Capitalism and the New Political Unconscious

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Vox Populi, Vox Dei: On the Vocal Substance of the Present

Federico Leoni

The myth of the word

It is not possible to question the state of contemporary democracies without questioning a kind of colossal shift that has occurred over the last century, a shift in what we could call the conditions of possibility of democracy, which concern the public sphere as a sphere of democratic discussion and deliberation. There is no democracy without a certain set of discussion and deliberation procedures centred on what we could call 'the word'. There is no democracy without the advent of a humanity educated in a certain use of the word, which provokes the appearance of common objects of discussion and deliberation, as well as subjects who share the vision, the evaluation and the organization of a conflict around those objects.

A beautiful and famous page from Hannah Arendt's *Vita activa* portrays this dimension of the word as a powerful tool of democracy and the public sphere, just as the Greek city would have articulated it for the first time:

> In the experience of the polis, which not without justification has been called the most talkative of all bodies politic, and even more in the political philosophy which sprang from it, action and speech separated and became more and more independent activities. The emphasis shifted from action to speech, and to speech as a means of persuasion rather than the specifically human way of answering, talking back and measuring up to whatever happened or was done. To be political, to live in a polis, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence. In Greek self-understanding, to force people by violence, to command rather than persuade, were prepolitical ways to deal with people characteristic of life outside the polls, of home and family life, where the household head ruled with uncontested,

despotic powers, or of life in the barbarian empires of Asia, whose despotism was frequently likened to the organization of the household.[1]

We can find almost the same order of considerations in Jürgen Habermas, whose *History and Critique of Public Opinion* was published only four years later than Hannah Arendt's *Vita activa*:

> In the fully developed Greek city-state the sphere of the *polis*, which was common (*koiné*) to the free citizens, was strictly separated from the sphere of the *oikos*; in the sphere of the oikos, each individuali s in his own realm (*idia*). The public life (*bios politikos*) went on in the market place (*agora*), but of course this did not mean that it occurred necessarily only in this specific location. The public sphere was constituted in discussion (*lexis*), which could also assume the forms of consultation and of sitting in the court of law. [...] The realm of necessity and transitoriness remained immersed in the obscurity of the private sphere. In contrast to it stood, in Greek self-interpretation, the public sphere as a realm of freedom and permanence. Only in the light of the public sphere did that which existed become revealed, did everything become visible to all. In the discussion among citizens issues were made topical and took shape. In the competition among equals the best excelled and gained their essence, the immortality of fame.[2]

The Lutheran reader

We could say that the above is an idealized image, and that Greek democracy was anything but democratic, as Arendt and Habermas know well and show in those same pages. We could add that even today we are very far from that ideal image, and that democracy is still to come, because the kind of word that constitutes the condition of possibility of democracy is itself still to come. But many signs seem to suggest that this is not the case.

Perhaps democracy has already come, as far as it was possible for it to come. Perhaps the kind of word that constitutes the condition of possibility for democracy has also already come, as far as it was possible for it to come. Perhaps it is that word's decline that has made it so perceptible, so visible to the gaze of twentieth-century political theory. Perhaps it is because we now look at it from the outside (from elsewhere, from afterwards) that it lends itself so well to our investigations. The owl of Minerva begins its flight at sunset, when the day has ended, and events are easily offered to her belated apprehension. As anticipated, a gigantic shift seems to have reconfigured the conditions of possibility of the

public sphere and its forms of subjectivation and objectivation. Something like another word – or something other than what we have so far called word – has taken hold. And with it, a new kind of subjects and objects, and a new kind of bond, have been put into play.

