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**RESEARCH ARTICLE****POWER AND RESISTANCE IN THE NEOLIBERAL AGE**

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**ABSTRACT:** Aim of this work is trying to show, from a mainly theoretical standpoint but with constant references to Italian concrete cases, how neoliberalism, even though usually described as a State withdrawal from many issues left to individuals' freedom, would actually represent an increase in forms of State intervention and control. The paper aims to analyze what forms this control may take, starting from current economic crisis, finding they are attributable to two scenarios: an explicit centralizing form, analyzed through the analytical tools of "state of exception" literature (Schmitt, Agamben); an implicit technical form, studied referring to the literature on "government through numbers" (Porter, Power, Miller, Espeland, Desrosier). The paper also tries to show, once again through concrete examples, and by comparison with Polanyi's analysis of resistance to '900 classical liberalism, how behind the two neoliberal power there would be the same strength to impose to consciences, and most of all what would be the consequences of this for the possibility for social movements to try to deconstruct neoliberalism's discourse, and to challenge it by collective action.

**KEYWORDS:** Neoliberalism, power, quantification, resistance, state of exception

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## 1. Introduction

The theme of popular sovereignty has become a central issue in Western democracies after the abandonment of a socialdemocratic/Keynesian vision of welfare state, and the apparent unchallenged victory of neoliberalism. This latter seems constantly to recur as efficient and fast recipe, far from the delays of democratic debate, for periodic situations of economic emergency. Aim of this work is trying to show, from a mainly theoretical standpoint but with constant references to Italian concrete cases, how neoliberalism, even though usually described as State withdrawal from many issues left to individual freedom, would actually represent an increase in State control. The paper aims to analyze what forms this control may take, starting from current economic crisis, vantage point from which to analyze the real locus of power, apart from what formally stated for “normal” situations. And also to verify the actual possibility for social movement to influence reality, in situations calling into question the *status quo* and thus potentially calling for atypical political actors to take the initiative.

The apparent inability of value politics in providing solutions to crisis seems to favour, in public rhetoric, recipes for another kind of “politics”, that of indicators as GDP, spread, and so on. Daily political reality shows how concepts like “technicians’ government” were not only theoretical elaborations of thinkers of the past two centuries, but government tools, silent for most of the time, becoming explicit in times of crisis. Similarly, following an institutionalist vision of right, sovereignty would reside in actual State functioning, visible as such, once again, in time of crisis, when rules themselves are circumvented. On this basis, Romano (1918) stated that necessity, not the norm, is the original power source. Actual sovereignty, generally constrained in its ordinary exercise, resurfaces in exceptional cases, revealing its *hybris* usually latent and denied.

Thus, strands of classical literatures distant from each other seem to indicate crisis and necessity as sources of two often conceived as opposite forms of power: the technical and the authoritarian ones. Starting from the consideration that economic necessity has always been one of the cause of the latter form, and definitely the typical one of the first, aim of this work is trying to show how neoliberalism would succeed in combining such kinds of power, counterintuitively with respect to its rhetoric of individual freedom.

The paper also tries to show, once again through concrete examples, and by comparison with Polanyi’s analysis of resistance to ‘900 classical liberalism, how behind the two neoliberal power there would be the same strength to impose to consciences, and this could influence social movements’ possibility in trying to deconstruct neoliberalist discourse, and to challenge it by collective action.

## 2. Neoliberalism as new power(s)

Neoliberalism is often described as an answer for the “overloaded government”, according to which, under the watchwords of privatization, deregulation and new public management, there would be a State withdrawal from the direct government of many issues, left to economic freedom. The “modest State”, however, should not do less, but “more with less”, not oaring but firmly holding the rudder. Confidence in *deregulation* seems only one of the 80’s oversimplifications, and the focus has shifted to *better regulation*. Opening, however, the question about what “better regulation” means. Official rhetoric of neoliberalist institutions talks about an epochal shift from government to governance, with an opportunity to enlarge civic engagement, participatory practices, subsidiarity and power devolution (Oecd 2001). Yet, this would be, in the best hypothesis, only a normative precept, if not a strategic attempt of repositing old practices under a more appealing form (Donolo 2004).

Beyond rhetoric, such change appears to respond to neoliberal perspective, according to which State withdrew from direct administration, while preserving, and even expanding, its powers of control in strategic sectors. It is often forgotten that, together with the end of explicit centralization, the rise of neoliberalism brings also the end of compromise between democracy and capitalism, at the expense of the first and with the unbalanced victory of the latter (Lo Schiavo 2014). Moreover, there has been growing space for the rhetoric of “evidence-based policies”, according to which better regulation is such if based on better knowledge, and knowledge is better if concentrated on economic aspects and expressed in a quantitative manner. Hence, economic criteria presented as scientific, objective and neutral evidences, guide the action of national rulers. Who, however, are far from deprived of their authority, but rather, sometimes, increase their power of acting politically, even if not democratically in a strict sense: the power to impose, implement and enforce such technical recipes.

Thus, neoliberalist power would be attributable to two main scenarios. The first is an explicit form in which democratic guarantees are bypassed through centralization and simplified procedures, justified by economic necessity and urgency. Such form will be analyzed by applying to concrete cases the analytical tools of “state of exception”, of which economic necessity is a classic case. No coincidence if, in recent years’ crisis, the main blaming target in anti-austerity groups’ rhetoric is precisely the theft of people’s sovereignty by technocrats. Who, on the base of economic imperatives, deprive popular power through authoritarian actions (technical or “unelected” governments, Parliament emptying, loss of sovereignty in favour of international organizations not controlled by people...), centralizing authority in the hands of executive power, at the

State, EU or supra-state level. Not only in economic and social policies, but pervasively on every aspect of society, and especially in sectors deemed strategic for quantitative growth (education, infrastructures...).

The second form of power is the implicit one, related to Foucault's concept of "government at a distance", through which neoliberalism would impose its values using the soft weapon of economic expertise, in particular through measurement of everything, starting from individual, organizational or State performance. Reference, in this case, always applied to concrete cases, is the literature on "government through numbers", according to which neoliberalism needs to quantify every life aspect, decontextualizing and thus depoliticizing numbers.

