

Dissatisfaction and mistrust in West European democracies

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An important proportion of citizens do not manifest confidence in many basic institutions (parliaments, parties, unions, army, public bureaucracies, big business, courts, ecclesiastic hierarchy, police) nor in the political class. Such a deficit of trust is attested by a wealth of empirical data. Nonetheless, the legitimacy of democratic regimes is not challenged: European citizens do not conceive realistically of an alternative system of government. A new counter-power is playing an increasing and crucial role in advanced pluralist democracies – that of magistrates and journalists combined. France and Italy are considered as typical cases, concerning in particular corruption at the highest level of the State and society. What types of citizens are needed in advanced democracies? Ignorant, naive, deferential, credulous, believers in myths or well informed, rationally distrustful citizens? Today, democracy is permanently under the supervision of the public, as attested by surveys conducted periodically.

Introduction

A massive majority of Europeans are deeply attached to democracy as the only acceptable political system. According to many surveys, most European citizens do not conceive realistically of an alternative system of government for their own country. Such a massive attachment is a new phenomenon in Europe – before the Second World War the picture was very different. At the same time, a comparable wealth of data indicates that, in most countries, a large proportion of people are dissatisfied with the real functioning of the system, that they mistrust basic institutions and social organizations and that they have lost confidence in the ‘political class’. Does this deficit of trust challenge the legitimacy of the current regime?

The problem of trust–mistrust is primarily a political issue but overflows into civil society, because many non-political institutions (churches, unions, large

corporations, the army and the police) are also mistrusted by a significant part of the citizenry. Mistrust is spreading also to many professions, from lawyers to real-estate agents.

This analysis focuses on West European democracies, and nine institutions and organizations. Despite the diversity of countries, institutions and variables, I shall refrain from engaging in a sophisticated statistical exercise, because the available data do not support more than simple cross-tabulations. In effect, for most countries, the sample is about 1000 interviewed individuals. The most trusted institution is the family, in spite of the fact that today, in Europe and the United States, one out of every three marriages ends in a divorce. The family may nevertheless serve as a point of reference.

Comparing countries, some common traits clearly appear across nations, but there is also a significant diversity in many domains, resulting in large part from national histories. In order to allow some comparative perspectives, included in Table 1 are a number of countries that do not belong to Western Europe.

Mutual mistrust between individuals

The mistrust of institutions has to be interpreted in the context of a high level of distrust in large sectors of the society. A deep distrust toward others, except members of one's own family, was observed in the south of Italy in the 1950s by Edward Banfield, who called it 'amoral familism'.¹ For a long time, this mutual distrust was considered as a particular phenomenon limited to the *Mezzogiorno* and explained by ancestral collective memory in this part of Italy. However, the same phenomenon was later observed in Greece, Portugal and Spain and, to a lesser degree, in other European countries. In 1963, Almond and Verba suggested in their *Civic Culture*² a typology where they contrasted the political culture of Americans and Italians. Verba also suggested that distrust of other people and political distrust went hand in hand.³ One generation later, a series of surveys attested a generalized distrust of others in almost all European countries and in the United States. In fact, in 17 out of 22 countries, more than half of the people interviewed in 1981 responded that 'they did not trust most people' and 'one can never be careful enough'. In only five countries (three Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Canada) was the proportion of distrustful people less than half of the population. In France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, between two-thirds and three-quarters of the citizens were distrustful. According to the results of the third wave of the *European Values Study* in 1999–2000,⁴ a large majority of European adults replied that 'one can't be too careful in dealing with people', except in Denmark, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands, where only a minority admitted to be mistrustful. In the United States, the proportion reached 60% in 1981.⁵ Two hypotheses can

be formulated. The first is fragile: in a relatively short period of time distrust was diffused. But in this case, what remains of the concept of culture that implies certain stability? According to the second hypothesis, the phenomenon of mistrust is older than previously supposed. It is the internationalization of research in values that has brought it to light. Such interpretation would challenge certain old theories based on insufficient empirical evidence. Meanwhile, the American political culture seems to have come closer to the political culture of the *Mezzogiorno*.

Erosion of confidence in institutions

The erosion of confidence has four characteristics. First, it is not a temporary phenomenon tied to a particular situation. It is a persistent phenomenon attested to by surveys conducted over the last two decades in some countries, and for a longer period in other countries. The disenchantment and discontent tends to become chronic. The absence of confidence is general. It is manifested in all advanced democracies, the only exception being Luxembourg. The lack of confidence is not only chronic and general, it is also structural in the sense that it concerns most of the important institutions. It is casting its shadow over institutions, sapping their respectability and reducing governmental authority (see Table 2).

Finally, the mistrust seems to have a rational tonality. For most interviewed people, such mistrust is not of an ideological nature, but rather is pragmatic. In effect, the attitudes of trust–mistrust vary little on the left–right axis or on that of liberalism–socialism.⁶

Persistent, structural and rational, the erosion of confidence has worsened in the surveys of 1999–2000 in parallel with the economic difficulties in some countries, particularly structural unemployment in Europe.

Table 1 shows that the proportion of people who expressed a negative opinion ('little or no confidence') on nine institutions or organizations in 1990. Among these nine institutions, six represent the State and the political regime: the parliament, the army, the police, and the public administration, the courts and social security. Three institutions, without being a direct part of the political system, contribute to its functioning: unions, big business and churches. For some people interviewed, the reason for lack of confidence is the inefficiency of institutions, while for others it is the abuse of power, favouritism, patronage and, in several countries, corruption.