In his *History and Critique of Public Opinion*, Habermas drops, almost in passing, an observation that reveals a glimpse of this landscape of 'the word after the word'. Habermas writes:

> Throughout the Middle Ages, the categories of public and private were handed down in the definitions of Roman law. One could think of the public sphere, defined as *res publica*. Undoubtedly, it is only with the formation of the modern state and this distinct sphere of bourgeois civil society, that these categories find an effective application from a legal and technical point of view. They serve both the political notion of self and the legal institutionalisation of a bourgeois public sphere in its specific sense. In the meantime, namely in the last century, its social foundations have in fact been disintegrating. The trend towards the disintegration of the public dimension is unmistakable. While its sphere is expanding more and more visibly, its function is becoming more and more impoverished.[3]

In the course of his work, Habermas illustrates the long and complicated genealogy that brings the public sphere to that maximum of effectiveness in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He meticulously investigates the spread of the first gazettes. They had, in the seventeenth century, been linked to the internal needs of certain commercial professions. Those information sheets gradually devoted themselves to broader discussions, no longer limited to the themes and problems of this or that professional category. In part they do this to attract new sections of the public. In part they sought to create the wider audience they seem to presuppose. The newspapers of the nineteenth century, which had already added to their repertoire a range of political, economic and military discussions, began to further broaden their interests into literary, artistic and cultural themes. They no doubt tried to attract a wider and less specialized audience. Increasing sales was a way of making the production of an increasingly complex and expensive object more sustainable. And in doing so, they built up, piece by piece, the public they seem to presuppose, a public that is increasingly united by a set of shared objects and methods of discussion.

Habermas shows how all this intersects with a similar movement within the administrative arrangements put in place by the largest European states. These are initially rather fragmented devices. Each is intended to regulate or monitor a certain area of social life: the education of the population, the productive

activities, the collection of revenues, and so on. But under the pressure of state centralization, these devices flow into more and more complex, coherent and binding systems. They end up constructing a set of observation coordinates that are increasingly homogeneous, or a field of survey objects that is also increasingly homogeneous, and a set of subjects that are also increasingly accustomed to think of themselves as homogeneous elements of a whole. Without this overall movement, which on several levels mobilises what we might call a set of new media, which are highly specific in their tasks and effects, there would be no public sphere of discussion and deliberation, no democracy in the modern sense. The public sphere, the space of democracy, is neither an idea nor a functioning, but an *artefact*, a product of these new media.

It is on this point that we must take leave from Hannah Arendt and certain pages by Habermas himself. These new media, in all evidence, are centred not on the word but on writing. Or, if you prefer, on the transcribed word. Think of the testimony of the merchant who informs his shipping company, the note of the administrative official who reports on the tax situation in a distant province, the minister's speech that the reader can read in the gazette of the capital, the journalist's reflection on the events of the week or the month. All this is certainly something we can attribute to the order of the word, as Hannah Arendt suggests. But it is a word that lies motionless on the page of a document, as Habermas shows. The subject who belongs to the modern public sphere is essentially a reader, not an orator. Similarly, the object of discussion and deliberation that involves him or her is essentially a written object. An object that is not only encountered, but first and foremost evoked, aroused and shaped through the written page. The common amniotic fluid of these objects is the proliferating but converging variety of textual documents that the state demands and multiplies in every direction. And that it will not cease to demand and multiply in an ever more pervasive manner, right up to our present.

Habermas shows us this set of transformations, but does not seem to give them specific importance. Nor does he seem to give them a function that we might go so far as to define as transcendental – to borrow an old metaphysical word. It is rather his Canadian contemporary Marshall McLuhan who puts the transcendental function of the medium at the centre of his reflection on contemporaneity. Curiously enough, it was in Germany, where Gutenberg invented the printing press, that McLuhan isolates the decisive shift.[4] Whoever reads a printed page reads with a cool mind and understands what he or she is reading at a distance. They evaluate these words and objects with the relative freedom that this distance allows them. They suspend that more passionate and

immediate reaction that the spoken and heard word often brings. They ask themselves what to think and what to do. McLuhan shows that Luther taught to use that distance first of all in the presence of the highest and most powerful word, the word of the Scriptures. And he shows that it is precisely because the word of the Scriptures was no longer the spoken word, or the word annotated on difficult and irregular manuscripts in need of slow and painstaking decipherment, that the praying subject became a reading subject and a doubting subject.