### **3. The explicit form: economic necessity and extraordinary powers**

Starting from the explicit form, with the progressive affirmation of neoliberalist discourse we can find a growing infringement of European directives' framework, quite contemporary built. This prescribes to go beyond mere representative model, reconciling decision models usually seen as opposed, such as "technocratic" evaluation, expert and independent from political pressure, and participatory engagement of all possible stakeholders. Both these, as we shall see, would actually be manifestations of the same implicit form of neoliberal power in the age of governance, seeming to leave no room for the classical form of centralized power. Nevertheless, over the years, there has been increasing cases in which, for reasons having to do, mainly, with economic necessities within a neoliberal view, delegations, exemptions and simplifications compared to usual procedures have been used, in order to allow a quick response to conditions presented as extraordinary, similar to the concept of "state of exception".

In exceptional situations, Schmitt (1972) noted, rules, protections and guarantees applicable to "normal" situations are suspended in a way provided within the legislation itself. As noted by Agamben (2003), exception is outside the legal system, and yet belongs to it, legalized suspension of current order, made by the same authority guarantor of its respect. Exceptional cases, or presented as such, there is no shortage (Marazzita 2011): international terrorism, major events, pandemics, public order, immigration, hydrogeological instability, natural disasters, waste emergencies, and, more topical than ever, economic crisis (Montedoro 2012). As there is no shortage of derogations/exceptions which, from within "normal" order, are provided in an equally exceptional way: deregulation, abuse of executive decrees, special commissioners for emer-

gencies, extraordinary simplified procedures, abuse of trust issue, decisions required by suppositories impositions from markets and “undemocratic” EU.

It is indeed remarkable that, often, derogations from European system are rhetorically justified as necessity to respond European impositions concerning economic criteria. Economic growth has always been one of the primary reasons for the identification of moments requiring exceptions. From an Italian point of view, obvious, in this sense, the reference to Monti’s technical government at the height of the crisis, continually appealing to necessity as legal source (Fusaro 2012), and to the unquestionable nature of technical choices in front of partisan irrationality. Indeed, this was often described, by anti-austerity groups, not only as a delegation from politics to technique, but also as an undisputable and undemocratic authority centralization in the hand of executive power, not balanced or controlled. Admittedly, not only Government’s birth and functioning, but most of all its acts, are conceivable as derogation dictated by economic necessity stated by technical indicators. Only as an example among many others, 2011 Finance Act, emphatically called “Save-Italy Decree” in order to point out its exceptionality, permitted even to company negotiation to derogate *in pejus* to Civil Code protection. Even more controversial, l.Cost. 1/2012 introduced the principle of balanced budget in Constitution, affecting «the very notion of sovereignty, the protection and promotion of social rights and, ultimately, the balances underpinning the parliamentary form of government» (Parmigiani 2015, 864).

Not only Monti’s government, however, neither only financial and social policies, nor only intervention within the crisis, follows such fate. Almost every aspect of public action, anyway affecting economic primacy typical of neoliberal thought, underwent a similar “exceptionalisation”. Preeminence of economic necessity on standard procedures is at a maximum in environmental issues, usually conceived in terms of trade-offs with respect to economic choices (Lastrico and Gasparini 2014), with the case of Ilva in Taranto, and consequent “Save-Ilva decrees”, as paradigmatic example among the most recent. Obviously, crisis functioned as a rhetoric multiplier with its charge of urgency and necessity, as evidenced by the genesis of the equally emphatically called “Unlock-Italy decree” by Renzi’s government, subsequent to the technical one, or the “Anti-crisis decree” by the last Berlusconi’s one, previous to it.

This latter, containing “urgent measures to draw national strategic framework in response to the crisis”, introduces simplified procedures in many issue deemed strategic for economic growth, also providing “special provisions for speeding up the executive procedures of projects included in the national strategic framework, in the name of the particular urgent reasons related to the contingent financial situation”. Thus avoiding the normal democratic protections in the design of works identified as strategic to

Government's discretion (Sandulli 2008). Another issue, in which development logic seems to prevail over ordinary legislation, is, in fact, that of major strategic infrastructure. On this ground, the reference to the role of simple multiplier of neoliberal power played by the crisis is clear, since such thrust towards centralization and simplification was already present in 2001, after the revival of neoliberalism but long before the outbreak of the crisis, with the Legge Obiettivo (Goal Law), wanted by the government Berlusconi II. This provides a strong return to derogatory decision centralism within the design of large projects considered of strategic interest for economic investments, significantly, all confronted with movements' oppositions. Aim is to streamline decision-making at the central level, bypassing tiresome negotiations with local authorities, and concentrating any power in the hand of the Government.

In these cases, regardless of the degree of engagement formally stated, sovereign is who has the monopoly of ultimate decision within situations presented as exceptional. The prevalence of a power (holder of emergency sovereignty) on the others (holders of established sovereignty) would remain latent, ready to recur not only within an ascertained state of exception, but also to impose when we are in a state of exception, in order to offer itself as necessary power. In this respect, exceptional sovereignty can be found more often than only in emergencies as economic crises, which would work only as multiplier of possibilities for new exceptions, for the creation of a permanent state of exception. In fact, important decisions have always been taken outside popular power, and even more in neoliberal age, though continuously propagandizing freedom and participation (Scotto 2008). Within economic imperialism, indeed, almost every life aspect, considered in its economic fallout, could fall among such "important decisions", that have to be kept rigidly separated from public scrutiny and transferred in an extraordinary way to institutions only indirectly democratic, when not only and openly technical. To be set aside, in these cases, is the same representative principle formally behind every decision, although not only rhetoric, but also legal norms, more and more often formally prescribe to even exceed such representative principle towards a more direct engagement. Economic crisis would function, also in this case, only as a powerful legitimizing multiplier for trends already in place, through which exceptionality is institutionalized and becomes the norm (Agamben 2003), within the permanent state of exception of neoliberalism.