The level of confidence in institutions should not be confused with the proportion of people who approve or disapprove of the manner in which governments resolve problems such as housing, unemployment, schooling, taxes, social security, pensions, etc. Opinions about these problems may be volatile and

Table 1. (a) 'No confidence at all' or 'not very much' in 1990

Parliament	Public		Courts Justice		
	Administration (%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	
Japan	71	Italy	75	Italy	68
Italy	68	Mexico	72	Portugal	59
Portugal	66	Portugal	69	Belgium	55
Mexico	65	Japan	66	Chile	55
Spain	63	Spain	64	Ireland	53
Canada	62	Germany	61	Spain	53
Denmark	58	Belgium	58	Mexico	46
Belgium	57	Britain	56	Britain	46
N. Ireland	55	Sweden	56	Canada	45
USA	55	Norway	56	N. Ireland	44
Britain	54	Netherlands	54	USA	44
Sweden	53	France	51	Sweden	44
France	52	Chile	51	France	42
Ireland	50	Canada	51	Japan	38
Germany	49	Denmark	49	Netherlands	36
Netherlands	48	N. Ireland	43	Germany	35
Norway	41	Ireland	41	Norway	25
Chile	37	USA	40	Switzerland	23
Switzerland	23	Switzerland	26	Denmark	21
Church	Army	Police			
(%)	(%)	(%)			(%)
Japan	89	Japan	76	Mexico	68
Netherlands	69	Belgium	68	Portugal	56
Sweden	63	Netherlands	68	Belgium	49
Germany	60	Germany	60	Spain	42
Britain	57	Chile	60	Japan	41
Norway	55	Spain	59	Chile	41
Denmark	53	Italy	57	Italy	36
Belgium	51	Denmark	54	France	34
Spain	51	Mexico	53	Germany	30
France	50	Portugal	53	Netherlands	27
Portugal	44	USA	52	Sweden	26
Italy	40	Sweden	51	USA	25
Canada	37	France	44	Britain	23
Switzerland	34	Canada	43	Switzerland	20
USA	33	Ireland	39	N. Ireland	20
Ireland	28	Norway	35	Canada	16
Mexico	24	Switzerland	32	Ireland	14
Chile	24	N. Ireland	21	Norway	12
N. Ireland	20	Britain	19	Denmark	11

Source: World Values Survey (1990)

Table 1. (b) 'No confidence at all' or 'not very much' in 1990

Unions	(%)	Large companies	(%)	Social security	(%)
N. Ireland	76	Japan	72	Britain	67
Japan	74	Denmark	62	Italy	64
Britain	74	Germany	62	Japan	57
Portugal	71	Portugal	55	Spain	55
Italy	68	Spain	54	Sweden	54
USA	67	Mexico	54	Portugal	53
Canada	65	N. Ireland	53	Norway	52
Germany	64	Netherlands	52	N. Ireland	52
Belgium	63	Britain	52	Mexico	52
Mexico	62	Belgium	50	USA	47
France	60	USA	49	Chile	47
Sweden	60	Canada	49	Ireland	41
Spain	60	Ireland	48	Canada	39
Ireland	58	Chile	47	Belgium	33
Denmark	54	Norway	47	Netherlands	32
Netherlands	46	Sweden	47	Denmark	30
Chile	43	Switzerland	44	Germany	30
Norway	41	Italy	37	France	30
Switzerland	40	France	33		

Source: World Values Survey (1990)

tied to ideologies. Opinions may vary with changes in partisan power. The majority of people may be dissatisfied with the way in which the government leads the country, but such opinions may indicate only an absence of confidence in the people who hold power. When a majority says that they disapprove of the manner in which the government treat the unemployment problem, they do not express distrust of the political regime itself but of some political decision makers. Other public opinion surveys conducted at the same time do not leave any doubt about the legitimacy of the regime. Such a distinction between judgement on particular problems, and the belief in the validity of the regime is needed for all European democracies.

One remains perplexed when one notes that, in most of the countries considered in Tables 1 and 3, the majority of the public has no confidence in parliament. The lack of credibility in this founding institution of democracy – which for a long time was the centre of gravity of democratic regimes – corresponds to its real decline in the functioning of representative democracies. In almost all countries, only a minority stated that it was confident in parliament. Other surveys confirmed that a significant minority of citizens, were judging the behaviour of

Table 2. Satisfaction with democracy in own country, 1995

	Very satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Not satisfied	Not at all	?
Italy	2	18	50	29	1
Portugal	3	39	37	17	5
Greece	4	26	44	25	1
Spain	5	36	39	17	4
France	4	44	36	15	2
Britain	5	43	36	11	5
Germany-East	6	42	40	10	2
Belgium	8	47	30	11	4
Austria	10	51	28	6	5
Finland	3	51	38	5	4
Germany-West	12	51	28	7	1
Sweden	5	50	33	9	3
Ireland	12	58	18	8	5
Denmark	19	64	14	2	1
Netherlands	9	60	24	4	3
Luxembourg	17	59	15	4	6

Source: Eurobarometer, Autumn 1995

parliamentarians severely and had no confidence in parliament, even though they believed that it should play a more important role. The level of mistrust has increased during the last decade.

In most democracies, the majority of people have a critical attitude regarding the 'necessary evil' of the public administration. Differences in appreciation that we observe among countries correspond to the perceptions that specialists have of the efficiency of public administration. The structure of the State – federal or centralized – does not seem to have an impact on the perception of the performance of public administration.

Recent and older military history of several European countries is rich in events that do not inspire full confidence in the army.⁷ This absence of confidence is not a new phenomenon. The novelty comes from the freedom to express oneself without fear and to show it empirically. Such a state of mind requires many commentaries. Anti-militarism in Belgium, the Netherlands and Austria may appear surprising. The army enjoys a good standing in Britain, and the French army has a medium rank.