Thus, it is not the word as such that constructs that sphere of discussion and public deliberation which Arendt and Habermas see as the basis of Western democracy. It is the written word and therefore the read word, the word which has been transcribed and therefore removed from the vocal sphere, from the affection of hearing, from the transport of musicality, from the power of enunciation, from the hypnosis of listening. If Hegel could say that reading the gazette is the daily prayer of the bourgeoisie, it is because the prayer of the man who held Gutenberg's Bible in his hands had also become an entirely bourgeois prayer, an entirely intellectual operation, an entirely critical rite. Now, at every level, from the smallest town council to the highest chamber of parliament, from the primary schools in the most remote countryside to the most prestigious university in the capital, the same device is in action. We are faced with a sphere made up of written words. We are faced with a sphere of solitudes summoned in front of these immobile words. We are faced with a sphere of common objects, on which those innumerable solitudes reflect and deliberate. Those solitudes share words that can no longer be believed, but around which it is inevitable to reflect, discuss and decide. We are faced with a sphere of solitudes united by their very solitude, and thus in a certain sense by this freedom they have with regard to the enigmatic objects of their questioning – a sphere of free subjects, we could say; provided that we ask ourselves what freedom means, for instance by folllowing McLuhan's analysis. Ultimately, it means the end of an old type of subjection and the beginning of a new one: the end of subjection to the spoken word and the seduction of its music, and the beginning of subjection to the written word and the seduction of its silent distance.

Vox populi, vox dei

Let us read this story backwards. If the public sphere was born as the product of those media, and today it is disintegrating with increasing acceleration, it must be because those media that had designed the conditions of possibility and

constructed the playing field of democracy are disintegrating. This is the point at which we find ourselves today. A point at which the public word, the word that not only circulates in the public sphere but most crucially *establishes* the public sphere, is being overwhelmed by something we might call a 'return of voice'.

This strange phenomenon should be understood in its most common sense. It is what happens in certain public situations when a speaker picks up a microphone that captures the voice at the moment it is emitted by the speaker. But at the same time the microphone captures that voice after it has been amplified. That voice now comes from elsewhere, it is now a stranger to the speaker. The voice that came from here, and resounded over there, now returns from over there. It invests the speaker as something that is of their own, but also not of their own. The speaker is now both themselves and also something other than themselves. Something other than the subject they were, perhaps even something other than a subject.

In a sense, this presence of the voice, or voices, within the field of public speaking is nothing new. It could say something about the people and its social substance, long before that the people became the people of democracy, the people inscribed in those procedures of discussion and deliberation that Arendt or Habermas seem to attribute immediately to the magical virtues of a mediologically unspecified word. Much sooner than as a people of Lutheran solitudes, which takes the floor within certain procedures formalized by certain media, it is as a people that listens to and emits voices, as a vociferous people traversed by vociferations, that 'the people' announces itself in the history of Europe.

The Latin syntagma *vox populi* is already attested in Roman times, as historians show.[5] Its later variant, *vox populi, vox dei*, is obviously from the Christian era. In particular, it inherits in discontinuous but evident ways one of the major traits of Christianity. The one, we could say briefly, expressed for example in the Sermon on the Mount and in the preaching of Christianity as the religion of the least. This trait is valuable and yet disregarded by the history of Christian institutions, which perhaps, precisely because it is a history of institutions, has had to come to terms with this vocal dimension, finally evacuating and removing it. The syntagm *vox populi, vox dei* must have circulated widely in the early Middle Ages, but it is only documented for the first time towards the end of the eighth century. We find it, as George Boas explains,[6] in a letter from Alcuin of York to Emperor Charlemagne, of whose court Alcuin is an influential organic intellectual. Alcuin's letter, from around 798 CE, is a particularly instructive text. First of all, the simple fact that a personage like

