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BOOK REVIEW

La partecipazione politica. Fare, pensare, essere

By Francesco Raniolo, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2024. 271p., €24.00 (paperback).

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Francesco Raniolo, professor of political science at the University of Calabria, wrote his first book on political participation in 2002. Five years later, he published a new edition and today proposes a radical rethinking. A necessary rethinking, because the time since the second edition has been marked by a shocking sequence of 'super-crises': the great recession of 2008, the great waves of migration, the Covid-19 pandemic, the invasion of Ukraine and the new war between Israel and Hamas. Historical breaking points have redefined the boundaries between individual questions and collective problems, and thus the possibility of changing everyone's existence through political participation. How to deal with this issue?

The author starts from the meaning of the concept of 'participation', reasoning by keywords and thus identifying its three constitutive dimensions: being part, taking part and feeling part. The first part of the book is concerned with the definition and transformations of these three dimensions, which are complementary and interdependent. From the very first pages, the real current problem of participation as collective action, not only instrumental but also symbolic and normative, emerges: it has lost the meaning of its social significance, the realisation of public goods and collective mobilisation. The inexorable process of the crisis of the great collective identities and the consequent individualisation of 21st-century society have restricted the participatory scenarios. Hence, the need to redefine participation.

With this objective, the second part of the book traces the semantic field of participation through five keywords: vote, association, partisanship, protesting and communicating. A careful and documented analysis that effectively sketches the jagged and problematic picture of contemporary political participation: from the intensity of abstentionism to the destructuring of electoral markets; from the complexity of current associative activism to the decline of party membership; from democracy within parties to digital participation, to the outcomes of social self-regulation.

And yet the parties, notwithstanding, resist, without however having the capacity to renew themselves in the sense advocated by the author: drawing on the various new participatory opportunities to mend the original pact with citizens.

Finally, the third part of the book – which is also the most thought-provoking section – reflects on the transformations of the four arenas of political participation and on the challenges that each one of them entails for the future (namely, the institutional, the protest, the community and the media and web arenas). As they all come not only with their own radical transformations and open challenges; but also as, according to the author, 'spaces of innovation'. Trying, therefore, to identify answers to the challenges posed to each one of those arenas means to look realistically (and hopefully) towards a better quality of democracy. The author then develops in greater detail some of the key aspects of each arena of political participation.

The institutional one has to face the challenge of the void, as Peter Mair well explained more than a decade ago: the decline of party participation and the delegitimisation of political

representation due to the disconnect between political elites and citizens. In this arena, the answer to the challenge of the void must necessarily be to broaden the range of participatory and deliberative institutions, involving citizens more directly in the decision-making process as well. The arena of protest has to do with the challenge of polarisation: if it is true – as Eisenstadt argued (*Paradoxes of Democracy*, 1999) – that the incorporation of protest is to be seen as a mechanism for the resilience and development of democracy, today we are witnessing a process of splitting society into antagonistic and non-communicating spheres. What are the possible responses? Certainly, also to contain populism, efforts to make political action responsive as well as responsible must be strengthened. Also complex is the main challenge of the community arena, namely a long and profound process of community fragmentation: long-term structural crises have led to the growth of civic and community initiatives that are increasingly detached and separated from the institutional forums where strategic decisions are taken. This challenge must be met by coming out of 'splendid isolation' and emphasising the inclusive capacity of political practices.

Finally, we have the arguably most challenging space of innovation: the participatory media and web arena, with its constant threats of manipulation. The technological revolution initially created many expectations of citizen political participation and electronic democracy. But within 20 years, we have been faced with online practices and experiments that have exponentially increased the risk of manipulation in favour of smaller powerful groups, starting with 'algocracy' (the government of algorithms that threatens to take the place of the government of the people). How, then, to regulate (and govern) the process of digitalisation of participation? This participatory arena is undoubtedly the one that presents the fewest answers to the future challenges. Even the author, who in the other three arenas moves with great familiarity between different theoretical and research frameworks on political participation, here suffers from the uncertainty of a wide open field. In the media and web arena, the three dimensions of being part, feeling part and taking part struggle to settle, on the one hand because of the speed of digital transformations (just think of how generative artificial intelligence is entering every tangle of our associated life), and on the other because of the expansion of increasingly 'individualised collective' action. It is probably to this arena that scholars of political participation will have to look more closely in the future with a view to democratic innovation.

Raniolo's book is a very rich, dense, erudite work. The very wide reference literature, the original re-elaboration of many classic sociological and political perspectives on participation, the continuous multidisciplinary inputs make it an indispensable landmark for theoretical discussion and research on this topic.