#### **4. The implicit form: technical objectivity and depoliticization**

The form of power analyzed above is an explicit one, in which political authority does not try to hide itself, but rather makes itself visible in order to be recognized as necessary. Such political strategy is by no means exclusive to current times, having characterized any era especially in periods of crisis. Nevertheless, with the advent of neoliberalism, and the proliferation of things conceived as crises under the economic dominion over any other consideration, also space for state of exception seems to multiply. However, beyond that, there would be also a more implicit, less visible but not less important kind of power, having to do with depoliticization (Pettit 2004) through the naturalization of standards and indicators instead obtained through bargaining between public and private actors. Also such form of power is not exclusive to neoliberalism, but, conversely, neoliberalism made of it one of its main features. As Daly and Cobb (2007, 288) state, «in the Middle Ages holy thought had to be expressed in Latin; today it must be expressed in numbers»: technical expertise, particularly if expressed in quantitative form, represents the main source of legitimation for public choice, after the neoliberal turn more than in the past. In particular, following Harvey (2007), financial accounting had a role in imposing neoliberal consensus, being central for legitimizing neoliberal discipline and its production of indifference, as called by Hibou (2015). It would have been exactly the holy nature of economic data, and therefore their need to be excluded from democratic scrutiny in order to preserve their purity, to have helped «the ascendancy of neoliberalism as a hegemonic world» (Arnold 2009, 56).

Technical indicators and quantification are the instrument for legitimizing choices as evidence-based policies, giving a neutrality aura to particular worldviews and power relations. Who has the legitimate power to impose the problem framing, barricading behind the alleged neutrality of scientific data, would deny both uncertainty and conflict, denying with them also the depoliticized nature of technical standards. These latter would depend by power balance among economic actors, but can rely on the universal legitimacy of techno-scientific rationality. This diplomacy of the technicians «is all the more legitimate, apparently, because accompanied by references to the democratic nature of the process of norms elaboration, and to scientific and technical data on which those norms are based» (Borraz 2009, 40). It bases its legitimacy on the use of expertise, stating objectively what is right. However, it is mainly the large industrial interests to have the resources to mobilize scientific data, as well as a direct interest in normalization, while other players, including public authorities, are often in a situation of dependency from data providers.

In this sense, technocracy would be a political and partisan form of power, pursuing depoliticization by showing as objective and neutral what is nothing but a compromise among interests, values and frames of one or more hegemonic groups (Lastrico 2015a). Thus naturalizing data representative only of a particular frame, the economic one of cost-benefits analysis. This would happen in particular through the emphasis on quantification and measurability, which on the one hand would provide policymakers with the supporting and legitimizing arguments of scientific objectivity, hiding, on the other, political criteria guiding those choices (Desrosières 2011). Therefore, spreading a vision taken for granted and subtracting it from democratic discourse, resulting in a power delegated to an elite of experts. Government through the “avalanche of numbers”, as Hacking (1982) calls it.

According to Perry-Kessaris (2011), commodification and quantification would be different aspects of economic imperialism, and particularly of neoliberalism (Gibbon e Henriksen 2012), on every corner of society, starting from right (Cortese 2015). Quantitative indicators impose themselves as guide for public choices, until their crystallization in juridical norms perceived as neutral (Krever 2013). Furthermore opening the door to legitimated state of exception, in which juridical guarantees as division of powers and representative control are bypassed. Indicators and standards would be central to the spread of neoliberalism as common sense, for its progressive transformation into taken for granted, because of its indisputable objectification (Thévenot 2011).

This would happen, in particular, through the importation of accounting standard into the field of policies and performances evaluation. Neoliberalism would need to make everything quantifiable, measurable through a universal unit like money, decontextualizing numbers, depriving them of any other consideration and then depoliticizing them (Sukys 2010). Therefore neoliberalism would re-propose the attempt of classical liberalism, described by Polanyi (2000) and stopped by social resistances as first of all labour movement, to create a self-regulated market in which everything is transformed into goods, into something quantifiable through the attribution of a market price, subordinating the same society to market rules. Money would be only one among many possible standard of commensuration (Espeland and Stevens 1998), even if historically the most important, but it became hegemonic, as Centemeri (2012) notes, when the utilitarian approach of neoliberalism also became hegemonic, homogenizing and converting everything in an economic language governable by finance, becoming a mode of power (Garapon 2012).

Being crystallized in a hegemonic meaning system, monetization is widely taken for granted and invisible as political process, denying that such measurements are not objective and neutral, and reveal nothing more than a particular interest and worldview.

They are not only attribution of a price (evaluating), but most of all attribution of a normative value (valuing) (Lamont 2012). Market competition is only one of possible “orders of worth” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), but with the progressive shift towards neoliberalism succeeded in becoming common sense (Ogden 1995). Especially if it introduces itself under the rhetoric appearance of participative, network capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). That, as we shall see, can be a problem for the possibility of resistance and deconstruction of such a framework by collective action. Although neoliberalism impose itself as hegemonic, it is also true that, on the other hand, because of the simultaneous era of reflectivity and crisis of certainties, the opportunity for alternative worldviews should grow. Yet, social mobilizations seems not to succeed, if not minimally, in challenging such state of things, mainly because of the strong legitimation in civil society of the implicit and the explicit power as a whole. It is then interesting to analyse how two so different forms of power can combine.

## **5. The two powers together: post-democracy as frame internalization**

According to Polanyi (2000), with the rise of liberalism, economy was naturalized and subtracted to political control at the very moment in which it took over as guiding principle of society. Nonetheless, «such institutional model could not work, if society itself were not someway subject to its requirements» (*ivi*, 92). Following Polanyi, self-regulated market of classical liberalism did not work exactly because of social resistances, first of all from labour movement. So what about the new attempt by neoliberalism? Are there similar resistances? Compared with classical liberalism in industrial society, the era of neoliberalism is characterized by greater complexity, leading to a growing number of periods of crisis and transition, potentially useful for the deconstruction of common sense and for the rise of resistance. Nevertheless, exactly through such recurrent crises, state of exception succeeded in proposing itself as salvific, and technocracy appeared as a crucial resource for the government of societies.

For Meynaud (1966), reducing all problems to economic efficiency solvable through technical methods prefigures not political power suppression, but a technobureaucracy requiring strict planning and programming, quite similar, following Supiot (2015), not to classical liberalism or to an implicit power-knowledge, but on the contrary to the most explicit power of soviet despotic regimes. «A neoliberal order is not, then, one in which the state is hollowed out (the aspiration of *laissez faire* liberalism). The state is reconstructed, not dismantled» (Sikka and Willmott 2009, 399). Starting from the vantage point of the last financial crisis, some see in the governments of

Monti in Italy and Papademos in Greece an abdication of democracy and sovereignty towards European and international economic technocracy. Others, by contrast, read it as a political strategy, a kind of aristocracy propagandizing partisan interests, hiding behind the specter of necessity and technical expertise.

