



Pandora's box: The two sides of the public sphere

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Abstract

The public sphere is the site where the collective will of the people is formed. The thesis is that to the extent that the people are constructed as entities that pre-exist their collective will, the public sphere contributes to fostering the evil among a people and between the people. This is discussed using the cases of nationalism, sovereigntism and populism. The narrative of Pandora's box provides the analytical leverage for retelling the theory of the public sphere. The story is that after the evils escaped Pandora's box, hope remained. This leads to two propositions: hope as preventing the closing off of the future of a people and hope as fostering collective learning processes that rectify the evils. These propositions provide the ground for a critical theory of the public sphere in which the force of the better argument is insufficient to explain the capability of a people to rectify the bad. It is a theory in which social relations matter that turn individuals into a people beyond national, statist or populist containers, making a people that is open to define and redefine itself in collective learning processes.

Keywords

Collective learning, collective will formation, democracy, normative theory, social relations

Democracy and the public sphere – An ambivalent relationship

Democracy depends on a vibrant public sphere – this statement belongs to the standard arguments defending democracy.¹ This assumption puts the public sphere, that is, the debate among free and equal people (or citizens) at the centre of the theory of democracy. Yet, arguments about the decline of the public sphere which are as old as the

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argument about its conditionality for democracy have questioned this assumption. Progressives observed that enlightenment grows as does counter-enlightenment. Conservatives lamented the destruction of social bonds and the loss of community by pushing the enlightenment project. Even the great thinkers of the public sphere reasoned about the decline of the public sphere through market forces or symbolic violence.

Defenders insist on the public sphere as a site of collective learning processes, whereas critics insist on the public sphere as a source of denunciation, lies and deception. Even more so, the public sphere instead of fostering equality among participants is said to enhance inequality among them, privileging some more than others. In fact, both observations can claim empirical evidence. The normative theory of the public sphere solves this double face of the public sphere by describing the empirical social world as an aberration, as a pathology, thus relegating it to the bad. I propose to start with the 'normality' of the bad in the empirical social world, and on this basis to enquire into the processes that might rectify the bad in the social world.

To develop theorizing in this direction, I will make use of two different stories: the first story is taken from the Book of Job, a Biblical narrative stating the problem of theodicy, and a second narrative tool taken from Greek mythology: the story of Pandora's box which is a story of how the evil came into the world. The public sphere in the first story is turned into a world which claims to be good yet does not get away with evil. The second story takes the public sphere as the world into which the evils well closed in Pandora's box escaped and where they remained since they could no longer be called back. Both stories provide a rather dire picture of the public sphere that runs against the standard theory that emancipating the public sphere from authoritarian control provides the site for democratic collective will formation. This theory does not reckon with the other side of the public sphere in which evils are circulated through the medium of public debate.

Attributing to what is circulating among people, the attribute of being or becoming something that is reasonable undermines the theoretical assumption of the normative theory of the public sphere as fostering democracy. The collective will of the people, the basic referent for democracy, is generated in a public sphere in which the good and the evil circulate equally well. This ambivalence is the key to rethinking the theory of the public sphere.

The collective will of the people emerging from public communication is equally exposed to the good and to the bad. How does a people succeed in keeping the good and rectifying the bad? This requires a people that does not exclude other people from will formation.

The construction of a people capable of forming a collective will after its emancipation from being bound to a higher social order (this is what is meant by 'becoming modern') contained already the roots of its self-deconstruction: the people was constructed as a people that includes only some people. There were different ways of drawing boundaries for excluding people. The people defined themselves as a national people, as subjects of a sovereign state or as a people defending a moral culture perceived as being threatened by others. Such constructions close off other people that do not fit the conditions for membership in a people. Nationalists, sovereigntists and populists argue that they 'are' the people. Anti-nationalists, anti-sovereigntists and anti-

populists argue that they want to ‘become’ a people. This difference is built on two opposing stories: the story of ‘being’ a people and the story of ‘becoming’ a people.² Thus, there are always more than one people that can be heard in the public sphere.

There is one people who is capable to rectify the bad, and there is one people who already knows the good and therefore does not need to rectify the bad that emerges from its collective will. Within society these two people stand in a conflictual relationship that is hard to reconcile. The public sphere turns out to be a sphere where reason is claimed by the people yet outcomes are produced that in some cases in fact foster the good, but more often foster the bad. The reason operative in the public sphere produces reasonable and unreasonable outcomes. The regulative idea of the public sphere is equally unreason as it is reason.

