1. In the background

Various elements might induce us to re-evaluate the profile of a figure that could be defined as mythical: that of the *good citizen* in contemporary democracies. Some of these elements will be reviewed in the coming pages. They are changes that have already occurred or that are now occurring, strictly connected to the transformation of political culture.

In this frame, there is a range of civic attitudes and values such as political trust, tolerance, specific or generalised support of democracy and of course a set of norms of citizenship (van Deth 2007; Micheletti 2017, 38) which are an important prerequisite of a working democracy. Yet they are changing along with conditions of political socialisation, which is a fundamental process in this regard (see Chapter 2).

These civic attitudes refer to phenomena that have marked the political and social context and the relational network in which citizens move. They have redefined the cultural atmosphere in which these citizens have grown up and are now immersed. But there are also processes that have developed around these phenomena, and which have had important effects on the relational sphere directly. In particular, they are developments that concern the dynamics related to the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), as well as to the evolution of the forms of communication, political and otherwise.

Both, indeed, appear strongly intermingled with the theme of citizenship, and hence with that of democracy. Moreover, we should not forget the transformations in the classical models of interaction between the main actors in a representative democracy, as well as the transformations that have occurred in the substantial and procedural sphere of democracy (Sartori 1957; 1995; Held 1996; della Porta 2011; 2013; Morlino 2011; 2003; Mastropaolo 2012).

In the background to these dynamics there are different issues that characterise the scene in which today's citizen moves. In the paragraphs of this introductory chapter these issues will be touched upon briefly, in order to sketch the background of the theme being discussed. The more specific contents and implications will then be explored in the successive chapters.

1.1   RE-THINKING CITIZENSHIP

Citizenship is a classical concept, widely used in the political studies and sociological literature (Bellamy and Palumbo 2010; Poguntke et al. 2015),

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but numerous scholars have felt the need to reflect upon the theme and to reconsider its semantic contours (Moro 2020). The need has thus emerged to clarify the definition of citizenship in the light of current times. However, any operation of redefinition inevitably ends up making the outlines of this concept more complex. This happens also, and above all, in the light of the profound cultural and technological transformations taking place, to which the political sphere has not remained immune.

Throughout the pages of this work we are dealing with an enrichment of this notion: with a new facet that adds meaning to a concept that is already in itself prismatic and variously defined by scholars over the course of time and related studies.

The category of *citizenship*, as is well known, can be traced back first and foremost to the work of the English sociologist Thomas Humphrey Marshall, whose contribution dates to the mid-twentieth century. Such a category is focused on the idea of rights and duties. It is closely connected to the concept of *equality*, and hence to the individual in relation to the other members of a given community and its institutions. According to this perspective, the organised political community comes to be identified primarily with the nation-state model, which is an entity presently much debated.

Today this specific type of polity has fallen into crisis throughout the Western world. The development of supranational or even global powers, political, economic and commercial networks and systems, inevitably redefines the *national* setting in which the citizen moves, and in which s/he has progressively acquired the rights of citizenship. The extension of these rights on Marshall's trilogy – first *civil*, then *political* and, then, later, *social* – has become the essential presupposition for affirming citizenship. It constitutes a fundamental characteristic for assuring the inclusion of the citizen in the political system, thus rendering him/her a full member of the community, passing from being a *subject* to being a *citizen* (Zincone 1992).

Marshall himself, it should be specified, in his reflections on the concept of citizenship, went beyond the aspect of rights and beyond the juridical conception of citizenship that remains significant (Costa 2013). He emphasised, indeed, the relevance of the connection between the issues of citizenship and identity – that is, the sense of identification, on the part of the citizen, with the community to which s/he belongs. This was an aspect that later came to be widely taken into consideration, particularly regarding the *affective* dimension of citizenship (Coleman and Blumer 2009).

In his seminal work, Marshall also stressed the direct connection between citizenship and the possibilities of development and consolidation of democracy. Moreover, democracy and safeguarding the wellbeing of citizens present a strong correspondence that has maintained its relevance to the present day, as

witnessed by public concern, the considerations of pundits, and the evaluations by experts on the functioning of political systems.

Indeed, the connection between social justice and political freedom is present not only in Marshall's work, but also, to introduce an example that extends to the present day, in the work of Amartya Sen, whose economic and political thought focuses on an ethics of development that goes beyond the concept of economic growth. It considers the principles of an equitable and sustainable wellbeing related to such development. This kind of perspective has been embodied by transnational opinion movements and by *critical citizens* that propose and carry out new practices and formulas of citizenship in the framework of global society. It is enough to think about the debate concerning the (non) adequateness of the *Gross Domestic Product* (GDP).

A critical approach towards this indicator of economic development has led to the definition and consideration of a new index, as in Italy with the case of BES, *Benessere Equo e Sostenibile*: Equitable and Sustainable Wellbeing. This traces its origins to a type of evaluation and reflection regarding a broader idea of citizenship connected to social justice and to the wellbeing of a community.

Therefore, citizenship emerges as a complex concept and issue, rich in implications. For this reason, the work that follows adopts a specific perspective: in certain respects, it appears necessarily *partial* and selective, while in others, it is *extensive* and elaborate.

It is *partial* because it focuses first and foremost on the civic and affective dimension of democratic citizenship, which is but one facet, albeit an important one, of this concept. By its very nature, the idea of citizenship is located at the crossroads of various issues (Rodotà 2014), from the founding and cultural elements of a community, to the tangible and implemented services guaranteed by the welfare state, to the daily relationship between the citizen and the institutions of the polity of which he or she is a member. It is related also to social stratification and the rights of equal opportunity, and directly touches upon the issues of gender difference and the integration process of migrants, and thus of the connection between the 'foreigner' and the community that hosts him/her.

It therefore assumes an inevitably multidimensional nature. Moreover, as has been mentioned, the adopted perspective traces the complexity of a political system in the framework of *post-ideological* politics within the *post-modern condition* that is associated with incredulity toward metanarratives and the implications of the new information technologies already discussed by Jean-François Lyotard (1979) more than forty years ago in his 'report of knowledge'.

In order to further restrict the frame of reference, the route taken will concentrate on the reflections arising from the transformations occurring in the social and political sphere – that is, in the context in which individuals as citizens move. Particular attention will therefore be paid to the new models

of participation and inclusion in the political system, examining the specific implications. It is, without doubt, a limited aspect, but one that is fundamental for the idea of the citizen of our times.

It will be *extensive* because it is inserted within the wider framework of the political culture, of identity, and of the related transformations taking place in the 'affective' dimension. The aforementioned participatory practices are the reflection of the cultural dimension, of how the citizens experience politics. Adopting this *culturalist* viewpoint, we shall go beyond the sphere of the rights of citizenship – an area which, however, provides the fundamental and formal frame of reference in the relationship between the citizen and the political sphere. We shall thus dwell upon the approach through which the citizens interact with the political system and its institutions, and upon the meaning of the participatory practices adopted. In this sense, the modes of *taking part* and *being part* (Cotta 1979) become windows through which to view the citizens in the public sphere; they become the reflection of the new political identities.

The idea of citizenship, moreover, has been conceived over time as a progressive form of inclusion of the individual in a collective dimension. Participation and belonging – hence behaviour and attitudes – represent, in this perspective, pivotal, inextricably connected elements.

But today, more than in the past, citizenship appears as a diversified inter-weaving of formulas of inclusion, of active participation, of multiple identities and motivations.

Citizens exercise citizenship in many locations other than the traditional ones. The remarkable, rapid and endless expansion of political participation activities since the beginning of the new century has fostered academic discussion about the change in the norms of citizenship (Dalton 2008a; 2008b; Poguntke et al. 2015) and the conceptualisation of the participation phenomenon (van Deth 2014). The rise of creative and individualised forms of responsibility taking (Micheletti and McFarland 2011) along with the spread of technology of 'infocommunication' add a further element of complexity to this scenario.

> Political participation can no longer be purely defined in terms of high-effort, offline acts. Political participation now covers an array of forms, which includes traditional forms, such as voting, petitioning governments, contacting elected representatives, and taking part in demonstrations, as well as non-conventional acts performed using digital technologies, which appear geared more toward expressing a view, supportive or otherwise, than influencing decision makers. […] Most conventional acts can be performed using digital platforms; however, social media also allows users to create or join communities which transcend state boundaries, starting or contributing to discussions, advertising support for causes, and promoting the work of a range of national and global political organisations and campaigns. Digital technologies thus provide a range of new means for engaging in civically oriented forms of behavior. (Lilleker and Koc-Michalska 2017, 21–2)

Jan van Deth (2014) proposed a conceptual map of political participation that goes beyond the classical distinction of civic and political engagement, conventional and unconventional, expressive and instrumental, new and traditional, and above all without excluding the forms of participation yet unknown.

Within this framework, e-participation has become a much disputed concept among scholars. First the Internet and then the emergence of social media have given a new impetus to the discussion about the expansion of the definition of political participation in the digital age (Gibson and Cantijoch 2013; Cantijoch and Gibson 2019). It is not easy to define what political participation is, so that, today, there is not yet a widely accepted definition that accommodates recent technological and cultural change (van Deth 2016; Ceccarini 2021).

