

Will Democracy Kill Democracy? Decision-Making by Majorities and by Committees*

INDIVIDUAL DECISIONS ARE TAKEN BY EACH INDIVIDUAL FOR HIMSELF (regardless of whether he is inner- or other-directed). Group decisions imply that decisions are taken by a 'concrete' group, i.e. a face-to-face interacting number of individuals which may thus be said to share (partake) such decisions. Collective decisions are hardly amenable to a precise definition; but they are generally understood to mean decisions taken by the 'many'. We then have *collectivized decisions*. Collective and collectivized decisions may be said to share the property of not being, in any meaningful sense, individual decisions. Even so, collectivized decisions are very different from all the others. Individual, group, and collective decisions all make reference to an actor, to who makes the decision. Collectivized decisions are, instead, decisions that apply to, and are enforced upon, a collectivity regardless of whether they are taken by the one, the few, or the many. The defining criterion no longer is *who* makes the decision, but its *scope*: whoever does the deciding *decides for all*.

In what follows I propose to look at politics from the vantage point, or the premise, that politics consists of collectivized decisions. Let it be stressed: collectivized, *not* collective decisions. Collective and collectivized decisions coincide only when the community which 'issues' the decisions coincides with the community that 'receives' them. This coinciding is of great

* This article condenses to the utmost a series of lectures. A more expanded text has appeared in *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, 1, 1974, pp. 5-42. However, the abridgement and the streamlining add up to a quite different text. In order to be as brief as possible I have been compelled to eliminate the bibliography and to make frequent reference to other writings of mine. I hope to be forgiven for that. Major cuts are indicated by three dots in square brackets.

theoretical interest, but a very infrequent occurrence in the real world of politics. For most practical purposes I take it, therefore, that politics ultimately consists of decisions which are removed from the competence of each individual as such and are made by somebody for someone else.¹

To be sure, while all the decisions of a political nature are collectivized decisions, the obverse is not true: not all collectivized decisions are political. When we speak, e.g. of economic power we again refer to collectivized decisions, to the fact that somebody (the capitalist, the corporation, etc.) takes decision for, and imposes them upon, wage earners and consumer publics. The difference between political power, economic power (and other powers as well) cannot be found, then, in the notion of collectivized decisions. The difference is, rather, a hierarchical one. That is to say that collectivized decisions are political in that they are (i) sovereign, (ii) without exit, and (iii) sanctionable. Sovereign in the sense that they can overrule any other rule; without exit, as Hirschman might put it, because they reach out to the ultimate boundary of an organized collectivity; and sanctionable in the sense that they are sustained by the legal monopoly of force.

If politics is perceived as consisting of those collectivized decisions which are both overarching and of greater consequence to the well (or ill) being of each and all,² is it appropriate to begin with the libertarian ideal of Marx or with the question of the anarchist: why have politics at all? The question is not trivial. After all, why should we like decisions taken for us *by others*, especially when – as in the case of politics – they can be utterly boundless and without appeal? The answer has been given thousands of times; but the merit of rock-bottom questions remains that they place matters in perspective. For instance, the area of collectivized decisions is far greater – other conditions being equal – in the socialist than in the non-socialist countries. We are thus required to distinguish between the ‘ideology’, and the ‘utility’ of collectivizing decisions, and to assess the extension of the sphere and power of politics, under these criteria [. . .]

¹ It goes without saying that politics is envisaged, here, at the macro-level and that by ‘decision’ I intend an enactment.

² Lest I should be accused of oversimplification, for the complexities on which I cannot dwell see G. Sartori, ‘What is Politics?’, *Political Theory*, February 1973, pp. 5–26.

EXTERNAL RISKS AND DECISIONAL COSTS

Whatever our ideological leanings, the problem remains: *how* should we proceed – no matter if out of preference or of sheer necessity – in collectivizing decisions? The question is not intractable and can be tackled – I suggest – on the basis of two very simple analytical tools: (i) the *costs* of deciding, and (ii) the *risks* resulting from collectivized decisions. Axiomatically stated, my premises are as follows.

Axiom one: all group or collective decisions have *internal costs*, i.e. costs for the decision-makers themselves, generally spoken of as *decision-making costs*.

Axiom two: all collectivized decisions involve *external risks*, i.e. risks for the addressees, for those receiving the decisions from the outside, *ab extra*.

While the notions of cost and risk have a familiar ring,³ the axioms show that they have been subjected to a good deal of pruning. To begin with, why do I first speak of *costs*, and then of *risks*? The asymmetry relates to the fact that the internal costs refer to *who* decides, while the external risks envisage *for whom* the decisions are taken. Now, the collectivity which receives the decisions can either benefit or suffer from them. If it benefits it would be misleading to say 'external costs', for our 'internal costs' mean *costs*, not benefits. On the other hand, from the vantage point of the outs the problem is precisely that they may, but may not, be benefited. That is to say that a collectivity which receives decisions that are not of its own making is *always* exposed to a risk. Hence the concept of risk is the minimal common denominator which reflects the actual perception of the outs. So the essentials of the matter are that the body that makes the decisions has 'costs' (whatever else may be at stake), while the collectivity that receives them faces 'risks' (whatever these may turn out to be).

With reference to the *internal* or *decisional costs* it should be understood that these costs are imputed to group (or collective) decisions, not to the decisions taken by a single individual. A 'one

³ For instance, in J. Buchanan and G. Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent*, University of Michigan Press, 1965, 'costs of decision-making' and 'external costs' play a major role. While I am greatly indebted to their fundamental work, it will be seen that my argument largely departs from their premises. Compare, e.g. their 'external-costs' function (pp. 63–8) with my 'external risks'. Also, Buchanan and Tullock do not distinguish between 'collective' and 'collectivized' decisions.

man' decision such as, in politics, the dictatorial decision, has a zero decisional cost. The dictator may well have to bear, when deciding alone, high psychological costs; but these are immaterial to the problem at hand. The first point is, then, that decisions have costs only with more than one decider. In the second place it should be clear that the costs in question are not monetary costs. They are, basically, costs in time and fatigue. By and large, decisions which take up a lot of time can be said to cost more than fast decisions. However, if time is a good measure, the measure must be extended to the 'time lost', meaning by this the time wasted on decisions which are not made and/or endlessly postponed. Low productivity, inefficiency, immobilism and paralysis can all be brought back to, and studied as, decisional costs. In the third place it bears stressing that the decision-making costs – as here defined – have nothing to do with the gains and losses of the members of the deciding body: they are the pure and simple *costs of the process*, of the process of deciding.

Turning to the *external risks*, the axiom states, if only implicitly, that they come about only when, and only if, an area of decision is collectivized. That is to say that if a decision is taken by the same group or collectivity to which it applies, no external risk is involved. To be sure, the group will contain winners and losers. None the less, these losers have participated in the decision. It cannot be said, therefore, that they were exposed to an 'external' risk in the sense in which the non-participants are so exposed. The point is, then, that 'external' defines, here, a *placement*: the placement of the third parties, of those who do not belong to the deciding body.