The image of the police depends on several factors, first of all on its integrity and its recruitment methods. On the whole, the police, among the institutions

Table 3. Britain. Have you confidence in ...

		Satisfied (%)	Fairly (%)	Little (%)	Not at all (%)
Army	1983	52	36	8	4
	1987	35	48	12	3
Police	1983	39	44	12	5
	1987	33	46	15	5
Churches	1983	22	30	31	17
	1987	17	28	36	17
Courts	1983	18	40	30	12
	1987	9	38	39	10
Parliament	1983	17	37	33	13
	1987	8	36	40	15
High Administration	1983	11	35	38	16
	1987	8	36	41	15
Companies	1983	11	37	35	17
	1987	10	43	32	15
Unions	1983	6	17	39	38
	1987	6	20	38	24
Newspapers	1983	5	27	49	19
	1987	2	15	53	29

Source: April 1983

IIPO, 1983–1983, pp 336–7.

considered in Table 1, is the one that inspires the lowest mistrust. In all West European countries, except Greece, but not in Eastern Europe.

The surveys measured attitudes about the church as an institution and not religion as a belief. But there is, naturally, a significant relation between the confidence in churches as organized religion and the level of beliefs and religious practices in Catholic as well as Protestant countries.⁸ Such a correspondence has its logic, but it is likely that the people interviewed have attached different meanings to the word 'church'. For some, it concerned the position of the ecclesiastic hierarchy on issues such as birth control, abortion, divorce and eroticism. Other respondents reacted according to their anti-clericalism or agnosticism. True believers may show opposition to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and some agnostics or non-believers may sympathize with the church because of their own conservative attitudes in other domains. However, in most countries, the absolute majority of adults say they have 'little' or 'no' confidence in

Table 4. British political system at the margin of legitimacy

<i>Agree with the following reforms or judgements (%)</i>	
Adoption of a Bill of Rights	79
Britain needs a written constitution	59
Parliament does not have sufficient control over what the government does	52
The system of government in Britain is out of date	50
Parliament works very badly (11%); fairly badly (19 %), neither well or badly (22 %)	52
Dissatisfied with the way the House of Lords is doing its job these days	33
Replacing the House of Lords with an elected second chamber	43
British people should be able to force the government to hold a referendum: good idea	77
Ordinary voters do not have much power over government policies between election (none at all or little)	85
Fixing the length of parliament	57
Changing Britain's current electoral system to proportional representation	50
There should be a freedom of information act, giving the right of access to information	81
The present system of governing Britain needs a great deal of improvement or could be improved quite a lot	75

Source: ref. 27

ecclesiastical institutions. The situation has worsened during the last decade. This finding is, no doubt, one of the most astonishing in these international surveys on values. It raises an embarrassing question: what is the church's real audience in Western Europe today?

The Netherlands merits special attention because, after having been partitioned for a long time into denominational communities, it has become one of the most agnostic countries in Europe, where today people are trying to throw off the ecclesiastical framework. Similar rapid transformations have been observed in other countries. It is not astonishing that the church benefits from the greatest amount of confidence in Italy, Poland, Ireland, Mexico and Chile, Lithuania, Portugal and also, because of a certain social conformity, in the United States (see Table 1).

Another surprising finding is the discredit of unions in most democracies. The decline of unions is a well-known trend, carefully studied by social scientists. What is surprising is its magnitude. Huge majorities in post-industrial societies – whose development is characterized by social reforms achieved through union action – do not trust the 'main organizations of workers'. This change shows that a page of history has been turned. In Sweden, where a 'neo-corporatism' has been

Table 5. Trust according to age in nine European countries in 1981 and 1990. Proportion of people having great confidence in:

Age	Church		Army		Police	
	1981	1990	1981	1990	1981	1990
18–24	12	11	13	7	16	11
25–34	15	10	13	8	13	9
35–44	21	13	19	9	18	12
45–54	29	22	21	11	21	13
55–64	34	27	26	14	28	17
65 +	44	40	26	19	34	23
Mean over Europe	26	20	20	11	19	13
Age	Parliament		Big Business		Unions	
	1981	1990	1981	1990	1981	1990
18–24	5	4	5	8	4	4
25–34	6	4	4	6	4	4
35–44	9	5	7	7	5	5
45–54	10	5	8	7	6	5
55–64	11	8	10	9	7	6
65 +	16	11	10	10	8	7
Mean over Europe	10	6	7	8	6	5

Source: ref. 6

forged based on the strength of unions, three out of every five citizens said that they did not have confidence in unions.

One could explain the poor position of unions in British public opinion by their impact on the performance of business, and by the consequences of frequent strikes. In surveys conducted by the Gallup Institute, one-third of the British indicated that the unions were ‘the greatest threat to individual freedom’. However, it is true that the strength of the unions has been considerably reduced in the recent period. There are people who say that they have ‘no confidence in unions’, but who admit at the same time that they belong to a union, willingly or not. How do we explain the current weakness of one of the greatest social institutions of the early part of this century? Oligarchic trends continued to develop after the formulation of the ‘iron law of oligarchy’ by Roberto Michels at the beginning of the century.

Big business has always been criticized, rightly or wrongly. It has never inspired a large degree of confidence among industrial workers. In recent years, many workers who have admitted that jobs are created by big business and not by the state bureaucracy have changed their attitudes toward big business. For France, the surprise is great: the *patronat* is perceived in favourable terms to such a degree that, with the exception of social security, it is the institution that enjoys the largest amount of trust, in spite of decades of ideological criticism of big business. A similar phenomenon was visible in Italy (Table 1).

