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**CRISES OF PARTIES AS LEGITIMACY CRISES:
A VIEW FROM POLITICAL THEORY**

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"... whatever may in fact determine our beliefs, it would be a gratuitous abdication of our power of reasoning (....) not to want to know what we believe, and for that reason, what the metaphysical implications of such beliefs are, what their relation is to other types of belief, what criteria of value and truth they involve, and so what reason we have to think them true or valid".

I. Berlin (1972, 33).

1.   Political theory by other means

Gabriel A. Almond's metaphor referring to the existence of "separate tables" in the social sciences is well-known to all. It certainly seems to be true that when a researcher explores a subject common to different methodological or ideological traditions, she or he soon discovers that not only are there separate tables, but that the food served and the conversations of the guests at each table are also very different. Discussion of the concept of legitimacy is a good example of this phenomena. When, for example, we read more empirical work, it soon becomes clear that the spirit of Weber presides over the table. If, on the other hand, we turn to more theoretical texts, Kant's influence is quite evident.

Generally speaking, it certainly appears that both tables can survive and nourish themselves independently of the other. A theorist may lead a full intellectual life analyzing the concept of legitimacy without ever referring to the work of the empiricists, that is, without ever tasting their alternative methodological menu. Naturally, the same is true of the empiricists.

This paper seeks to disturb this routine by inviting the occupants at each table to temporarily relinquish their respective menus and have a drink together at the bar. I am fully aware that many of the arguments developed here in the hope of finding some common ground for debate will satisfy neither group, for perhaps we have all grown too accustomed to our respective diets. However, I do believe that the effort is worth making.

I should start by explaining the basic objectives of this paper:

1. I wish to analyze the crisis of political parties in terms of their problems of legitimacy. I will offer, therefore, only a partial explanation of this crisis. This assumes, however, that the concept of legitimacy is crucial to our understanding of contemporary democracies[1] The empirical point of reference will be the Spanish

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[1] For arguments for and against this assumption, see O'Kane (1993), Beetham (1993), Barker (1994) and O'Kane (1994).

case. In this respect, rather than definitive conclusions, I will attempt to present some working hypotheses which need to be verified through further research into the legitimacy-parties relationship in Spain.[2]

2. I will begin, therefore, by reinterpreting the multi-dimensional concept of legitimacy recently developed by Beetham (1991) in order to apply it to the analysis of the legitimacy crisis facing Spanish political parties. I will then reconvert Beetham's analysis for my own purposes. In order to do this, I will examine in turn the three dimensions of the parties' legitimacy crisis and attempt to relate these to the *value networks* found in existing democratic systems. These *value networks* are formed from *normative links* which aspire to legitimize an institution or practice by associating it with certain fundamental values. For example, when we affirm that "political parties play a key role in democracy", in reality we are attempting to legitimize an institution (the parties) by alluding to the essential role it plays in defence of another institution (democracy) which we assume is in itself legitimate. For our purposes, the issue of whether the "ultimate value" of a normative link (in this case democracy) is questioned or not, whether it constitutes the "hard core" of political culture, or whether it has one or various meanings, etc., matters less than the fact that it is continually used in arguments which seek to legitimize an institution or practice.

3. This approach makes it possible to achieve three objectives. Firstly, it enables us to understand legitimacy as a continuous and always incomplete process of legitimation through allusion to values. Secondly, we can identify the most common value networks and normative chains in any given political culture.

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[2] I am currently working with Ferrán Requejo (Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona), Fernando Vallespín (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid) and a number of other researchers on a research project on "Representation and participation in the Spanish political system". The reflections presented in this paper are derived from this research. See Requejo (1992) for a tentative operationalization of some of the concepts relating to the hypotheses outlined here.

Finally, it allows us to pinpoint the cracks in an institution's legitimacy and hence to analyze which strategies might serve to re-legitimate, or even de-legitimate, that institution.

2.   A map of the crisis: legitimacy and political parties

Are political parties facing a legitimacy crisis? Is there a legitimacy crisis of the parties in Spain? If so, what is the nature of the crisis? What values are involved? What processes is it linked to? Before answering these questions, we must first define what we mean by "legitimacy".

As noted above, empirical analysis of the concept of legitimacy has largely been inspired by the Weberian definition of the term: legitimacy is belief in legitimacy. From this starting point, and led by Lipset (1959), Linz (1978) and others, we progress towards a minimalist and operational definition according to which legitimacy is the conviction that, whatever their defects or failings, the relevant political institutions are better than, or preferable to, the alternatives. Accordingly, an institution is legitimate if, when compared to a given alternative (democracy versus authoritarianism, for example), the majority of the people support one alternative (democracy) as opposed to the other (authoritarianism).[3] In this way, the accumulation of favourable or positive opinions is what produces legitimacy. In political theory, in contrast, legitimacy is not related to opinions, but rather to something which is assumed to exist beyond opinion: epistemological truth, general will, reason, etc.. In the wake of the crisis of modernity, the temptation political theorists felt to look for the substantive foundations of legitimacy has been replaced by the search for rationally impeccable procedures of democratic deliberation. Thus "procedural legitimacy" has replaced "substantive

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[3] See, for example, Morlino and Montero (1994).

legitimacy". From this perspective, an institution or a practice is not legitimate because, for example, it is an expression of the general will or reason, but rather because it is the result of a general and rational process of deliberation by all those concerned.[4]

The first interpretation, namely the empirical one, appears to understand legitimacy in terms of aggregation. It constitutes, therefore, an aggregative concept of legitimacy based on the idea of isolated individuals who express an opinion about the preferability of certain institutions, practices or values. The result of the sum of individual opinions is the positive image which is identified as legitimacy.

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[4] See, for example, Manin (1987). For a critique of these distinctions, see Barnard (1992) and del Aguila (forthcoming).

The second, theoretical interpretation tends to see the question in terms of deliberation, that is, debate, discussion and persuasion within a framework of an open and balanced public sphere. In this case, legitimacy is the product of a process of group discussion - as opposed to individual opinions - and of the consensus about values generated by that process. Deliberation, as a critical ideal, endows arguments of legitimacy with flexibility, reversibility and "contestability".[5]

The limitations of the first interpretation can be seen in the way that, as a result of the very fact that it is operational, it leads to a very shallow concept of legitimacy. Moreover, its narrow definition of legitimacy reduces this to individual, superficial and isolated opinions. On the other hand, the limitations of the second theoretical interpretation arise from the excessive levels of deliberation it requires and its scant applicability to political systems such as ours (which are characterised by citizens' apathetic withdrawal and by the existence of multiple and uncoordinated public spheres).