Communication is, indeed, at the very heart of social and political processes. In this sense, too, the perspective adopted towards the concept of citizenship is extensive, in that it crosses and widens the very idea of being part of a collective, recalling the models of relationships in social circles and networks. For this reason, in the chapters that follow, beginning with the recollection of classical contributions before moving on to more recent reflections, an attempt will be made to outline a discourse on the re-reading of the category of citizenship in the light of the transformations occurring in the media ecosystem.

The goal, as we shall see, is to locate such a concept, intended in its most politological sense, in the current stage: in the post-modern, post-ideological, post-representative political society; in the framework, as it were, of the global world in the Internet age.

1.2   THE INCLUSION OF CITIZENS

The *real democracies* – namely, the existing and concrete forms of representative government – are experiencing moments of tension and weakness; they exhibit signs of crisis as widely discussed in academic research. Scholars wondered how democracy 'can be saved' (della Porta 2013) and if democracy is a 'lost cause'; after all, democracy is a human imperfect invention, and then a historical fact, marked by paradoxes (Mastropaolo 2012).

The democracy of modern times, indeed, is being pushed and strained by various phenomena that call into question its basic elements and processes: above all, mediation and political representation (Pitkin 2004). Consequently, the intermediate bodies, or, rather, the leading actors in the process of mediation – mainly political parties – are directly involved in these transformations. They are transformations that lead us to ask: 'what will live broadcasting representative democracy be like, with participation via the Web, without parties and with the Internet becoming a direct means of information […]?' (Urbinati 2013, 17 [author's translation from Italian]).

The contribution of the leading scholars on the theme of political parties – in particular, Max Weber and Sigmund Neumann – underlines, in the very definition of the concept, the centrality of the function of *social integration* or *democratic* (or *total*) *integration* (depending on the author) carried out in the society and territory of these organisations. These scholars refer directly to the ability of the party, in the *ideal type* model of the *mass party*, capable of organising, mobilising and incorporating the new citizens in the political sphere.

The processes of democratisation have led to the formation of communities whose members have been able to take advantage of the extension of a series of inclusion rights, within the framework of a politics that has become increasingly, and not without difficulty, mass politics. The institution of the right to vote and the extension of institutional guarantees have been crucial steps in this regard. In these circumstances the parties have assumed the functional role of interpreters and transmitters of social demand towards the political system, assuring the integration of citizens in the community. Parties, as is well known, have traditionally carried out a function not only of *articulation* of social interests and needs – mainly carried out, for that matter, by interest groups – but, above all, of *aggregation* of this social demand in policies and general programmes (Almond and Powell 1978).

Today, however, in all modern democracies to some degree, the parties, which are fundamental actors in the democratic process, are raising feelings of disaffection, if not outright hostility. Anti-political attitudes in general, and anti-party sentiment, in particular, end up calling into question the *mediating* function of political parties in the democratic system, as if representative and liberal democracies could exist without them, as if the process of democratisation, and of development of citizenship, had not passed through the institutionalisation of *contentious politics*, phenomena of a 'movementist' nature, the demand for liberty and democracy, which then gave rise to modern party organisations (Alberoni 1977; Tilly 1978).

Anti-political sentiment and the expression of mistrust are common to many systems, as may be seen from election results and the continual formation of anti-party parties and anti-political bodies (Verney and Bosco 2014; De Petris and Poguntke 2015).

The process of democratisation has taken place, indeed, thanks to various stimuli. On the one hand, there are demands from *below*, with the action of popular and social movements; on the other, there are concessions from *above*, on the part of rulers, who – often constrained by pressure from below – have widened the mesh of political inclusion of citizens. Then, politics has gradually assumed a mass character.

The parties are, indeed, the fruit of socio-political divisions and *cleavages* that originated (a) with the *nation-building* process, – cleavages between the centre and the periphery and between the State and the Church – or (b) with the

industrial revolution – *cleavages* between rural and urban areas and between capital and labour – as highlighted by Stein Rokkan's (1970) theory. The parties are formed, therefore, on the basis of conflicts at the heart of society; they represent parts, portions, or sides, as the etymology of the word *party* suggests. They have followed the path of institutionalisation, becoming part of the political system, representing cross-sections of society and allowing the inclusion of citizens in the political sphere. These established and long-lasting 'frozen' cleavages have gradually been reconfigured, consequently losing the capability to provide sense to the political action of citizens and of the party organisations themselves (see Chapter 3).

The process of 'de-freezing' implies transformations in the dynamics of the political system, in voting behaviour, and in the sphere of the parties; that is, in the forms and institutions that are the expression of political citizenship. Some of the principal effects of the de-freezing of socio-political divisions are increased electoral volatility, decreased trust in, and identification with, political parties, a decline of the old and traditional parties in favour of the birth of new ones (i.e. pop-up or micro parties), organisational change, 'leaderisation', and the central place taken up by the (digital) communication strategy and political consultants.

1.3   THE END OF THE POLITICAL PARTY(?)

The party and the conventional participation linked to it has long represented the main instrument of the dynamics of democratisation and of the recognition of the principle of *political citizenship*.

The structure of interests, their organisation through pressure groups, social movements and other expressions of associational activism and collective action, to a greater or lesser extent institutionalised, should not be underestimated. They are particularly significant in the framework of the democratic dynamics interpreted from a pluralist perspective. But the parties are strongly intertwined with, and almost overlapping, the concept of democracy itself, giving substance to its most widespread conception: *representative* democracy. But different conceptions (and practices) of democracy can be distinguished and discussed (della Porta 2013).

Political parties have essentially provided, on a large scale, a conjunction between society and politics, between citizens and their own communities. Over and above the alleged 'golden age' of the parties, their integrative function today appears decidedly weakened.

The countless studies on the party, intended in the past as a space for identification and ability to awaken feelings of trust, for a long time now have highlighted a disenchantment spreading to some extent through all contemporary Western democracies (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Hay 2007).

The party is a complex entity that has, however, its own multidimensionality. Consequently, a crisis regarding one aspect does not necessarily imply a decline in other areas. The loss of social legitimisation and the unravelling of the symbiotic relationship with civil society do not lead directly to the weakening of the prerogatives of power and of control over either the mechanisms of resource allocation or the working of the state. On the contrary, the party has gradually become a *part* of the state rather than remaining its *counterpart*. Indeed, it has ended up assuming a 'state-centric' form (Ignazi 2017).

There are at least two areas in which parties have not lost their relevance (Manin 1997): parliamentary politics and electoral campaigning. Notwithstanding the *personalisation* process of politics and elections, and hence notwithstanding a change in the model of the relationship between the party and its leadership, where the leader counts much more, these political organisations remain the principal forces behind the figure of the leader itself. They support the political orientation in the actions of government and the functioning of the legislative power.

So, in this sense, parties have not suffered a widespread decline. They have changed their own organisational structure and even the approach to politics, but they remain strong as electoral and parliamentary organisations. There is a need, however, to mobilise the voters on some basis other than the sense of belonging, and to seek an accord with citizens' opinions and attitudes. The consideration of voters and citizens as a permanent *audience* – to use Bernard Manin's terminology – occurs not only in the pre-electoral phase. In times of *permanent campaign* (Blumenthal 1980), such as those experienced in modern democracies, this aspect constitutes a basic feature of politics, and is linked to the decline of the party in its traditional model.

The personalisation of politics constitutes a fundamental element in this framework (Barisione 2006; Calise 2010; Bordignon 2014; Poguntke and Webb 2005), as do the dynamics of media communication. The erosion of party loyalty entails a different relationship between the parties and society. The bond of identity is but one facet of the link between citizen and party. It clearly indicated the phase of *party democracy* when these organisations provided consistency, representation – and thus identity – to wide cross-sections of society; but it counts less in the following stage of *audience democracy*, according to the reconstruction proposed by Manin of the metamorphosis of the principles of representative government.

However, today it is evident that the party, after travelling a long road towards affirming itself and acquiring centrality in society and the system of mass politics, has a shortfall in some fundamental resources: trust and recognition of legitimacy on the part of citizens. The party, then, has lost the capacity to embody ideals and passions, and to provide support for the need to belong. It has lost, that is to say, Pizzorno's well-known idea of *identifying activity*

and its related capability that characterised the mass party and political organisation themselves (Pizzorno 1983). Two points are important in this regard:

(a) First, it does not mean that the contemporary political party does not have a hard core of 'loyal' voters, although the component of 'identity' voters is gradually being reduced, as the indicators of voting abstention and electoral volatility show.
(b) Secondly, parties are continuing to throw their weight behind the contemporary democratic systems, maintaining power and certainly not disappearing. They have changed over time, but their strength within the state institutions has surely grown. The literature on the theme emphasises, indeed, how the parties have created cartels in order to safeguard positions and prerogatives of power, which recalls the elitist Michels' perspective on *oligarchy*, assuming a 'state-centric' configuration. The *cartel party* (Katz and Mair 1995) acts in a rational way, like an economic enterprise when it finds itself in a market context that permits this kind of behaviour. It is known that it even forges agreements with its competitors in the electoral arena, as well as with allies within the institutional framework. Both of them are privileged interlocutors in the decisions on the allocation of resources such as public finances and also on the control of public service broadcasting organisations.

Allocation and control of resources are important actions, given that they influence the very survival of the party and then its presence in the political scene. They constitute a process that has come to reinforce the position of the parties (in the state), developing in a climate in which the political actors no longer have the status, public image and social role that they enjoyed in the past.