Alcuin feels the need to deal with this expression, naturally to refute it, shows that this expression must have been sufficiently widespread to create some concern for the emperor and his circle. No one dares to refute a rumour, except when it is riskier to let it circulate without contesting it than to contest it, thus giving it further opportunity to circulate. The refutation of our syntagm occurs *en passant*, of course. Alcuin is talking about something else. He is talking about the problem of inheritance. Does he mean the general question of inheritance? Does he mean a particular inheritance, the legacy of a specific personage? Does he even mean the legacy of Charlemagne, who was now elderly and probably worried about the fate of the Empire after his death? This would be all the more significant, but historians invite us to leave the question open.

It is enough, for us, to note that Alcuin wonders about who should be listened to, which opinion should prevail over others, in resolving such important and controversial issues. And it is at this point that he observes that the voice of the people should certainly not be listened to. The word of those, whom Alcuin calls 'the men who have a position,' is much more reliable. Deciding on an inheritance, be it large or small, requires listening to an authoritative word, and not to a voice circulating among the plebs. But in carrying out this obviously traditional argumentative manoeuvre, a whole theory of voice is conjured up. Alcuin's argument is constructed around two blocks. The first one reflects on the status of the body. A body without a head, we read, is a body whose individual limbs are destined to languish. It is from the head that the strength of the organism, the solidity of its parts, the very fact that they form a whole, descend. This is not a new thesis, of course. The second block moves on to the terrain that interests us. 'The people,' writes Alcuin, 'according to the law of God, must be led, and not followed.'[7] He observes that 'when witnesses are needed, it is men who have a position, who must be heard.' No credit, he argues, and here comes our motto, 'to those who are wont to say that the voice of the people is the voice of God'. For, he concludes, 'the clamour of the *vulgus* is close to madness'.[8]

Here too, we might say, nothing is particularly new and unexpected. But between these two rather predictable theses there is more than one implicit link, and this link is, by contrast, extremely original. It is worth dwelling on it. It is a link between body and speech, or rather a parallel between the good constitution of the organism and the good constitution of speech. We have a body without a head and a people that speaks, a people that vociferates, a people close to madness. And we have a body endowed with a head, the strength of which invigorates the limbs, making them a whole, the counterpart of which is that of a discourse endowed with a head, a word endowed with a subject, we might say.

Aluin says that to the senseless clamour of the people we must prefer that significant clamour, the voice 'endowed with a head', the word endowed with meaning, which is the word uttered by 'men with a position'. We are entitled to suspect that the man with the highest position is the man who guarantees in the surest way that the mad vociferation of the *vulgus* is translated into a fully meaningful word. And it can be deduced that the fragmented and delirious body of the vulgar takes on the features of a people only when it is guided by the word of a man 'endowed with position.' But a final remark quickly brings us back to our problem. While it is not possible for us admirers of democracy to discard this word that Alcuin defends as an authoritarian word, this word which lies in the salvific hands of the emperor is structurally homologous to the democratic word admired by Arendt and Habermas. Did we not say that the Lutheran word was the premise to the democratic word precisely because it was a word looked at from the outside? A word contemplated by a subject who is foreign to it, and is therefore pondered from a vantage point, removed from the mad immanence of the voice? A word which is inscribed in the transcendence of a subject whose property or faculty it constitutes, rather than as a power that passes through them as an impersonal event?

True and false hallucinations

A century of psychoanalysis seems to have moved on a similar path. Indeed, a similar double path or double track. The first body a child comes into the world with, psychoanalysis explains, is a chaotic, fragmented, disorganised body. The expression 'body in fragments' comes from Jacques Lacan.[9] Only when those scattered limbs are knotted together into a unity thanks to the vantage point of an external gaze, namely a mirror image, does that body avoid the risk of psychosis by assuming a certain compactness, a properly organized structure. On the other hand, a body which has not known this transcendent knotting remains an unstable body, and is thus open to psychosis.