This double effect of the public sphere has been noticed as its fall or decline (Habermas, 1992; Sennett, 1977). The ‘fall of reason’ in the public sphere is attributed to external factors such as capitalism that blocks instrumentalizes public communication and turns it into an ‘unfinished project’. Another attempt has been to see the public sphere as a field of social struggles (Bourdieu, 1980). Mouffe has radicalized this idea making such struggles a constitutive element of ‘agonistic’ democracy (Mouffe, 2013). This proposition leaves open the question of the self-limiting capacity of the agonistic rules of the game when unreasonable outcomes dominate the game. The more disillusioning about the benevolent outcomes of people engaging in the public sphere spreads among a people, the more the public sphere turns into a space for missionary zeal for one’s arguments or devastating sarcasm about what the will of the people is.

This brings back the issue of theodicy: Why does reason allow so much unreason in the world? Apart from being a provocation for a normative theory of the public sphere, a social theory of the public sphere has to answer the question of how society reproduces itself while permanently violating the rules of living together in peace.

The double face of the public sphere: *Volonté des tous* and *volonté générale*

Irritations about the public sphere

This experience is not something new in the modern history of the public sphere (Eder, 1985). It has been perceived from its beginnings also as a danger for the social order which has fuelled the conservative backlash against enlightenment thinking debate since then. Over time ups and downs between the conservative and progressive fractions of the people emerged and provided an irritation regarding the possibility of a collective will of the people.

The public sphere added further irritations. That there is the bad lurking in the back started with the observation that by doing away with censorship, people are unbound to start talking badly about each other. Denouncing the other as villains and producing unfounded claims about facts and organizing such elements into ‘theories’ (mostly conspiracy theories) and ‘narratives’ (narratives of the other as the enemy) produce a cacophonous situation. Since everybody can claim the right of freely expressing one’s will, the public sphere becomes not only a site of competing master narratives such as

those between progressivism and conservatism but also a site of bad talking about the other which raised the moral stakes in public debates.

These irritations have set into motion a process of normative disillusioning about the public sphere. How is it possible (if at all) that a collective will emerges in the public sphere that makes the good win over the bad, the angels over the devil, God over the monsters? Since this victory nowhere pops up, we are back in the position of Job who was desperate about God's will. God did not explain why the bad is in the world. Reason behaves in an analogous way in the postbiblical world: Reason tells us what to do, but it remains helpless in front of the unreason produced in the public sphere. Unreason unfolds in the medium of reason. How can public reason emerge from a public sphere which even increasingly produced good reasons for fostering the bad?

The answer could be psychological. The problem of differing wills in the public sphere could be explained by the aggregation of psychological dispositions of human beings (Fehr & Gintis, 2007). The public sphere in this model is the site where individual dispositions are aggregated into collective dispositions. This model has provided a successful analytical framework for public opinion research (with effects on voting behaviour where democratic institutions are installed). The collective will of the people is their collective opinion, a public opinion (which, as Bourdieu has argued, doesn't exist (Bourdieu, 1980)).

Another model is to assume that the public sphere produces an emergent property, a collective will of the people that transcends the volatility and distortions that permeate public debate and that forces people into common will that is stronger than their individual wills. The psychological model obviously corresponds to what has been called 'volonté de tous'. The second model claims that there is a collective will that transcends the 'volonté de tous', namely a 'volonté générale'. This is Rousseau's idea and problem. He discusses at length the conditions that generate a 'volonté générale' beyond the 'volonté de tous'. His theorizing remains inconclusive, yet the way in which he tries to address the question is worth looking at and helpful to solve the riddle of unreason produced by a public sphere claiming to provide a rational will of the people.

The search of a volonté générale: The people's will

Rousseau's theory (Rousseau, 1762) starts with the idea that individual wills are transformed into something that is not reducible to these wills. It assumes that the diversity of individuals wills (including the most disgusting ones for some within in a people) can be turned into a general will by a process of collective will formation. If the people sufficiently informed would deliberate, the volonté générale would necessarily result from maximizing the numbers of entities and minimizing (particularistic) communicative bonds among them. As soon as people enter groups (i.e. enter particularistic communicative relations), the maximizing principle would be violated, and the will of the people would increasingly turn into a non-general will. This process could be corrected by maximizing the number of groups of individuals that guarantee the supposed mechanism to work. As soon as individuals (or groups of individuals in the second-best case) start to coordinate their private wills and act under a self-imposed 'veil of ignorance', that is, under the condition of ignoring pre-existing communicative bonds, then a general

will is the necessary outcome. The general will, as opposed to a sum of private wills, is a will targeting the common good, as opposed to a will targeting the individual good. When a general will emerges, then the general will does not err. If the people act on behalf of one group or a few groups, then the *volonté générale* remains a *volonté de tous* and is prone to err.