Regardless of the true nature, they were described in a manner close to the definition of “technical state” by Schelsky, as a meritocracy where there is perfect overlap between the most qualified people and who decide validity and type of qualification. Through these lenses, it would be possible to look not only at Monti’s government, but also at the next, and political, Letta’s one and the so-called European “autopilot”. Technical state, in Schelsky’s formulation, does not provide for a government necessarily directed by technicians, describing rather a regime in which politicians are subjected to automatism and constraints of technique, but getting from this latter the legitimacy to act coercively and extraordinarily (Funnel 2007; Espeland 1997). As Harvey (2007) states, neoliberal hegemony prioritizes market-driven competition as the preferred mechanism, while admitting a role for the state for supporting this priority.

Convergence of the two apparently different neoliberal powers is therefore similar to a technical state, which in turn is ascribed by Brunkhorst (2008) in the strain of post-democracy, since “technical state, without being undemocratic, takes away its substance to democracy”. From the meeting of the two powers would come out «a centralized government, inscribed in a logic of technocratic production of public policies, designed to plan society (...) The number of subjects entitled to participate in decision-making is reduced. Space of decision is limited and not visible» (Rui 2004, 33). Crouch (2003) describes post-democracy as a paradigm, dominant since the success of neoliberal ideology, resting on the one hand on the negative conception of State of classical liberal tradition, on the other on an elitist vision. In the words of Rancière (2007, 98)

declaring themselves simple managers of local fallout of historical world necessity, governments contrive to eliminate democracy. Inventing supra-state unaccountable institutions, governments realize their goal: to depoliticize political issues, to put them in places closed to democratic contentious places (...) to reject ancient conflict, getting used to objectify problems passionless.

The two manifestations of neoliberal power would support each other, creating a sort of post-democratic power in the sense of Crouch. On the one hand ranking, rating, benchmarking, GDP and spread would be instrumental to power centralization (Bruno 2009), technical devices allowing a power revolution without major institutional changes (Rouvroy and Berns 2010; Hansen and Porter 2012), whereas on the other power centralization would allow legitimization to quantifying normalization (Berland

and Chiapello 2009). For Supiot (2011), governance based on quantitative indicators is suitable to striking juxtapositions with the tools of autocratic planning. What is implicit through technique, only becomes explicit in case of extraordinary power.

Behind the two neoliberal powers, there would be the same strength to impose to consciences (Cata Baker 2002). There are several studies on neoliberal quantification as biopolitical power devoted to the creation of governable individuals (Miller and O'Leary 1987), example of power *a là* Foucault, able to forge *Homo Liberalis* mentality (Lambert and Pezet 2012). Neoliberalism therefore becomes an internalized self-discipline, more than an external pressure against to which, potentially, to resist (Poppy 2013; Sauder and Espeland 2009). Actually, something similar would happen also in the visible form of power. Indeed, even in this case we can find a tacit acceptance of neoliberal recipes as almost natural, that we cannot do otherwise given necessity and urgency dictated by crisis. Hence, state of exception category comes into play. Especially because, thanks to numbers suitable to demonstrate such necessity, exception is transformed into a usual decision-making tool, technique of government (Simoncini 2008), secret weapon of power (Cabiddu 2010), so much so to get largely internalized determining even the shape resistance can assume (Espeland and Sauder 2007). Thus, neoliberalism would be naturalized in common sense, becoming the hegemonic framework taken for granted within which even opposing movements are forced to move (Davis, Kingsbury and Merry 2012).

One of the most discussed issue is that of education and research. Quantified evaluation of individual performance (for Italy: INVALSI test, statistical accounting in National Scientific Habilitation), ranking of universities and reviews, are only few example fully studied of commodification through numbers, at the expense of any other consideration, as a form of biopower (Sauder and Lancaster 2006; Piller and Cho 2013). In particular, it has been analyzed how, instead of creating a strong movement against such program, people affected by these choices take them for granted, natural and neutral. Quantitative performance measurement not only represents a pressure for students, teachers and universities to adapt, but is introjected as indisputable. Therefore, ranking becomes an interiorized self-discipline, more than an external pressure against which to resist. However, it is interesting how, in the Italian case, this same issue has been touched also by the more explicit form of power. The thrust towards performance in educational organization and the appeal to the necessity of reforms going in this direction, are the base also of Renzi's "Good school" proposal to create the figure of the super-headmaster, with enormous discipline powers.

Neoliberalism would then be a sort of hegemonic cognitive-normative master-frame (Snow and Benford 1992), no longer recognized as such because self-evident, natural-

ized and taken for granted. And, as a result, removed from discussion, since its being institutionalized in cultural practices makes it invisible and exempted from the same reflectivity which would scratch its intractability (Schön and Rein 1994). Neoliberalism, in the terms of Advocacy Coalition Framework, acts in fact at the cultural level, the most difficult to change, that of deep core beliefs, affecting normative and ontological assumptions of the involved actors as a general framework for their life, shaping their worldview regardless of specific policy sub-system. In this sense it is the most insidious power, preventing the basic capability of naming, thus impairing the ability of social actors to find an alternative solution and to take action in collective mobilization.

## **6. What forms of resistance to neoliberalism?**

Are there, in neoliberalist era, resistances to marketization comparable to those registered by Polanyi in classical liberal times? What forms do such resistances take? The hypothesis followed here is that the nature of hegemonic frame assumed by neoliberalism influences even the forms of reaction. Because, paraphrasing Benedetto Croce in the sense suggested by former Italian President Napolitano, often criticized for having been one of the actors of neoliberal power in its explicit form, “we all cannot define ourselves as not liberals”. If this would be true, also more organized, critic and politicized minorities would see their resistance efforts forged by the same master-frame they wish to challenge, without succeeding in deconstructing it.

Indeed, such resistance seems to take two main forms. The first is trying to demonstrate that neoliberal assumption of being based upon solid objective evidences is by no means true, using the same technical tools in order to demonstrate the opposite. The second one is trying to short-circuit neoliberalism by opposing to depoliticization of the implicit power, and to centralization of the explicit one, a bottom-up re-politicization.