These two conceptions of legitimacy, aggregated legitimacy and procedural legitimacy, can be seen as corresponding to the well-known distinction between more liberal or more republican-democratic conceptions of politics.[6] However, both may lead to excessively uni-dimensional visions of legitimacy and, perhaps, of politics itself. For this reason it seems necessary to attempt to overcome some of these problems. Suitably reformulated, David Beetham's theory would appear to offer a good place from which to begin this task.

According to Beetham, it is possible to identify three different criteria of legitimacy (see Table 1). The first is that of conformity with the rules, or legal validity. This criteria stipulates what may be called the legitimate exercise of any power. The second criteria is that of the justifiability of the rules in terms of

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[5] See, for example, Keane (1992) and Knight and Johnson (1994).

[6] Obviously this distinction is not absolute. See, once more, Knight and Johnson (1994).

prevalent beliefs. Thus, Beetham diverges from the Weberian definition when he argues that the idea of legitimacy as belief in legitimacy should be replaced by that of legitimacy understood as justification in relation to beliefs. The distinction is important and for this reason should be clarified further. In the Weberian view, legitimacy is the result of the accumulation and aggregation of isolated opinions of individuals and their (positive or negative) attitudes towards a rule or institution. Beetham's definition, in contrast, incorporates a deliberative dimension: something is legitimate if it may be justified as legitimate through reference to prevalent beliefs and values in the public sphere.

Table 1. *Criteria of legitimacy and forms of non-legitimate power.*

Criteria of legitimacy	Forms of non-legitimate power
1. Conformity to Rules (legal validity).	1. Illegitimacy (breach of rules).
2. Justifiability of Rules in Terms of Shared Beliefs.	2. Legitimacy Deficit (Discrepancy Between Rules and Supporting Beliefs; Absence of Shared Beliefs).
3. Legitimation Through Expressed Consent.	3. De-legitimation (Withdrawal of Consent)

Source: Beetham (1991: 20).

Finally, the third criteria of legitimacy would be that of legitimation through consent. Regardless of the theory of consent employed,[7] here the crucial problem is

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[7] That is, regardless of whether we prefer a voluntarist, a teleological/utilitarian, or a deontological/hypothetical, etc., definition. See Horton (1992). However, a voluntarist definition may prove most fruitful when considering the questions dealt with here, as it would tie up with the idea of deliberation and prior agreement. In any event, here we can only point to the existence of a possible connection.

to identify a series of actions or omissions which demonstrate that consent has explicitly been withdrawn from an institution.

In short, in order to be considered legitimate, a power, an institution or a practice must meet these three criteria: validity, justifiability and consent. Clearly, each of these three dimensions involves complex theoretical and empirical problems.[8] These problems will only be discussed here in so far as they arise in my attempt to apply this rereading of Beetham's ideas to the analysis of political parties and their legitimacy crisis.

These arguments can be reformulated in order to highlight the most significant points for my argument and to suggest some initial hypotheses concerning the question of party legitimacy. In reality, this entails drawing up a map of values and beliefs which identifies those which are those most frequently alluded to, or "visited" by legitimizing arguments. In other words, I will use Beetham's classification to trace the channels which connect political parties to fundamental democratic values. Institutions (eg. parties) derive their legitimacy from the existence of channels linking them to values. When these prove impossible or difficult to establish, cracks appear in an institution's legitimacy. In this analytical approach, particular importance is attributed to justification itself (the deliberative element), and to the normative chain (ie. the connections between the different values which constitute value networks), as well as to the places where the different arguments finally converge, that is, the legitimating "hard centre" of political culture.[9]

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[8] Not least of which is that both validity and consent could be considered different forms of justifiability. In other words, the need for respect for the rules can be justified in terms of prevalent beliefs (whether these are *moral* (it is bad to break the law), *functional* (breaking a law is dysfunctional for the system), or of a different nature). Equally, the idea that consent is a cornerstone of legitimacy can be explained in terms of the autonomy of rational citizens (consent is a consequence of autonomy, and is, therefore, justified by it). Unfortunately this is not the appropriate place to explore these problems.

[9] Where can we find examples of legitimizing discourse? Or in any given case (Spain for example), where should we look for examples of deliberation which would accord with this concept? In other words, what are the sources for a concrete analysis of the ties linking institutions to values? The answer is that these sources are found in a number of different forums and spheres: (i) in

It can be seen in Table 2 that the left hand column (illegitimacy, legitimacy deficit and delegitimation) alludes to Beetham's three criteria. The right hand column shows the values and belief networks which sustain or deny the legitimacy of political parties in terms of each of these three criteria. Let me clarify some aspects of this point.

Firstly, illegitimacy is understood as being related not just to illegitimate practice and rule-breaking (corruption), but also to the political processes which give rise to these practices: the parties *hubris* (lack of accountability); the emergence of parties as mechanisms which unify or fuse different powers (the absence of plural powers); and the tension between civic and market culture.

Secondly, parties as an institution are justified in terms of the various functions they perform in a democratic system. In this way, the institution's legitimacy deficit is a consequence of a failure to associate the parties with the values which define their functions (namely, ensuring pluralism and competition, representation, participation).

Thirdly, delegitimation through the withdrawal of consent is related to processes which, it should be recognised, only partially affect parties. I am referring here to processes such as abstention, the consolidation of negative perceptions of politics, falling levels of party membership and active support, and the emergence of organisations (social movements, non-governmental organisations, etc.) or

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deliberative, in the strict sense of the word, settings (assemblies, committees, commissions, etc); (ii) in the explanatory introductions and preambles to legal texts (and in legislative activity in general); (iii) in documents produced by parties or other social, political or economic organisations; (iv) in the press and the media in general; etc.. The idea, therefore, is to use a variety of sources in order to identify the elements of the prevalent political discourse which will enable us to establish a map of the legitimacy of political parties.

outsiders who compete with the parties for citizens' support. In this context, we must inevitably consider the image of the ideal citizen operating in each case if we are to maintain that these processes represent delegitimation.

A more detailed explanation will help to clarify some aspects of this table.

Table 2.   *Legitimacy crisis and political parties.*

Legitimacy crisis	Political parties
1. Illegitimacy (breach of rules).	1.1. Corruption and Funding. 1.2. *Hubris*/opacity 1.3. Fusion/unification 1.4. Double standards: market-politics.
2. Legitimacy Deficit (divergence between parties' actions and the beliefs which sustain some of their functions in democracies).	2.1. Pluralism and Competition. 2.2. Representation. 2.3. Participation.
3. Delegitimation (withdrawal of consent).	3.1. Electoral abstentionism 3.2. Negative opinion of politics and politicians. 3.3. Low level of membership and support. 3.4. Declining party loyalty. 3.5. Competition of other organisations. 3.6. Appearance of outsiders.