Three empirical issues in this theory need to be clarified. The first empirical issue is how to define the boundaries of the people that take part in collective will formation (the 'who-question'). The second issue is the procedure of the levelling of particularistic interests (the 'how-question'). The third issue is to know whether the outcome of collective will formation (the 'what-question') is accepted as a general will of and by the people. What the general will is therefore depends on (1) who has taken part in this collective will formation, (2) how this collective will is generated and (3) whether the outcome of collective will formation is contested.

The third issue is crucial. It is the problem of 'updating' and even 'bettering' the general will which, by definition, does not err. Therefore, the general will has to be defended against its enemies. Empirically, this means that some (a group) and in the extreme case one actor (Hardin, 1995) starts to 'act in the name of the people'. Rousseau's solution is an institutional set-up that defends the general will of the people. Yet the *volonté générale* evolves, and the question is how to allow for such evolution, in other words: to enable the formation of a general will as a collective learning process.

Rousseau keeps the idea that a general will cannot err. But this is a costly theoretical move. He blocks the possibility of theoretically understanding the dynamics of general will formation. Instead, he introduces 'naturalizing' assumptions about who the people are (Somers, 1995). Naturalization means that elements of the social world are taken for granted, thus escaping the problem of their being made. Rousseau does so by assuming that the general will of the people emerges exclusively within the container of the state. The state is filled with a people, the boundaries of which are defined objectively by the state and its law and subjectively by the identification of a people with the state. The people become the people defined as citizens of a state and as citizens recognizing each other as part of a nation. Rousseau in this way naturalizes the people in a double way: as existing through the state and as existing as a nation. Such naturalization avoids taking up the problem of the temporality of a general will. Instead, he closes off the story of collective will formation – the people interacting in idealized social contexts cannot err. Nonideal circumstances retransform the general into the will of the many.

How to solve Rousseau's paradox without re-naturalizing the collective will of the people as a general will? Assuming that (a) the will of the people pre-exists the constitutional order of the state, and (b) the will of the people is never coming to an end and permanently errs, Rousseau's theory of a naturalized people provides the grounds for a counterfactual theory of collective will formation.

The people in the 'counterfactual' situation of collective will formation

Rousseau's theory of forming a general can be seen as an exercise in counterfactual theorizing. He argues that if the people sufficiently deliberate well and if the citizens do not communicate with each other (outside this deliberation), then out of the many little

differences (among the citizens) resulting from this ideal situation a general will emerges. Three conditionals for the ideal outcome are thus defined: (1) sufficient deliberation, (2) maximizing the number of differences, that is, the number of units engaging in deliberation and (3) no communication among the citizens outside the process of general will formation.

This model is astonishingly similar to Habermas' counterfactual construction of reaching a consensus in the counterfactual discursive situation (Habermas, 1984). Habermas' counterfactual theory of rational discourse assumes that people who deliberate long enough for sorting out their particularistic interests can reach a reasonable consensus. Three conditionals guarantee the ideal outcome: (a) time-indifferent deliberation, (b) neutralizing the factual differences among those concerned and (c) exposing the interests of all involved to the test of their generalizability.

Both authors offer a theory of an ideal situation of collective will formation. Contrary to liberal authors who assume a veil of ignorance in the process of will formation as the best way to form a rational collective will that optimizes the interests of all (Rawls, 1971, 1985, 2001), both, Rousseau and Habermas, do the opposite: to force all those involved to put their interests on the table. This is a heroic assumption. In social interaction, people hide their private interest by presenting them as if they were in the interest of all. Even regarding the non-communication rule of Rousseau both authors converge: to avoid power differentials in collective will formation that may distort this process, people must leave their communities of communication (in Habermas: their lifeworlds) and engage in a hypothetical exercise of will formation. The individuals entering this situation might get out of it as a different people. What marks the difference between both authors: in Rousseau the people are subject to their general will, in Habermas they engage in the permanent reconstruction of the general will. This is the anti-naturalist position against Rousseau's naturalism.

Yet both authors share a theoretical assumption: they take the social reality of collective will formation as something that in the counterfactual construction fosters, but empirically disrupts, collective will formation. Rousseau smoothens the idealizing non-communication rule by assuming that the number of differences/units in the will formation process must be sufficiently high. There are different points along a continuum ranging from the *volonté générale* to the *volonté de tous*. Where the point is when a process of will formation turns to the one or the other end of the continuum is not specified. But it offers an analytical lever for real processes of will formation.

Rousseau and Habermas offer a theory that describes the way from the *volonté de tous* to the *volonté générale*. Yet that theory works only under idealizing sociological assumptions. In real contexts, we end up in a world that turns the ideal world of forming a general will into its opposite: Rousseau's idealizing assumptions about making the people form a general will produce perverse effects, and Habermas' idealizing assumptions exist side by side with a world that remains unaffected by communicative rationality, that keeps communicative irrationality and fosters unreason. When unreason is overwhelming the rational power of the argument and blocking the rectification of unreasonable arguments in the public sphere, then the question comes up: What saves the people from unreason? What unblocks the rectifying power of reason and helps to interrupt the permanent decline of the public sphere? So far, we have only normative

answers assuming a counterfactual necessity for the unfolding of reason: either God, or its secular substitute, Reason, will do it.