After a half-century of nationalization of large companies in Britain, France, Italy and elsewhere, and after the rich experience of state capitalism in Western Europe and the lessons learned from the socialist experience in Eastern Europe, the *grand patronat* today reflects a better image in the mirror of public opinion. For this category, there is not an erosion of confidence but a rehabilitation in the eyes of the public.

The principle of social security is widely accepted. What varies from one country to another is the practical functioning. Detailed studies have shown that its efficiency is more frequently perceived in France, Germany and Belgium than in Italy and Britain. This ranking appears in Table 1, which simplifies a wide variety of situations. Social security is not, strictly speaking, a political institution, but it is, nevertheless, the one that today gives rise to the hottest political debates in many European countries. The ideological 'left-right' dimension appears strikingly in this debate because the essential function of social security is the redistribution of income in advanced welfare states. This problem of redistribution is increasingly becoming one of the main sources of conflict and, consequently, of frustration and calculated mistrust. Today, social security is the Gordian knot of liberty–equality in all advanced democracies. Among the institutions considered in these tables, the school system is the most trusted, except in Greece.

Dissatisfaction with the political class and the political parties

Mistrust of whom? We can distinguish several levels. Mistrust, first of all, of the politicians who hold power at a particular moment. But if such mistrust persists in spite of the alternation of parties in power, it becomes a chronic attitude. What surveys constantly show is the negative attitude of a large part of the public toward the political elite in general, whatever their political bent. Careful research has shown that many voters do not vote *for* a party. They chose to vote *against* the candidates that they dislike the most.

In international surveys of professional ethics concerning the honesty of some 24 professions, politicians appear, in many countries, as 'the least worthy of confidence', at the same rank as 'used car salesmen' and 'real-estate agents', while doctors, pharmacists, school teachers and bankers inspire a lot of confidence. Such

an absence of confidence in parliamentarians seems incompatible with the fact that many of them succeed in being re-elected. Curiously, one values 'one's own representative' but not representatives in general. The popularity curves of the principal political figures, particularly prime ministers, rise and fall, and this implies that the erosion of confidence is only partially rooted in ideology, that the curves respond to government decisions and to the performance of political actors.

In several countries, people have been invited to formulate judgements periodically on the following issues. Do you have confidence in the government to make good decisions? Do you think the people in power waste the taxpayers' money? Do you think that leaders are knowledgeable people who know what they are doing or that many of them do not know? Do you think that politicians are honest, and, if so, many or a few of them? The responses to these questions asked every two years in the United States since 1952 by the Institute of Social Research at the University of Michigan and reproduced in many European countries in 1980, 1990 and 1995–2000 attest to an increase in negative attitudes toward political rulers.

Loss of popularity is a sociological given. With rare exceptions, presidents and Prime ministers lose during the exercise of their functions a significant part of the political capital that initially permitted them to rise to power. This loss may be gradual or abrupt, slow or rapid. There is, in the archives of surveys in many countries, a rich documentation of these sociological trends. The trajectory of leaders in public opinion depends first of all on their own actions, their choices or their lack of action. The trajectory also depends on factors that are outside their control. The loss of popularity can mostly be explained by the difficulty or the impossibility of keeping electoral promises. Such criticism appears in numerous surveys. Whether sincere promises or deliberate lies, sooner or later these commitments appear as imprudent or cynical.

Unpopularity is largely engendered by the 'hypocrisy of those who govern us'. The 'little screen' is a detector of hypocrisy, acting as a magnifying mirror. One needs to be a good actor to be able to dissimulate cynicism on television. The former French prime minister R. Barre admitted that 'political life is fundamentally hypocritical'. He said this (in a television broadcast on 2 May 1993) as if it were the formulation of a medical diagnosis. Hypocrisy, which may be inevitable in the art of politics, produces mistrust. It is for this reason that politicians who frequently appear on television lose, after a certain time, their credibility.

In various countries and, in particular, in presidential regimes and in prime ministerial systems, presidents and prime ministers have most of the time governed without the support of the majority of the public. Elected according to constitutional rules, most of them lose the support of the majority shortly after their election. Only retrospectively can historians claim that some of the leaders,

in spite of their unpopularity, nevertheless made wise decisions. It is a sociological fact today that, in most democracies, leaders behave as if they represent the majority of the population, while in reality they are supported only by a minority. This is one of the sources of political mistrust.

In France, the majority thought, according to several surveys, that politicians did not listen to what the people had to say. In 1996, large majorities believed that they were not represented by any political party (67%), nor by a union (77%), nor a political leader (68%). Many believed that most politicians were 'corrupt'.

How high can the level of unpopularity of a president or a prime minister go without undermining the legitimacy of the regime? The level of positive public opinion dropped to less than 20% for leaders as diverse as Major and Juppé, and the level of negative opinion reached more than 70%. Nevertheless, such unpopularity did not challenge the legitimacy of their functions. But if the gap between support and rejection persists, in spite of the alternation of parties and teams in power, does not legitimacy itself suffer? The experience of the last half-century demonstrates that democracy can accommodate itself to limited, partial and fluctuating confidence, even if the feeling of mistrust becomes chronic and massive. Only rarely does the regime lose its legitimacy, as for example, in France on the eve of the fall of the Fourth Republic or in Italy in the 1980s. It is a difficult task to determine when a regime passes furtively from discredit of the political class to the discredit of the institutions themselves.

The erosion of confidence is particularly noticeable regarding political parties, whose image has been degraded in almost all western democracies during recent decades, except in the Scandinavian countries. The number of party members has declined everywhere. The mass parties of yesterday have become parties of militants. Notorious examples are the social democratic parties and the most spectacular case is obviously the fall of the 'partitocrazia' in Italy.