The next question might be: how does a risk relate to a cost? Well, a risk is an uncertainty, a menace, a potentiality, while the cost is a reckoning *ex post*. This implies that risks are, by definition, non-measurable. Only outcomes can be measured. But the outcome of a risk is not necessarily a cost (a negative outcome); especially if the risk is faced appropriately it can be a benefit (a positive outcome). Therefore external risks can well be assessed – in outcome – *qua* 'external costs'. But in outcome we may equally find 'external benefits'. The full argument is, then, that (i) collectivized decisions involve external risks, that (ii) external risks may not result in harm, but that (iii) the problem is precisely to increase the probability of 'benefit-outcomes' and to minimize the likelihood of 'cost-outcomes'. And here a last clarification is in

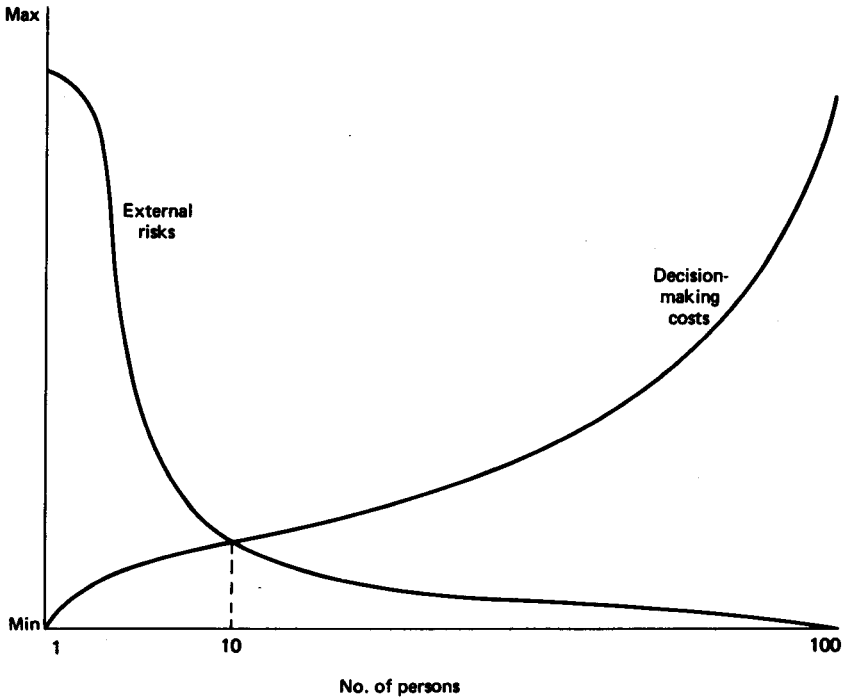
order. While the notion of benefit can be left undefined, what do I mean by *external costs*? Basically, and above all, I am concerned with the 'costs of oppression' – arbitrary power, injustice, and rule by terror. But the notion also covers, to be sure, the 'costs of waste', i.e. the costs resulting from incompetence, ineptitude and corruption.

OPTIMIZING COLLECTIVIZED DECISIONS

We can now proceed. With reference to the decisional costs, the crucial variable is the *number of persons* participating in the decision. As a rule of thumb, the greater their number, the higher the decision-making costs. We may equally say that the cost of decisions is a function of the size of the deciding body. This holds good, to be sure, under the assumption that the decision-makers are independent individuals who are free to express themselves. A thousand people crowding together and proceeding by acclamation do not fall under my rule because there is nothing they really decide: they simply ratify decisions already taken. The rule can thus be restated as follows: provided that each participant has an independent say, the number of deciders stands in *direct relation* to the costs of decisions: they increase together. If this is so, it follows that it is irrational to enlarge a decisional body (i.e. to augment the costs of decisions) without reason. This reason, or the best reason, is (should be) to reduce the external risks, the risks to third parties. Accordingly we can set forth a second rule: the number of deciders stands in *inverse relation* to the external risks: as the deciding body grows the external risks diminish.

Let us make sure that the argument has no hidden flaw. Assuming, for the sake of simplicity, a collectivity of 100 people, the first case is that 1 person decides for 99. In such a hypothesis the external risks are highest, or maximal, while the decisional costs are zero. This makes sense. Second case: the decisions are taken by 10 people. Surely the decision-making costs will rise. Will the external risks diminish? Yes and no. Yes in the trivial sense that they will affect 90 instead of 99 persons. But we cannot say for sure that the 90 are likely to face lesser risks. If we say so, we must have some other factor in mind. So here we have a problem. Third case: all the 100 people decide for themselves. Clearly, the external risks will be zero, while the decision-making costs will be maximal. Here, again, the rules hold.

We have sensed some incompleteness, but in the main the two rules seem to make sense. If so, we are seemingly approaching a stalemate. To the extent that decision-making costs and external risks are inversely related – or co-vary negatively – and that both are conceived, roughly, as monotonic functions, there is little to be said in favour of collectivizing areas of decision. We may *have* to do so on grounds of sheer necessity; but, we would be left with a



clear case of 'negative development'. Either the external risks are too great or the decisional costs too high – and whatever is unloaded from one of these elements is reloaded on the other one. To be sure, the monotonic assumption is an unrealistic assumption. This having been granted, we still have no solution. For the solution clearly lies in reducing the external risks much faster than, and before the point at which, the decision-making costs escalate. As illustrated by the diagram, the curve of the external risks must plummet and cross the curve of the decisional costs before an accelerated stepping up of the latter. With respect to our

hypothetical collectivity of one hundred persons, the point of least ordinate (i.e. ten people) strikes the optimal balance between external risks and decision-making costs. An optimal balance which indicates not only *when* it is convenient to collectivize an area of decision but also *how* to do it conveniently.

The query is: in what way can we obtain, in the real world, curves like those hypothesized in the diagram? It is self-evident that the problem would be insoluble if the number of the participants in the decision was the only variable. But two supplementary variables can be entered:

1. The *method of forming the deciding body* – how it is recruited and what is its composition or nature.

2. The *rules with which decisions are made* – the decision-making principles and procedures.

The first variable is central to the object of reducing external risks.⁴ Instead the second variable taps, primarily though not exclusively, on the costs of decision-making. [. . .]

With three variables – numbers of deciders, ways of selecting them, and rules of deciding – we are already in a position to pull some nets to shore. The problem is, as we know, to minimize the external risks in relation to the costs of decision-making. More precisely, we must obtain, on the one hand, a more than proportionate reduction (indeed, an exponential reduction) of the external risks and, on the other hand, a less than proportionate increase in the decisional costs. The problem can be managed on two counts, or for two reasons.

The first one is that the external risks are not so much a function of the number of participants in a decision, but primarily a function of the method of formation of the deciding group and, thereby, of its composition and nature. And what makes all the difference, in this latter respect, is whether or not the deciding group is a group of representatives.⁵ Since the theory and practice

⁴ For the simplicity of the argument the variable is so defined as to imply that the deciding body is a group. But the point can be extended to the dictatorial hypothesis, to the 'rule of the one'. Depending on whether the single ruler acquires office by heredity, election, force, conquest, lot (anyone), lot-and-rotation (anyone in turn), indefinitely or temporarily, it can be easily shown that the external risks vary.