A different answer is explored in the following: it is the people who must do it. But how can the people do it when the public sphere appears as a battleground for power struggles and expands the bad in public communication?

Opening Pandora's box

Blocking the people: Perverse effects of generating a 'volonté générale'

Looking at the people is like opening Pandora's box. The story of Pandora's box tells that it is human beings that brought unreason into the world and that it is human beings who get around with the mess they created. In this story, neither God nor Reason come in to save from the bads in the world (there are, however, gods and half-gods in Pandora's story who behave like human beings). Pandora's box is a narrative representation of a public sphere. The closed box keeps the evils contained in it from spreading into the social world. When the box is opened, the evils escape. There is nobody to stop that escape except those who are affected by it.

The problem has already been noted by early critics of the theory and the empirical performance of the public sphere. They already warned that it is full of lies, denunciation and bad wishes against the others. Opening the public sphere and leaving public communication to its own dynamics will foster the evil in the world. It is easy to criticize public spheres that foster negative feelings against others and positive feelings towards one's ingroup from a normative point of view: such public spheres violate the principles of truth, of moral reciprocity and sincerity. But still we do not know what to do with the evils that have escaped the box.

The story about Pandora's box does not tell us what happens after opening the box. We are told that Pandora could not put them back into the box. Opening Pandora's box fosters the evil among a people. The story tells us about effects that counteract the good among a people. Rousseau has been aware of such perverse effects when discussing the reduction of the *volonté générale* to the *volonté de tous*. Rousseau's theoretical effort has been to find a way to counteract the evil by elaborating conditions allowing to correct the perverse effects of the *volonté de tous* by a *volonté générale*. This is like putting the evils back into the box. Yet the story of Pandora tells that putting the evils back into the box is impossible. Habermas is putting more trust in the rationalizing power of public debate which is said to contain the bads. This equally is an attempt of putting the evil back into Pandora's box.

What to do if the evil remains in the world? Following the story of Pandora's box, the recipe is to make individuals into a 'people' capable of acting collectively upon evils that escaped Pandora's box. The solution to the problem is to empower the people to act upon the evil in the world. The critical problem for such empowerment is how individuals are turned into a people, into a 'we'. Since social relations move at the edge of an abyss, always running the risk of social relations breaking down, something is needed to foster social relations among individuals to turn them in a people capable of forming a collective will.

Historically, the variety of democracies that have emerged builds upon types of constructing social relations among individuals. I will discuss three ideal types of social relations that make individuals into people, using the cases of nationalism, sovereigntism and populism. These cases are at the same time cases of a 'learning people' as they are cases of a 'blocked people'. The cases make clear that the cures foreseen by Rousseau are self-defeating and the cures foreseen by Habermas are insufficient. Nationalism turns people into groups with exclusive boundaries against others. The State turns people into 'subjects' (in the literal meaning of being subject to somebody) of the state. And populism turns people into an exclusive group defending the people against its enemies (such as elites, foreigners, cancel culture and so on). The requirement of a homogeneity of the people ends in nationalism, the requirement of the state as the exclusive container of a people ends in sovereigntism and the requirement of defending the people against its enemies ends in populism.³

The three 'cases' are analysed as 'ideal types' that in the real world of people come up in combinations. The naming of these three ideal types uses semantic conventions that are taken for granted in political discourse. In this sense, the adjectives 'nationalist', 'sovereigntist' or 'populist' are nothing more than markers for ordering the debate on the perverse effects of attempts of turning individuals into people.

Three cases of the making of a people

Nationalism: Turning the people into a nation. Since the seventeenth century, the people were turned into an encompassing group: the nation. The French Revolution succeeded in turning peasants and others into Frenchmen. The nation above regional groups, estates and classes is, as Rousseau said in line with the revolutionary agenda of his times, the privileged collective actor that can form a collective will. This collective will, seen as something above interests and interest groups, guarantees that nothing intervenes between the people and their will. Groups below the boundary of the nation are considered to defend a particular interest whereas the nation is supposed to be able to defend a general interest.

Since many nations exist, we run into the problem of as many general wills as there are nations. This threatens to undermine the validity of the general will of the people. Therefore, the nation needs to block communication with other nations to avoid the undermining of the general validity of its will. This creates the typical paradox of universalist claims: the nation functions like an exclusive group which claims to act in the name of the universal. To keep this image of representing the universal and claiming the general will to be universal, the nation needs to be evoked, venerated, enthroned in a series of rituals that keep the nation uncontested.

