# Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*

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# Pierre Rosanvallon, *The Society of Equals*

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What democracy is and what equality is are the two main topics of the books *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People* (Urbinati 2014) and *The Society of Equals* (Rosanvallon 2013). Not only do the authors inquire into the nature of these two deeply interconnected notions (democracy and equality), they also set a goal to reevaluate their meaning in the changing conditions of the contemporary world and propose certain adjustments to make these ideas work again.

In the introduction to her book, Nadia Urbinati suggests to employ the metaphor of figure in analyzing the democratic regime: "I take 'figure' or an observable configuration as indicative of a political order, a phenotype thanks to which we recognize it as distinct and different from other systems" (1). Disfigurements of democracy thus pertain to the changes in the democratic procedures that sabotage the meaning of democracy and distort its proper operation. Similarly, viewing equality as one of the central characteristics of democracy, Pierre Rosanvallon observes that "we face a crisis of equality… the situation, in which we find ourselves, tends to destroy the very idea of democracy, which was forged to make sense of modern revolution" (7).

Both books thematize the crisis of democracy, however, they pick out different strategies to deal with the issue. Urbinati examines various forms of democratic malfunctioning and tries to come up with the procedural solution that would fit into her definition of democracy. She gives a more general analysis of democracy, where the central problem for her is unequal access to public space and hence the constrained ability for citi-

zens to exercise freedom of opinion. Rosanvallon's book, although different in spirit from Urbinati's, covers similar topics: it presents a more in-depth study of the idea of equality and discusses how its meaning changes over time and what is required for its contemporary revival. Both books likewise elaborate on some practical suggestions as to how democracy should function to balance out its two essential elements—opinion and will (Urbinati), and what is required to restore the idea of equality in its revolutionary spirit (Rosanvallon).

Urbinati departs from defining democracy as having a diarchic nature: an equilibrium combined of institutionalized (voting) and not institutionalized (public opinion) forms of political participation (16). Only autonomous and unrestrained operation of these two elements together prevents representative democracy from mutation. A threat to democracy consists of substantial changes in the correlation of will and opinion. Urbinati singles out three major threats, where alterations do not bring about a regime change as they do not touch upon the will element (elections), but "they change the opinion-based character of democratic politics and in fact disfigure democracy" (7).

These three threats are the epistemic theory of democracy, populism, and plebiscitarianism. As Urbinati understands politics as "an art of public discourse in the tradition of Aristotle" (81), her analysis boils down to explaining how these three forms of democratic disfigurements undermine the public exchange of opinions. The epistemic view threatens democracy insofar as it assumes that opinion is not a legitimate outcome of a political discussion. If not invariable truth, but at least intention toward accurate knowledge is what should be in the focus of politics according to the epistemic view. Thus, a decision is only political if taken by informed experts. Urbinati puts forward a helpful comparison saying that the epistemic ideal rests on equating a judgment in jurisprudence with a judgment in politics (123), whereas unlike a judicial decision, a political opinion should not by any means bear traits of finality.

Another disfigurement of democracy, populism impairs the idea of plurality that should support the vast variety of citizens' opinions, according to Urbinati. Oriented at acquiring enough support for a leader, "populism aims at a more genuine identification of the represented with the representatives than elections allow" (136). As the people (in the singular) is the crucial element in the competition for power, they are being artificially unified for the sake of obtaining unanimous support instead of being granted the diversity of opinion. Authentic democratic procedure does not allow for the polarization of society and the contrasting of one group against the other. "The main political character of a democracy is not so much that the people are collectively involved but that they are involved as individuals" (163).

Finally, the third threat to democracy is plebiscitarianism. Being "the politics of passivity," similarly to populism it refers to the direct

support by the people for a leader or a proposition. Urbinati describes plebiscitarian politics as having purely aesthetic character, for it does not call for any other form of political activity except approval. As Urbinati deliberately points out the twofold structure of democracy (will and opinion), the domain of opinion for her should have no less political effect than elections, whereas plebiscitarianism neglects the sphere of opinion entirely and makes "acclamation the action of an assemblage of people that react to a proposal or a view or a fact it does not produce or initiate" (189).