⁵ Note that 'representative group' draws from, and points to, the sociological theory of representation ('representativeness'), whereas I am exclusively concerned with the theory and practice of political representation. Throughout this article, therefore, 'representation' is conceived as 'responsiveness' and

of political representation has been subjected, recently, to much disdain, it is important to stress that apart from the *representative techniques of controlled transmission of power* there is no other known technique for coping with the external risks. Reverting to our earlier example, the reason that allows a collectivity to entrust the power of deciding for the whole to ten persons only, is that this deciding group is assumed to consist of representatives. Otherwise the collectivity is protected only by all its members entering the decision-making body. This is fine with one hundred people. But it quickly becomes unfeasible and unworkable as soon as the numbers grow.

I was saying that the problem can be managed for two reasons. The second reason is that the costs of decisions are not only a function of the number of deciders, but also a function of the decision-making rules adopted. Since these rules will be assessed in due course, the thing to note right away is that we should not be misled by the symmetry of my presentation: how the deciding body is formed, on the one hand, and how it decides, on the other. In reality, the representative method of forming the deciding body permits a vertiginous fall of the curve of the external risks, whereas the rules of decision-making allow only for a lessening, or a smoothening, of the decisional costs. If you like, the two curves display a very different elasticity. Consequently the crucial key remains *representation*. That is to say that – despite much, and often justified, dissatisfaction – only the drastic reduction of the universe of those represented to a small group of representatives permits a momentous reduction of the external risks without aggravating the decisional costs.

ZERO-SUM AND POSITIVE-SUM

Thus far my focus has been, in the main, on the external risks and on how to cope with the problems thus resulting. I now turn to the decision-making itself not only with respect to the rules according to which decisions are made, but, in the overall, with respect to their nature in outcome.⁶ The question is: *how one decides*,

'responsibility to'. See my article 'Representational Systems' in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Free Press & MacMillan, 1968, vol. XIII, to which I must also refer for many other facets and complexities of the institution.

⁶ Remember that, in outcome, external risks turn out to be either costs (damages) or benefits. Analogously, the outcome of decisions can be declared

with *what end-result* and, eventually, with *what by-effects*. To this end we must take into account the following three elements: (i) *type of outcome*: zero-sum or positive-sum; (ii) *decisional context*: whether discontinuous or continuous; (iii) *intensity of preferences*.

By type of outcome I mean whether the participants engage in the decisional game in a *zero-sum*, or in a *positive-sum* prospect. A third possible outcome is *minus-sum*; but this outcome is, for the moment, beside the point. Since the theory of games is well known, and its bearing on decision theory explained, it will suffice here to recall the definitions.

A game is said to be zero-sum (or constant sum) when one player gains exactly what another player loses. The problem, here, is simply to win. The adventurous player will try to inflict the maximum damage on his adversary(ies), if at a greater risk for himself. The cautious player will choose, instead, a strategy that minimizes his own possible losses. In every case, when a game is zero-sum the alternative is simply to win or to lose. Contrariwise, a game is said to be positive-sum when every player can win. In substance, a positive-sum outcome points to a co-operative game. And the problem becomes, here, how to slice the cake, that is, how to share the winnings. Passing from the real to the 'figurative' games – I mean, to politics as a game – let me simply point out that to the extent that we move away from 'politics as war'⁷ and come near to 'politics as bargaining', to the same extent it is fitting to say that we are shifting from zero-sum to positive-sum politics.

ONE-SHOT AND CONTINUOUS DECISIONS

The decisional context can be, I have said, discontinuous or continuous. The context is *discontinuous* when we are faced with separate, *discrete issues*. This is the case in referenda and also in elections. Regardless of the frequency, and even when a referendum submits to the voter a cluster of issues, the voter necessarily responds with discrete decisions. Likewise, elections are, for the electors, a one-shot decision. On the other hand, we

damaging and beneficial – provided that we make clear for whom (for the decision makers or for third parties). The argument is not pursued for lack of space.

⁷ Reference is made to Carl Schmitt, whose major writings are now collected in *Le Categorie del Politico*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1972. Class war also enters this perception of politics.

also find groups (concrete groups) in charge of a stream or flow of decisions. In such a case the decisional context is *continuous*, for we are no longer faced with discrete issues – at least in the sense that the deciding body need not treat them discretely. Note that the decisions ‘flow’ in a theoretically endless stream, and that nobody can decide in isolation. On both counts the group is likely to link the various issues, regardless of their intrinsic affinities, by engaging in reciprocal exchanges. A group which so performs is generally identified as a ‘committee’. But more on this shortly. The immediate point is that a decisional context is continuous when a stream of issues is handled by linking them, that is, when the issues are not treated discretely.

As the foregoing implies, a discontinuous and a continuous decisional context are not separated by a fixed or ‘natural’ borderline. Whether an issue is dealt with discretely or not can be said to depend on the context in which the issue is placed. On the other hand, it is equally true that whenever large numbers are involved – as in a general election or referendum – one-shot decisions on discrete issues are unavoidable. In this sense discontinuous contexts can be said to be imposed by the circumstances.

INTENSITY OF PREFERENCES AND MAJORITY RULE

The intensity of preferences points to the fact that every issue elicits a different degree of affect, involvement or disinterest. We are thus confronted with the *unequal intensity of individual preferences*. Preferences vary not only in being diverse, but also in that they are strongly or feebly held. The fact is well known – it is part and parcel of our daily life experience – but its political implications often escape us.

Take the various majority rules – indeed an important sector of the decision-making rules. We have recourse to majority rules on the assumption that people have contrary preferences,⁸ and that – if deadlocks are to be overcome – what is preferred by a 51 per cent (in the case of simple or absolute majority rule) must prevail over the preference of the 49 per cent.⁹ Fine. But it should not

⁸ I no longer say ‘diverse’ but ‘contrary’ preferences, because majority rule turns a gamut, or a spectrum, into a yes-no structure of alternatives. We thus have an instrument of conflict resolution which is not conflict-minimizing.

⁹ Majority rules are actually referred to four confusingly classified majorities.

escape us that the rule totally ignores the fact that these preferences *have* a different intensity. Majority rules weigh individuals *qua* individuals; and this means that they *equalize unequal intensities*. So majority rules rest on a *factio*, indeed on a very thin and unrealistic stipulation: let us pretend that preferences are equal in their intensity. Let us pretend it; but let us also realize that they are not.

With this I am not suggesting in the least that we should attribute equal weight to equal intensities, instead of equal weight to individuals declared to be equal. The intensity criterion cannot establish a workable 'rule'—and our first need it to have rules. I only wish to explain why the majority principle is never accepted in full, why its application often falls short of the mark, and especially why *intense minorities* dispute the principle and definitely refuse to submit to it.