To keep the nation uncontested means to block equal recognition of the other beyond the boundaries of the nation. Within the nation, the equality of those belonging to the nation has served for democratizing state structures: the increasing inclusiveness within the nation corroborates the uncontestedness of the nation. The people could become one people beyond the differences, especially beyond class, gender, in rare cases beyond ethnic boundaries. Outside the nation, the state of nature is shaping social relations.

This solution had perverse effects – the experiences of wars between nations in the name of nations or even in the name of people have (at least partially) desacralized the nation. The classic version of the nation as the carrier of a general will is gone with the end of the Westphalian order. The transnational world has become normal and upholding the national boundaries has made visible the particularistic endeavour. Thus, the nation is good for one's nation (defend our country against exploiters) but bad for other nations. The return of slogans such as 'We have to defend our country' contributes to reviving the state of nature between nations.

These well-known observations lead into a paradox: how is it possible that a story such as becoming and being a nation continues to exist despite the obvious perverse effects of generating a collective will of the people within the container of the nation. This idea not only survives amidst traditionally oriented people but also among liberal intellectuals and in the political left. It turns out to be a stable collective illusion about the general will of the people. Pandora's box is not yet opened.

Sovereignism: Turning the people into subjects of a state. Instead of referring to the nation as a quasi-natural political community, sovereignism provides another solution to the riddle of generating a general will above the wills of the many: the state within which people are allowed and supposed to act together. The state equally contains elements of the sacred, be it a notion of the state as an ultimate reference for people to be a people, be it through institutional links with tradition such as monarchical and/or religious elements.

The state enables collective will formation through procedural arrangements (especially citizenship rights and institutional designs) and sets procedural rules for collective will formation. As soon as a general will is established through procedural rules set by the state such as election procedures, the general will is fixed for a restricted period (until the next election) or even longer when the *volonté de tous* expressed in referenda is taken to be the general will that blocks the people from correcting their will afterwards (as happened in the Brexit case).

This makes visible the danger of perverse effects of marrying the people with the state. The more the sovereignist justification of the state is emphasized, the more the state blocks the people's will. To the extent that the people's will extends to the realm of politics between states and outside the state, the sovereignty of the people is reduced to a particular sovereignty which is the sovereignty of the state people live in by chance of birth or migration.

Benhabib offers a similar argument, couching it in a critique of state sovereignist notions. Her argument states that human rights regimes provide a mechanism for pushing collective will formation beyond the constraints of the national constitutional state by what she calls democratic iterations (Benhabib, 2016). This comes close to the idea that collective will-formation can go beyond the classic limits of the nation-state when people engage in issues that might even go against the national state. Such 'politicization of world politics' (Zürn, 2014) undermines even more the idea of a people defined to be a sovereign as subjects of (or to) a state. The more the general will of the people can no longer be realized within the nation-state container, the more state-bound claims of

sovereignty of the people are self-defeating: the general will be bound to a sovereign people only in terms of the sovereignty of the state.

Sovereigntism is the idea that the general will of the people is identical to the will of the state. The sovereignty of the people is guaranteed by the sovereignty of the state, an imagery that has gained a quasi-sacred status: the sovereignty of the state is holy from which derives the holiness of the will of the people. Rousseau's idea of the state as the container of the general will of the people produces the perverse effect of sacrificing the sovereignty of the people on the altar of the sovereignty of the state. Any deviation of the will of the people from the will of the state produces the prosecution of those deviating voices and makes the authoritarian state the embodiment of the general will.

Populism: Turning the people into agents of moral crusades. Populism is going beyond the model of turning people into nations or into subjects of a state. It is based on the model turning people into believers in a group that defends the freedom of the people. The people are united in a moral crusade against the enemies of the people, elites, foreigners or dissenters (cancel culture). This model works so well because it allows to identify the source of all evils in the world in the enemies that threaten the freedom of the people.

This is a situation that Rousseau has not foreseen. His idea to do away with intermediate groups to minimize the opportunities for pushing interests in the formation of a general will of the people is in fact taken up by transforming the will of the individual into the higher will of a moral project. Such a general will does not emerge in processes of communication among these individuals, and it is the outcome of a narrative unity of the people united in a moral crusade against the enemies of the people.