'Parties are only interested in peoples' votes, not in their opinions or aspirations'. Such a statement submitted periodically to citizens in survey research was approved by strong majorities in many countries. Even in Sweden, where parties have been strong for a long time, the proportion of those who did not have confidence in parties rose from 36% in 1968 to 68% in 1992.

The decline of parties is related to many factors. The electoral volatility (not to be confused with long-term trends) often reflects the disappointment of a significant part of the electorate. The decrease in the number of active members and supporters has been the object of many well-known studies. All of these studies conclude that the main reasons are the disappointment with parties as organizations. The oligarchy of parties is not a new phenomenon, but has recently become more visible through the mass media, and consequently has generated more dissatisfaction. The weakening of parties could be also explained by the decline of ideologies.⁹⁻¹²

Mistrust generated by corruption and the role of the mass-media

In the European political forums, corruption is today more visible than in the past. A careful observation of the phenomenon of corruption during the last three decades in some countries, particularly Italy, France and Spain, tends to indicate that in the recent period there was, simultaneously, an increase in corruption involving politicians, and an increasing control and reporting of graft. The better uncovering of corruption results from the joint action of magistrates and journalists.

Action and rhetoric of politicians are today, more than ever in the past, under the spotlight of a counter-power, the mass-media. For the print or electronic media, bad news is 'better' than good news. However, the media do not engender this bad news, they only spread it. The media are vehicles, not political decision-makers, even if the power of some journalists, through the influence they exercise, is greater than that of many politicians. Investigative journalists, by alerting the courts, play the role of prosecutor. But it is the official judge who condemns or pardons.

The behaviour of governments and decision-making processes are, today, under the scrutiny of the media, which not only inform but monitor. Governments are controlled by voters only on election day – this is to say, only once in a while. But they are constantly supervised by the civil society, represented by the media. In fact, governments are perceived in the mirror of public opinion as they are portrayed by the journalist's pen. It is impossible to conceive of a truly democratic regime without powerful and independent journalists. Today, we may have democracy without powerful parties, but not without strong printed and electronic mass media.

The relation between democracy and scandal is fallacious. It is such a correlation, grounded in the independence of the judiciary and the freedom of the press, that has so often blinded enemies of democracy in France, Italy, the Weimar Republic, the Austrian Republic, Belgium and Spain.

In reality, a scandal is a redemptive act. It is because of a scandal that captain Dreyfus was rehabilitated. In democracy, scandal, if it is not too frequent, is a symptom of good democratic health. In some exceptional cases a scandal may appear as proof of democratic functioning and of the legitimacy of the system. In few countries is democracy solid enough to correct political error against the will of the army, or to require a chief of state to resign, as was the case with three Japanese Prime ministers, the Italian president Leone and the American President Nixon. It is time to revise the conceptions that moralists have spread about scandals. For scandals to blow up, two conditions are necessary, and these are found only in democracies: freedom of the press and independence of the courts. Scandals are symptoms of democratic vigour.

The impact of media can be demonstrated by content analysis of daily newspapers and weekly magazines. For instance, in the United States in the Spring of 1989 (April–June), three newspapers with circulation of millions of copies (*The New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Los Angeles Times*) reported, almost daily, court cases concerning wrong-doing and acts of corruption at the federal, state and large municipality levels.

Hundreds of pages have been written about corruption at the highest level of society in several European countries. Many politicians have been implicated in scandals and have been obliged to resign from their official functions. It is worthwhile mentioning that the Scandinavian democracies do not suffer from corruption as much as some other European countries.

In the domain of public corruption, some observers estimate that we see just the tip of the iceberg. When it becomes very frequent, citizens lose confidence in institutions. One cannot emphasize strongly enough the corrosive effects of corrupt behaviour on the loss of confidence in institutions.

Mistrust and corruption: France and Italy as clinical cases

France and Italy are quasi-experimental cases for the study of the relation between mistrust and corruption, because of the sudden intervention of the judicial authorities in the public forum. In both countries, for the first time in their history, magistrates played a crucial role by denouncing and prosecuting corruption at the highest level of the state hierarchy. One of the main reasons of this quasi-political role assumed by magistrates is related to the change in the social recruitment of a new generation of judges. Another important reason is the connection, i.e. the cooperation between magistrates and journalists, in the building of a functional ‘tandem’ between these two relatively independent actors in highly advanced democracies. These two groups have understood rapidly that they need each other: journalists without magistrates are blind; magistrates without journalists are mute. In Italy, ‘the revolution of magistrates’ started by accident, in 1992 (this accident has been the object of dozen of books and of the whole Italian printed and electronic media). In France, the awaking of magistrates occurred a few years later.

A distinction is needed, between petty corruption at the lower and middle level of society, and the crafty corruption at the elite level. The first is interpreted by many social scientists as ‘functional’, particularly in the developing countries. The second appears where money and power converge. We are here interested in the elitist corruption.

Another distinction is needed, between personal enrichment by corrupted practices and illegal partisan financing. Personal enrichment is unanimously condemned morally, politically and judicially. The second is the object of an open debate between ethical interpretation and pragmatic tolerance. Usually, the debate

about what is moral and what is immoral takes place in academic circles. However, the debate about public corruption took place in France and Italy in the printed and electronic media. In Italy, the trial of the most prominent leaders of the *partitocrazia* was a televised trial in front of a large part of the population, an audience of millions of citizens. The protagonists were, on one side, the magistrates and, on the other, many of the most notorious Italian politicians during more than two decades.