Urbinati does not get tired of emphasizing the importance of opinion that should never be outshined by the role of elections. Since opinion is an uninstitutionalized means of political participation, it is harder to perceive its potential in political influence and simultaneously evaluate when its free exercise is constrained. Urbinati herself believes that the main menace to freedom of opinion is unequal access to the media of public communication. Her practical recommendation is thus increased state control over mass media and public forums aimed at reducing the impact of economic inequalities on the domain of public opinion.

Rosanvallon's book is an extensive examination of the idea of equality that plays the central role in Urbinati's analysis of the democratic crisis. *The Society of Equals* gives both historical and theoretical reviews of equality. Rosanvallon dedicates a considerable part of the book (three out of five chapters) to scrutinizing the history of equality, the establishment of the idea of distributive equality, and describing its failure to operate in the contemporary world. The fact that "de facto inequalities are rejected, but the mechanisms that generate inequality in general are implicitly recognized," he calls "contemporary schizophrenia" (5). According to his projects, as the old idea of justice as the redistribution of wealth ceases to exist, equality conceptualized in a new way will regain its revolutionary potential.

Unlike "old" equality that was based on the principles of similarity, independence, and citizenship, new equality is organized according to the following new principles: singularity, reciprocity, and communality. The basic idea in contrasting two understandings of equality in Rosanvallon is to emphasize the individualistic character of the former and the communal character of the latter. As "the ideal of a society of autonomous individuals has lost much of its relevance" (260), Rosanvallon seeks to capture equality in terms of collective participation.

The principle of singularity pertains to the recognition of particularity, but the rejection of autonomy. Rosanvallon characterizes classical rights as subjective rights and calls for defining rights as procedural, that is, not based on individual characteristics of a person, but oriented on their equivalent treatment. The next principle, reciprocity, concentrates on the equality of interaction and on understanding social good as relational, or achieved only if shared. Here Rosanvallon resembles Urbinati's

intention as he insists on legal interference into this sphere: "law must severely punish forms of contempt, humiliation, and harassment that threaten human dignity and equality" (Rosanvallon, 272). Finally, the third principle, commonality, is again the same as Urbinati's focal point: the creation of public space for deliberation and partaking in the formation of public opinion. These shared space of "mutual comprehension" in Rosanvallon "depends on the work of intellectuals and journalists, on political activists and government investigators, on the authors of blogs, and artists" (288).

Rosanvallon concludes that the new understanding of equality is equality as relation, where the old understanding of equality as distribution is subordinate to it. His solution, as in Urbinati, is to call for some top-down measures to prompt the implementation of equality: "all pro-egalitarian politics must begin with a dynamic urban policy designed to increase the number of public spaces and ensure greater social mixing" (299).

Although the two books that I have reviewed here have much more to offer than I have been able to demonstrate, they also have their apparent shortcomings. Both books stand in deep connection with the authors' previous work. Urbinati's *Democracy Disfigured* is in line with her most well-known book, *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy* (2006), and continues with her apology for representative democracy. In this new book, Urbinati does not put forward any conceptual innovation: she persistently analyzes the opposition of will and judgment throughout all of her oeuvres. What may seem tedious to those familiar with her *Representative Democracy* will be an enriching read for those discovering Urbinati for the first time. However, if presented with the choice between *Representative Democracy* and *Democracy Disfigured*, one should definitely go for the former, which has already become a classic in studies of representation. Apart from apparent shortcomings (the focus only on the domestic sphere and the obliteration of ways of democratizing transnational structures), *Democracy Disfigured* does not seem to reach the goal it has set for itself, namely to suggest new forms of democratic participation. Although Urbinati agrees with Rosanvallon on the importance of public spaces, her emphasis on the independence of opinion and individual rather than collective participation seems misguided. Rosanvallon's *The Society of Equals* (in French *La société des égaux,* first published in 2011) is the last part of his trilogy on the history of democracy (the two other books being *La contre-démocratie. La politique à l'âge de la defiance* [2006] and *La légitimité démocratique* [2008]). I would call it a must read for those interested in democratic theory and the history of the French and American Revolutions. However, the book has a clearly disproportionate structure, overdetailed in its historical part and with a lack of precision in its theoretical part. The book is worth reading for an original discussion of equality; nevertheless, no radically new suggestions should be expected.

Rosanvallon does not offer ways of restoring equality's revolutionary potential, as he wants it, except for abstract ideas of "mutual comprehension" and "social mixing."

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