3.   Illegitimacy: a breach of rules.

Corruption is probably the catalyst of the legitimacy crisis of Spanish political parties. Although corruption can be defined in a number of ways[10], in general terms one can agree with Lapalombara's definition of this as "behaviour of a public servant, whether elected or appointed, which involves a deviation from his or her formal duties because of reasons of personal gain to himself or herself or to other private persons with whom the public servant is associated" (1994: 328).

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[10] See Heidenheimer, Johnston and Levine (1990: 3ff., 15ff. etc.), and De Leon (1993: 19ff.).

There can be no doubt that behaviour of this kind constitutes a breach of the rules of the game of liberal democracies which directly clashes with its moral dimension: it implies taking advantage of the public in order to obtain private advantage, breaking accepted rules for one's own benefit, etc.. However, to what extent can we make a connection between corruption as a mechanism of delegitimation and political parties as institutions? Funding is probably the link which connects the corrupt behaviour of individual civil servants to political parties as a central institution of democracy. As Linz has rightly noted (1992: 49ff.), public funding of political parties transforms these into public entities. The tax-payer has to finance parties for which s/he has neither voted nor feels any affinity or sympathy. As Linz himself has argued, the fact that the citizen must accept that democracy costs money and is expensive should be compensated for by the guarantee that party financial accounts should be both public and clean. That is, a tacit contract somehow exists by which the citizen has obligations (to fund the parties) but so do the parties (financial transparency). Illegal funding does not merely break the terms of this tacit contract. It also "brands" one of the sides: political parties come to be seen as unworthy of citizens' confidence. The illegitimacy argument, therefore, not only affects the conditions of a given "contract", but also leads to a reevaluation of the confidence merited by certain political actors (in this case, the parties). This is significant because it damages the image of the institution in general, since parties are believed not just to break the rules, but to do so systematically by using public resources of power and privilege for their own purposes.

In this way, corruption *in* the parties rapidly becomes corruption *of* the parties. The danger is, therefore, that illegitimacy vaults from here to the political system itself, and in this way becomes corruption *of* democracy. It is in this sense that corruption can be considered "*l'ordre du mal*".[11] Corruption not only affects the moral dimension, that is, the network of values which sustain and legitimize

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[11] See Médard (1993).

democracy, because it implies the transgression of certain rules of the game, but also because this behaviour reduces confidence in the institutions. Therefore, the problem is not simply that the parties are not "politically or morally virtuous". Over and above this, generalized corruption also reveals the existence of a failing in a democratic system which is seen to be unable to put a stop to this behaviour, or at least finds it very difficult to do so.

It is in this context that, as in the case of Spain, another new criticism emerges in relation to political parties. This can be expressed in the following terms: the parties have generated two parallel dynamics which impede the prevention (or hindrance) of corruption (whether in parties, government or other institutions of the democratic system). I have chosen to label these the dynamic of *hubris-opacity* and the dynamic of *fusion-unification*.

1. The dynamic of hubris-opacity: The term *hubris* (excess, disorder) refers to the tendency seen in Spain in recent years for some professional politicians to justify their estrangement from individual citizens on the grounds of their electoral majorities. Broadly speaking, the argument made by some politicians and parties goes as follows: since the majority of the population have voted for a given political option (whether in general, regional, or local elections), minorities and minority groups of citizens thereby lose the opportunity to control their elected representatives or make them account for their actions until the next elections. In other words, whenever possible, the party organisations deactivated mechanisms of accountability, answerability and transparency.[12] The significant point for the present argument is that an impoverishment of the dimension of accountability leads to a lack of transparency and of public control over decision-making which

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[12] This attitude was fairly generalized. Not only the PSOE central government acted in this way, but so too did the ruling parties in some autonomous communities (the PP in Galicia and Cantabria, for example). I am as yet unable to provide concrete data to support this affirmation.

enables corruption to blossom. The crucial question here is not whether the parties behaved corruptly or not, but rather that they fostered a policy which hindered the prevention of corruption.

2. *The dynamic of fusion-unification*: Political parties appear to be responsible for the emergence within democratic systems of a dynamic which diminishes the dispersion and division of powers and leads to their fusion. This process is particularly evident in parliamentary systems such as ours, in which the leader of the victorious party in the elections is the leader of the group with a parliamentary majority and is usually also the head of government. This signifies that the mechanisms of parliamentary responsibility depend more heavily on the party system (regardless of whether there is an absolute majority, etc.) than on the rules and norms which regulate the control mechanisms. Moreover, parties also tend to influence the elections for key posts in senior judicial institutions (the Constitutional Court, etc.). Beyond the institutional sphere, parties also contribute to the fusion of other social and economic powers through their connections with economic and financial elites, the mass media, and so on. These processes tend to lead to the formation around the party of a series of powers and to the dissolution of the polyarchy which many consider to be a characteristic feature of democracy. This scenario ties in with the existence of an interventionist State whose role in the provision of goods and services grows and multiplies. As this occurs, parties controlling different levels of government - national, regional and local - gain an extra quantum of power.

Even though differences can be detected in the practices of the different parties in relation to these processes of *hubris-opacity* and *fusion-unification*,[13] both dynamics are nevertheless common to the parties as institutions.[14] And, both

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[13] Differences which can only be evaluated through a more detailed analysis.

[14] A good illustration of this is that the denunciation of corruption (in institutions, parties, etc.) has generally been initiated by political actors and social powers relatively unconnected with the parties (the press in Spain, the judiciary in Italy, etc.). Equally, recently there have been examples of parties in general (and not just one party in particular) collaborating to obstruct measures intended to

dynamics essentially challenge the network of fundamental values which sustain legitimacy in democracy, values such as accountability, answerability, pluralism, transparency, publicity, etc..

In this context, the emergence of a third element which forms the context for these two dynamics becomes particularly significant. Economic growth and prosperity in Spain during the 1980s generated a culture of enrichment which, along with its values and norms, penetrated the political sphere. The culture of the market, of strategy, of calculation and profit, led to the homogenisation of the moral standards required in economic activity with those of political life. It is well-known that one of the strongest temptations for contemporary political theory is precisely this, that is, to understand democracy in economic terms. Despite the important difference between them, this is a tendency found in Schumpeter, Downs and advocates of rational choice theory. Yet the normative links which endow democratic institutions with legitimacy still make continual allusions, in the public sphere, to ideals of civic virtue, common interest, and morally irreproachable political behaviour. As a result, two different worlds exist. On the one hand, there is the world which understands political actors in economic terms. On the other, that in which the mechanisms which legitimate political actions relate to liberal-democratic values. This dualism gives rise to an internal tension which affects parties in so far as, in practice, it affects the political system as a whole. There are at least three possible ways of resolving this tension.