The real facts of life are that one strong No regularly overcomes two weak Ayes, and, conversely, that one obstinate Yes usually beats down two feeble Noes. The generalization could be that intense minorities prevail, in the long if not in the short run, over apathetic majorities. Let it be stressed that this would remain the case even if the resources of each and all were made equal. We could also say that 'intensity' is the most overlooked, and yet the most powerful base or resource of power. But let us attempt to be a little more precise with reference to a special case: observable direct democracy, defined as that size or amount of self-government among equals which can be visually observed in actual operation (something in the range of the hundreds and even of the thousands, but surely not in the range of the hundred thousands and millions).

In recent years many of us have in fact seen direct democracy—as defined—in operation, thereby rediscovering what has been well known since the time of Plato and Aristotle, namely, that it is a true paradise for the *active minorities*. We have also frequently observed that the larger the collectivity of the allegedly self-governing equals, the lower the percentages that enable a minority to have its way. So, why is it that, say, a 5 per cent rules over the quasi-totality of its equals? The reply is: intensity. Intensity is the element that brings the group together, that activates it, and that

A *qualified* majority is first contrasted to a *simple* majority (to mean that it is not qualified). In turn a simple majority is *absolute* if referred to the universe, and *relative* if based on those who are actually present or voting. But then we also use *relative* majority for whatever majority (whoever first passes the post).

goes to explain its impact and force of attraction. All of this is, to my mind, as obvious as it is inevitable. The issue may, however, be pressed further by asking: why should intensity be an attribute of (small) minorities and not also of majorities? This is a good question; but hardly an objection. An 'intense majority' can well materialize: but, in all likelihood, on a single issue, or on a set of issues revolving around one core. Therefore, over a broad range and sequel of issues we can only expect to find, at best, different intense majorities each of which dissolves as the issues change. Thus, an *intense majority* amounts to an *occasional majority*. Instead, small groups can be lastingly and equally intense on a global set of issues. Indeed, this is how and why they come into being. The difference is, then, that intense minorities are real (concrete) groups, while intense majorities are ephemeral aggregates. If they are not, then it will be discovered that they are mobilized by intense minorities – and we thus come full circle.

The fact that the majority principle disregards the unequal intensity of individual preferences and, conversely, the extent to which this latter element limits or deviates the implementation of the former, entitles us to wonder whether some other decisional rule might not be better. For instance, would the principle and rule of unanimity be better?

As regards the principle it can hardly be disputed that unanimity does justice to the intensity of preferences; indeed it over-does justice, for it legitimizes the veto of one sole intense dissident. But while unanimity can be upheld – on this and other grounds – in principle, it seemingly fails us in practice. The objection is well known and appears formidable: the decisional costs of unanimity rule are unbearable, for they add up to paralysis. This conclusion sounds pretty final and doubtlessly applies to the cases to which it applies. This is to use a truism to say that an ulterior question still needs to be asked, namely, is it *always* the case that the cost of unanimity is paralysis?

Up to this point we have looked at the unequal intensity of preferences as an *obstacle* to majority rule. But the fact that intensities differ and obtain different distributions can also be seen as a positive fact, as an *advantage*. If everybody's preferences were always equally and strongly intense on all issues, how could any deciding body ever reach an agreement? In effect, the agreement is reached precisely because its members are not equally intense on all issues. In short: the mechanism of group agreement largely

consists of the non-intense giving in to the intense. And this is particularly the case with those decision-making groups spoken of as committees.

COMMITTEES AND UNANIMITY RULE

The notion of 'committee' has already been mentioned in passing but needs pinpointing. First, a committee is a *small, interacting face-to-face group*. Being an interacting group, it cannot consist of less than three members for interactions begin to be meaningful when they are triadic.¹⁰ But how large can 'small' be? The face-to-face requirement does give a first delimitation; but an assembly is still a face-to-face group, and yet an assembly largely outnumbers a committee. The maximal efficient size of a committee is established, in effect, by its operational code. In practice, this means that committees generally range from three to some thirty members. To be sure, thirty is a very loose approximation. A committee may perform poorly with twenty members, and manage to perform nicely with forty – for this depends on the extent to which its members fully comply with the mode (or code) of operation I am about to describe.

Secondly, a committee is a *durable and institutionalized* group. Institutionalized in the sense that its existence is recognized – whether legally or informally – by the fact that things have to be done by, and through, a specified group. A committee is institutionalized, we may say, by the tasks assigned to it. However, a group cannot be, or become, institutionalized without being durable. This latter characteristic is not related to the actual permanence or stability of the members of the group. As we know from role-taking theory, whoever enters an institutionalized group is likely to assume the time perspective of the institution. Thus a group is durable – regardless of its actual rate of turnover – when its members act *as if* they were permanent. What counts is the expectation.

Thirdly, a committee is a decision-making group confronted with a *flow of decisions*. We may equally say that whenever decisions come in streams, or strings, they 'naturally' call for a committee-like counterpart. So when we speak of committees we make reference to a *continuous decisional context* in its difference

¹⁰ Other characteristics of 'group', such as shared goals or a sense of belonging, are immaterial to a minimal definition of 'committee'.

(discussed earlier) from discrete decisions on discrete issues.

I have dwelt on the definition for two reasons. The first one is that committees, and the committee system thus resulting, largely escape not only visibility but awareness. This is not only because a committee system actually prefers to perform in a penumbra under conditions of low visibility, but also because of its dispersion, of its minute fragmentation. It follows that the crucial role played by the 'committee subsystem' within any 'political system' is – far more often than not – either grossly underscored, or grossly disparaged, and generally both. My second reason for dwelling on the definition is, thus, that the committee system is, in one, the most pervasive, crucial and misunderstood part of the real 'stuff' of politics. For all decisions enacted by any polity are previously examined, discussed and actually drafted by one or more committees. And since a government is a committee, often enough it is a committee that also decides in the final instance.¹¹

How do committees actually work? Never, or hardly ever, on the basis of majority rule. Usually decisions are not brought to a vote. If they are, the vote generally is *pro forma*. As a rule, decisions in committees are unanimous – which comes very close to saying that committees abide by the principle of unanimity. But this is not because their members are of a same mind – they are not. Committees generally end up with unanimous agreement because each component of the group expects that what he concedes on one issue will be given back, or reciprocated, on some other issue. Since this is a tacit understanding it can be called an operational code.

There are many terms for this mode of operation. In Latin the expression is *do ut des*: I give to get in return. The colloquial word is logrolling; and in common parlance we also speak of bargaining in view of reaching compromises. But none of these terms is quite fitting. A 'compromise' consists of meeting somewhere halfway at each point in time, that is, issue by issue. Logrolling is, on the other hand, a very broad and vague term – as is bargaining. Most authors currently borrow from game theory and thus speak of 'vote trading' and of 'payments'. But vote trading is not specific enough; and the payments in question are *internal payments* (not, e.g. side payments). My complaint with all this terminology is that it does not bring out what is peculiar to the operational code in

¹¹ It is only obvious that these considerations apply to any large organization. The argument is confined to political systems for the sake of brevity.

question, namely, the time element. The members of a committee engage in exchanges *over time*, and having especially in view a future time. As I was saying, each member of the group tacitly 'expects'. I shall speak, therefore, of a principle, or mechanism, of *deferred reciprocal compensation*.