Populism stages a general will that defends the moral superiority of the people. It makes the people carriers of a moral crusade against those who block the people to become a people. The perverse effects of making such a 'free people' is that they are forced to denounce those who do not share the script of the moral superiority. Populist campaigns are moral crusades such as the Brexit or the electoral campaigns of Trump or Le Pen. The public sphere turns into a site for the daily plebiscite in which the people recognize themselves as marching towards becoming a real people.⁴

Populism easily mixes with national sentiments or authoritarian legalism, the two classic forms of organizing social relations among a people. Its distinctive feature is that it uses the force of moral arguments to denounce those who are regarded as deviants from moral norms taken as valid for all. The conflicts that emerge from colliding national sentiments have shaped centuries. The conflicts that emerge from claims of sovereignty over territories have shaped even more bitter wars. The conflicts that a people produce on the basis of its claim of superiority intensify the conflictuality of people becoming enemies of other people.

The good and the bad – And the ambivalence of the public sphere

Rousseau has provided two conditions for collective will formation that transcends the will of all and opens the path towards forming a general will: the neutralization of social groups by maximizing the number of individual wills and the constraint of realizing the general will within the confines of the nation-state. The nationalist and sovereigntist

closure of the people has led to processes in which collective wills collide, with obvious perverse effects. The populist moment has added another factor aggravating such perverse effects: people against people each claiming moral superiority.

These observations make clear that the solutions Rousseau and Habermas had in mind, that is, the idea that a general will which is more than the sum of individual wills can be formed by communication, permanently produce perverse effects. Even worse, the contextual conditions proposed for doing so make the theory of forming a general will self-defeating. Rousseau did not find the solution to a 'rationality' that transcends the sum of the individual wills as the basis for the control of power by the people. Habermas clearly saw that it is not the sum of the individual wills that constitutes the 'democratic will' of a people but the outcome of a process of confronting the wills in a procedure of permanent reciprocal critique in the public sphere. This process is, however, bound to highly restrictive assumptions, formulated as the social conditions of free debate among equals (and without time pressures).

Yet the public sphere is not only full of evils, it even adds more of them. The public sphere is embedded in a social context in which national sentiments, claims of state sovereignty and claims of moral superiority counteract the rationality attributed to the public sphere. Pushing this argument to its extremes, the very idea of rational debate founded on the capacity of the people to use their 'reason' does not produce a general will, but a general will hiding the will of the many. Collective will formation in fact needs the public sphere, the power of the argument, to justify particularistic interest of the people. Populism does exactly that. It stages arguments for securing the power of one group against other groups. There is a permanent exchange of arguments, but not for figuring out the better (or ideally the best) argument, but for legitimating a people that by defending its freedom is forced to denounce the others who do not fit the criteria of being a 'people'. The collective will of the people is a distorted one.

Using the public sphere for fostering sentiments of national pride, of identification with the state or the moral supremacy of a people, the public sphere produced by this mobilization of sentiments perverse effects. The people are constructed as a people linked together by stories that praise the people as the true defenders of freedom and equality. The observer of these perverse effects of the public sphere in modern societies must feel like Job when asking why the good that was supposed to emerge from communication among free people in the public sphere produces so many perverse effects. We cannot ask God, but we can ask ourselves why reason in public debate produces so much 'unreason'.

Instead of assuming that the power of the good argument is the mechanism of fostering public debate, we should assume the power of bad arguments as its distinctive mechanism. The power of good arguments is based upon being rectifiable, based on empirical evidence or moral judgment. The power of bad arguments is based on claiming truth and rightness for what is taken as incontestable. The people in the name of which claims are made in the public sphere are either a people open to new arguments or a people closing itself off from new arguments. A people closing off itself can use arguments to defend to do something morally bad or to tell lies about facts and simultaneously believe that this is good for the people for whom they speak. The arguments of the people not included into this people (the non-nationals, the non-citizens, the non-moral)

equally circulate and constitute a different dynamic that comes closer to what the enlightenment theory of the public sphere once imagined: triggering collective learning processes in the public sphere.

The public sphere is like Pandora's box: opening it, the evils can escape and spread in the world, and they cannot be put back into the box. The story of Pandora's box, however, also tells that Pandora kept one element in her box: hope. This is a possible key for dealing with the evil in the world.

Revising the theory of rational collective will formation

The public sphere caught in the Munchhausen dilemma

Opening Pandora's box allowed the evil to spread among the people. The evils cumulate, become part of an intensifying flow of communication that ends up in stories that attribute the evil in the world to the enemies of the people. Such stories search and find the evil in the other (the neighbour, the other village, the other nations, the religious or cultural other).

The expectation that the increasing communication in the public sphere leads to collective will formation understood as a collective learning process is permanently disappointed. Public debate produces results that even expand the evils in the world. The public sphere produces perverse effects that do not destroy it, but make it grow. Job would have become desperate. Pandora had to concede that the evils could not be put back into the box.