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investigate and control corruption involving party funding (as in the case of France, for example). Plurality, therefore, is what has led to the development of mechanisms of accountability in opposition to the parties' tendencies towards *fusion-unification* and *hubris-opacity*.

The first is to consider certain types of behaviour leading to corruption as "functional" for the system. A certain level of corruption would constitute, in the words of Merton, an "informal system of allocating government goods and services". Thus, corruption is the way in which some desired political functions which are not performed satisfactorily by legitimate officers or procedures are carried out. Walter Lippman's observation that "there are places today where corruption is progress" makes a similar point.[15] In this strategy, accusations that certain behaviour in the political system in general, and within the parties in particular, is illegitimate are refuted through reference to the gains they bring in terms of efficiency.

The second possibility consists of resolving the tension by adopting a characteristic strategy of economic (and liberal) visions of democracy. Susan Rose-Ackerman[16] proposes two types of measures to limit corrupt political practices. Firstly, vigorous law-enforcement, and secondly, the creation of conditions and policies that would reduce the benefits otherwise derived from corrupt behaviour. That is, the solution lies in altering market conditions rather than admitting the functionality of corruption (as in the first possible strategy), or of changing the morality of actors (as in the third strategy to which I will now turn).

In effect, the third possibility is democratic-republican in style. It entails ending the tension between economic morality and political morality by subordinating the former to the latter. This requires both citizens and political actors to become civically virtuous, as this would prevent political life from being seen in economic terms and, in contrast, link it to terms such as the common good, public service, etc.

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[15] For Merton, see De Leon (1993: 27). For Lippman, see Heidenheimer, Johnston and Levine (1990: 371).

[16] See Lapalombara (1994: 344).

Each of these possible strategies for resolving the tensions caused by the existence of double standards of morality correspond to a different normative link and allude to very different legitimizing values and beliefs. In the first case, the values concerned are those of functionality. Functionality denies the idea of any type of moral tension by considering it resolved due to the need for efficiency. In the second case, legitimacy is achieved through the values of balance and the generation of incentives which limit and regulate egotistical and individualistic behaviour (along the lines of a modern day version of Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees* or Adam Smith's "invisible hand"). The third strategy resolves the tension by generating moralizing mechanisms among political actors which restrain their undesirable tendencies and prevent them from violating shared values, beliefs and norms.

It is striking that even though the third strategy is the most demanding of political agents and actors (including political parties), it is nevertheless the one they appear to use most frequently in their public discourse against corruption.

To summarize the above and link it to the party legitimacy crisis:

(1) Corruption signifies a violation of fundamental values of democracy.

(2) There is one main channel connecting the parties with corruption: illegal funding, in which the breach of rules directly benefits the political parties involved.

(3) However, corruption is also connected to the parties because the latter are responsible for the dynamics of *hubris-opacity* and *fusion-unification* which clash with central values of democracy (accountability, the pluralism of powers, etc.) and favour the spread of corrupt behaviour.

(4) The infiltration of economic values and norms into political life, and the tendency to conceive politics in economic terms, lead to the existence of moral double standards (economic and political, based, respectively, on calculation and private profit or civic virtue and the common good). This duality provokes problems of legitimacy for parties (even if not for them alone).

(5) As it directly involves both the moral and political dimensions of democracy, corruption emerges as the catalyst of delegitimation and contributes to the political parties' legitimacy deficit (see section 4). The fact that infringements of the rules of the game cannot be justified publicly reveals that they directly defy the ensemble of values which sustain the legitimacy of the democratic system itself (accountability, pluralism, publicity, control, civic virtue, etc.).

4.   Legitimacy deficit and delegitimation

In the previous section we have seen how certain forms of corruption, by becoming associated with some of the functions which parties fulfil in political systems, contributes to the legitimacy crisis of political parties. We should now consider whether parties have a legitimacy deficit as a consequence of the difficulties they encounter in justifying their existence in terms of values and beliefs concerning their functions within the democratic system. In other words, a legitimacy deficit would arise when the institution (the parties) prove unable to relate its functions in the democratic political system to liberal-democratic legitimizing values.

The list of values and functions considered here is not exhaustive. I will refer to just three of these: parties as expressions of pluralism and competition; parties as channels of representation, and parties as channels of participation.

4.1.   Parties as expressions of pluralism and competition.

Parties have never found it easy to legitimize their existence in terms of pluralism and competition. From the time of Aristotle, the republican-democratic tradition considered factions as defending private interests and contrary to the common good. Only with Machiavelli would a distinction be made between factions which merely seek to promote private interests (factions corrupting the republic) and those which represent distinct visions of the public good (factions producing

positive political conflicts). Hannah Arendt employed this distinction when she defined the democratic public sphere in terms of pluralism and competition, thereby incorporating pluralism as a key element in the republican-democratic conception of democracy. In this school of thought, pluralism is associated with the existence of free deliberation among equals of alternative courses of action. This permits the construction of arguments which legitimize the parties by presenting them as expressions of the competitive pluralism which foments processes of rational deliberation.[17]

However, the strongest defence of pluralism and competition is undoubtedly found in liberal conceptions of democracy. Pluralism is the essence of the liberal conception of politics itself. It is not merely identified with distinct visions of the common good, but is also considered legitimate when it corresponds to the defence of partisan interests. The metaphors of the economic market are transferred to the political market. Thus, just as in the economic market all those pursuing their own private interests inadvertently contribute to something akin to the common good, the pursuit of private interests and competition between parties in the political market generates something very like the general interest. Pluralism and competition are good in themselves since, rather than leading to the division of political unity, they are seen as generating union around the rules of the game of competition. Once the organic metaphors of the "body politic" used in the *Ancien Régime* have been replaced by liberal contractualist metaphors based on the idea of agreement and contract between the two sides, these sides gain legitimacy. The

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[17] In both this and the alternative liberal school of thought which is examined below, there are many arguments *against* the idea that parties are legitimate. Rousseau is just one example. However, these criticisms are not discussed here, since our immediate concern is to show how parties can justify their legitimacy in terms of the functions they fulfil in liberal democracies.

result is an interpretation of pluralism which echoes Hamilton in *The Federalist Papers*: the negative effects of the pluralism of factions can be controlled through proliferation, the division of power and permitting the different factions to counterbalance each other.[18]

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[18] See Ball (1988), Ware (1986), and many others.

