Chechenia yesterday as well as in Ukraine today, in the name of the 'Holy Motherland Russia', a nationalistic and ethnical concept, old-fashioned, but still fashionable for laypersons, a concept which is nothing more than greed in disguise.

Why so? Why did we have a prime minister, Berlusconi, who was among Putin's best friends for ages? Why do we still have some political leaders, scholars, and a consistent part of public opinion who are fascinated by Putin? Why do we have so many intellectuals on stage who are making their best efforts in order to blame NATO and to explain Russia's reasons for attacking Ukraine? We need to make some steps backward in order to understand that the despise of liberal democracy, which had shaped up our Western society, is directly related to the rise of populism. Against Sandel's view, according to which "the right-wing populism ascendant today is a symptom of the uncritical embrace of a neo-liberal version of globalization that benefits those at the top but leaves ordinary citizens feeling disempowered" (2018, 353), I argue that populism is the most recent transformation of authoritarianism, a challenge to liberal democracy aimed to drive a wedge between democracy and liberalism as if it would be possible to have a democratic system without cultural liberalism. Many scholars defined it the 'illiberal democracy' of 'the people', to be intended as a reaction against the 'undemocratic liberalism' of "the elites". This is the main deceit of populism and this is the main fallacy of the present debate on the Russian-Ukraine war that is occurring in Italy.

Putin has always played the role of the ideal-type for populists in Europe, which converged, as the Russian leader has often claimed, towards a harsh critique to liberal democracies. This is a cultural, rather than a political stance. The mix of Italian populists who might be nostalgic either of Fascism or of Communism are called in Italy "rosso-bruni", a word that literally means "red-black": although they are situated on the opposite sides of the political spectrum, they share a suspicious and sometimes ferocious attitude against liberal democracy and free-market. They never stopped feeling the call of the tribe, as in Vargas Llosa's terms, no matter whether the color of their tribe is red or black; they never stopped feeling the urgency to find a leader/a party/a project to be intended as a

universal problem-solver able to magically fix challenging and often dramatic situations of any matter.

This attitude does not affect Italy only: the Western society and culture has been attacked and blamed during the past thirty years everywhere.

I don't know if the light of liberal democracy has actually failed: indeed, it has faded and one of the reason might be the lack of education aimed to reinforce the values of the open society, as in Popper's terms: a society based on individual freedom which, since the first revolutions during the modern era, had paved the way to liberal democracy. Liberal democracy is not a set of forever fixed rules rooted on general principles; neither a specific political program in a fixed agenda. Rather, it is a meta-culture: a set of procedures that in principle allows the coexistence of many different ways of thinking and living. Almost all ways of thinking and living, with the main limitation that no one should impose a specific one on others. It is a way of social interaction established by the Rule of Law, able to guarantee human, civil, political and social rights embedded in democratic procedures. It is simple but also hard to achieve and it has been too much taken for granted especially after the collapse of Communism.

The present debate in Italy on the war in Ukraine is an episode of this lack of education and it is time for western elites to make it clear: there is no future and prosperity without lighting up that light which is fading. The light of liberal democracy, which rests on civic egalitarianism, individual freedom, limitation and division of power, cannot be defended on a battlefield only though: it must be embedded in a major project of education aimed to transmit habits and practices of liberal democracy in order for people, especially young generations, to understand and appreciate their opportunities and responsibilities as free citizens. This is the main responsibility of each of us: without a serious

commitment to education to freedom that light we mentioned earlier might actually fail. Please, allow me to conclude by quoting Luigi Einaudi's first Presidential speech: "Our Constitution affirms two solemn principles: to preserve all that is a guarantee of the freedom of the human person against the omnipotence of the State and against private arrogance; and to guarantee everyone the greatest possible equality in the starting points regardless of their lottery of birth. We all are called to collaborate in this sublime work of human elevation".

It looks like that Einaudi's words have been lately become a wishful thinking but it is our responsibility to make them back real again.

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