At the end of industrial society, with the crisis of certainties, scientific and economic development would have lost, following Beck, the nature of non-politics that politically neutralized its action, and people would start reclaiming the right to be a relevant knowledge source both in political and technical systems. On the latter side, “outsiders” would become aware that their experiences are worth nothing until not scientifically proven (Callon 1998). Consequently, people begin to transform into many small anti-experts, breaking the monopoly of rationality of technique. Thus violating, as Negri (2012) says, the principle of capitalist detention of knowledge, by using the same methods allowing a capitalist decision passing off as technical. On the other side,

awareness arises that to present a problem as technical would often be just a way to protect it from discussion. On the contrary, to recognize its social dimension means admitting the possibility of discussing within more or less extended arenas. Within this context, it is possible to read the call for greater participation, and the claim for “hybrid fora” (Callon, Lascoumes and Barthe 2009). How can such strategies being somehow forged by the economic master-frame?

## **7. First strategy: scientification**

Even some of the most critical subjects seem not to be immune to the thrust of technical objectivity as democratic guarantee against failure and particularism of party politics (Porter 2007). Taking the example of local conflicts, in which social movements face the application of neoliberal thought in issues deemed strategic for economic growth, we can verify how protest arises frequently as claim for greater engagement of local people, likely to remain frustrated, and even overtaken by the application of extraordinary procedures and exceptional powers, if not by explicit repression of dissent. Therefore, over time, movements often take firsthand the task of deconstructing, through the same scientific weapons used by authorities to keep out protesters’ irrational claims, rational decision-making objectivity. To report as such system does not comply with even the basic rules of the technocratic paradigm of which is the flag, which in this case is considered by movements a more democratic guarantee than the simple imposition of an indisputable political solution.

Paradoxically, it spreads within such movements the idea that technical and objective data can be stimulus for those dialogue and participation that the formally democratic political process in neoliberal frame seems not to be able to ensure anymore. The emphasis on the supposed objectivity of numbers invoked e.g. by No-Tav movement, is particularly interesting, because it goes exactly in the opposite direction than expected from the claims for contamination of knowledges expressed by the same collective subject. In this sense the movement, despite the intention to undermine the paradigm underpinning the choice, ends up for standing as a bulwark in defense of objectivity, neutrality and democracy of technical data, against political, and therefore undemocratic and partisan, attacks from political authorities. The appeal to data seems to spring from deep frustration and disappointment towards politics, seen as colluding with economic interests, and with respect to which, however, technique seems to offer greater guarantees also from a democratic point of view. A technique more democratic than the same low quality democracy.

Nevertheless, the strategy of playing on the same field movements want to challenge, instead of deconstructing it, may also have some side effects. Following Harvey (2007), the reaction from some movements, proposing to consider alternative data to those instrumental to commodification, should be rejected, because accepting quantification is just another expansion of neoliberal project in the appearance of objectivity. Further limiting the possibility of its deconstruction. According to such vision, movements, in order to be successful, should conceive technocracy as means of expanding neoliberalist market ideology. Against which, as in Polanyi's analysis concerning apparently distant times, every reaction seems legitimate. This would lead to more critical repertoires of action, like rejecting economic compensation, refusing to quantify health, labour and human rights (Rosga and Satterthwaite 2009), but also promoting true participatory claims, and not being afraid of struggle.

## **8. Second strategy: participation**

Although technique is often referred to as a neutral guarantee against partiality and discretion of politics, the downside would be that technique itself would actually have conventional and discretionary nature, although hidden by its scientific legitimacy, and democratic institutions should balance this power, and act as warranty. Contrary to the accusations of irrationality generally aimed at those who, outside the narrow circle of technicians, dare to challenge or ask about their work, many subjects believes that the best way to control discretion power is to develop instruments of public scrutiny.

The common background for subjects quite different from each other seems to be the idea of participation as a panacea for all the ills of delegitimized politics. Participation identified as repoliticization of what, through depoliticization, have been stolen from democratic debate. It is clear the trust in procedural tools referring to Habermas, author widely known and appreciated within many movements. Deliberative practices, bringing social rationality into decision-making, would allow reversing what Habermas defines colonization of the world of life by instrumental rationality, helping to problematize neoliberalism as «a dogmatic (i.e. unquestioned) universal approach» (Salais 2012, 237).

Participatory claim is undoubtedly important, for the critical thrust it may have in deconstructing both explicit and implicit power, but also, paradoxically, as a tool to maintain the *status quo* by using rhetoric, without having an impact on reality. Major problems, however, may not come from a top-down strategy (centralism through dialogue), but from bottom-up good faith, transforming engagement itself in a master-

frame through which discourses are structured, regardless of the actual, often weak, effects. The “deliberative imperative” (Blondiaux and Sintomer 2002) «sometimes takes the traits of an ideology, but it does, in most cases, at the price of a circumvention of conflict (...) in this way, elites yield undoubtedly more to an ideology of consensus, rather than to a neoliberal one» (Pinson 2009, 143).

A purely procedural vision like Habermas’s one would remain tied, following Foucault, to a legal-discursive conception *à la* Rawls, in the context of which power is a superstructure built around relationships already established. Instead, for Foucault, power would be more subtle, but more pervasive, therefore more difficult to challenge looking solely at the procedure, if this keep on reproducing the same power-knowledge system. Power, as biopower, would give rise not only to what resistance is exerted against, but also to the shape resistance can take. This latter should therefore not stop at the procedural level, but continuing towards the deconstruction of discourses taken for granted, through which subordinates are used to think.

## **9. Neoliberalism as a cultural trait, and capability of resistance**

Even once democratically criticized, and scientifically proven, the low rationality of a model technocratic on the one hand, authoritative on the other, it does not mean to automatically achieve a collective action able to get closer to a new model, as many simplistic enthusiasms wish. First, technocratic paradigm shows to keep virtually intact its legitimizing strength, especially in a period of politics decay, and of defeat for “costs of democracy” supporters, faced with markets’ diktats presented as objective and rational. On the other hand, also centralist and top-down instances seem not to give way, often in compliance with technical demands, coming from abstract but personified markets, for simplifying decision-making.