This defence of pluralism, which is sometimes combined with a pragmatic concept of tolerance (John Locke) or the praising of diversity (John Stuart Mill), allows parties to affirm their role as expressions of political pluralism. In fact, other liberal conceptions of democracy take the same position, legitimizing the parties as manifestations of both pluralism and competition (between ideologies, interests, etc.). Thus, Lipset, Schumpeter, Downs and Dahl have all noted that competition is one of the most important characteristics of democratic systems. Powell, Ware or Sartori, for their part, consider parties to be the principal agents or vehicles of this political competition.[19]

In this way, the logic of pluralism and party competition is grounded on certain fundamental values of liberal democracy. It is, therefore, through reference to these values that parties can establish a legitimizing normative link.[20] However, certain developments taking place in contemporary democracies are undermining' the parties' ability to defend their legitimacy in terms of pluralism and competition. Let us consider briefly three of these developments.

The first is ideological convergence. Whether we share the different theses on the end of ideologies outlined by Waxman, feel closer to Touraine's view of post-industrial society, or accept Fukuyama's diagnosis of the end of history, one thing is certain: contemporary political life is characterized by processes of ideological convergence. The great ideologies have practically disappeared, parties no longer represent class alternatives, nor do they propose major, ideologically-inspired transformations. The tendency to become catch-all parties, to compete for votes in the centre of the political spectrum, to direct their messages to the new middle classes, etc., means that their political programmes converge towards intermediate positions and differ only in terms of degree. Whilst in many ways this tendency might be welcomed, there can be no doubt that it makes it difficult for the parties

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[19] See, for example, Strom (1992). This obviously does not mean that the plurality of our societies is only protected by the parties. An intelligent critique is Linz (1992: 42-4).

[20] Some of the paradoxes produced between the logic of plurality and the logic of identity in democracies are discussed in Mouffe (1992).

to present themselves as plural alternatives. It is perhaps for this reason that personalized leadership is steadily replacing ideology as the means by which parties identify themselves before the electorate. Similarly, there is a growing tendency for competition to be expressed in terms of personalities or images rather than opposing political alternatives. Although the extent of these processes of convergence should not be exaggerated, I think it is reasonable to assume that they make it much harder for parties to justify their existence in terms of their role as expressions of pluralism and of competing alternative visions of the present and future.

Along with this ideological convergence, the technification of politics also hampers the parties' identification with the legitimizing normative link of pluralism and competition. The technification of political affairs, which Jürgen Habermas and others consider to be ideologically-inspired, has in fact become a feature of virtually all political systems. There are different technical solutions to different problems. As these solutions are technical, they are not exclusive to any particular party or world view and so circulate relatively freely right across the political spectrum. Social democratic parties adopt neo-liberal economic solutions, conservative parties combine defence of the market with electoral populism, and so on. Almost any combination is possible. The technification of politics encourages debate among experts, whilst the population as a whole scarcely has access to plural or competing analyses of the different problems, nor the possibility of evaluating the different solutions to these problems. There is no need to exaggerate the impact of these processes to appreciate the difficulties the parties face in legitimizing themselves through pluralism and competition in this field of technical politics.

Finally, but just as importantly, these processes point to a change in the concept of pluralism which can be called post-modern pluralism. Although the parties have tried to incorporate this type of pluralism into their programmes, they have found it extremely difficult to do so. Post-modern pluralism does not correspond to what Lyotard labelled meta-narratives. That is, it does not imply the existence of global alternatives, nor does it establish general cleavages (rural/urban, bourgeois/proletariat, Catholic/Protestant, etc.). Rather, it is structured around partial, fragmented, self-affirming, narcissistic, marginal or sporadic demands. These include, for example, some feminist, ecological or pacifist demands, general demands concerning sexuality, others involving specific issues (pornography,

abortion, etc.), cultural demands derived from alternative lifestyles, those centred on concrete problems (movements against drugs, organisations in favour of their legalization) etc., etc.. Virtually none of these manifestations of post-modern pluralism have totalizing aspirations, nor can they be easily integrated into a global political programme.[21] Hence the new pluralism does not serve to legitimate the traditional political parties; rather, it works against them.

4.2. *Parties as channels of representation.*

Representation is one of the key concepts in liberal formulations of politics. Representation is not merely a lesser evil in the context of social and economic developments which make it impossible to practice the ideal of participatory democracy in large monetarized modern societies (as, for example, Sieyès suggests). In liberal thought, as argued, for example, by the authors of *The Federalist Papers*, representation is actually preferable to the alternative of direct democracy.

Originally, representation in liberal democracy was not to be achieved through political parties, but through Parliament. Eighteenth-century England saw the emergence of the idea that all individuals and all their interests are represented in Parliament, that Parliament "reflects" the interests of the population since those sitting in it act as agents of the people they represent.

Faced with the problem of defining what representation actually means in this context, liberal ideas provide two different answers which are still persuasive. The first was formulated by Edmund Burke, and basically rests on the idea that the representative owes to those s/he represents "devotion to their interests, not to their opinion". In other words, the representative knows the interests of those s/he represents better than they themselves do. Despite its conservative tinge, this theory of representation is echoed in some contemporary liberal theories of

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[21] This does not mean that it is impossible to incorporate these demands, simply that it is not easy to do so and that their inclusion in party political programmes tends to be seen as an attempt by the party concerned to manipulate the issue.

democracy. This can be seen, for example, when Sartori writes of the need for the political system to have "experts" to analyze the complex political problems which exist today, or when Schumpeter argues that the citizens' lack of information and interest suggests that the interpretation of what is politically preferable should best be left to elected representatives.

The Federalist Papers offers an alternative way of considering the problem of representation. Representative government is even more legitimate than direct democracy since, as noted above, it is a better mechanism for encouraging the emergence of plural interests. The "stalemate" between pressures is also seen as generating stability and equilibrium. Moreover, the representative mechanism is associated with a capacity to reduce the complexity of interests and to articulate, order, and aggregate interests within the complex decision-making structure.

It is here that the link between the political parties and the concept of representation becomes apparent. For it is assumed that the parties are the institution that aggregates the demands and interests of individuals and social groups and which presents (re-presents) them in institutional decision-making. This function may be considered one of the most important sources of the parties' legitimacy; on the one hand, it reflects the power of the citizenry over its representatives and establishes the parties as vehicles for its demands; on the other hand, it legitimates the parties' authority as representatives of the people who vote for them.[22] If this reference to representation is adequately combined with the majority principle which governs our democracies, a party can attempt to justify its existence by referring to its contribution to the "representation of the people". Once it has obtained a majority, the party concerned becomes the agent of the general interest, so the normative link (a powerful legitimizing force) connects the party to the idea of representation, and this to the general interest.