It is quite interesting that, in Lacan's teaching, the same logic applies to the experience of voice. Here the voice too is a sort of chaotic reverse of the word, a signifying and unorganized materiality capable of corroding the well-organized word and the perfect transparency of the meanings it conveys. A sort of reversal of oneiric prehistory when not actually mad, of a predecessor somehow removed but always on the point of returning to the scene. The word, in Lacanian terms, never happens without a return of voice, just as the body knotted around the

'caput' of the specular image is never without jolts, without a certain edge which remains unaware of specular capture.

Let us refer to two passages in Lacan's text that allow us to define this general landscape. On the one hand Lacan says that the voice is the reverse of the word. More precisely, that 'the voice' is 'the otherness of what is said'.[10] The voice is the other of saying or wanting to say. It is in some way the antagonist of the intention to say or wanting to say something. It is the signifier – if we assume that the signifier is the antagonist of the signified – which is not taken for granted and may be not entirely correct. It is the signifier insofar as the signifier makes itself heard when the word that wants to say something fails, namely when the word that belongs to that subject who intends to say something (the word which is inscribed in the field of a subject who has made himself or herself its master) fades away. Seen from the point of view of the subject who has taken possession of his voice as a means to an end, the voice is an anti-subject. It is a matter that turns a deaf ear to the intentions of subjectivity; an instrument that displays something monstrous in its rebellion against the intentionality of the discourse – no different, after all, from every instrument that takes on an autonomous life and returns within the human field, with human features, while being radically inhuman underneath. It is a classic scene from a horror film or novel – think for instance of Stephen King's novel *Christine*.

We could define the above as an 'imperial' conception of the voice, in the double sense retained by the term 'imperial': that which brings water to the emperor's mill; and that which presupposes an anthropology where the voice is the vulgar element, that which must be lost (together with the insanely dispersive body of the perverse polymorphic child) so that a word can become body and a body can become word – a word that is one, univocal, endowed with a single voice, a single meaning, and a body that is compact, a well-coordinated tool subordinated to the subject's intentions. To the Christian priest Alcuin – for it seems that this extraordinary early medieval intellectual became a priest towards the end of his life – this imperial conception of the voice must have posed at least one problem. That is to say: is God, then, also crazy? If God's people are the lowest people, and if the lowest people madly vociferate instead of speaking reasonably, is the Christian God also a mad and vulgar God, nothing more than a vast, fragmented and vociferating body? If God is infinite, how can we exclude the fact that his voice resounds everywhere, not only at the head of the empire but also in the margins? And perhaps in the lowest possible parts of the body, in the very genitals of the empire, where the so-called 'proletarians' live and make love?

On the other hand, Lacan reflects on the ways in which the voice returns. He knows, as a psychoanalyst, that the removed voice does nothing but return. Even though it has fallen under the bar of the Saussurian algorithm, which places the signified at the top and the low materiality of the signifier below underneath the bar. The voice does nothing but return as a more or less hallucinatory experience, whether it occurs in a neurotic subject as a slip of the tongue, as a momentary lapse of mastery; or in a psychotic subject as a siege, a civil war in which an almost powerless sovereign is periodically visited by a rigorously acephalous, a-subjective power. Lacan recalls in his Seminar III, *The psychosis*,[11] how already classical psychiatry observed that the patient suffering from verbal hallucinations performs, more or less mutely, a series of phonation moves in which a sufficiently attentive observation recognizes the articulation of those same voices he claims to hear: 'There were people having verbal hallucinations who could be observed, by quite obvious signs in some cases and by looking slightly more closely in others, to be uttering the words they accused their voices of having spoken to them, whether or not they were aware of it.'[12] Lacan adds that verbal hallucination is a speech that the subject is unable to recognize as his or her own. The subject speaks and hears his or her speech, but without managing to recognize himself or herself as the one who is speaking. That is, without arriving at the point where the circle of hearing oneself speak is welded together, and without appearing as the very welding point of the circuit. This is a more or less illusory appearance, or rather an illusion that sometimes is more effective, sometimes less.