Of course an operational code does not come out of the blue sky. A mechanism of deferred reciprocal compensation presupposes two intertwined conditions with which we are by now familiar: (i) unequal intensity of preferences, and (ii) a flow of forthcoming decisions. The group can be unanimous because the distribution of the intensity of preference changes from issue to issue, so that at every moment the members who feel less intensely about a problem are disposed to give in to the members who feel strongly about it. But this disposition needs, in turn, to be lubricated and reinforced by a return in due course, that is, on future decisions: whoever concedes today expects to be paid back some other day.

Prima facie the committee-type of decision-making may strike us as being fragile and precarious, that is, as being exposed to too many conditions. In reality it turns out to be a widely practiced and efficient decision-making system – and this because it hinges on very realistic incentives and rewards. As will have been already understood, decisions in and by committees are *positive-sum*. The essence of a decisional system based on deferred reciprocal compensation is, in effect, that all the members of the group stand to gain and, moreover, that this positive-sum game is endless (with no fixed end in time). Therefore committees are far from proceeding on feet of clay. Quite to the contrary. Given the 'transacting disposition' afforded by unequal intensities, committees activate and sustain a mere disposition (or good will) with a concrete interest in positive-sum returns.

To be sure, every committee has its internal conflicts for two reasons at least: that no divine or pre-established harmony presides over the distribution of preferences, and that the gains are never evenly distributed. Therefore from time to time even committees have showdowns, i.e. have to decide by a majority vote. However, if the recourse to the majority principle is not an exception but becomes the rule, this means, very simply, that a committee ceases to be a committee. Since committees are characterized by unanimous agreements, this implies that majority rule represents the watershed. And it is important to understand

why.

By now we know that committees put to efficient use the unequal intensity of preferences, while majority rules merely counteract them. This is then a first respect in which decisions by committees and decisions by majorities are at odds. But they are at odds in an ulterior respect. *Decision by committees are positive-sum*. The same cannot be said, though I only say it now, for decisions by majorities: *the majority principle is zero-sum*, that is, it produces zero-sum outcomes. When we have recourse to this principle the majority wins all, the minority loses all, and the majority can be said to gain, with respect to the stake at issue, what the minority loses. Let me immediately point out that I say majority 'principle' because when we come to its application the statement needs to be qualified and does not always hold (as we shall see). However, for the point at issue it is sufficient to note that a group which regularly and really decides by majority vote (i) treats each issue as a discrete issue, (ii) resulting, issue by issue, in a zero-sum outcome, which in turn (iii) puts a premium on the formation, and/or stabilization, within the group, of a 'winner takes all' majority. On all these counts—as can be clearly seen—all the premises and the very essence of the committee-type of decision-making founder.

Up to now I have looked at committees in isolation. But every committee is inserted into a dense web of other committees: the committee *system*. How does the system operate or, more parsimoniously, how do the committees belonging to a same *iter* (course) or to a same network interact and co-ordinate? The co-ordination occurs *via* a second mechanism: *side payments* (in the terminology of game theory).

Remember that with respect to each committee I have previously spoken of *internal* payments. It follows that side payments are conceived here as *external* payments: the concessions that one committee has to make to other committees. It should also be clear that 'vote trading' and 'logrolling' can be indifferently imputed to internal and to side payments. Now, side payments among committees may indeed take the form of vote trading negotiations. But this is hardly the distinctive aspect of side payments conceived—as they are here conceived—as a *mechanism of co-ordination*.¹² For the greater the complexity of the network

¹² According to Buchanan and Tullock *op. cit.*, 'if full side payments are allowed to take place, any decision-making rule for collective action will lead to

(which does become very complex in democracies) the greater the need for automatic, or quasi-automatic adjustments. This means that most side payments will not be explicitly traded or bargained but will simply occur in terms of *anticipated reactions*. According to this rule, formulated by Carl Friedrich, we discount in advance, and implicitly, the likely reactions of the third parties affected by our actions and decisions. Thus the anticipation of a negative reaction feeds back into a state of indecision, or else in transforming a coherent decision into a 'please all', incoherent decision. I do not assume, therefore, that the inter-committee mechanism of co-ordination works to anybody's satisfaction. I am simply trying to explain how it can work at all. Co-ordination is the *telos*; but much of the actual process is best described as a muddling through.

In the summing up, a committee system performs, within each committee, on the basis of deferred reciprocal compensations (or exchanges, or payments) and, *qua* system, on the basis of side payments largely guided by anticipated reactions. The *internal* payments (reciprocal compensations) are conducive to unanimous decisions and to positive-sum outcomes. The *external* side payments represent the costs, but also the *sine qua non* condition of a spontaneous (as opposed to imposed) process of adjustment and co-ordination. However, the side payments are not necessarily circumscribed by, and within, the boundaries of a committee system. To the extent to which a committee system includes 'representative committees' which are responsive to the popular will, to the same extent the side payments reach out to this broader world. But we shall revert to this point.

COMMITTEES, PARTICIPATION AND DEMO-DISTRIBUTION

Committees are, at a minimum, the decision-*forming* and often, in the final analysis, also the decision-*making* bodies in whatever polity and under whatever regime. None the less a committee system (subsystem) is moulded by the political system to which it belongs. Thus a committee system which operates within a democracy acquires characteristics of its own. A first feature is quantitative: in democracies committees seem to proliferate. This

positions that may be properly classified as Pareto-optimal' (p. 189). It is appropriate to note once again that the route followed here leads to very different conceptualizations and conclusions.

multiplication lends itself to two contrary interpretations: either that it amounts to a development of anti-bodies and represents, therefore, a counterdemocratic development; or that it is perfectly congruent to the 'pluralistic' development of democracy. And if one adopts the latter view, then the proliferation of committees can be said to maximize participatory democracy by affording ulterior sites for 'real participation'.

The contention is not without merit. Since participation has no 'real' meaning other than 'taking part' in person, and becomes more real the more frequently it occurs, the amazing thing is how we have managed to becloud a concept born to be operational: for 'participation' is a *ratio* that can be expressed as a *fraction* and related to a *frequency*. In a group of ten each takes part, i.e. participates, as $1/10$, and takes more part the more frequently the group meets. In a group of one hundred each takes part as $1/100$ – and so forth. As the denominator grows, it indicates the diminishing 'part' (share or weight) of each partaker. Concurrently, as the frequency diminishes, so does the import of participation. Hence it is unquestionably true that participation is 'real', that is, a significant, authentic and effective taking part, only in small groups (and hardly beyond assembly sized groups). When we speak of electoral participation and, in general, of mass participation, the term is overstretched and points, more than to anything else, to 'symbolic participation', to the feeling of 'being included'. But if the contention that committees allow for real participation is borne out, it does not follow that the demand for participatory democracy can be really met on these grounds.