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[22] See, for example, Stokes (1968: 151).

These ideas have long been associated with the existence of a correlation between social demand and political options, or in other words, between social classes and political parties. However, the social and economic transformation of post-industrial societies mean that there is no longer an easy correlation between the two. Contemporary societies are no long ordered by social classes, and these, in fact, do little to explain citizens' electoral behaviour. New interests have emerged which are associated with consumption, communication, social mobility, the new middle classes, immigrant and ethnic groups, alternative life styles, culture or the environment. In this context, parties come to embody vague lifestyles, symbols or leadership, rather than coherent groups of interests.[23]

Although this situation should not necessarily be interpreted as a crisis of representation proper, it should certainly be seen as constituting a crisis of the role the parties play in representation. Among other reasons, this is because other institutions are competing with the parties for this role. The large corporations which cooperate with governmental agencies in the formation and implementation of public policies are no longer "peripheral". Rather, they are now at the centre of the decision-making process, their prominence often gained at the expense of the parties' role. Similarly, a citizenry characterised by its "shifting involvements" (Hirschman) finds single issue interest groups more attractive than the parties. These single issue groups are occupying space once filled by the parties, benefitting from their greater flexibility and their greater ability to articulate and aggregate interests, as well as their capacity to ensure that these are taken into account in the decision-making process. The weighty bureaucratic-electoral machines which the parties have now become cannot compete with the flexibility of these groups which successfully use the impact of the mass media to make their presence felt and to force major changes in governmental agendas.

Furthermore, the oligarchisation and bureaucratization of the parties provoke suspicions that they give more importance to their own interests as organisations than their role in representing citizens' interests. In other words, the

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[23] See, for example, Touraine (1994, 117ff).

critiques made by Weber, Ostrogorski and Michels still have delegitimizing power with respect to the representative function of political parties.

4.3.   *Parties as mechanisms of participation*

Political participation is an essential element of the republican-democratic conception of democracy. According to this interpretation, citizen participation is the best (in the sense of most legitimate) means of taking any decision which affects the collective. Not only does participation guarantee collective self-government, but it is also seen as having positive political consequences in terms of the notion of individual self-development. The Greeks believed that participation in self-government was what made human beings worthy of the name. Debate, public competition and collective deliberation by equal citizens promoted both the personal dignity of the participants and their collective good. For Renaissance humanists, the commitment to the *vita activa* was the community bond which created civic virtue. According to De Tocqueville, citizens' involvement in all types of associations (civil, social, political, economic, recreative, etc.) was a distinctive feature of democratic systems. For John Stuart Mill or John Dewey, democracy was not merely a system of rules and institutions, but a series of participatory practices intended to foster individual autonomy and a particular way of life. In the same way, contemporary advocates of a "strong" or "expansive" democracy attempt to base their arguments on the question of participation.

In republican-democratic thinking, therefore, participation is a key value of democracy. The importance attributed to it is justified in terms of the three types of positive consequences it brings. First, participation generates interactive habits and spheres of public deliberation which are essential for the emergence of autonomous individuals. Second, participation makes people democratically and

collectively responsible for decisions and activities which they must control directly if they are to be self-governing. Third, participation also fosters a civil society with strong and deep-rooted community bonds that give rise to a collective identity, bonds which engender a distinctive way of life which is constructed around notions such as the common good and pluralism.

The combination of these three positive effects of participation favours the emergence, in this way of life, of other important values: the citizens' powers of reflection and judgement, solidarity, deliberation, communicative interaction and joint action, etc.. In short, the way of life constructed around the notion of participation tends to generate a legitimating justification of democracy based on ideas of participation and self-government.

There was a time when political parties could aspire, at least in part, to justify their existence by referring to this value of participation. For much of the 19th and 20th centuries, the mass parties were the catalyst and principal stimulus for participation, as they promoted political education, debate about collective decisions and processes, and deliberation over political options or alternatives. etc.. They also sought to create their own "culture", to promote certain values, customs and practices of solidarity and mutual support, and to increase the citizen's political powers of judgement, etc. In this way, the struggle for the extension of suffrage went hand in hand with the creation of a "sense of community" in the heart of party organisations. According to the prevalent discourse, political parties functioned as the catalysts of participation and as the channels through which the sovereign people exercised its sovereignty.

However, this image and those parties have not survived the passage of time. Although a good deal of political discourse intended to legitimate parties (that is, to link their functions to values cherished by society) still portrays their activities in terms of the image described above, the transformation of their role makes this extraordinarily problematic. Clearly, parties remain a key element in the institutional structure of democracies and an important means by which citizens' achieve effective unity of action in order to influence decision-making. However, it

is equally clear that, as the parties have evolved into electoral machines, they have lost their participatory tendencies and modified their functions. As is the case with the other developments mentioned above (the transformation of class structures, etc.), the parties' institutional and electoralist orientation means that they now discourage participation. They do so in two ways. Firstly, through their attempts to monopolize and discipline participatory movements beyond their control. Secondly, by restricting the internal channels for the participation of their members and supporters. In both contexts parties attempt to control processes from above, since their main priority is stable participation. That is, parties pursue a balance between participation and apathy which will guarantee them control of these processes. Although this tendency is justified in a number of ways, it nonetheless seems to be the case that it meets with the approval of citizens who in elections severely punish those party organisations in which they detect strong internal divisions (seen by some as the result of excessive levels of democracy and participation within the organisation).

In Linz's opinion (1992: 38), this suggests that models of the type suggested by Schumpeter may indeed be valid: citizens now vote for a prime minister, a government and for the party which supports them. Rather than mechanisms for political participation, parties are electoral alternatives. As Linz also argues, this may lead to the depreciation of discussion, of internal debate and of collective and democratic processes of decision-making within parties. It would also foster the oligarchical subordination of the parties to governments, and of governments to their leaders.[24] Hence everything seems to contribute to weaken the parties' legitimizing links to the notion of participation.