In a few years, the proportion of people who expressed a negative judgement about the dignity and honesty of political rulers increased from 33% to 70% (between 1967 and 1974); the dissatisfaction concerning the functioning of the State and of the public administration went from 35% to 83%, and the negative opinion of the competence and loyalty of political rulers went from 22% to 66%. A similar trend has been observed in France, but over a longer period of time. The chronology of survey results has an important sociological meaning. When the magistrates started their action in Italy in 1992, and in France in 1995, public opinion was already ripe and ready to applaud the prosecutors.

In France, political life has been, since 1996, largely a judicial chronicle as testified by a content analysis that I have done of the most prestigious French newspaper, *Le Monde*, which is read by almost the entire French political class, by all higher civil servants, and the industrial and financial elites.

This newspaper has published, during the five years between June 1996 and June 2001, 1500 issues of the journal (300 issues per year). The readers of this privileged observer of the top of the French society have found articles and reports on public corruption and political–financial scandals in 1300 of these 1500 days. In the majority of cases, the articles concerning political–judicial affairs took long columns or even entire pages. In about 300 issues, that is on average one in every five, political–financial affairs were presented on the front page.

If a content analysis were to be performed for other newspapers, similar findings would be obtained. Television networks have also assiduously reported the prosecution of political personalities.

By concocting a list of the most important actors in French politics during the decade 1990–2001 – say the 500 most visible and renowned politicians, having occupied prestigious positions (presidents, prime ministers, cabinet ministers, leaders of political parties), and most important of the 1000 parliamentarians (deputies and senators), mayors of the largest cities, executives of regional councils – I have found that about 160 of these 500 politicians have been investigated officially by the judges (the exact figure depends of definitions and criteria).

Among the personalities directly ‘mises en examen’ by the French judicial authorities or mentioned by the media as being under investigation are the following: the current present of the Republic; the entourage and members of the

family of the previous deceased president; a former president of the National Assembly; the president of the Constitutional Council, who was obliged to resign; several former prime ministers (one was obliged to resign); 30 of the cabinet ministers during the period 1995–2001; many leaders of the main political parties; many mayors of the largest cities; many executives of regional councils.

In a book sponsored by the National Assembly on the relationships between ‘politics and money’ one can read that ‘the confidence of citizens in their representatives is shaken’, that ‘the basis of republican legitimacy is “undermined”’, and that elected representatives are ‘victims of rumours, insinuations and calumnies’.

Survey research conducted in recent years shows that two in every three French citizens believe that ‘most politicians are not honest’. In 1990, and again in 1998, the National Assembly has decided on an amnesty of acts of illegal financing of political parties. But these amnesties have been condemned by a large majority of the French adult population, with such a severity that a new proposition of amnesty formulated in spring 2000 was considered ‘harmful’, ‘insupportable’ by the general public, and as ‘a provocation which risks to generated demonstrations in streets’. The project of a third amnesty is not on the agenda anymore.

Political leaders themselves acknowledge this mistrust, ‘On doit réhabiliter la fonction du politique et lutter contre le discrédit qui pèse sur l’ensemble de la classe politique’ declared President Jacques Chirac (6 November 1994). The former prime minister Michel Rocard wrote in November 1998 ‘François Mitterrand n’était pas un honnête homme’ (*Revue du Droit Public*). The former president Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, in an interview in June 1994, commenting on the mockery and the satirical treating of politicians in the written and electronic media, said: ‘Corruption does exist. It is indispensable to extirpate it, otherwise the political class will be eliminated’.

In Italy, in 1994, 6059 persons were under judicial investigation. Among them were 335 deputies, 100 senators, 331 regional councillors, 122 provincial councillors, 1525 communal councillors, 973 entrepreneurs and businessmen, 1373 civil servants.¹³ In the middle of these were the five party leaders of the *pentapartito* coalition, and four former prime ministers. The 435 deputies and senators represented almost half the elected parliamentarians.

During 1992 to 1994, the Italian newspapers have daily reported, over entire pages, the vicissitudes of the prosecutions for corruption. Never in the history of the European democracies had a political class been more humiliated than the Italian one during these 30 months. It would not be enough to say that the Italian political class had been decimated – which would imply that only a tenth of politicians were excluded from the forum. It was clearly decapitated. More than half of the Italian politicians at the top of the political pyramid were eliminated in the legislative elections that followed.

According to data published by the prosecutors of Milan in February 1995, in this city alone, there were investigated during the previous three years about 2500 persons, of whom 718 were preventively incarcerated. About 210 of these 2500 persons were condemned, at the first trial, but most have appealed to a higher judicial court. Only one person had been condemned definitely.

How to explain that a few dozens judges have been able to decapitate the powerful political class of the *partitocrazia*? It is generally admitted that one of the main reasons is the status of the magistracy, its independence and freedom of action, but this explanation applies more to Italy than to France.^{14,1,28,29} Another valid reason for both countries, is the already mentioned judiciary–media nexus. A prosecution becomes a political event only from the moment when journalists report and comment it. Revealing, interpreting, investigating by the media is a continuation of the work of the courts. The so-called ‘secret of judicial instruction’ is too often a pretext to hide political–financial scandals.¹⁶ In democratic regimes, the alliance between magistrates and journalists is the most efficient counter-power. Even in France, where many judges are placed under the control of the threatened politicians and their partisans, the journalists are the best protectors of the magistrates, who in turn, help the journalists to play their role as informants of the public, as opinion-guides.