The (mass) parties, along with the political form of *party democracy* of which they were leading players, have undergone transformations that have had direct implications in shaping the relationship between society and politics.

This is a metamorphosis that has occurred over time, involving, in parallel, both the party organisation models and the profile of representative government. Alongside the development of the electoral and media-centred trait in the parties, there has been a reduction in both the ideological identity and the bureaucratic-organisational complexity that characterised the mass parties. There has been less reference to a specific *classe gardée*, and a growth in the 'catch-all' characteristic as discussed by Otto Kirchheimer (1966). In the new era, this party model can be renamed, like the significant case concerning the Five Star Movement, *catch-all (anti-party) party* (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2015, 44).

At the same time, the importance of membership has diminished considerably, which has limited the support arising from the base of the party, regarding finances and direct interpersonal communication with partisans and voters in general, in places where people live their daily lives. Above all, though, it has reduced the organised presence of the party *on the ground*, and consequently the voluntary work of militants. The electoral base of loyal voters was affected by this organisational change. These voters acted, indeed, as a source from which to draw candidates at various levels of the electoral assemblies.

The classical organisational structure of the party has been redefined over time (Poguntke et al. 2016). All this leads to repercussions in the dynamics of the party's internal power, which have ended up assuming a generally vertical and 'leaderistic' configuration. Another not-insignificant aspect has also grown: the role of media communication (Sartori 2002). *Party democracy* is being pushed in the direction of *audience democracy*, wherein the personalisation of the leader and the centrality of communication testify to the weakening of the ideological dimension and of conventional participation. This implies that the space for a new model of citizenship has been widening.

1.4   CITIZENS AS SPECTATORS

This new form of *representative government* directly overlaps with the fundamental issues of today's political citizenship.

The idea of *audience democracy* not only evokes a form of representative government, but also describes a model of the relationship between society and politics, between citizens and parties. And then, a model of the relationship between politics and its media ecosystem.

The very evolution of the party, transforming itself and redefining its organisational model over time, has progressively ceded space and centrality to the person – to the leadership intended in a personalised way. The public image of the leader thrives on private and personal traits. The post-modern leader is a *celebrity* (van Zoonen 2005). The dimension of communication, having been an important strategic element of political activity since the time of ancient democracies, has nevertheless progressively assumed unprecedented centrality. The various models of the 'electoral' party theorised since the 1960s – by Otto Kirchheimer (1966) and Leon Epstein (1967), then picked up again in later analyses – not only underline the 'electoralistic' profile of these organisations, but also recall the roles of communication, professionalisation and 'leaderisation' at the heart of the party. Angelo Panebianco (1982), considering the changes occurring in electoral behaviour and their interweaving with transformations in the model of political communication, underlined the change occurring in the very form of the party, emblematically defining it as an *electoral-professional* machine.

This kind of party model, among other organisational aspects, is characterised by a specific and highly professional expertise, as well as by the centrality assumed by the *issues* in the political discourse, rather than the ideological contents. This foreshadows a distinctive model of the relationship with the base of the party: the voters. It is thus a voting model that is decreasingly centred on elements of belonging.

Moreover, the leader and his/her charisma constitute a fundamental resource for this party model within a framework that differs from that of past times, although charisma is a characteristic that has always been at the centre of the political legitimisation process, as Max Weber recalls in the ideal-typical definition of 'charismatic authority'. In the 'golden age' of political parties, leadership and charismatic legitimisation were at the service of the ideological narration inherent in that type of party organisation: the mass party. In *audience democracy*, a sort of turning upside down of the terms has taken place. With the personalisation of politics, not only is the person pushed to the forefront, but the ideology and the collective identity are 'substituted' by faith in the leader, who guarantees, with his/her *persona*, the worth of the electoral project, of the political action, and possibly of government.

There has been talk, in this regard, of the 'americanisation' of politics and 'spectacularisation' of the electoral campaigns, and more in general of 'pop' political communication (Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009).

In this framework, the political consultants and the expertise of the professionals, who control the marketing techniques and manage the political communication strategies, have gradually assumed a growing relevance in the organisation and managerial aspects of the party. The idea of the 'electoral-professional party' precisely accounts for this profile being increasingly centred on the figure of the candidate leader. And the 'media-oriented' and above all *permanent* (electoral) *campaign* becomes – according to Sydney Blumenthal (1980), who first introduced this category – 'the political ideology of our time'. The heated phase of campaigning develops in a continuous manner, beyond the pre-electoral period. Communication is then designed around the traits of the leadership and assumes an issue-oriented character. The idealistic vision of the world connected to great ideological narratives is left in the background.

Because the party is at the centre of the democratic model, this transformation inevitably reflects on the practices of democratic citizenship. In this framework, the base-level participation and militancy assume a lesser significance. In *audience democracy*, the theme of representation has been redefined, finding expression in a more direct relationship between leader and society, where 'society' means, first and foremost, 'public opinion', the audience of politics, as measured by opinion polls and pollsters. Citizens assume the role of *spectators*, and mass-communication tools mediate this relationship.

This metamorphosis of representative government is accompanied by the organisational change of the party form, and by a substantial weakening of the link on the ground. The presence of parties within society and the rooting of politics at a local level are scaled down (Ramella 2005; Diamanti 2009). Moreover, there is a loosening of the network of connections with various kind of groups, *flanking* associations and activities that once contributed to the reproduction of the traditional political and social identities on the ground: *political-territorial subcultures* (Trigilia 1986). This was a relationship structure that fomented a model of political citizenship intertwined with an institutionalised dimension of civic and political participation which was closely based on parties and other intermediate bodies such as unions or churches.

The parties have become ever less the expression of specific segments of a civil society that has gradually opened itself up to other, and more fragmented, channels for conveying the demands of the citizens. Civil society has experienced new formulas of involvement: opinion movements, including transnational ones, 'post-bureaucratic' (Bimber 2003) and 'post-ideological' forms of participation, in the frame of *fast* (and evanescent) politics. Also, at a local level, community action groups or committees of citizens which could take part in a broader organised collective action have been developed (della Porta and Diani 2004). Although these do not in themselves represent a novelty, especially in urban areas, they have come to be established in new contexts, in zones traditionally marked by the well-rooted presence of political-territorial subcultures; they thus testify to the weakening of the party and to transformations in the traditional model of citizenship. This change of scenario also affects other bodies of institutionalised representation and political intermediation, such as trade union organisations and interest groups.

In accordance with this, the party identification has shown clear signs of weakening, as testified by the falling rates of membership in modern-day democracies, the increase in electoral volatility, voting indecision, and other indicators that account for the de-freezing of the classical socio-political divides. The orientations and evaluations expressed by public opinion towards the parties and the political class reinforce this interpretation.

It is obviously difficult to establish the underlying causal order. The parties must necessarily be considered part of a dynamic and complex social framework involving a shift of culture and value orientations as well as economic development and its consequences. The transformation of the party models can also be seen as the reflection of a society changing over time in terms of modernisation and social stratification, and thus of the underlying cleavages and the meanings that have long been able to shape citizens' visions. But the change also affects the political culture: the system of values, civic *ethos*, and the process of *individualisation* that has profoundly marked the citizen of late modern times.

The transformation of the parties may be read, therefore, as a reaction to, and their ability to adapt to, the reference context. The parties may then be considered as a proxy for studying social change and, as far as the object of this work is concerned, for the relationship between citizens and politics, which has a central meeting point in the cultural dimension.

1.5 NEW VALUES AND POLITICAL CULTURE

In parallel with the development, during the last century, of the rights of social citizenship, welfare systems and, more in general, wellbeing in Western democracies, what came to be called a 'silent revolution' began. Concerning this, Inglehart (1977; 1990), dealing with the theme of young people's political culture – referring, in particular, to those socialised in a period of social wellbeing and economic growth, with real prospects of reaching high levels of formal education – proposes a reading in which the approach to politics is distinguished on a generational basis.

The theme of generations is fundamental in the perspective adopted by Inglehart. It directly recalls the process of political socialisation experienced in different historical times. For individuals, socialisation means entering into contact with values, norms and models of political behaviour (see Chapter 2). It therefore affects the orientations and the forms of involvement and participation: voting, civic engagement, the relationship with public institutions, and adhesion to the principles of democracy and community to which the citizen belongs.

It is a slow, under-the-radar, hence *silent* transformation, which has nevertheless produced a 'revolution' in the orientations and hierarchy of citizens' values. It has led the younger generations to develop a more tangible political culture directed towards post-materialist issues such as self-actualisation, the quality of life, esteem needs, aesthetic and intellectual satisfaction, and so on. At the same time, in this perspective, the prevalent materialist political demand linked to the traditional organised and 'bureaucratised' modalities for citizens' inclusion in the system has lost significance. This orientation is more widely shared by those cohorts who are socialised in a specific historic-political moment that has deeply marked the social and ethical context of these subjects.

In other words, having experienced a specific cultural climate has characterised these subjects' phase of entry into political life; therefore, this marks the construction of their socio-political identity and, consequently, the models of participatory behaviour, and thus their way of being citizens.