To increase the occasions of participation by increasing the number of committees resolves the problem of who is on them.¹³ But what about the excluded? Clearly, their problem is not settled by the 'participation of others' in their place; it can only be solved in terms of *control*, by the extent to which they – the citizenry of a democracy – are in control of the decision-making bodies. We are thus referred back to the representative techniques of controlled transmission of power as *the* means for minimizing the external risks. But we have also arrived, at the same time, at *the* distinguishing characteristic of committee systems in democracies: the existence of *representative committees* (both responsible and

¹³ I switch from 'small group' to 'committee' on the assumption that what is at stake is participation in decision making, i.e. in those groups entrusted with a flow of decisions which afford the highest participatory efficacy.

responsive). In democracies, committees remain and indeed augment. But this first trait is far less distinctive and far less momentous than the fact that democracies transform the method of formation – the recruitment and the composition – of committees.

This is not to say, of course, that *all* the committees are composed of representatives resulting from free elections and electoral procedures. In effect, even in democracies most committees are not so recruited: they are special-purpose groups 'representative of' talents and technical competencies. But a decisional system resembles a traffic system in that it can be controlled at a few, strategic crossing or merging points. Therefore, the 'control function' can be satisfied by relatively few representative committees placed at the appropriate junctures. The obvious, grand examples are governments and the standing commissions in parliaments. Indeed, even if no other committee had a representative nature, it would already be true that in that polity the committee system had a unique feature brought about by, and attuned to, the democratic nature of the master system.

We are now in a better position to confront the central question: how does a committee system stand *vis à vis* a democratic system? If the question is dramatized, it amounts to asking whether committees and democracy are inimical to each other. In more sensible terms the question can be put as follows: whether committees 'slow down' the furthering of democracy, or whether they 'sustain' any stage of democracy?

Obviously assessments of democracy – whether it exists, and to what degree – depend on the parameter which is employed. If democracy is transliterated into demo-power, i.e. understood literally as a literal power of the people, then nothing will ever suit. When the chips are down, power rests on its exercise, not on the titular attribution. Hence literal democracy must be a literal self-government.¹⁴ And literal or 'real' self-government can be operationalized and measured just like participation: it is the *ratio* between the governing of each over the others, and, conversely, of the 'all-body' over 'each-body'. Thus etymological democracy – as I have called it elsewhere – cannot be a macro-democracy.¹⁵

¹⁴ While a literally self-governing democracy can be said to coincide with 'true' direct democracy, it should be recalled that I have given earlier a narrower definition of the latter (in terms of observability).

¹⁵ *Democratic Theory*, Wayne University Press, 1962 (and Praeger 1967), esp. chaps. 2, 5 and 10. Here I treat the problem of self-government as an inverse

This is not to suggest that we should raise our arms in despair, but that we should change perspective. Micro-democracies can still be conceived in *input*, that is, as a *demo-power*. But macro-democracies are best conceived and furthered in *output*, that is, in terms of *demo-distribution*.¹⁶ What can still be mightily improved is not the power-end of the problem – more power to the people – but its end-result: more equal benefits, or less unequal deprivations, to the people. Even if scholars are somewhat reluctant to acknowledge it, they are in fact dealing less and less with *who* has power and growing more and more interested in payoffs and allocations, that is, in the *effects* of power choices: who gets what.¹⁷ And it can hardly be denied that for the public at large popular rule means the fulfilment of popular wants and needs.

If democracy is assessed, as I was saying, in output, then it appears that a committee system does sustain and promote *demo-distributions*. This is so – let it be repeated – on the premise that democratic regimes create representative (i.e. accountable and responsive) committees placed at strategic junctures. Under this condition the side-payments trespass the committee boundary and extend to the universe of the represented. Hence a positive-sum decisional system which is linked to the people by the umbilical cord of representation is *positive-sum also on behalf of the people*. The contention cannot be pushed as far as to imply that by this route we approach a Pareto-optimum, or even an ‘equi-distribution’ – let alone a Rawls-preferred solution.¹⁸ By definition a positive-

relationship between the connotation and the denotation of the term: ‘The intensity of self-government attainable is in inverse proportion to the extension of the self-government demanded’ (p. 60 ff.). This formulation is somewhat more flexible, but adds up to the same conclusion.

¹⁶ My distinction bears only on the extremes of the size continuum. Micro-democracy cannot extend beyond the size of the *polis*, of the small city. Conversely, by macro-democracy I intend the state level of our territorially dispersed, large scale democracies. In most other respects I would agree with Dahl and Tufte that it is very difficult to establish relations between size and democracy (*Size and Democracy*, Stanford University Press, 1973).

¹⁷ Compare the sterility and monotony of the debate on how to maximize the power of the people, to the vitality and development of the ‘politics of allocation’ literature, as testified, in one of its recent variants, by the ‘Rawls principle’ (see John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard University Press, 1971; the overall appraisal of Brian Barry, *The Liberal Theory of Justice*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973; and the follow-up, ‘Symposium on Rawls’, *American Political Science Review*, forthcoming).

¹⁸ A solution is Pareto-optimal when at least one person is ‘better off’ and

sum outcome benefits all, but not all in a same amount. I say *demo-distribution* because this is what I mean – this and not more.

While my claim – positive-sum allocations – is modest, its importance should not be downgraded and comes forcefully to the fore as soon as a positive-sum decisional system is replaced by majority rule and zero-sum outcomes. And this leads me to a final point: the extent to which majority rule coincides with a zero-sum decisional system.

The issue was left at the statement that while the majority principle is *per se* a zero-sum principle, it does not follow that its application necessarily leads to zero-sum politics. Let us first see when it does. The majority principle does entail zero-sum outcomes in the following cases: (i) elections, (ii) referenda, and (iii) whenever a concrete majority is relatively stable and crystallized. It will be easily seen that this is so on two different grounds: the one-shot, discrete nature of the decision (in the case of elections and referenda), and the nature of the majority in question (it must be *concrete* and *crystallized*). The implication is that the majority principle will not produce zero-sum *overall* outcomes under two joint conditions: (i) a continuous flow of decisions submitted to (ii) cyclical, relatively fluid or fluctuating concrete majorities. Even under these circumstances each decision is, no doubt, zero-sum; but the process will produce, in the aggregate, positive-sum compensations among the changing majorities.¹⁹ Let it also be pointed out that the counterpart of a continuous flow of decisions must not only be a *concrete*, but also an *institutionalized* group (as previously defined): in substance, either a committee-sized group, or an assembly such as a parliament. Occasional, crowd-like or unruly assemblies which can be attended, each time, by different publics will not do.

Under special circumstances, then, majority rule is *not* zero-sum rule. In practice this adds up to saying (in the realm of politics) that while parliaments do abide, of necessity, by the majority principle, nevertheless parliamentary decision-making can result, over time, positive-sum, (i) if its majorities are cyclical, or (ii) if a

nobody else is 'worse off'. A solution is Rawls-preferred, instead, when it gives as much as possible to those who have least.