In fact, it is quite clear that a number of developments now taking place seem to be leading us in this anti-participatory direction. Abstentionism is growing, party affiliation rates remain low, loyalty to and identification with parties is on the decline, interest in politics is limited, and apathy, demoralization and

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[24] See these reflections related to transition processes in Bermeo (1994).

disengagement are generalized features of political cultures. Equally, membership of associations and organisations of all types remains relatively low (and, in any event, unconnected to political parties), etc..[25]

However, should we interpret citizens' estrangement from participation (and from the parties) as implying a process of delegitimation? Does the fact that citizens are tending to abandon and lose interest in parties mean that citizens are in some way withdrawing their consent? These questions cannot simply be answered in the affirmative. For whilst the republican-democratic view is constructed around the notion of citizen participation, liberal thinking is not overly sympathetic to this definition and may provide the parties with alternative sources of legitimacy.

In liberal thought, the essential notion is modern individualism. Democracy is not defined in terms of a participatory way of life, but rather as an ensemble of institutions and mechanisms which guarantee each individual the possibility to advance his or her interests without interference, or with the minimum possible degree of interference. Motivated by self-interest, each individual will try to promote his/her desires, connect these with those of others and make them felt, through aggregation, in the decision-making process. The role of parties, therefore, is not to facilitate participation, but rather to articulate and aggregate interests. The public good embodies the total (or the greatest possible number) of individual interests selected and aggregated in accordance with a justifiable legitimate principle (for example, the majority principle).

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[25] For concrete data on Spain see del Aguila (forthcoming: 2) and the bibliography referred to there.

The conception of citizen developed in this interpretation is very different to that proposed in the participatory model. This interpretation assumes that the liberal citizen is a more realistic construction for three main reasons: (i) it would appear to be easier to comprehend one's own interests than the common good; (ii) the incentives for participation are more closely related to the promotion of the individual's own private interests than to the goal of the general good; and (iii) the promotion of self-interest provides the incentive for the minimum level of participation required in a democracy.[26] This leads to the creation of a concept of citizen based on individual interest. As a result, political activity and public participation are discouraged as they become increasingly professionalised. In liberal thought, this occurs because the crucial element for self-realization is not related to political participation but to self-development in the private or professional sphere and to control over the mechanisms which aggregate interests. This control is linked to the existence of elections in which individuals, armed with a knowledge of their own interests and sufficiently well-informed about the alternatives, choose from among competing political products and subject them to their control in the following election. This interpretation of the citizenry does not require citizens to participate. Rather, it suggests that a prudent balance between participation and apathy is both the "cheapest" and most efficient means of managing complexity.

Here, therefore, we have a justification (legitimation) of the parties which refers to their capacity to adequately aggregate interests, and perhaps also to their role in selecting professional elites capable of carrying out this task effectively. Some scholars certainly consider that the parties and electorate in this interpretation appear to be very similar to those which actually exist in our contemporary democracies.

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[26] See Dahl (1992: 47).

However, is this such a realistic portrayal of the situation? The interpretation of democracy in terms of the advancement and maximisation of individual interests appears to be too narrow. One reason for this is that, since the promotion and maximisation of interests must necessarily be linked to democracy as a procedure, this is only possible if we accept that each individual is the best judge of his or her own interests (as, for example, Bentham would argue). If each individual is the best judge of his or her own interests, this obviously implies that we all possess the ability to judge and reason autonomously. This ultimately means that the concern for autonomy which characterized the republican-democratic tradition reappears here under a different guise.

However, the concept of autonomy is broader than that of self-interest. Yet, if this is indeed the case, we must admit that self-interest is dependent on autonomy, and this should signify that the liberal concept of citizen still requires a category which is capable of endowing individuals with autonomous judgement and, as a result, of turning them into citizens.[27] In republican-democratic thought, the category which gave rise to autonomous citizens was that of participation (that is, autonomy is achieved through participation). Which is the equivalent category in the liberal interpretation?

I think that this question can best be answered in the light of some recent formulations of citizenship.[28] These suggest that we need to elaborate an

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[27] Unless, of course, like David Hume or the utilitarians, we assume that autonomy simply implies letting oneself be governed by one's inclinations. Here is not the place to examine and question this dubious definition.

[28] For the following, see Dahl (1992), Gross (1993), Burtt (1993) and Rusconi (1994).

intermediate concept of citizenship which realistically sets out the minimum requisites of a democratic citizen but which neither overburdens the citizen with civic duties nor establishes a loose or empty concept.[29] Dahl has put it, what we need is a "good enough citizen".

Firstly, this "intermediate" citizen should construct his or her autonomy as a "reactive" citizen, in the sense that a citizen should participate directly by reacting to intolerable situations in accordance with his or her political judgement. If the habitual institutional mechanisms break down, it becomes essential for citizens to act to ensure that democratic society is reestablished on moral principles. The force which obliges the "good enough citizen" to embark on some form of participatory action is what John Rawls described as the need to "reinvigorate the public sense of justice". This "minimal obligation to participate" is an inevitable consequence of certain aspects of the self-identity of a democratic society. Here, interests are only involved in a symbolic sense: reactive action against injustice and intolerable situations, whether or not it is linked to self-interest, is always more than mere self-interest. For, fundamentally, it is also the protection of the citizen's "interest" in living in a world which can be legitimated in accordance with our fundamental values. If something destroys the coherence of this self-image, reactive participation must take place in order to reestablish a minimum of coherence. In this sense, the reactive citizen is, above all else, a good judge. Citizens are critical judges who reflect about public values and so become critical interpreters of the political reality in which they are immersed.

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[29] Empirical analysis has led to the construction of interesting intermediate categories which in some ways are defined in similar terms to those outlined below. See Sani (1992 and 1993).

However, citizens' cognitive capacity must be heightened if they are to fulfil this critical function. This does not now mean that they must participate directly. Rather, they must be able to directly judge (after deliberation) the most diverse realities, to empathize with others and their problems (as Dahl recommends) and, one might add, they must be able to empathize with the decisions taken by their representatives by imagining themselves in their position. In fact, what is required of citizens in any democracy is empathy with those who take decisions in their name in order to be able to judge them. Even the narrowest economic theory of democracy which interprets actors in terms of their interests requires this concept of empathy if it is to understand the accountability of electoral processes. In this definition of citizenship, it is this condition of empathic judgement which gives rise to autonomy. The republican-democratic tradition linked this virtue to political participation. In the liberal tradition, political judgement can be developed in a variety of other spheres or activities[30], but it cannot be avoided without eliminating the very fundamentals of democracy (even when this is understood in "thin" terms).