One such collective orientation has, in fact, accompanied the birth of what has been defined as a *political generation* (Mannheim 1952), which presents specific values and orientations in terms of politically relevant forms of behaviour. So, the segment of society that was socialised during a period preceding

that of the young protagonists of the 'silent revolution' – indeed, during a more difficult phase – has continued to attribute greater importance to materialistic needs and demands, thus marking a generational difference.

The experience of the new social movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s (della Porta and Diani 1997; Neveu 2000), in which the repertoires of participatory action were renewed through non-conventional forms (Milbrath and Goel 1977; Barnes et al. 1979), bears witness to this generational divide. The relationship of the younger generations with social institutions and with politics is rooted in this kind of culture. The wave of *new politics* that developed at that historical and cultural point in time has lasted until the present day, uniting innovative political cultures and participatory approaches. Today there is an interweaving of requests supported by movements critical of the neo-liberal approach to the economy and the consequences of globalisation on the environment, the safeguarding of common goods, social justice, and the defence of human rights.

The extent to which young cohorts constitute a *political generation*, sharing models of participation and of interpretation of citizenship, not only represents an element of great interest, but is closely linked to the evolution of the ideal-type of citizen. Young people born in the digital age, in a political climate succeeding that of international bipolarity, correspond to a specific segment of society (Bolin 2017). They have been socialised within the framework of the 'liquid society', within the horizon of post-modernity, in the so-called reflexive society that is subject to individualisation processes (Beck et al. 1994). This is a context in which traditional models of social belonging that are typical of mass society are overcome as part of a hybrid culture (Garcia Canclini 1989) in which individual orientations are marked by social and cultural overlapping membership involving, then, multiple identities; in which the links appear to be many and varied, and living spaces that are *interconnected* (Boccia Artieri 2012); in which 'real' social networks and digital social networks are intertwined with one another. And the relationships that develop in the offline and online spaces simultaneously combine local and global horizons.

This combination of local and global consists of a hybrid political culture sphere, marked by the process of modernisation of society, where the development of new political identities and a new demand for participation and modes of engagement unlike those of the past are taking shape.

Therefore we are faced with a new kind of citizen, particularly young people, brought up in a different political environment and in a 'network society' (Castells 1996), in a 'networked society' (Rainie and Wellman 2012) that has taken shape with the development of Web 2.0 and social media. These citizens live in a world in which the cost of instantaneous, horizontal, continuous transmission and retrieval of information (including political information) is particularly low, and where the organisation of collective action,

or at least the production and sharing of content and meaning within specific communities, becomes less burdensome. Citizens, in this scenario marked by *disintermediation* (or *neo-intermediation)* processes, become first 'prosumers' (Ritzer 2010), producers and consumers at the same time, and then 'produsers' (Bruns 2008), in the sense that various forms of cooperation, participatory and collaborative modes of user-led digital content production, non-proprietary platforms, *free* or *opensource*, were built.

This reflects on political culture and public life, on the modes of participative engagement, and therefore on the formation of political identities and reshaping of traditional ones. The formation of public opinion itself also develops in the shadow of social media, albeit with all the limitations, distortions and problems related to that instrument. The impact of Web 2.0 platforms has been such as to stimulate the interesting hypothesis of Facebook Democracy (Marichal 2012), in which the transformations induced by the use of social media in the public and private lives of citizens, as well as those of political actors, accompany the development of a form of involvement that favours the personal perspective: 'Facebook allows us to expand and deepen our personal network, not at the expense of public life, but in a way that encourages us to see the public through the lens of the private' (Marichal 2012, 57).

These technologies, therefore, do not imply a disengagement from public life. Indeed, according to José Marichal's understanding, social networks – especially Facebook, which is the object of his study and still today the most widespread – stimulate the involvement of citizens. But, in the frame of this post-modern scenario, political involvement reflects the relational logic in-built in these instruments, determining the feature of the engagement itself, which in turn loses its 'collective' trait (see Chapter 5). This is an interesting approach because it indicates a model of citizenship whose fundamental elements are the interweaving of the use of social media and the link between the Internet and democracy. However, another critical aspect of these dynamics should also be pointed out. In addition to the above-mentioned tendency of 'privatisation', towards which the approach to the public dimension seems to be pushed, the loss of deliberative spaces and rational argumentation potential should be highlighted. The dialogical practice is, in fact, a fundamental element founding the ideal-type of the *public sphere*, focused on the comparison – online, in this case – between citizens with different and therefore conflicting perspectives (Marichal 2012, 94).

1.6   TECHNOLOGY AND 'HYPER-DEMOCRACY'

Over time, therefore, there have been changes both at the individual level, in the political culture of citizens, and at the structural level, regarding the forms of communication and the relationships among the political actors. Attempts to

develop, including through the Internet, procedures of direct and participatory democracy, even via digital tools, testify to the questioning of the principles of representative democracy. These formulas that ultimately refer to disinter-mediation processes are founded on assumptions critical of representation and are sometimes based on anti-political and anti-party leanings. Various Western democracies are involved in this dynamic (Todd 2008; Diamanti and Natale 2014; Verney and Bosco 2014; De Petris and Poguntke 2015).

These are experiences that challenge the principles of mediation and representation, pushing the concept of democracy beyond the very concept of *post-democracy* (Crouch 2004; 2020). They incorporate both long-standing features and innovative drives; a mixture of old and new in which the relationship between new technologies and democracy changes the very terms of politics. As has been pointed out during the reflection on *hyper-democracy*, it is a development that should not be understood in a reductive way, or as if the technology offered only those

> means that render voting ever easier and more rapid and frequent. In such circumstances, a narrow vision of democracy would be recognised, seen not as a process of participation of the citizens, but only as a procedure of ratification, as a perpetual game of yes and no, played by citizens who nevertheless are extraneous to the preparatory phase of the decision, to the formulation of the questions they must answer. The conceptual and political change is evident. Direct democracy becomes solely a democracy of referendums, and at the horizon appears, rather, a plebiscitarian democracy. (Rodotà 2013, 6 [author's translation from Italian])

In order to escape this reductionist formulation between technology and democracy,

> it is necessary to go beyond the identification of the electronic democracy with a referendum-type logic, and to analyse the manifold dimensions of the problem, which concern the effects of the information technologies on individual and collective liberties; the relationships between public administration and those who are administered; the forms of collective organisation of the citizens; the modalities of participation of the citizens in the various procedures of public decision-making; the types of consultation of the citizens; the characteristics and the structure of the vote. These, however, are not separate matters but facets of a single theme […]. (Rodotà 2013, 6 [author's translation from Italian])

In other words, technology and its connection with democracy directly shape the theme of political citizenship and its expression. The evolution of modern democracies seems to push in the direction of a democracy that is *continual* (Rodotà 2004), *hybrid* (Diamanti 2014), 'audience(s)' (as it will be seen) (Manin 2014), *hierarchical* (Mounk 2018) and 'live broadcasting' (Urbinati 2013). Accordingly, the figure of a hybrid citizen emerges, located between

democracy and post-democracy (see Chapters 3 and 4), in the 'post-representative' domain (Keane 2009; Tormey 2015) and the 'counter-democratic' sphere (Rosanvallon 2008), but also between new and legacy media, between offline and online dimensions, between flash mobs and institutionalised forms of participation.

1.7 DISINTERMEDIATION AND INDIVIDUALISATION

Mediation, representation and responsibility are closely connected concepts (Sartori 1995). Their meaning goes beyond the 'mechanical' process of *articulation and aggregation* of the interests present in society, with the related transmission of requests towards the places of political decision-making. It concerns aspects of citizenship. The party is a fundamental actor of mediation and political representation, which simultaneously carries out an important integrative function in society (see Chapter 2). With the processes of democratisation and the advent of mass politics, the competition among the parties has become the natural framework in which the dynamics of mediation and representation are carried out. The parties move in the territory, connecting themselves with the organisations of civil society and with citizens. The link with the existing organisations becomes fundamental for representation and for electoral performance. This has a clear identifying meaning. Identity and participation, indeed, feed and reinforce each other reciprocally (Pizzorno 1983).

To mediate and represent therefore means offering the basis for citizens' identification with the system as a whole, and with the institutions that constitute it, rather than with only a specific political part. The sense of belonging to a collective is the bedrock of living in a political community. Identity and its identification mechanisms constitute a fundamental resource for integration. They reinforce the dynamics of solidarity, inspiring behaviour and actions coherent with it. The idea of *affective citizenship* falls within this framework.

However, the citizens of modern democracies have gradually become detached from the traditional formulas of involvement and participation, such as those offered by the parties, because they are considered too bureaucratic and not greatly representative of their individuality, but also because they are demanding and time-consuming. In participative logic, the traits of horizontality and flexibility are privileged with respect to the characteristics of verticality and rigidity. Consequently, the so-called *personal* participation in the everyday realm and daily practices tends to widen the range of actions offered by forms of traditional and conventional involvement. It should be noted, however, that there is an oscillation between the two poles rather than a complete break between the two. There arises, therefore, an effect of *hybridi-*

sation of citizenship rather than a clear transition from one to the other. Within such a framework the real commitment of the citizens tends to interweave the collective and individual dimensions – that is, the interest towards the common good is developed by adopting an *individualised* perspective. The Internet itself becomes a model and a concrete opportunity for this type of participation. Online activism represents both an actual and a conceptual window of opportunity.