Economic freedom implies limits to political freedom (Buffoni 2014). Hence, the more dominant a vision geared towards as great as possible economic freedom, and towards necessity as legal source for restoring the conditions of economic freedom, and the greater the possibility of legitimately requiring extraordinary powers by national governments. Which, in turn, would be largely heterodirected by international markets (Lanzalaco 2015), through the cogency and apparent neutrality and objectivity of technical standards convergence, namely through the power of numbers that, while favouring market uniformity as the dominant political value to the detriment of other possible values, hide we are talking about politics and values (Negrelli 2014).

The linkage between the two powers would pass therefore through a self-fostering mechanism (Cortese 2014, 804):

1. economic orders of worth invade every social sphere, starting from politics and law. Which means making everything measurable in order to tag a price (commoditization);
2. on the basis of such master-frame, founded on technical standards, policies of global finance institutions (IMF, WTO, World Bank) transform specific economic beliefs in binding, naturalized and objectified legal instruments (Espeland and Vannebo 2007);
3. on the one hand, national states' policies must adapt to such legal instruments; on the other, policy-takers will be brought to take for granted such measures' necessity. This allows the introduction without particular difficulty of a state of exception, capable of accomplishing the goals identified in a discretionary manner by technical indicators (Carrer 2014);
4. policies must be measured in terms of conformity to the system of technical standards created at the international level, result of political agreements, but lived as objective data;
5. such measurements are internalized, making accepting the «demolition of the fundamental rights culture through the widespread use of macroeconomic indicators as engines for “necessary” reforms» (Dani 2013, 350). Thus enabling new states of exception.

The keystone of neoliberal power, maybe more than other kinds of power, is then the internalization of neoliberalism as a master-frame. Let us turn to Polanyi (2000) and his analysis of classical liberalism. He praises the various forms of resistance to liberal homogenisation, instead accusing all those forces uncritically accepting the alleged objectivity of economic science, which would conversely base itself on the ideological assumptions of self-regulated market. Such an axiom mandates to shelve any other considerations in favour of «a mystical readiness to accept the social consequences of economic improvement, whatever they may be» (*ivi*, 45). So progress is transformed by «the stubborn and vehement insistence of liberal economists in their mistakes» (*ivi*, 182), in a real creed, based on the one hand on the apologetic claim of economic laws' scientific validity, on the other on the proud defence against criticism according to which «the incomplete application of its principles was the reason for all the difficulties attributed to it» (*ivi*, 183). Polanyi understands the insidious character of this defence, oriented to inhibit any political control over commodification of nature and society. The apologists, in his words, «continuously repeat that liberalism would demonstrate its merits, and that responsible for our ills is not the competitive system and the self-

regulated market, but, on the contrary, the interference with that system (...). In consequence of this defence liberalism spiritualizes itself, because, against the evidence, it becomes the champion of progress against the dark conservative forces opposing to it» (*ivi*, 185).

If in industrial society, however, there were reaction to liberalist creed, with the growing complexity of postindustrial society it seems as, for many, it would be too costly to problematize and take action against neoliberalism, accepting more and more its recipe as indisputably true. In order to avoid conflict and cognitive costs, ordinary citizens, even those demanding greater participation in minute issues, in major themes seems to be sensitive to the needs of economic actors, whose frames would be introjected becoming hegemonic (Hendriks 2002). This could explain why «neoliberal (recipes) were so successful at occupying the spaces of common sense and the popular logics of calculation of economic and political possibilities. While their claims to science no doubt have something to do with it, it is just as true that it is the popular approbation of such discourses that has legitimated their claims to scientificity, especially in the face of their continued failure (most visible in current crisis)» (Grossberg 2010, 309).

The problem of resistance against neoliberalism may be, therefore, that this latter has become so strong, as a naturalized worldview, and somehow cognitively reassuring, with its simple recipes in an increasingly complex world, to unconsciously contaminate even the mind-set of collective subjects which should be the most critical towards it, as the various left-wing organizations. So let us make some brief examples from Italy, without any presumption of completeness, but only in order to support the theoretical hypothesis.

## **10. Leftist parties (and liberal consensus)**

With this premise, here we do not focus on radical parties, but on the greater centre-left one, Democratic Party (PD; before: Leftist Democrats, DS). Furthermore, for my purpose, I look at it from a very particular point of view: that of possible influence by social movements. Finally, I take as reference movement not a strictly anti-austerity one, but a subject born from a local conflict: No-Tav movement. As far as influence from radical movements to less radical parties is concerned, we can find how organized social pressure can drive changes in party system, and then in policies, in an unexpected direction. Focusing on Italy, we can find in the past decades even a conservative party like Christian Democracy (DC) somewhat influenced by a so different movement as the feminist one, as analysed by Piccio (2014), whereas national level PD appears

willing to explicitly remain aloof from any contamination by No-Tav movement (Piazza 2011).

One possible explanation is that local movements, setting the goal of overcoming current development model, put in contrast with parties' legitimacy bases, much more than how much feminist movement did. The latter, in fact, acted more at a cultural level, not questioning capitalist system. Apart from genre consideration about electoral constituency, even for DC, with strong investment of a cultural kind in Catholicism and traditional family, it could be easier to make concessions on a cultural level, than on that of the call into question of the party itself in its role of last defender of economic liberalism against communist threat. Territorial movements, conversely, are in an irreconcilable conflict with a party, as PD, whose cultural level seems to be conspicuously less important (being the unsuccessful synthesis of Catholic and ex-communist souls), seeming to put, as almost sole base of aggregation, to embody the true and credible representative of Italian post-Washington Consensus and moderate neoliberalism, better and more than Berlusconi's right-wing (Piazza 2001). In this way, for PD to accommodate influences from such movement would be contrary to the very party's base.

Such specific suggestion, taken from a very lateral point of view, serves only to a well-known consideration: for social movement to influence reality, they have to face with adequate political opportunity structure. In the case of neoliberalism, this seems not to be the case, since majoritarian party systems reveal a quite impressive unanimity on economic recipes. What is worst, who introduced the first and more disruptive neoliberal policies were, often, precisely centre-left parties' governments (as those of Mitterrand, Schroeder, Gonzales, but also Prodi), namely those which should be more sensitive to social movements' demands, providing them with suitable opportunity structure for influencing reality.

Parties, defining themselves leftist, operate against masses' social rights and political dignity, while playing the role of convincing no-power people that what you need is satisfying the system's logic. Meritocratic fable is the core of this ideology of subordination (Urbinati 2015).