It would be difficult to evoke in an adequate manner in what way Lacan explains this failed constitution, or this fragile illusion of the welding point. We would have to summon up his entire analysis of the so-called *other* and of its function of recognition. The scene Lacan has in mind is quite ordinary. The other gives back to the child who cries that same cry as a meaningful word, by the very fact of responding and answering in a certain way. The other's response, we might say, 'will have been' the meaning of a signifier; or more precisely the meaning of that thing which, after receiving a meaning, will become a signifier. But Lacan notes – and this is for us the most interesting point – that sometimes 'the other doesn't agree'.[13] Sometimes the other does not keep to this game of question and answer, sometimes the other shirks its Hegelian task. Then the place of the voice remains an uncertain terrain, where no answer installs the *après coup* effect of a meaning.

Is this always the case, to some extent? Is the answer of the other always to some extent vague, erratic, elusive, enigmatic? Would not a certain madness of the voice, a certain hallucinatory return of the voice in the word (even the most

coherent word) be a structural datum to be used, rather than an unfortunate case to be lamented, or a psychopathological situation to be healed? One detail seems to be able to make a difference and deserves more attention. It is only *après coup*, Lacan shows, that the cry will appear as the negative of that positive which is meaning, as the chaotic and potentially hallucinatory signifier of that meaning which presents itself instead as transparent, ordered, meaningful. We might observe that in itself the *terrain vague* of the voice is neither a signified nor a signifier, neither a meaningful word nor a simply chaotic voice and inarticulate cry. That the voice as such seems chaotic, this is an *après coup* effect of a certain established order. That the signifier is the place of chaotic materiality and senseless fragmentation is what the emperor tells us, what his advisor Alcuin fears, and what his official psychoanalyst sometimes repeats. But Lacan, who sometimes seems to be the official psychoanalyst of the empire, is also an unofficial psychoanalyst. He seems to leave us the possibility of going in another direction. Is there something like a good hallucination, or a good use of hallucination? Is there a voice that is not just the formless matter of the word that belongs to 'men with a position'? Could Lacan go so far as to affirm that *vox populi, vox dei*?

Phenomenology of rumours

We could devote ourselves to a kind of transcendental deduction of the structure of the current public sphere from the structure of this Lacanian voice thought *juxta propria principia*. The first way in which this return of voice to the field of democratic speech announces itself is precisely as a voice claiming to be, as a matter of fact, the voice of the people. This claim must be thought of, not taken for granted or disqualified as such. What does this voice look like? First of all, it looks like a voice that murmurs contrary to the word that speaks from above, and the language that frequents the ethereal regions of written meaning. It is a voice that rises from below and rumbles against the presumptuous word of the literate citizen, dedicated to free and solitary meditations. A voice that shatters the illusion of those common objects and discussions and decisions that, tautologically, unite only subjects and only objects formed within that field. Outside that field, completely different kinds of subjects and objects see the light. Vocal subjects and vocal objects, we could say. But to say so, we would need to rely on an assumption, namely that in that field there are no subjects nor objects, since there is no Lutheran distance, no disconnectedness of silent

readers in front of silent books, no transparency capable of differentiating myself from the object I am dealing with. Subject and object fall together with the fall of the word, and overflow into each other when voices return to that field investing it with their a-subjective power. There are voices without subjects; voices that it is not even sufficient to ascribe to the register of the voice to understand them properly. That thing we call voice is, in the final analysis, always already measured on the basis of its function as a support of the word; it is always looked at from the point of view of its 'becoming a word'. What would a voice-in-and-for-itself be? And a people corresponding to that voice?