In conclusion, the distinguishing features of the reactive citizen are political judgement and empathy, not participation or interests. Hence it is perfectly possible for many citizens to believe that participation in political parties is "pointless", in the sense that it does not serve as a mechanism for advancing their interests and that it is "meaningless in itself". In the first instance, the citizen may choose to advance his or her interests by participating through channels other than parties (interest groups, corporations, etc.). In the second instance, the citizen may participate, not through parties, but through Non-Governmental Organisations or any of the many other types of social movement. For when all is said and done, the

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[30] For example, it can be associated with the home (because gender equality allows it), with professional life (despite the hierarchies which regulate it), with social life and leisure (groups of friends may play an important role in the development of political judgement), etc..

parties do not appear to be organisations likely to promote autonomous judgement or critical reflection. This function is probably being performed better by other organisations which in this way give participation some "meaning".

The fact is that from either perspective - liberal/interests or democratic/participation- the citizens' estrangement from the political parties and the withdrawal of consent which this entails does not imply irrationality or democratic cynicism. Rather, these attitudes simply reflect the citizen's use of autonomous political judgement in relation to an institution (the parties) which has serious difficulties in legitimating itself in accordance with those values. Abstentionism, falling party membership or levels of loyalty etc., may in fact indicate the development of citizens' critical capacity and, in part at least, thus be interpreted as actions which delegitimate the parties.

5.   Tentative conclusions

In other words, citizens' believe that the parties do not fulfil some of the functions associated with legitimizing values (those relating to participation, for example, but also those relating to representation, pluralism or competition). Parties are also considered responsible for, or contributing to, dangerous developments which challenge the moral dimension of democracy itself (for example, corruption). As a result, citizens withdraw part of their support for these organisations. However, they also know that parties are necessary. They know that the problem of legitimacy is one thing, but that the existence of viable and more legitimate alternatives is quite another matter. Therefore, they do not act cynically when they judge parties negatively and democracy positively. On the contrary, they judge with autonomy and empathy where their interests lie and which is the moral dimension associated with a democratic political identity that they wish to promote.

The absence of alternatives certainly provokes paradoxical tensions. In their haste to find an antidote to this tension (the tension resulting from their belief that parties are necessary but that parties have serious legitimacy deficits), citizens

sometimes seek relief in "outsiders" (Perot, Berlusconi, Fujimori). It is quite possible that this is a mistaken solution to this tension, basically because "outsiders" do not promote a reform of the system designed to create "wiser" citizens, but in practice do just the opposite. There are other possible solutions to this tension which might appear to offer more hope: those which take the form of social movements, single issue pressure groups, Non-Governmental Organisations, etc.. None of these, however, constitute an alternative to the parties. It should be recognized, therefore, that the tension produced by the legitimacy crisis of parties, to which there is no viable alternative, may be with us for some time to come.

From the parties point of view, the paradox is derived from the fact that despite having radically changed their functions, they still attempt to resolve their legitimacy deficit by appealing to values which they are no longer able to uphold. Citizens force them to justify themselves as key institutions for democracy, whilst at the same time their actions and abstentionism demonstrate that there is a crisis of legitimacy. Perhaps, however, this is a far from irrational attitude.

It is now possible to outline some tentative conclusions:

Firstly, corruption can be considered a kind of catalyst for the different processes of delegitimation suffered by political parties. There are a number of reasons why this is so. First, because corruption is, in fact, a breach of the basic moral rules of liberal-democracy which directly affects the moral dimension that is a necessary feature of democratic regimes. Second, because corruption is linked to political parties through illegal funding which is a problem of parties in general, and not just of a particular party. Third, because political parties set in motion two different dynamics (*Hubris-opacity* and *fusion-unification*) which seriously hinder the possibilities of investigating cases of corruption. At the same time, these dynamics contribute to a political framework that favours the spread of corrupt behaviour. Fourth, because parties act in the midst of a political environment dominated by the morality of economics (strategy, profit, calculation, etc) which is at odds with the conception of politics in terms of civic virtue, general interest, etc.

Secondly, political parties seek legitimacy by attempting to establish a normative link between their functions and various core liberal-democratic values such as pluralism, competition, representation and participation. Nevertheless, their actual functions correspond less and less to this "legitimating" image. The "ultimate" values (pluralism, competition, etc.) are still key values in our political culture, but parties are unable to create a normative link with them because their functions no longer correspond to activities that promote these values and beliefs. The changes in the functions of political parties, their conversion into public entities, their concern for efficiency, their emphasis on performance, etc., are far removed from the conceptual universe of liberal-democracy. Yet despite this, political parties try (during election campaigns, in their public self-justification, legal vocabulary, etc.) to legitimate themselves as representatives of the people, as expressions of social and ideological pluralism, and as channels for citizen participation. Although they find it very difficult to establish normative links between the functions they perform and the values those functions are supposed to embody, political parties still attempt to justify their own existence in liberal-democratic terms. This internal tension creates legitimacy deficits for parties that are difficult to overcome in the present context.

Finally, whether we prefer the liberal model of citizen centred on interests and individuality, or we choose the republican-democratic model of citizen which emphasizes participation and deliberation, political parties have legitimacy difficulties in this respect too. For both models share a core value: that of the citizen capable of political judgement and autonomy. Yet certain political processes going on within political parties (oligarchization, bureaucratization, internal discipline, lack of internal democracy, strong leadership, de-ideologicalization, etc.), make these institutions less and less attractive to an autonomous citizen. In consequence, certain trends of contemporary democracies (abstention, political apathy, declining political activism, party membership, party loyalty, etc.) can, after all, be interpreted as a withdrawal of consent. An autonomous citizen is likely to consider participation in a political party as unappealing, because it lacks the "meaning" of

deliberative participation as well as the benefit of promotion of interests. So it is likely that an autonomous citizen will participate in social movements when s/he is looking for meaning, and in a "single issue pressure group" or a corporation when interest promotion is at stake. In both cases, there is nothing cynical or irrational in this behaviour. In fact, rather than cynicism, this behaviour suggests an attachment to liberal-democratic values. Whilst estrangement from political parties sometimes creates "new monsters" such as the outsiders (Berlusconi, Perot, etc.), it nevertheless seems that the withdrawal of consent now being experienced by political parties is best understood in terms of autonomy and increased political judgment. After all, parties do not appear to constitute a good setting for developing deliberative processes conducive to the increased autonomy and political judgment of citizens.

Yet the crisis parties face when they try to associate themselves with liberal-democratic values does not mean that we have an alternative to them. It is one thing to understand the crisis of parties as a legitimacy crisis, and to identify some of the problems this presents, but quite another to suppose that an alternative to the parties exists, or that we know of an organisation which could better perform their functions. That is, a legitimacy crisis is one thing, the existence of alternatives quite another. The legitimacy crisis suggests the existence of tensions between values, institutions and functions. The question remains, however, how to resolve this tension. For the idea that by identifying a problem we have found a solution to it is merely a superstition of our culture.

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