For a variety of reasons, most politicians who were under judicial investigation had not been formally condemned, and those who were condemned, are not in jail. Many have benefited from amnesties. Many have escaped from condemnation because of prescription of their acts. Corrupted practices take time to be discovered and, often, when the affairs come to light, it is too late. Prescription forbids further prosecution. In addition, any judicial decision can be the object of an appeal at a higher level of the judicial hierarchy. Judicial proceedings are very slow. Relatively few of the investigated politicians were effectively arrested. Until the final condemnation they are protected by the principle of ‘presumption of innocence’. In France, but not in Italy, a vicious circle is perceived by millions of citizens. Powerful politicians appoint the prosecutors, who, too often, protect their godfathers. Finally, a small number of guilty politicians are in jail.

Nonetheless, most of those who were amnestied, or have benefited from prescription or who succeeded in delaying a formal and final condemnation, are politically wounded. From the very first day when their name appeared in the media for corrupt behaviour, their political credit and influence are abruptly diminished.

A scandal is a redemptive act. Even if someone is not formally condemned, even if he or she is not in jail, by the simple fact of being under investigation, they are severely wounded and condemned to ‘civil death’, or at least to a political temporary exclusion.

A judicial prosecution or journalistic information is a sanction by itself,

damaging the prestige and authority of the politician, even if, subsequently, the suspected cabinet minister, or mayor, is found 'not guilty'. In France, a non-written ethical rule obliges the incriminated holder of an important political position, to resign immediately. Such an exclusion from the political forum is a kind of civil death.

Politicians are powerful people but also very vulnerable. Most cases of political corruption arrive at the ear of the magistrates and journalists by denunciations, formulated by political enemies, by associated-rivals, by partners-in-connivance and by accomplices-in-pacts. Among political enemies the fight is open according to the democratic rules, but enemies do not share secrets. They know how to protect themselves from frontal attacks. However, associated-rivals are, in normal times, rivals as much as allies as, for instance, are factional leaders within the same party. In some circumstances associated-rivals may become dangerous enemies because they can hurt each other by revealing some secrets, notably in matters of corruption.

Partners-in-connivance establish transversal alliances, they protect each other, as recently seen in France. The French media, however, have denounced such a connivance at the summit of the State. This led an important politician, the leader of a party and candidate for the presidential election of May 2002 to recall to audiences in September 2001 that 'the fish becomes rotten by the head'. Accomplices-in-pact is another type of vulnerability. When a member of a chain becomes a loser, there is a high risk of scandal for the entire chain.

These four types of vulnerability appear only in democratic regimes. In dictatorships, corrupted politicians are not vulnerable – at least most of the time. Ironically, the revealing of a political-financial scandal is, for a democratic regime, a positive act.

Legitimacy and dissatisfaction

Given such an erosion of confidence in institutions – in particular concerning parliament as a central institution – a phenomenon which has persisted for two decades in some democracies and longer in others, one wonders if there is in the old democracies a risk of challenging the legitimacy of the political regime. The reply to such a question should not be speculative. It should be based on empirical data. There is not a single country in the world where all the people perceive the regime as totally legitimate. Legitimacy comes in degrees. Ranking a regime on a scale from minimum to maximum of legitimacy is a valid approach for comparative analysis of political systems. Many scholars have felt the need of such scaling: 'Legitimacy runs the scale from complete acclaim to complete rejection ... ranging all the way from support, consent, compliance through decline, erosion and loss. In case of conscious rejection we may speak of

illegitimacy'.¹⁷ As Juan Linz¹⁸ stresses, 'no political regime is legitimate for 100 per cent of the population, nor in all its commands, nor forever, and probably very few are totally illegitimate based only on coercion'.

Legitimacy never reaches unanimity. All groups and all individuals do not evaluate equally the authority of the political power. There are apathetic strata and rebellious subcultures, pacifist opponents and armed terrorists, and between these extremes the majority is only partially convinced of the government's pretension to legitimacy. David Easton³¹ believes that frequent violation of the law and dissident movements are an indication of the degree of legitimacy. However, in empirical research it is difficult to identify and to measure this phenomenon.

There is often confusion between legitimacy and legality.³⁰ In a democracy, governments change periodically. It is considered as legitimate precisely because there are rules concerning the replacement of the holders of political power. Hostility toward the party in power is compatible with the belief in the wisdom of the regime. Occasional violations of constitutional rules do not undermine the legitimacy of the political regime. What is lost in such a situation is the confidence in a particular institution and in its leaders. A distinction between the legitimacy of the regime and the confidence in certain institutions or rulers is necessary because no institution can totally escape the criticism of some of the population. Unanimity is a ridiculous pretension of totalitarian regimes.

The available documentation does not permit us to say that democratic legitimacy has been contested.³² The majority of citizens are favourable to improving political regimes by reforms according to democratic rules (cf. *Eurobarometer*¹⁹), but between conventional reforms and revolutionary agitation there are many forms of action and pressure. Another question raised by *Eurobarometer* (in December 1995) was whether a high proportion of citizens were satisfied with the functioning of democracy. In all of Western Europe, one out of every two citizens declared that he or she was dissatisfied with the way in which democracy was functioning in his or her own country. In most cases this signifies a desire for improvement. The dissatisfaction regarding the functioning of institutions does not challenge the legitimacy of the regime. A pertinent question has been asked many times in various countries, inviting people to choose from three propositions concerning the issue of legitimacy. (1) Accept overall the existing law, our present system of government and our society. (2) See many shortcomings in our present system. Believe in a gradual improvement within the existing system of government. (3) Completely reject the existing law, our present system of government and our society – the only solution is complete social change.

The first proposition implies a belief in the legitimacy of the regime; the second bears witness to the conviction that, in spite of all insufficiencies, the existing regime is the best conceivable and that, in addition, it is unprovable. The third

indicates that the existing regime is perceived as illegitimate. In most countries, the proportion of people who chose the third option was small. In some countries the proportion was relatively significant, (more than 10%) particularly in France and Italy.