## **11. Trade unions (and economic urgency)**

Also in the case of trade unions, I take into account only the peculiar perspective of concertative unions' reaction in two particular moments: technical governments of early 90's, called to introduce some of the first neoliberal measures, and 2011 technical government, called to solve the crisis by introducing austerity policies. Both executives

took neoliberal decision, in a situation of both economic and political crisis, and, in both cases, unions more or less accepted such decisions in order to prove their responsibility in exceptional moments, without resorting to struggle. Nevertheless, the two cases are different for the method adopted by governments towards unions' inclusion.

With DC and PSI overwhelmed by Tangentopoli, and PCI in full transformation, emergency governments of early '90s, lacking of electoral legitimacy, tried the way of social legitimacy by carrying forward a strong demand of consultation (Gualmini 2012). I.e. by a new re-politicization, albeit of a different type from party politics, a surrogate of parliamentary democracy. Unions increasingly became the indispensable social structure for governments trying to move on the path of economic recovery. Their support was necessary for the executives in order to make economic austerity socially accepted. Unions, in this case, did nothing to prevent the introduction of neoliberal measures. On the contrary, by supporting the reforms and giving up conflict, they became somehow "complicit". Instead, the next Berlusconi's first government would have ended up, for opposite reasons, to assign unions a relevant political role: to guide the social opposition against right-wing government's new neoliberal policies (quite similar to technical executives' ones on the merits, even if not in the method), at a time when the political opposition appeared weak.

The same thing happened with the following centre-right executives, but not with the centre-left ones, so calling into question other possible explanations, out of neoliberal power, linked to unions' party reference. What is anyway interesting is the change in unions' behaviour passing from last Berlusconi's government, facing labour opposition to its austerity policies without consultation, to technical Monti's one, even worsening both the merits and the method. Nonetheless, «the climate of political confrontation allowed to move in few hours from radicalization to consociativism, and even, at some stages, to subordination to the government» (Cerruto and Facello 2013, 88), notwithstanding the same urgent economic conjuncture.

Returning to the difference between technical executives of the early 90's and Monti's government, in both cases parties were weak and delegitimized. Nevertheless, whilst the first needed to lean on social partners receiving legitimacy by them, in the second delegitimized parties are counterbalanced by a government strong and able to benefit of large internal and international legitimacy precisely because technical and exceptional. Claiming for itself both neoliberalist powers: explicit and implicit. One cannot do otherwise than having a strong government, invested with exceptional powers, because numbers, most notably the spread, tell us that it is necessary so, that we unquestionably find ourselves in a state of exception.

In this way, making national institutional trajectories converging towards a standardizing model, even without the need for institutional major changes, but through a “conversion” of existing institutions (Baccaro and Howell 2011). Unions, not even invited to decision-makers’ table as it was for the other emergency governments, made even less than then, almost completely giving up to any active role, leaving the way open without even disturbing (but for non-concertative unions, cfr. Lastrico 2014a).

## **12. Social movements (and their limits)**

Therefore, both leftist parties’ and trade unions’ fail to oppose a resistance against neoliberalism seems to have something to do with delegitimation of party politics. This is truer in the case of social movements, trying to challenge both technocratic neoliberalism, and despotic and corrupt representative system, through the two aforementioned strategies of participatory claim and arguments’ scientification. If in the first case the rhetoric of “people” against “caste” is well known, also in the second politics delegitimation is central, opposing objective arguments to distrust toward politics (Porter 2007).

Yet, both proposed solutions are not at all contrary to the meaning system and normative framework of neoliberalism, which seems to have shaped the resistance against it, probably largely invalidating any concrete possibility of deconstruction. On the hand of transformation from critique to expertise, to accept, as many movements do, the field proposed by the hegemonic frame, may mean helping to merely reproducing domination mechanisms instead of building an alternative (Marx 2013). Indicators, indeed, from their social legitimacy and claim to objectivity, are often able to influence not only decision-making, but also opposition. This implies, in turn, a further step towards the unquestionable nature of technical data: accepting criteria proposed by public authorities or industrial property means legitimizing the “ideology of numbers” (Chelli and Gendron 2013).

On the hand of participatory rhetoric, considering, with Habermas, deliberation as the solution to market imposition over world of life, means not questioning the procedure and letting goals and collective identity in the background, together with conflict (Lastrico 2013). One of the acknowledged limits of many anti-neoliberal movements seems to be the creation of new subjects through participatory tools as the aim in itself, to the detriment of achieving goals, also because of vagueness in goals required by political transversality necessary for the aggregation of new subjects (Lastrico 2015b). These “networks without a cause” (Lovink 2011), however, are likely to break on inter-

nal differences (De Leonardis 2008). The deliberative imperative often seems an attempt to overcome difficulties in constructing collective identity, due to capitalism passage from industrialism to informationalism, just using tools arising from this passage: horizontality, networking, communication arenas. The doubt is if participatory tools, rather than creating a new kind of collective, would reproduce precisely the model created by the changes in work and welfare, identified as causes of the end of collectives: that of “collection of individuals” (Castel 2003) confined in privatism, spaced out by multiple, temporary and superficial campaign mobilizations. A networked individualism, using authors like Castells and Wellman, «a class of disaggregated millions, deluded to be free because parts of social networks. If and when conflicts explode, these are peripheral events (some segments of precariousness...) that do neither change the character of global order, nor crack its organicity. To try it out, think about this: many strategies developed to make possible the individual resistance to this holistic logic are producing the opposite effect» (Urbinati 2015). Therefore, even participatory rhetoric seems to fully fit neoliberal model (Formenti 2008), and network to be a hegemonic interpretation useful to the connectionist and individualist “new spirit of capitalism” (Borghi 2011).

Furthermore, the combination of such often supposed as opposite strategies may be the more invalidating for the possibility of concrete resistance. Experts, not legitimized democratically but by virtue of their expertise, are thought as exempt from controls, checks and balances on the base of external and undeniable technical constraints, without falling into democratic conflicts and incompetences. Never as in the case of recent economic management, experts would act more like lawyers for a political solution, rather than as analysts acting on the base of objective criteria. Nonetheless, it is interesting that none of the hostility against financial regime seems to be aimed against economists who not only provided the arguments, but also sought the influence on public policy (Grossberg 2010). If social movements’ claims are directed towards participation against political caste, but not against technique because of an introjected confidence, in large part are likely to miscalculate the target, so making possible resistance irrelevant in many cases.