With the aim of dealing theoretically with the features of the new repertoires of action, the concept of *individualised collective action* has been developed (Micheletti 2003). This is a category that allows us to distinguish the nature of the new forms of involvement from that of the traditional ones: *collectivist collective action* (see Chapter 5). In other words: 'participation 2.0' from 'participation 1.0' (Micheletti 2017).

With this distinction, the intention is to underline the growing relevance assumed by a type of post-modern involvement (Inglehart 1977; 1990), expressed, as Ulrich Beck has observed in relation to *risk society*, through the creation of everyday and *subpolitical* arenas of engagement. They are forms of activism that intersect people's lifestyles: *life politics*, according to the category conceived by Anthony Giddens (1991), or *lifestyle politics* as conceived by Lance Bennett (1998), wherein the connection with organised political structures has become progressively weakened.

It is clear how the demographic element of this aspect plays a significant role. The discourse regarding political socialisation and inherent in *political generations* has a fundamental importance (see Chapter 2). In particular, the youngest citizens constitute the central actors of the process of change, although age is not the only socio-demographic category involved. The younger generations are, by definition, post-ideological and native 'digital' citizens. They live in a globalised world and cannot but see in conventional politics – centred on the collectivist dimension and linked first and foremost to political actors such as the traditional parties – an element that is 'naturally' distant from their sensibilities, experience, feelings and political culture. Practices such as elections, delegation of voting within the ambit of the nation-state, are no longer able to awaken that sentiment of adhesion that they were able to provide to previous generations.

The practices of participation linked to that type of politics assume a reduced salience from their point of view; hence, young people appear more open to experiencing different formulas of involvement (Dalton 1996; Putnam 2000; Norris 2002, Grasso 2016; Bolin 2017). Young people's participation constitutes a form of activism that recalls a logic closely connected to the Internet configuration, in the ambit of a post-bureaucratic (Bimber 2003) and post-ideological mobilisation. This tendency pushes the idea of citizenship

towards other confines, no longer circumscribed within the nexus of citizens and state, or that of rights and duties.

This is a style of citizenship that is less *dutiful* and more *self-actualising* (Bennett 2008), where its modes of involvement do not necessarily take the path of the traditional political actors' delegation. Or, in the words of Pippa Norris (2002), activism has been 'reinvented', evolving from the 'politics of loyalties' to the 'politics of choice'.

1.8 THE RISE OF POPULISM AND ANTI-POLITICAL SENTIMENTS

Among the phenomena that challenge modern democracies and thus the idea of citizenship, we should not forget the various forms of populism and neo-populism (Canovan 1981; Mény and Surel 2000; Taggart 2000; Taguieff 2002; Mudde 2004; Laclau 2008; Tarchi 2015; Crouch 2020). Beyond being difficult-to-define phenomena that will barely be touched upon in this exploration of citizenship, they are certainly not new experiences in the history of political regimes, be they democratic or illiberal. However, on the wave of problems brought about by the process of globalisation, a new season has opened up, with novel forms, actors and contents in the populist mosaic.

The neo-populist message is tinged with xenophobic features, casting doubt upon the issue of cohabitation and integration into a collective already struggling with the global process of immigration. The question of identity is therefore driven by the populist experience and by its rhetoric. The symbolic construction of the community and its confines (which recalls the sovereignism issue), the definition of '*we the people*' and its enemies, and the distinction between *us* and *them*, are elements closely connected to the concept of citizenship. The contents and messages put forward by the protagonists of the populist phenomenon touch the very foundation of the idea of citizenship itself. Another aspect of major significance is the anti-political sentiment common in Western democracies, by means of digital communication and *webpopulist* expressions, as a vast body of academic literature has pointed out in recent years.

Moreover, with respect to the theme of mediation in the political process, populism incorporates the regard for, while not the exaltation of, the concept of *people* as the essential bedrock in the connection between leader and base. The rhetorical figure of the *people* thereby becomes a primary source of legitimisation, through a direct, unmediated appeal to this idea.

This logic damages the role of the traditional party as the principal actor of political and social integration, of mediation and representation, and hence the party as a place of argumentative discussion and deliberation aimed at the solution of problems. The (web)populist phenomenon is by definition a mul-

tifaceted entity. Criticism of political mediation and of the traditional actors represents one of its facets.

The traditional parties become, in this way, the target of this communicative rhetoric. In this regard, the (somewhat oxymoronic) *anti-party parties* existing in the political systems of modern liberal democracies convey a message characterised by the questioning of the very utility of the party actor in the democratic dynamics.

It is a phenomenon, then, that changes the logic of representative democracy from within, recalling, in many cases, the virtues of (online) *direct democracy*, without filters and mediations, wherein the charismatic leader rails 'against' elites, representative politics and the institutional bodies that interpret this scheme. It supports the idea that democracy can do without the function carried out by the party in the political system, resorting also to the web-based forms of democracy. Therefore, the variegated populist phenomenon intertwines with the anti-party thrust. At the same time, it feeds on those anti-political sentiments present in considerable measure in the public opinion of Western societies. As stated earlier, the anti-political movement and culture are rooted in a critical attitude towards, if not open protest against, the democratic decision-making method (Urbinati 2013, 71).

From this perspective, the parties become delegitimised and are considered to be inappropriate, antiquated, in collusion with *strong powers*, and far removed from the demands expressed by citizens, that is, social needs and will of the *people*. In other words, traditional political actors are considered to be increasingly weak in guaranteeing *responsiveness* – that is, the capacity to provide a response to the demands presented by the represented community – but also in assuming an adequate level of *accountability*, which in turn regards the complex issue of responsibility, intended as being accountable for actions on the part of anyone who holds a position of power, makes political choices and implements government actions.

The anti-party parties express an anti-system force adjacent to, when not strictly connected to, the multifaceted populist phenomenon. These political actors place themselves explicitly in contradiction to the system of traditional parties and to the meaning and process of intermediation that they represent and practise in the wider dynamic of the political process (see Chapter 2). But at the same time, illiberal democracies are rising in the world, even in the Western world, and citizenship rights themselves are now at risk along with established liberal democracies which are challenged by various forms of post-modern authoritarianism, as discussed by Yascha Mounk in his book, *The People vs. Democracy* (2018).

The appreciation of specific formulas of democracy, such as direct, participatory or deliberative (and frequently, *digital*) democracy, which place the *people* in a crucial position, can be seen as a consequence of the evaluations

expressed by anti-party parties and (anti-)political entrepreneurs. Both, in different ways, propose anti-system elements, then in contrast to those of the representative democracy model. The Internet, in this vision, becomes something more than a tool, more than a simple means. It constitutes a genuine structural element of a new conception of democracy. According to Stefano Rodotà (2013), the technologies, indeed, change the scheme of *democratic sovereignty* and the models of relationships among the various political bodies.

1.9 PERVASIVENESS 2.0

The Web has by now become an important presence in society at a global level. In 2020, according to the organisation Internet World Stats, Internet users[1] numbered more than four and a half billion, equal to 60 per cent of the world's population (Table 1.1). This figure was 42 per cent six years previously (2014) and 30 per cent in 2010. Internet users have therefore doubled in a decade. These data alone provide a measure of the relevance that the Internet has, and will have with its further development, on civil society and in the political sphere.

The highest levels of social penetration are found in the societies of North America (95 per cent of the population), Europe (87 per cent), Middle East, Latin America and the Australian continent (around 69 per cent). Asia and Africa rank below the global average, at 55 per cent and 39 per cent respectively. In only a few years, substantial growth trends have been observed, although these differ considerably among the world's geographical areas, as well as among individual countries.

The development trajectories traced are diverse, even if the common trend is towards growing diffusion. Figure 1.1 shows global Internet usage trends and those of some specific continental areas, as reported by data from the World Bank.[2] North America has a slightly higher social penetration of the Internet currently, but it also showed earlier development compared to Europe and the rest of the world. The global trends obviously have had repercussions for the potentialities of the Internet in terms of political citizenship. Some continental areas under this profile are disadvantaged with respect to the average North American and European citizen, who lives in a context in which there is

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[1]   Internet Usage and World Population Statistics estimates are for 31 May 2020. See https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm; accessed 18 July 2020.

[2]   Internet users are individuals who have used the Internet (from any location) in the last three months. The Internet can be used via a computer, mobile phone, personal digital assistant, games machine, digital TV etc. (Indicator ID: IT.NET.USER.ZS). See https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS; accessed 10 February 2020.