The second way in which the voice of the people manifests itself is as noise; the rumour that passes from mouth to ear; the whisper that never makes it possible to identify a sender or a receiver, as the semiologists say. Here the subject is essentially a place of transit. The voice that the subject emits is simply a voice that someone else has emitted before him or her. That voice passes through the subject to reach another subject, who will in turn be passed through and forgotten. The movement of rumour has, in other words, the structure of contagion. If the written word lies motionless before the reader's eyes, as the object of their reflection and the matter of their decision, the voice of the people runs from subject to subject, remaining immune to subjective elaboration. It is the voice of the people, and fundamentally this has to do with an object moving from subject to subject without belonging to any subject or being modified by contact with any subject. If rumours change, from day to day or from hour to hour, this happens according to the logic of rumours themselves, and not according to their subjective elaboration.

But a voice or a rumour without a subject is also without an object. This is why the third way in which this strange word without subject or object manifests itself is the allusion, the essentially enigmatic hint, the ultimately unverifiable conjecture. A voice cannot be attributed to someone who is responsible for it, and does not designate any object for which it can be called to account. If the word is relative, relational, correlated to a subject and an object, the voice, when it returns, it returns as an absolute. A rumour fully encloses, in its own place devoid of otherness and exteriority, what remains of the subject and of the object. It segregates in its perfectly self-sufficient space those who seem to be the emitters, the receivers, the referents. All the categories of semiotics must be rethought and redistributed, so to speak. They are no longer arranged in exteriority with respect to one another, but in interiority, within the absolute sphere of rumour. Perhaps the rumour emanates from someone, perhaps it seems to address someone, perhaps it seems to speak of something. But we must

not deceive ourselves: its structure is in no way intentional. Like any absolute, a rumour essentially speaks of itself and to itself.

Therefore, the fourth way in which rumour imposes itself is as a disturbing power, a force that the subject feels as foreign even when its content seems positive, or simply amusing, or indifferent. A rumour is by definition threatening for the subjects of the word, or what remains of them. For in no way does rumour fit with the subject's reflexive habit, with their illusion of being able to establish the truth or falsity of a certain statement by moving within the framework of a common discussion; or with the subject's inclination to decide on those objects of discourse after having tested their truth or falsity. A rumour draws on an undecidable field, and for that person who is entirely identified with their own presumed power of decision, the undecidable is by definition a hostile terrain, a field destined to denounce a fundamental impotence, an unmanageable swamp in which every discussion and deliberation is destined to wander indefinitely. A rumour, after all, is never really true or verifiable. There is no subject that can take on this task. There is no object around which to promote any verification.

For this reason, the fifth way in which a rumour presents itself is the way of truth, but absolute truth, a truth that is beyond true and false, a truth defined by something eternal and indestructible. The rumour's truth is the truth of the absolute space within which disputes may be opened – essentially, precarious discussions or confrontations that must necessarily take the form of bickering, quarrels that explode between positions that are in fact incommensurable and incommunicable. A rumour, being an absolute, always wins, even when it looks as though it will lose. Those who speak in favour and against a certain kind of rumour actually draw a path that they are never tired to travel, perhaps in different directions, as they could travel a kind of large concave surface, like the endless internal curvature of a bubble.

The sixth way in which this noise is presented beyond subjectivity and beyond objectivity is then the way of reassurance and faith. In the field of rumour, the a-subjective and the unobjective are finally at home. But this home is still to be thought of. More precisely, what remains to be thought of is whether it is a home or a landscape of ruins.

On the use of the vocal substance of the contemporary

At this stage in the discussion, we could attempt a definition of populism entirely based on an exploration of that unprecedented battlefield which is the battlefield

of the voice. If democracy takes shape when the voice of the people becomes the democratic word, populism takes shape when the democratic word is visited by the voice of the people or by the people as pure vocality.