How far can the level of confidence fall before it disrupts the foundations of democracy? Italy can serve here as an empirical demonstration. Between 1991 and 1994, this country experienced an implosion that eliminated important political parties from the political arena, brought about a change of ideology and of the name of parties, and provoked a hecatomb of the political class following a large number of scandals of corruption. The corrosive effect of corruption on the regime's legitimacy appeared clearly. Nevertheless, democracy has not collapsed, it has spontaneously reconstructed itself. Even in this extreme case, democracy proved itself ineradicable.

Today, most citizens cannot conceive of an alternative solution to a democratic regime. The available documentation does not allow us to conclude a rejection of the basic civic culture. The only exception that comes to mind is Russia, but this is an exception that confirms the rule: today, Russia is a democracy in gestation, it is not yet an advanced democracy.

In their book, *The Confidence Gap*, Lipset and Schneider²⁰ arrived at the same diagnosis. They asked if there was a crisis of legitimacy in the United States. Their interpretation is that 'people lose confidence in their leadership much easier than in the system' and that 'the public has become more and more critical about the performance of the major institutions'. Their conclusion is that 'the loss of confidence has positive and negative aspects. It is real because the Americans are extremely dissatisfied with the performance of their institutions. It is in some sense superficial because Americans have not yet reached the rejection point of these institutions'.

Substantial empirical evidence covering Western democracies obliges us to make a clear distinction between the legitimacy of the regime, confidence in institutions, and popularity of governments. In a democratic country, even if the number of dissatisfied people is high for a long period of time, the legitimacy of the regime is not challenged, except in the case of economic, military or political disaster.²¹ The democratic regime does not collapse because there is no better alternative than to reform democracy in a democratic way. The virtue of democracy is that it offers the possibility of change according to the rules of the political game. It is easier to avoid errors when one can anticipate the actions of others. This is what Carl Friedrich calls the 'rules of anticipated reaction'. Such a quasi-medical precept is particularly useful when one analyses the erosion of confidence and seeks a remedy.

It is not because we are convinced that democracy is the best system of government that we should refrain from admitting that it is not perfect, that it

contains disfunctions and injustices, that it can, as living organisms, experience pathological trends that engender feelings of alienation.

The legitimacy of a democratic regime is not contested in any of the western post-industrial democracies, but the persistence of low confidence shows that we are in the presence of serious disfunctions.^{4,22-27}

The development of mass communications and the increasing intervention of the state in all domains have created what is called governmental overload. Intermittent voting rites are no longer sufficient. Parliament is no longer a privileged centre of power. To the old constitutional theory of parliament mandate is gradually substituted a permanent surveillance of institutions and their leaders by frequent recourse to surveys of public opinion. Parliamentary elections take place every four or five years, but surveys can be conducted every month. Parliamentary democracy becomes increasingly survey-directed, giving citizens the possibility of expressing themselves on concrete problems. In all countries, politicians are sensitive to the results of surveys.

Overloaded with conflicting tasks, governments cannot satisfy all aspirations. By its omnipresence, the state engenders doubt and dissatisfaction. In this statist society, a large part of the GNP is collected and redistributed by the state according to criteria and methods that are contested by certain categories of the population, disadvantaged or privileged. Citizens depend more and more on a government in which they have less and less confidence. The more powerful the state, the less efficient it seems to be. The more generous it is, the less impartial it appears. As a result, citizens are manifesting scepticism. Advanced democracy today is in a paradoxical situation. The more it develops, the more it demands of a powerful government. But a free society does not support a too-powerful government. It is for this reason that the arrows of discontent and distrust are directed against the central government and its institutions.

What types of citizens do we need in a democracy: ignorant, naive, deferential, sheep-like, credulous, believers in myths? Or do we need informed citizens, demythologized, who are at the crossroads of multiple influences and cleavages, in brief, rationally distrustful citizens? A good critical scepticism can only consolidate democracy. By a crisis of confidence, we must understand rather the collective aspiration to more democracy, and not a loss of faith in its fundamental values. All political philosophers have said and repeated: democracy is the least bad political system. Erosion of confidence is first of all a sign of political maturity. It is not so much that democracy has deteriorated, but rather the critical spirit of most citizens has improved. What has changed during the last few decades is the perception we have of the performance of the political system.

Pluralist democracy is today becoming less governable, not so much because of government overload, but rather because of the diffusion throughout all strata

of society of a mitigated confidence or, in other words, of rational distrust nourished by experience.

One of the principal lessons to be drawn is that electoral procedures are no longer sufficient for building confidence in representative democracy. Today, citizens' judgement is no longer expressed only once in a while at election time; it is pronounced weekly or monthly. Contrary to classical theories, and to some old, sometimes dusty, constitutional practices (as in Britain) (see Tables 3 and 4), the electoral procedure today – while it is irreplaceable and rightly sanctified – can no longer ensure the harmonious operating and full legitimacy of democratic regimes in the most developed and demanding countries. From one electoral rite to another, choices must be made and decisions must be taken for which the vote expresses a vague indication, which is too often misleading. Deception, frustration and discontent are the inevitable results particularly for the younger generation (see Table 5). Surveys conducted according to the rules of the art under the supervision of a constitutional court can usefully complement universal suffrage. It is not inconceivable that one day such a survey will be institutionalized in certain domains, at least on a consultative basis and without decision-making power, as participation of large social strata in the great political debates. Since there are too many disfunctions in the most advanced democracies (and even more in other kinds of regimes), the venerable parliamentarianism is called upon to enlarge the political forum.

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