The digital citizen(ship)

Table 1.1   *World Internet usage and population statistics, 2020 Year-Q1 Estimates: comparison among the main world regions in the period 2000–20*

World regions	Population (2020 est.)	Population % of World	Internet users 31 May 2020	Penetration rate (% population)	Growth % 2000–19	Internet World %
Africa	1 340 598 447	17.2	526 710 313	39.3	11 567	11.3
Asia	4 294 516 659	55.1	2 366 213 308	55.1	1 970	50.9
Europe	834 995 197	10.7	727 848 547	87.2	592	15.7
Latin America / Caribbean	658 345 826	8.5	453 702 292	68.9	2 411	10.0
Middle East	260 991 690	3.3	183 212 099	70.2	5 477	3.9
North America	368 869 647	4.7	348 908 868	94.6	223	7.5
Oceania / Australia	42 690 838	0.5	28 917 600	67.7	279	0.6
World total	**7 796 949 710**	**100.0**	**4 648 228 067**	**59.6**	**1 187**	**100.0**

Source: Adapted from Internet World Stats.
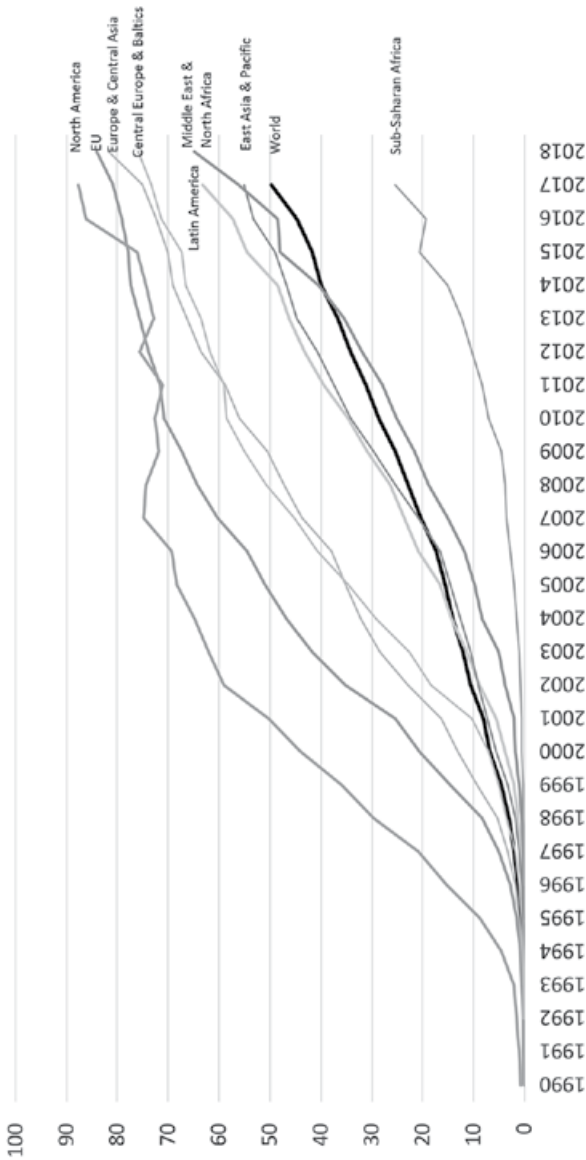
Source: Author's elaboration of data from The World Bank Group.

Figure 1.1 *Internet users out of every 100 inhabitants (1990–2018)*

a larger number of Internet users and hence a greater possibility of creating a *critical mass* and online citizenship.

Online citizens, even if they use the Internet mainly for reasons other than civic use and political engagement, nevertheless represent a potential catchment area for which the online space can amount to a place for the expression of citizenship (see Chapter 6).

The monthly users of Facebook, the most popular social network, number approximately 2.6 billion, of which 1.7 billion are everyday users. In about five years this number has increased by about 1 billion users. Facebook is today the leading social network in 151 countries out of 167 (90 per cent of all world countries). They were respectively 153 and 92 per cent in 2019. Facebook lost its top position in Azerbaijan and Georgia, as reported in vincos. it analysis.[3] The global map of the diffusion of social media shows 'regional' peculiarities only in very few contexts where other local networking applications are preferred. This is the case for QZone in China, VKontakte in Russia and Odnoklassniki in some Russian territories and Instagram in Iran, which has replaced, as of 2017, Facenama, which was used because of the state censorship of Facebook. Within the space of only a few years, the multiplicity of social networks has reduced considerably, as demonstrated clearly in the maps reported on vincos.it, where data relating to social network usage are kept up to date. In particular, in June 2009 the map showed 17 leading social media networks in the various countries considered, whereas by July 2014 this number had fallen to five; since then the number has remained steady (see Figure 1.2).

The data relating to Iran is particularly interesting in that it links with the discussion on democratic online freedoms, which will be dealt with in the coming pages. The same source, regarding the map updated to 2020, compared with that of the previous year, reports that in Iran, where state censorship makes it difficult to access Western websites, a change of habits has been recorded. The use of Cloob declined in favour of another social network, Facenama, and then it was replaced by Instagram as the principal social network.

In the light of these data, which show a gradual and dynamic growth in the importance of the Internet and of social networks in people's daily lives, it is possible to assert that the relationship between citizens and politics also occurs more and more by way of the Web. This happens both in Western democracies and in countries in which democratic freedoms suffer from control by non-democratic regimes.

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[3]   Maps and analysis are available at: https://vincos.it/2020/03/12/la-mappa-dei -social-network-nel-mondo-gennaio-2020/, accessed 21 July 2020.

Note: Google+ is not considered, as its usage is difficult to distinguish from that of Google's search engine.
Source: Alexa/SimilarWeb; Credits: Vincenzo Cosenza, vincos.it: licence: CC-by-BC.

Figure 1.2   Map showing the most widely used social network in each country

Moreover, disinformation campaigns are not carried out directly just by individuals but also by software known as bots that are programmed to distribute and repeat specific contents automatically.

This 'computational propaganda', as it was termed (Woolley and Howard 2018), by means of bots, fake accounts and trolls, relies on automation and platform manipulation and gives the illusion of a large-scale consensus towards a specific issue with the aim of influencing public opinion. According to Bruce Bimber and Homero Gil de Zúñiga (2020), the health of the democratic public sphere is challenged by the circulation of falsehoods.

This is, in other words, a new form of political communication that can be practised during election or referendum campaigns or throughout the political life of a community, both in democratic or authoritarian regimes.

It is worth highlighting again that the predominant use of the Internet has a nature that differs from political or civil engagement, but it is mainly used for working, studying or recreational activities. The Internet is of course also used for communicating and socialising, maintaining relationships, dealing with the necessities of daily life, finding various types of information, and e-commerce. But the Internet also represents a fundamental media channel in the frame of a renewed media ecosystem. That is, it serves to inform users on issues of general interest, but also to produce and share content in the frame of 'produser' logic (Bruns 2008) which is a central aspect of being a citizen in the global society.

The online society is based on 'a new social operating system' defined as *networked individualism*, which bridges all the spheres of social relationships:

> When people walk down the street texting on their phones, they are obviously communicating. Yet things are different now. In incorporating gadgets into their lives, people have changed the ways they interact with each other. They have become increasingly networked as individuals, rather than embedded in groups. In the world of networked individuals, it is the person who is the focus: not the family, not the work unit, not the neighborhood, and not the social group. […] It is also the story of the new social operating system we call 'networked individualism' in contrast to the longstanding operating system formed around large hierarchical bureaucracies and small, densely knit groups such as households, communities, and workgroups. We call networked individualism an 'operating system' because it describes the ways in which people connect, communicate, and exchange information. We also use the phrase because it underlines the fact that societies – like computer systems – have networked structures that provide opportunities and constraints, rules and procedures. The phrase echoes the reality of today's technology: Most people play and work using computers and mobile devices that run on operating systems. Like most computer operating systems and all mobile systems, the social network operating system is personal – the individual is at the autonomous center […]. (Rainie and Wellman 2012, 6–7)

This *individual* and *autonomous* dimension touches citizens in their own way by use of social networks and networking, but also in the way in which they relate to politics and democracy (Marichal 2012).

1.10   ONLINE DEMOCRACY: UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA

The role of the Internet and social networks in the political sphere is arousing growing interest, as demonstrated by the number of publications on this theme. The scientific community is raising questions about the meaning and implications of the so-called networking democracy and networked politics. Democratic theory and practices are necessarily stimulated by the development of the Internet. The process of *mediatisation of politics*, which has accompanied the development of *democracy*, sees in communications technology a frontier of special interest. Society has, in the Internet, a fundamental communication tool that redefines the very form of society itself: the models of social relationships, the identities and the civic cultures present in it (Castells 1996; Dahlgren 2013).

This is happening thanks to the peculiar features of online communication, such as interactivity and velocity, but also forms of horizontality, polycentrism and pluralism, which are some of – and not the only – characteristic elements. The Web facilitates the de-structuring of the spatio-temporal barriers in the informational and communicational sphere. It simultaneously offers a new social and civic space, beyond the 'apocalyptic' or 'integrated' understanding of Umberto Eco (1964), or, to use a terminology more appropriate to the Internet age, cyber-pessimistic or cyber-optimistic.

There are, in fact, readings of critical orientation with regard to optimistic interpretations of the democratising virtues of the Internet. Cass R. Sunstein (2017), in his *#Republic*, for example, focuses on social media in general and on *echo chambers* in particular, and discusses their dangerous effects on public debate, and then on democracy itself. Evgeny Morozov (2011) several years ago focused on the dark side of Internet freedom, describing what he defined as the 'naïve belief' in the emancipatory nature of the Internet. He began with an analysis of the use of the Web in the illiberal countries of eastern Europe, of the 'Arab Spring', of the Middle East, and of China and the Latin-American countries. He focused both on the activists supporting democratic liberties and on militants, which are part of the authoritarian regimes. The latter situation and related use of the Internet are understandably in the interest of objectives characterised by the conservation of the illiberal *status quo*.