¹⁹ This point is probed in detail, with reference to the distinction between 'predominant' and 'countervailing' majorities, by R. D'Alimonte, 'Regola di Maggioranza, Stabilità e Equidistribuzione', *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, 1, 1974, sect. 3.

parliamentary majority is permeable (to the demands of the opposition), and/or if (iii) it lacks discipline and displays low coalescence. On the other hand, under different circumstances and whenever a decisional context is discrete, majority rule *is* zero-sum rule.

ACTING BEYOND UNDERSTANDING

Pulling the various strands together, an 'ideal' decision-making system would have to satisfy the following requirements: (i) each individual should be given the same weight; (ii) equal intensities (of preference) should be given the same weight; (iii) positive-sum and zero-sum outcomes should be appropriately balanced; (iv) external risks should be minimized; (v) decision making costs should be minimized.

As the enumeration suffices to show, there is no one principle, rule, or decision-making system that can even begin to meet all these requirements.²⁰ What does happen is that each unit applies the decision-making rules which are feasible and connatural to it. These units can be reduced to: (i) committees, (ii) institutionalized assemblies, and (iii) any dispersed voting collectivity.²¹

Committees do not apply majority rule, reach unanimous agreements *via* internal deferred payments, and adjust to the outer world, or incorporate its demands, *via* side payments. Institutionalized assemblies, instead, must abide by majority rule, but may or may not end up, over time, with zero-sum outcomes, depending on the fixity of their majorities. Dispersed voting collectivities are characterized – regardless of their size – by the fact that a dispersed universe is unable to interact and to enter vote-trading: each choice-maker is left to choose discretely. The unit is clearly residual, and yet unified by the following traits: each actor can only vote, his vote is necessarily expressed issue by issue, counts only if it adds up to some winning majority, and the outcomes are always and necessarily zero-sum. Two points are worth noting. First, the fact that a dispersed voting collectivity is

²⁰ This conclusion entails that I do not subscribe to the guideline suggested by Buchanan and Tullock: 'the logrolling process [full side-payments] provides the general model of analyzing the various choice-making rules' (*op. cit.*, p. 123).

²¹ I neglect other identifiable units – such as small groups in general, or occasional (non-institutionalized) assemblies – because the former are not amenable to any precise operational code, and the latter are utterly rule-less.

not defined by the numbers that are involved, does not imply that size thresholds are irrelevant to the unit. In effect, if the numbers do not surpass the assembly size a dispersed collectivity can be gathered; whereas beyond the assembly size a collectivity is necessarily dispersed. The second point bears on the difference between the two grand cases of the category: general elections and referenda. In the former case electorates at large choose a person, or a party, which becomes, in turn, entitled to make the decisions for them. Thus, while the electoral results are, in themselves, zero-sum, the voting act projects itself into processes which may become (in parliament, but especially in the resulting committees) positive-sum. In short, the voting act is not a final, self-contained act. Referenda are, instead, final. In this case voters at large do not choose choosers but decide, and thereby close, an issue. Thus referenda are definitely zero-sum.

Since my major focus has been on the first unit—the committee—and since a committee system is seldom adequately appraised, it is appropriate to attempt such an appraisal. There is much to be said in favour of committees. For one thing, only face-to-face small groups with a well-established but highly flexible operational code (reciprocal compensations can be deferred) allow for a 'reasoned', well-discussed elaboration of decisions. For one thing, then, (a) committees can well claim to be the optimal *decision-forming* unit. Moreover (b) committees not only account for the unequal intensity of preferences, but put it to efficient use. And if 'committees of representatives' are entered, then a committee system can be credited with these additional merits; (c) allowing for a drastic reduction of the external risks at no, or minimal, increase of the decisional costs (as compared to assembly costs); and (d) producing positive-sum outcomes for the collectivity at large (demo-distribution).

This high praise does not imply that I lose sight of the limits. In essence, the other side of the coin is that positive-sum outcomes basically lead to 'incremental' change.²² Rapid or decisive change, and particularly the pursuit of ideals and imperatives, all of this requires clear cut Yes-or-No alternatives and, thereupon, zero-sum decisions. It should be well understood, therefore, that I am not implying that positive-sum politics should be preferred, whenever possible, to zero-sum politics. On the other hand, given

²² To this effect C. E. Lindblom, *The Intelligence of Democracy: Decision Making Through Mutual Adjustment*, Free Press, 1965, remains the unsurpassed analysis.

that the majority principle cannot account for the unequal intensity of individual preferences, and given the extent to which its implementation is disturbed and deviated by the intensity factor, it would seem to follow, (i) that majority rules should be employed with a clear cognizance of their shortcomings, and that (ii) these rules are best employed either *faute de mieux*, for lack of anything better, or when a *turn of events* needs, at whatever cost, to be enforced. So I am simply trying to understand at which points the imbalance – too much committee rule, or too much majority rule – rocks the boat.

With this last remark I rejoin, at long last, my title: whether democracy can kill democracy and, if so, whether our democracies are currently heading for suicide. The issue is hardly original; but we do dispose of new analytical tools for pinpointing it. Thus my scheme of analysis brings into focus the following trends.

First, a wholly unjustified and indeed dangerous neglect of the problem of *external risks*.

Secondly, a very unclear perception of the *size thresholds* which affect both the costs of decision making, and the switch from unanimity rule (in committees) to majority rule.

Thirdly, an emphasis on *more visible politics*, as against its low visibility areas, with no clear understanding of what is involved.

Fourthly, a hypertrophy of the arenas which are, first, entered by politics and, second, *politicized*.

Fifthly, and conclusively, a very naive democratic primitivism which pitches direct and participatory democracy *against* control and representation.

Little needs to be added to the first two charges. The inadequate alertness to the external risks is well exemplified by the decay of *garantiste* (protective) constitutionalism in the face of an exponential growth of the power of power.²³ And our reckless way of handling size thresholds without accounting either for the decisional costs nor for the drawbacks of majority rule, is well

²³ On the decay of constitutionalism as an intransitive, power-checking and power-limiting structure, see G. Sartori, 'Constitutionalism: A Preliminary Discussion', *American Political Science Review*, December 1962; and, more in general, *Democratic Theory*, chaps. 13 and 15 (esp. pp. 288–91, 306–13, 372–4). On the multiplication of the potentialities of power entailed by technology, my concerns are stated in 'Technological Forecasting and Politics', *Survey*, Winter 1971, esp. pp. 63–8, and, extensively, in 'The Power of Labour in the Post-Pacified Society', published in Italian in *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, 1, 1973.

illustrated by the devastatingly simple way in which legislators have met, in most of Europe, the pressing demands for university reform: by transforming committees into parliaments. But while the first two charges can be left at that, the following three require a somewhat more detailed illustration.