What does this tell us in theoretical terms? The collective will of the people fosters the evil. This statement can point to overwhelming historical experience. The history of the last two centuries is full of cases of perverse effects of collective will formation: from the European civil wars between nations to fascism and finally to the culture wars of the last decades. The public sphere played a central role in these conflicts as the site of telling the story of the good people fighting the bad people, a story that is immune to collective learning processes triggered by public debate. This is not to say that the public debate has not fostered 'moral progress'. What it says is that the public sphere is no guarantee for keeping moral progress. Moral progress is much easier to cancel than the theory of the enlightenment project made us expect.

Pandora's failure to put the evils back into the box tells us another story: that the people can get out of the mess by looking into Pandora's box where hope remained. The story of Pandora's box in fact makes two points: one that the evils cannot be brought back, and another one that people can contain the evils.

Who are these people? It is a people that is constituted in a way different from the people united in a nation, a state or in a superior moral culture. The theoretical proposal is the following: the people, capable of generating a general will that transcends the particular interest of those taking part in the formation of a general will, constitute themselves out of the people caught in the mess that was brought about by opening Pandora's box. This is the Munchhausen situation, a people trying to pull themselves out of the swamp by their own hair. Nationalists, sovereigntists and populists fail to do so. The nation, the state or moral superiority pulls the people out of the swamp. Is there a

way of constructing a people capable of pulling themselves out of the swamp without relying on a prefabricated nation, state or moral superiority?

Unblocking the people: Turning individuals into people

The narratives that turn individuals into members of nations, into subjects of sovereign states or into groups claiming moral superiority over the others tell the story of a people that does not form a collective will but that already has a collective will before entering into communication among the individuals forming this people. The national narrative tells us about a people which has found its identity in an already given culture. The narrative of the sovereign state tells us about a people that derives its being a sovereign from the sovereignty of the state. The populist narrative tells us about a people that defends a moral culture against those who want to destroy it.

The three narratives share some properties. The first is a common reference to some past that is constitutive for the people. Nationalism, sovereigntism and populism stage the past, be it national victories or defeats, be it the religious foundations of the state, be it a moral world threatened with loss. This narrative 'appresentation' of the past marks the beginning of a people. As soon as such a past turns into a marker of exclusive recognition, the story of becoming a people turns into a story of being a people (Bearman & Stovel, 2000). A good example of such appresentation of the past is the story of becoming the American people that ends in being an American people and at times requires the remaking of the American people. The French story is not different. This story plot repeats itself all over the world. In partial overlap with the religious narrative (providing a longer past that is to be continued), the national narrative has become the founding story for the people. To save such people the state is added as its quasi-natural container, saving the people against its enemies from inside and outside. Moreover, attacks on the people must be averted by the occupying the public sphere which suppresses the moral unity of the people (such as cancel culture). Such a people already know who they are – the story of the people has a closed end which derives from some beginning in the past. Such a people no longer need a future since the end of the story is clear. Such people have arrived at the 'end of history'.

The conception of a people already constituted blocks the future (Bearman et al., 1999), creating a dead history. The nation constitutes the people and the remaining task is the defence of the nation. The nation is the historically final carrier of a general will. The becoming of a nation was intrinsically linked to the nation-state as its final goal. Having realized the nation-state, the nation-state becomes final and non-revocable. The state constitutes the people and not vice versa. Those acting against the state are traitors, insurgents as staged in cases of irredentism. The populists finally demarcate the people from those that do not belong to it (America first) and reappropriate the state and the moral culture that was lost to enemies of the people. The populist message is to reinstall the nation-state under the premise of a superior moral culture that includes some and excludes others from being equal others. Knowing who are the good people no longer requires the debate and the conflictual communication with others. This is the populist end of history.

Nationalism, sovereigntism and populism block the future. As soon as the nation, the state of the superior moral culture is established, the people will live forever in happiness and peace. Such a general will cannot be contested. It no longer needs a public sphere since the people are already happy. If the future is blocked, then collective learning is obsolete. Nationalism, sovereigntism and populism are sure that people do not err. The public sphere is no longer a site of figuring out whether the people err. It is a site for confirming that this people cannot err.

Yet people normally err. The function of a public sphere is to provide ways for rectifying errors. Opening the future is what a public sphere permanently produces. This future is indifferent to the good or the bad. That the world is in flux necessarily undermines the story that makes a nation, a state or a moral culture the end of this story. Events take place that are unforeseen and force the retelling of such stories. Retelling a story is the point where the power of reason might come in, nourishing the hope that a better world might be possible.

The hope that is left – Reinterpreting Pandora's story

What the Greek myth tells us is to reinterpret hope as the collective capacity to rectify the collective will of the people. Hope projected onto the collective level is nothing but pointing to the capacity of people to learn collectively. Hope provides the motivation to make some people (never all) engage in experiments of collective learning. This can only lead to a temporary collective will (that in principle errs). Hope provides an element for deconstructing what is offered as a general will. Pandora kept the hope in the box and protected hope from the evils in the world. Pandora did not tell the people what is good for them – she enabled people to start searching for the good amidst the bad.