Finally, what emerge are potentialities, but also critical elements inherent in this technology applied to politics and democratisation processes. The Internet can be used by autocrats but also protesters; sometimes it may help liberali-

sation and then democracy, but sometimes the Internet fuels repression and stabilises autocrats. In other words, cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists are both right in their views (Weidmann and Geelmuyden 2019).

Freedom House,[4] in this regard, in the report *Freedom on the Net 2019*, presents data collected with the aim of measuring the freedom of citizens on the Internet. For the ninth year running, with respect to the ten years of activity of this study of Internet freedoms, a declining trend was recorded.

This study on Internet freedom was carried out in 65 countries around the globe, covering 87 per cent of the world's Internet users. Among the countries that were assessed, 15 were considered *free*. Less than half, 29, were classified as *partially free*. Finally, 21 were defined as *not free* (Figure 1.3). Of the total number of countries considered in this study, 33 have been on an overall decline since June 2018. Only about half, 16, registered a net improvement. From the report it emerged that both in democratic countries and in authoritarian regimes legislative measures have been approved that restrain online liberty. The possibility of control has grown; that is, political authorities use the Internet to identify users and monitor their online activities.

Therefore there has been an increase in the number of citizens persecuted or detained for online activities considered illicit. More difficult conditions for expressing such liberties are then observed in non-democratic countries. The latest edition (2019, at the time of writing) has an emblematic title: 'The Crisis of Social Media' and the subtitle stresses this idea even more: 'What was once a liberating technology has become a conduit for surveillance and electoral manipulation'.

In certain cases, the punishments for online dissent are more serious than those for corresponding actions offline. The targets towards which these forms of control, influence and censorship are most explicitly directed are online journalists and bloggers involved in anti-government demonstrations, as well as independent websites critical of the regime.

The Internet, then, should not be understood only as an unquestioning place of liberty. It is subject to forms of close control on the part of rulers, becoming an ambiguous space with regard to democratic freedoms and civil liberties. The opportunities of inclusion clash with censorship, surveillance and repression. It is on the basis of these considerations that an interpretation of caution emerges against approaches such as cyber-utopianism and Internet centrism.

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4   This is an *International Non-Governmental Organisation* (INGO) that carries out worldwide research on the diffusion of democracy, civil liberties and political rights. See Chapter 4 for other data published by Freedom House on the spread of democratic freedoms in the world.

Source: Freedom House, Freedom on the Net Report, 2019.

Figure 1.3 *Freedom on the Net in 65 countries (2019)*

The first of these embraces the idea that the Internet favours the oppressed rather than the oppressors, but it is an approach compromised by a 'naïve belief in the emancipatory nature of online communication that rests on a stubborn refusal to acknowledge its downside' (Morozov 2011, XIII).

The second is a pragmatic and not necessarily utopian approach: 'Internet-centrists like to answer every question about democratic change by first reframing it in terms of the Internet rather than the context in which that change is to occur' (Morozov 2011, XVI).

The socio-political context and the persons are, instead, fundamental – perhaps the true independent variable. Facebook, YouTube and now Instagram, which is the third most commonly used social network with one billion users worldwide, or even the 'elitist' Twitter are certainly functional in the growing demand for democracy in specific countries. They have represented and guaranteed a technological and communicative opportunity. They have stood out as leading instruments of revolts and 'Springs', but they amount to an intervening variable.

Morozov's criticism touches upon both cyber-utopianism and Internet centrism. It expresses, therefore, a parallel critical approach: towards an excessive regard for the contribution offered by the Internet, which ends up provoking an interpretive distortion of social reality along with its potentiality, and of political facts, such as those linked to the processes of democratisation in countries where civil society activism mobilises towards a demand of greater democratic freedoms. The adoption of this perspective would lead to an underestimation, in the analysis of the political phenomena, of the impact of cultural conditions, enhancing first the role of the Internet and online communication technologies.

Moreover, in the field of this critical understanding of the relationship between technology and politics, another distorting point in the manifestation of citizenship should be highlighted. That is, the online citizen risks identifying political action and engagement only with Internet activism. So, through the various forms of e-participation, such as supporting online campaigns and petitions, posting protest contents, and participating in discursive political consumerism actions,[5] one may end up considering this digital environment

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[5]   This dimension of political consumerism refers to actions of communication, *guerrilla warfare* and *culture jamming* consisting in practices aimed at challenging the media-diffused images, places and advertising slogans of various targets, and in particular of multinational enterprises. Such actions are realised through the deconstruction of the message content, which comes to be placed in an unusual semantic context, with a profoundly changed or even opposite meaning, rendering it paradoxical. Such an action is charged with critical meaning through parodies characterised by the logic of 'naming and shaming', with the purpose of undermining the public image, and hence the credibility, of the subject whose ethical, political or environmental conduct is being

as *the* political domain. Instead, there are 'no such things as virtual politics' (Morozov 2011, 201) and the traditional methods of doing politics, in the territory and the institutions, remain essential even in the age of the Internet.

According to these considerations digital activism would tend to be inscribed within the perimeter of 'couch activism', that is, a *lazy* or passive approach that sometimes, for example, is limited to donating money to a cause, often in small amounts, and there the involvement ends, as does the *responsibility taking*, which is why some campaigns, even sizeable ones, have begun to oppose the figure of the *slacktivist.* As well as marking the Visa and MasterCard logos with barred red circles, they call on online activists to participate, with explicit pleas such as 'DON'T DONATE; Take action' (Morozov 2011, 179).

So, the approaches are various; they regard not only the specific link between the Internet and politics, but also that between the Internet and society. Scholars of the digital phenomenon, in the political sphere, nevertheless point out how the pervasiveness of the Internet, and, in particular, of the platforms traceable to Web 2.0, have favoured the development of an unprecedented public space, which Manuel Castells (2007) defines as *mass self-communication*, emphasising the simultaneous presence of the *collective* dimension and the *individualised* character of the communication and engagement over the Internet. Castells stresses that with the advent of Web 2.0 a new form of civil society has developed. In this scenario the new media amount to an important resource to foster citizens' political interest and discussion. They spread information opportunities that reach the *networked* citizen directly and automatically, through the system of notification, for example, in some sense without the *cost* of searching for contents. Social media contribute to the organisation and management of public opinion campaigns. They stimulate attention and competence on general issues. They solicit the civic involvement of the citizen (Shah et al. 2005; Dahlgren 2009).

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attacked. They are actions that are carried out by, for example, movements criticising globalisation, for the Internet represents an important resource for organisation and mobilisation (Castells 2012). Today these initiatives are shared through the so-called new media, but they are rooted in the 1950s, when the practice of 'cultural interference' was enacted by the cultural currents of the time through significant channels and various artists. Beyond the *discursive* dimension there are two other modalities of political consumerism, which are: (a) the positive type, that is, *buycotting*, in which purchasing choices are based on rewarding a company or country's respect for certain ethical and social principles and practices in the production model and institutional behaviour; (b) the negative type, that is, *boycotting*, in which specific brands or products are not purchased, with an explicit punitive intention, based on the same ethical, environmental or political considerations (Micheletti 2003; 2004; Stolle and Micheletti 2013; Ceccarini 2008).

The process of disintermediation, and its implications in the framework of representation (see Chapter 6), therefore finds an ally and objective support in the fundamental feature such as the direct and horizontal nature offered by the Internet, and by the resources and potentiality made available by social media.

Finally, even if the negative potentiality of the Internet and social media in political life is a fact, it has also to be taken into consideration that digital platforms are not

> […] necessarily good or bad for liberal democracy. Nor is it that social media inherently strengthens or undermines tolerance. On the contrary, it is that social media closes the technological gap between insiders and outsiders. Until a few decades ago, governments and big media companies enjoyed an oligopoly over the means of mass communication. As a result, they could set the standards of acceptable political discourse. In a well-functioning democracy, this might mean declining to publish racist content, conspiracy theories, or outright lies – and thus stabilizing liberal democracy. In an autocracy, this might mean censoring any criticism of the dictator – and thus keeping liberal democracy at bay. With the rise of social media, this technological advantage has all but evaporated. (Mounk 2018, 146)

1.11   PUBLIC SPHERE(S) AND CITIZENSHIP

The public sphere, in its classical meaning, is a place of dialogue, a theatre of argumentation and counter-argumentation, and thus a space for the formation of public opinion. This has been affected by the pervasiveness of Web 2.0, as well as by the mechanism of disintermediation or rather 'neo-intermediation'. Consequently, the public sphere in the post-modern society widens its borders and multiplies its spaces. In this regard one speaks of *public spheres*, in the plural, marked by an ever-greater degree of interconnection (Boccia Artieri 2012; Manin 2014; Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri 2020). Within this framework are developed processes of inclusion of the citizens in the political system that differ from those of the past. Different mobilisation formulas are expressed, and hence different ways of being citizens and experiencing citizenship.

A useful interpretation in this regard is that proposed by Pierre Rosanvallon (2008) with the evocative idea of 'counter-democracy'. With this concept the centrality of the role of surveillance, in this case from the grassroots upwards, of the holders of power comes to the fore. Unlike what the neologism proposed by this author suggests, it should not be understood as the antithesis of democracy; that is, as its negation, anti-democracy. Rather, it should be considered as a mechanism that, being based on 'democratic distrust' in the holders of power, could reinforce and offer support to the concept and practice of representative government, improving its fundamental function. It is thus a corrective to democratic procedures in the hands of the citizens.