The visibility problem has been confronted, thus far, only tangentially, by implying that low visibility is very important to the operational code of committees. On the other hand, democracy seemingly demands transparency, that the house of power be a house of glass. The rational, as distinguished from the moral, basis of this stand is that high visibility allows for better control and thereby reduces the external risks. This is indeed so; and implies that even if visibility entails higher decisional costs, these may well be justified. But the coin always has another side. As is well known, the same person behaves very differently as he switches from low to highly visible contexts; and this means that the visibility element may improve but also distort behaviour. For instance, invisibility protects the freedom of the voter. Conversely, visibility distorts when it imposes 'image selling' to the detriment of 'responsible behaviour'. Furthermore, visibility can well enhance, if not create, conflicts; so much so that 'removal from visibility' is the most usual way of lessening tensions. The latter two aspects can be illustrated by the actual proceedings of the Italian parliament, where most legislation is enacted by the parliamentary commissions and is possible only because these commissions are truly invisible committees. In this case visibility, i.e. bringing an act to the floor, is an almost sure way of burying it: its cost would be utter paralysis. And if we turn to foreign policy, the dictum 'open covenants openly arrived at' fares no better. To be sure, we can legitimately ask that poker be transformed into another game; but we cannot ask of one player only to uncover his cards while the others are still playing poker. All in all if 'more visibility' is displayed, as it is being displayed, as a universal panacea, it is likely to produce far more ills than it cures. To the extent that visibility hampers responsible behaviour, instigates image-selling and demagoguery, intensifies conflicts, leads to decisional paralysis or, in international politics, to defeat, to the same extent external risks are best looked after by other means and ways of control. Let alone that the efficacy of a searchlight diminishes with its diffusion. Too much visibility, on too many things, drowns visibility.

The hypertrophy of politics is an ever more intricate matter. As we know from the outset, decisions are collectivized (not collective) in many spheres and arenas. Politics enters only when decisions are collectivized by the 'sovereign' decision-makers (politicians). So far I have dwelt, in the main, on the risks and costs of collectivized decisions. But the above definition also helps to pinpoint the difference between the *extension of politics* and *politicization*. More and more decisions can be collectivized and brought – in democracy – under the authority of parliaments, and yet their implementation can be 'depoliticized' (as when entrusted to the judiciary). Politics may well enter everything – as the contention often goes – but, if so, not all politics is politicized. There is wide disagreement as to the point at which the expansion of politics is necessary and beneficial. In this respect the least objectionable way of assessing a hypertrophy is to employ the yardstick of structural differentiation. There is less disagreement, instead, on the respective merits and demerits of politicization. Therefore to make my point as brief and as clear as possible, it will be confined to the *politicization of politics*.

When a given arena becomes politicized, this may be for the better – as when we refer to an apathetic citizen who becomes interested and participant – or for the worse. When is it for the worse? In two cases, I would say: (i) when politics becomes overheated, i.e. the politics of violence, intimidation, intolerance, and of ideological (or party) discrimination; and (ii) when it enters in one of these forms – even its mildest one – the judiciary, the army, civil servants, and institutions of learning. And while my analysis has little to do with what causes the overheating of politics, it does suggest a number of caveats with respect to its containment. The preliminary caveat being that new electorates for creating new electorally appointed bodies, should not be created as lightheartedly as they are. Quite apart from whether the decisional costs are worth while and appropriately assessed, the ulterior question is whether what enters – *via* the electoral route – is only politics in its innocuous and even positive sense, or, instead, politicization in its most undesirable aspects and cumulative consequences. This is, again, a matter of being clear headed. Are we?

The final point is, in essence, that if participatory democracy is conceived as being inimical to representative democracy, and if the former actually undermines, instead of implementing, the

latter, then both are doomed: democracy *will* kill democracy. But the argument must be spelled out. So-called participatory democracy includes, or covers, a number of different things, such as: (i) participation in terms of interest, attention, and, thereby, information; (ii) participation in support of 'voice', i.e. pursued in terms of 'demonstration democracy';²⁴ (iii) power-sharing, that is, real and effective participation in decision-making; (iv) a participation that amounts to a true direct democracy. With respect to the first meaning, we all agree: we badly need more interested and better-informed citizens, for the state of disinformation of the public at large is indeed dismal. With respect to 'demonstration democracy' we may say that more 'voice' is beneficial provided that voice does not become 'violence'. We must pause, instead, on the third meaning, which is also, currently, the central one. We know that the 'reality' of participation is expressed by a fraction, and that its 'efficacy' is optimal in committees. One way to increase real participation is, therefore, to increase the number of committees. But while this path is being pursued, it appears self-denying and rapidly leads to a dead end. The more numerous the committees, the more a decisional *iter* is slowed down (time costs), and the greater the incidence of side-payments (to the limit of utter dis-co-ordination). Thus the proliferation of committees quickly reaches a ceiling beyond which what is gained in terms of power-sharing is disproportionately lost in terms of efficacy and efficiency. If the opportunities of real participation offered by committees are matched against the number of claimants, the whole system would collapse under the weight of 'diseconomies of scale'.

Are we faced, then, with a problem without solutions? The reply lingering in the air is that technology provides the solution: for technology does permit large-scale, true direct democracy. All that is required is a video and a simplified terminal in each house, with only two Yes-No buttons. Thus each and all citizens could, upon returning home, sit before their video and respond to the issues in the air by pressing their buttons. Direct and true democracy can thus be realized as a *daily referendum democracy*. How nice – and how deadly. Since referenda do not choose the choosers, but decide the issues without more ado, its virtues inextricably hinge, to begin with, on the state of information and on the level of competence of large publics. As Rousseau put it, the

²⁴ See Amitai Etzioni, *Demonstration Democracy*, Gordon and Breach, 1970.

people want a good which they often fail to see. And the world of Rousseau was incommensurably more simple and intelligible than our present world. So much so that even our best experts – with political scientists doing even worse than economists – appear more and more unable to grasp it. Thus the idea that the government of our fantastically complex, interconnected and fragile societies could be entrusted to millions of *discrete wills* which are bound to decide *at random*, with a zero-sum instrument which amounts, in practice, to a daily victory of the *least intense and least informed* over the intense, and comparatively better informed – this idea is indeed a monumental proof of the abyss of incompetence which is menacing us.

I conclude. Aside from this final reduction to the absurd, in the overall it seems to me that we are pursuing targets which are, out of proportion, unduly isolated and pursued blindly, and that are, therefore, in the process of creating – at the very minimum – a wholly unmanageable and ominous *overload*. And the most distressing part of the ongoing processes recalled under my five headings is precisely the mental fog in which they occur. Risks and costs, rule by committee and rule by majority, the relevance of size and the nature of outcomes, all these elements have been reduced, in my argument, to an almost shameful point of simplification. And yet they have no currency – there is little, if any, sign that who should know knows. We are beginning to realize – in the prosperous democracies – that we are living above our means. But we are equally, and even more grievously, *living above and beyond our intelligence*, above our understanding of what we are doing. The more we engage in ‘planning history’, the more I am struck by the uneasy feeling that we are apprentice sorcerers who are turning politics into a gigantic negative-sum, or minus-sum, game – a game in which all are bound to lose.