### **13. An open conclusion: a pessimistic scenario**

As seen, what most unites the two neoliberal powers is depoliticization, which would lead to expropriation of political participation, without explicitly denying it but rather continuously promoting it. After the crisis of traditional representative politics,

the way chosen by movements seems to be, on the one hand, participatory/network rhetoric as valid procedure beyond specific goals and collective identities, and, on the other, flattening on technical expertise considered as neutral and objective solution to political bias. Both strategies seem to have much to do with distrust towards traditional politics, not surprising contemporary to neoliberalism advent.

The debate on the economic crisis, and on the alleged “markets’ dictatorship”, seems to be concerned on the vexed question of democracy-technocracy binomial. Many collective subjects, at least among those developing a critical view on the matter (and this, as seen, is far from obvious), read a conflict between the two principles. Ascribing technocratic aspirations, however, to fully political attempts to depoliticize dominant values, not to a real domination of technocracy as opposed to politics. Contraposition is seen not with politics as such, but with a particular form of politics: democratic and especially participatory one. The real opposition, therefore, is between a more or less authoritarian politics pretending not to be such (neither political, nor authoritarian), and a different kind of politics, democratic and increasingly more participatory (Lastrico 2014b).

Thus it seems to glimpse a direct link between the rhetoric of “caste”, and that of technicians as defenders of a dominant value system to which all major political parties, including the left, would refer. Besides, choices presented as technical and compelling seem to make disappear even the previous minimum of political competition, confirming the substantial consensus among main political parties, instead of being potential institutional partners for social movements, leaving them without effective channels within representative structures (Pharr and Putnam 2000; Cain, Dalton, Scarrow 2006).

Indeed, representative institutions are increasingly subjected to a double, and apparently opposite, attack: on the one hand the tendency to use a technocratic decision-making; on the other, the request for more participatory processes. Under this second aspect, in the opinion of various authors (Dalton 2004; Nye, Zelikow, King 1997), this suggests a lack of trust in actors traditionally conveying participation by mediating bottom-up political questions (Inglehart 1999). Hence, distrust may not be addressed towards democracy as a whole, but rather towards representative institutions in order to overcome them. New forms of participation would therefore be in many cases forms of potentially critical citizenship (Norris 1999). A significant minority would evaluate as good not the evidence-based policies, but those not only achieving goals, but also satisfactory with respect to the process by which decisions are taken (Lastrico 2015c). Nevertheless, such claim is definitely far from a role for people in decisions affecting their life. This, very narrow in any field, seems to be impenetrable in case of policies involv-

ing two strong adversaries for popular power: the role of technical arguments and the necessity and exceptionalism characterizing the policy at stake. The point is that participation cannot be taken for granted. It may be widely advocated in theory, but is much less popular in actual practice.

It is therefore interesting to analyze possible adherence with the literature opposed to that on democratic experimentalism, i.e. that centred on “stealth democracy”, according to which people’s majority just does not want to question *status quo*, in order to avoid democratic conflict. In this case, distrust towards democratic institutions would be attributable, at the opposite with respect to previous view, precisely to its democratic nature. Democratic and therefore intrinsically confrontational, cognitively and emotionally costly, especially because of the growing social facts’ complexity of postindustrial age. According to Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002, 2),

most people have strong feelings on few if any of the issues the government needs to address and would much prefer to spend their time in non-political pursuit. Rather than wanting a more active, participatory democracy, a remarkable number of people want what we call stealth democracy.

Taken for granted the role of neoliberalism in both technocratic governance and power centralization, this explanation seems to be useful for the analysis of the tacit social acceptance of neoliberal master-frame in its implicit and explicit form. Indeed, under such view, distrust in institutions would actually be directed only against democratic politics, whereas unaccountable authorities like both technical and public order institutions would be seen as possibility to delegate, without the need of questioning the frame, as in the case of neoliberalism seems to happen. Proof of this could be the large confidence in Monti’s executive from many sectors of civil society in mobilization at the end of the last Berlusconi’s government. These appear to have largely abandoned the critical intentions once set aside delegitimized party politics, embracing with confidence competents’ executive hailed as able to solve the economic failures whose blaming falls on politics incompetence (Zamponi 2013). It is therefore to be noted how the credibility of technocratic proposal, even in the sectors of civil society most critical, organized, progressive and willing to direct participation such as those acting in mobilizations (so far from those wanting a stealth democracy), seems to maintain, and possibly increase, its attractiveness in the face of political parties’ delegitimation.

How is it possible the coexistence of claim for stealth and participatory democracy? For Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, who show little political interest and commitment are more likely to put the attention on the process, hoping not to participate, than on the content of decisions, they do not understand or are not interested in. People with

greater interest in politics, rather, are more concerned with policy content, fully understanding and having a position about. Nonetheless, as seen, also for the more militant, process have a growing importance, although for the opposite reason: common people are interested in process because they do not want to participate and do not care about the content; militant people are interested in the process, even at the expense of the content, because they want greater participation. Desire to participate is something, after all, a starting point and the most important, since affecting what Appadurai (2013) calls “capability to aspire”, to imagine and reframe a different future at a cultural level which even politics rely on, in a context where many others seem to have largely introjected the neoliberal recipe of democracy without people. In either cases, however, it seems difficult to witness, in short term, mobilizations able to change reality.

In the terms of Polanyi, commodification of labour and territory determines the disappearance of public space, *milieu* for possible resistance to the same commodification. As De Leonardis (2015) remarks, years of welfare cuts and privatizations have not only polarized inequalities, but also silenced demands from society: privatization powered privatism. Even participatory thrust, if not accompanied by the identification of common goals, identity narrative and organizational structure, seems to respond more to a desperate adaptive reduction (De Leonardis 2010) in front of the evidence of widespread individualism, than not to allow a fertile collective mobilization. Ultimately, participatory quiet revolution (Sabel 2001) is like to be by no means a revolution. Thus, contrary to theories closer to these forms of democratic experimentalism, according to which “remedy to participation problems is more participation”, the flattening on expertise and participatory rhetoric, used by certain movements, would do nothing but increasing neoliberalism hegemony (Davies 2010), according to which, paraphrasing Polanyi’s critique, “the only remedy to neoliberalism failures would be even more neoliberalism”.

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