Counter-democracy is a model of civic involvement and democratic citizenship, complementary of the electoral moment. The elections, indeed, are necessarily episodic. For that reason, through the diffusion in society of *indirect powers* – above all surveillance – which are put into effect through the action of institutions, citizens' groups and civic associations, counter-democracy can strengthen modern representative democracies, improving their quality. However, counter-democracy – with its counter-powers – is also an ambiguous 'political form'; it can reinforce democracy, but, at the same time, it can also contradict it (Rosanvallon 2008, 24).

The action of surveillance and monitoring and the consequent publicity and discussion in the public debate constitute an activity that can be carried out by citizens individually, using, for example, the tools made available by the Internet (see Chapter 5), which comes to be described as one of these powers of control, and is considered one of the forms through which counter-democracy, and hence the idea of 'monitoring' in the hands of the citizens, is structured.

The 'individualised' feature is an extremely characteristic element of the models of citizenship behind this formula of political responsibility assumed by the digital citizen (Isin and Ruppert 2015). The resources of the Web render the sharing of information, including that covering the political community, to some extent less costly and more efficient (Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2012). Online action can be integrated, and then hybridised, with the traditional modes of participation carried out by the entities organised in the frame of civil society, such as the press and civic associations.

The Internet, according to this reading, comes to be defined as a political form, because it has the potential, in the counter-democratic approach, for the control and surveillance of the powers that be. Blogs, forums and online campaigns favour the creation of opinion movements. They can reinforce a deliberative, dialogue-based, argumentative logic in civil society in a granular way down to the local level.

Bernard Manin underlines the potential for change – for *metamorphosis*, as he puts it – inherent in the erosion of party loyalty and the transformations of the communication dynamic. The diffusion of the Internet and social media and the multiplication of television channels with digital technology lead to the overcoming of the *audience democracy*, of a single public, giving way to an *audiences democracy*, of several, and fragmented, publics.

On this basis, the new information and communications technologies can be seen as a tool that widens the public space (but makes it even more fragmented), supporting, either directly or indirectly, practices of confrontation, argumentation and counter-argumentation. They allow an acting space to be created, according to the well-known meaning discussed by Jürgen Habermas (1962), in which social and private actors give shape to their opinions and positions, discussing issues of general interest rationally and critically. The

exchange and hybridisation between new media and legacy communication tools (Chadwick 2013) amplify all that takes place in the online realm. The holders of power will have to take account of this in the sphere of the political process. The online dimension can thus be considered a new level of the public sphere that complements this direction, even if the online dynamics pose some structural restrictions regarding the forms of communicative interaction that develop in the physical space. The condition of 'communicative abundance' in post-modern society (Keane 2013), to which the Internet contributes in a considerable way, leads, precisely owing to an excessive wealth of information offered, to a decline in the role of the media as a system and structure of control and monitoring of politics.

1.12   POWER, COUNTER-POWER AND DISTRUST

The Internet is not immune to limits, simplifications and manipulations. This is an evaluation that is now well recognised, and it is an idea that is not recent, but widely shared by pundits and scholars of this phenomenon (Howard 2006; Morozov 2011; Wolton 2012). The above-mentioned data, yearly gathered by the think-tank Freedom House, further confirm that interpretation. The alarm raised by the hacktivist group Anonymous in July 2020 regarding the social media app TikTok charged with being malware controlled by the Chinese government to control users is a clue in that respect.

The actual critical issues that exist can be adequately considered if a 'cyber-realistic' approach is adopted. If the perspective is located beyond the utopic/dystopic dichotomy, it can lead to an attentive and detached analysis of the potential elements that might reflect upon the concept and practices of citizenship.

In the Internet, therefore, a mode of expression of civil society can be realised that can contribute to the spontaneous role of vigilance, denunciation and evaluation of those in power (see Chapter 5). This action of control from below can assume a relevant political meaning, becoming a 'political form' that inserts itself into the scenario that Pierre Rosanvallon defines 'the age of distrust'. It is a specific civic attitude, that of *democratic distrust*, which differs from the simple sentiment of disenchantment towards politics. It is a component element of political culture, which justifies attention towards and involvement in politics, and also justifies a continuous surveillance of those who govern. In this sense, the other facet of distrust is control, civic attention, and not disinterest, indifference, anti-politics. Behind this specific model of being part of a community there is the aim of making rulers feel the vigilant presence of civil society, in order that they may work for the common good.

Power and counter-power, moreover, represent the poles of a basic dualism in the democratic process: it is the system of checks and balances. Within this

frame, the citizen is not limited to being only a voter. The vote continues to represent the most visible and institutionalised form of political citizenship, remaining at the centre of the functioning of modern-day democracies. It is an essential ritual (and right/duty), a fundamental liturgy of representative democracy. But the citizen, according to this approach, can also be seen as an active and *critical* figure (Norris 1999; 2011). She or he goes beyond the elections, beyond the conventional political spaces, capable of practising diversified forms of involvement and actions: control, surveillance and alarm, in *subpolitical* and online spheres. At the base of this conception of citizenship are the ideas of *monitoring* democracy and the *monitorial citizen*, as John Keane (2009) and Michael Schudson (1998) respectively suggest.

Within this framework, even with all the implications of the case, political participation can be viewed in a different light. The widespread idea of the passive citizen gradually takes on fuzzier outlines. Yet the classic debate in political communication studies concerning the hypotheses of mobilization – that is, in our case if digital media use stimulates the participation of those who are not politically active – versus reinforcement – that is, the opposite situation – is still open and the causal direction quite hard to prove. The same applies for the third thesis described by Pippa Norris (2000), called a virtuous circle, where mobilisation and reinforcement effects are in a reciprocal relationship. Scholars are trying to study the causal direction by the meta-analysis of repeated-wave panel data (Boulianne 2009; 2015; Oser and Boulianne 2020). However, this research problem is still to be examined in depth.

Observing participation through categories other than those linked to the traditional forms of engagement, the paradigm that recalls the citizen's decline in terms of civic spirit and community involvement leaves room for diverse interpretations. It is a perspective that underlines a gradual transformation of the modalities used in civil society for *responsibility-taking* (see Chapter 5) on issues of general interest. The online–offline link is a fundamental release from these dynamics.

1.13   ONLINE AND OFFLINE

In the light of what we have seen in this first chapter defining the scenario, it would be reductive to consider the new technologies of the Internet – based on Web 2.0 – simply as tools for providing information or for organising political mobilisation on the ground (Bennett 2003). Their scope is not limited to an instrumental nature. Rather, they deeply concern the very redefinition of the concept of democratic citizenship (Bentivegna 2006; Hermes 2006; Rodotà 2013; Isin and Ruppert 2015), the dynamics in which citizens' opinions and methods of civic and political involvement are formed, especially those of the

younger generation, who are greatly affected by the digital element (Bennett 2008; Grasso 2016; Bolin 2017).

Technological innovation thus has to do with political socialisation and culture, and related transformations, but also with the change in the sphere of representative government. The interweaving between the online and offline modes of engagement is at the centre of this discourse. Ethnographic research shows that online spaces and groups, political conversation in various kind of forums regardless of the site's main purpose, foster political engagement that can generate offline political activism and mobilisation, where young people are more politically involved than much of the civic engagement literature suggests (Beyer 2014).

The online social space is a specific but important domain, allowing the collecting of some clues that are useful for understanding the connection between citizens and politics, between mediation and disintermediation, but also the junction between forms of collective participation and modes of individualised engagement.

The literature on the transformations that have occurred in the relationship between society and politics refers to categories and processes such as that of *individualisation* of the citizen-voter, delegitimisation of the traditional and institutionalised political actors (Eliasoph 1998; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Pharr and Putnam 2000), and the drop in civic involvement in modern Western democracies (Putnam 1995; 2000).

Many authors have dwelt upon these critical issues regarding the frailty of the democratic fabric. The expressions most frequently used for the analysis have been *disenchantment*, *decline*, *malaise*, *partisan dealignment* or *distrust* (see Chapter 3). These categories are first and foremost the result of the attention to the traditional modes of engagement and inclusion in the political community: primarily the vote and the parties, but also participation in the classical hierarchical organisations of political representation, based on delegation and membership. But the divide between citizens and politics, which many authors have emphasised, does not automatically imply the growth of indifference and apathy towards the public space. It does not necessarily lead to unwillingness to become involved on the part of citizens. If anything, the models of *taking part* are changing. Some interpretations go beyond the idea of revival in the private sphere, and they suggest that research should be steered in other directions (Norris 2002), adopting other paradigms and looking elsewhere, towards different and emerging forms of involvement (Dalton 1996; Inglehart 1990; Bell 1999; Ceccarini 2021). It is worth recalling the epochal shift from the 'politics of loyalties' to the 'politics of choice'.

It is from this point of view that the very figure of the citizen should be reconsidered, because political culture and the forms of participation are in continuous development, especially among the younger generations, who

are the protagonists of social change. They are more open to experiencing new forms of citizenship that intersect with their everyday lifestyle, based on personal and individualised modes of responsibility taking. *Life politics* takes form and assumes meaning in places where the border between politics and non-politics is ever more tenuous, and where the distinction between online and offline worlds is blurred by the process of *hybridisation.*