Pandora has been a woman who opened the box. She is responsible equally for the bad that entered the world as for the hope that the bad can be turned into the good. The public sphere is the site where the bads that move people, that is, emotions, hatred, disrespect and other elements that make social relations an abyss, are circulated for figuring out what would be better for the people. Keeping hope in the box, Pandora kept alive the idea that things could turn to the better. Hope unblocks the representation of the world that some take for granted. It tells us that we could do better given that people even driven by emotions are forced to present their narratives in public and support it with arguments. Narratives contain a force that transcends individual emotions and points to the power of narratives to bind people together. Telling stories requires that others listen.

The enlightenment in Western Europe has nourished such hope. But it fixed it to a people that did not do what the enlightenment thinkers thought they had to do. Enlightenment thinkers turned into the new Jobs. The people got ahead by erring about their general will. What is left is the hope that the world might become better. We can continue to hope that the boundaries between communicative echo chambers will fall apart and constitute a people concerned about an issue and enters the process that Rousseau and Habermas once had imagined: raise the power of critique and accept that there is not one people named such and such, but actors acting together, concerned with and affected by an issue, ready to disregard what separates them and focussing on the issue that is to be solved. The evil will always be around and wait for an opportunity to

distort the process of reciprocal critique. Hope provides the only motive to continue to still believe in the power of reason. Pandora can be taken, due to keeping hope in her box, as an actor in a narrative that provides reason with the power to act against the world of the bads.⁵

A miniscule theory of collective learning

The story of Pandora's box contains an element that opens a path towards a revision of the theory of the public sphere: Hope is a principle that fosters new ways to narrate the making of the people trying to turn the evils that its individual members produce in the world into a collective good. Pandora had no idea about the mechanism at work here. We claim to know one mechanism: narrating the world can undermine the narrative closure of a people and open collective learning processes.

The public sphere is a site where stories about a people are permanently put into question by the simple fact that events occur that disturb the continuation of the story of a people. In cases of small or major readjustments of the dominant narratives windows of opportunities pop up that are used, whether for the good or the bad. In the latter case, we see the public sphere as fostering perverse effects that might even undermine the public sphere itself. In the other case, we might see traces of what we can call collective learning processes. That they change the world is a rare event in an eventful world (Eder, 1999). That such events irritate is the hope that is left.

This conclusion invites for reconsidering social theory as being primarily a theory of normative social integration through good-willing people. Such social theory needs to be turned from the head to the feet. Society is not a normatively integrated system of social relations, but it is an abyss, a system of social relations at the fringe of falling apart. This idea is not new – it has been the basic intuition of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) which has shaped an important strand of micro-sociological theorizing. The idea of social relations held together by narratives helps to understand how people act together on the macro level without resolving the fundamental problem of self-destructive sociality. This is the message of the critical analysis of the 'critical theory of the public sphere'. Narratives provide images of a social world which inhibit people crossing the edge of the social abyss. Narratives do so at high costs: when narratives collide, people fight and sacrifice themselves for their narrative. Narrative conflicts undermine the idea that storytelling blocks the approach to the abyss. But colliding stories at times can be bridged (Smith, 2007). Here the normative element of a theory of society comes in as the possibility that within narratives reflexive reasoning pops up and intervenes into the way narrative bonds are organized. This is what in the story of Pandora's box has been named 'hope', a chance that talking might engender a possibility to break the 'normal' course of the narratives in which people are wrapped up. Hope opens a window for reason, a possibility for rectifying human social relations. Reason is a corrective of social relations, but it is not their *raison d'être*.

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Notes

1. This article profited from critical comments by referees which helped me to clarify some arguments and avoid repetitions.
2. This distinction is fundamental to a theoretically innovative paper on becoming a Nazi (Bearman & Stovel, 2000).
3. In the following, I will not present a review or overview of the three phenomena in question nor tackle the issue of post-national, of post-state or even post-populist identities. This is the project of a book on ‘postliberal democracy’ in the process of being written.
4. Ernest Renan unintentionally foresaw what happens in the public sphere when he described the nation as the ‘plébiscite de tous le jours’ and as ‘une grande agrégation d’hommes, saine d’esprit et chaude de cœur’ (Renan, 1992). Here Renan sets the course for what was to come: the mobilization of the people for defending the nation, the fascist mobilization for an elected people to rule up to present-day populism.
5. It is probably not by chance that at least in West European languages reason is female: ‘la rationalité’, ‘die Vernunft’, ‘la ragione’, ‘la razòn’. The implications of this observation might be left to another paper.

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