What we call 'the people' is nothing other than that unassignable voice, or the asymptote of that unassignable voice. An asymptote, that is to say a line that is never really touched, but sometimes carefully cultivated. Thus, democracy is nothing but the voice of the people once it is assigned to the regime of the word, inscribed within the communicative circuit of writing. It is also an asymptote, evidently presupposed by both the theory and the practice of democracy, but never actually realized and perhaps now definitively unrealizable.

We could take the *Leitfrage* of vocality to attempt not only a definition of populism and democracy and their strange topological relations, but also a historiographic periodization. Like any periodization, this one too is politically significant. The whole of the last century, from 1922 to 2022 – i.e. from the March on Rome, which gave rise to the Fascist dictatorship in Italy and the season of European totalitarianism, up to today – unfolds like strange comings and goings, a back-and-forth movement made up of shifts and bounces, more or less violent, between two extremes that we could define in purely mediological or psychoanalytical terms. One extreme is that of the removal of the voice, the other is that of the return of the voice. One extreme is that of the media of the written word, the other is that of contemporary vocal media, and more generally of media that take as their chosen terrain the impersonal matter of experience, the impersonal quota of experience that always embodies our subjectivity. This is not the place to inventory the vast array of these new media, which we could include in a single genre stretching from the radio and the phonograph – which Mussolini's or Hitler's speeches have frequented and exploited so effectively – to apps such as Facebook, Youtube, TikTok and so on. This is also not the place to show that although the image has become more and more overbearingly mixed with these vocal media, the image itself has very often taken on what we might call a vocal function, mixing with, rather than replacing, what remains today of that fetish of twentieth-century thought that is language as the ultimate transcendental form. The images in TikTok videos are more similar to what we might call voice-images than representation-images, that is, the iconologically organized and ultimately linguistically designed images that had hitherto governed the Western use of the image, and in particular the use of the image in the political field.

Voice, thus, is the terrain not of populism, but of the dissolution of democracy as a product of a certain technology of the word. This is a terrain that populism

colonizes in its own way, taking over that vocal element that is radically foreign to democratic treatment, and which in any case escapes the grasp of its writing devices. It is interesting, moreover, that populism takes charge of the voice not as such, *juxta propria principia*, but as democracy itself imagines it. It is instructive, in other words, that populism values the voice in the same (basically, purely negative) terms in which the democratic public sphere is forced, by its media structure, to encounter the voice itself. That is to say, as a misfortune, a rumour which is mere noise, chaos. It is also significant that democracy's response to this populist takeover of the vocal dimension is, in its own way, a regressive and restorative response, since it simply aims to reinscribe it within the technologies of the word which constitute the condition of possibility of democracy. Thus, caught between two false opponents who quietly agree in seeing the voice as a chaotic element (which one would have to liberate) and the other regiment, that vocal element which is the very substance of the contemporary political field, will continue to remain inaccessible. In turn, the political field will continue to oscillate indefinitely between the false alternatives of populist pseudo-revolution and pseudo-democratic restoration. This is as much as to say that the challenge that the contemporary scene presents us with has nothing to do with the populist liberation of the vocal instance, nor with the re-democratization of the voice as word. Instead, it has to do with intercepting the energies belonging specifically to this unprecedented vociferous humanity. It has to do with the alliance that can be established with the vocal element and the vocal devices of the present.

Notes

1   Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 26–27.

2   Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, transl. T. Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 3–4.

3   Ibid.

4   Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy. The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

5   George Boas, *Vox Populi. Essays in the History of an Idea* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969).

6   Ibid., 9.

7   Ibid.

8   Ibid.

9   Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,' in *Écrits*, transl. B. Fink (New York: Norton & Company, 2002), 75–81.

10   Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety. The Seminar. Book X*, transl. A. R. Price (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 275.

11   Jacques Lacan, *The Psychosis. The Seminar. Book III*, transl. R. Grigg (New York: Norton & Company, 1993), 16–28.

12   Ibid., 24.

13   Ibid., 40.

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