I

What has motivated us to launch such a journal? Besides a certain evident “lack of realism”, without which one would certainly not embark on such a huge task, it was primarily the current graceless state of politics and of political science. This means that not only are people increasingly dissatisfied with current politics which is unable to find answers to the growing number of pressing issues, but that established approaches in political science also fail to find explanations for this state of affairs. Modern politics has made, and continues to make, extremely ambitious, overarching claims, about working for the happiness of the greatest number of people; about rights, democracy and the participation of every citizen; nothing short of promising, at least “potentially”, the realization of an earthly paradise.

However, in spite of a certain progress in formal “democratization”, and some increase in the nominal rate of material well being, if not the elusive “quality of life”, so far this endeavour has remained largely unsuccessful. The increase of formal and substantial freedoms has come at a considerable price. Far from achieving what it had promised, modern democratic politics has effectively mutilated political life by eliminating the question of meaning (or sense) from politics. By placing the emphasis on all the wrong places, contemporary politics has become a parody of itself: a grotesque, mimic copy of the authentic. Politicians who go against wind and tide, whose joy is to stand alone, are the antithesis of politics. Politicians strive for instant popularity, becoming charismatic heroes in the dreams of their people by promising happiness to them. The increasingly mediatized public sphere is filled with characters who fail to generate a sense of society, are rather lonely hunters in an alienated world. It must also be said that modern political science, unfortunately, is faithful to itself, performing what it preaches: instead of diagnosing and analysing the situation, it is satisfied with simply reproducing and reflecting this state of disgrace.

If the contemporary political scene seems to be filled with iconoclastic characters that are so devoid of meaning, unable to separate the genuine from the fake, it is so – apart from the already mentioned mindless chasing of an unreal dream – because of a very particular reason. The history of modern politics is in fact the story of the separation of political techniques, institutions and structures from their meaning – in this development the exception proves the rule. Examples of such exceptions recur in the work of Charles de Montesquieu (the spirit of laws), of David Hume (sympathy holding society together), of Adam Smith (again sympathy and benevolence), or more recently of Max Weber or Eric Voegelin. This separative attitude was possibly due to two basic assumptions, which dominate the rationalist anthropology on which modern politics is based. The first is the idea that the questions of value – and thus of meaning – can be safely eliminated from politics, as such concerns are trivial and shared by every member of the population, only to be addressed in empty expressions like “what is good for men”. The only question to be posed in political life is how to realize such ends; politics is, therefore, only about choosing the proper means to realize self-evident ends. Needless to say, the idea that we all mean the
same thing by the “good”, and that the search for goodness could be secured by technical politics, are extremely problematic assumptions.

The second general objective of a type of political thought dominated by formal rationality is to capture and regulate, in a systematic theoretical framework, the ordinary life common to all members of a political community. This assumption seems just as trivial as the previous contention, being as it is, allegedly, close to the way in which Aristotle founded political science on the “empirical” study of all existing political systems. However, on closer inspection, it is just as problematic as the previous claim. In fact, the relation between ordinary life and its reflections in political theories was always complicated, as one can discern just by reading Aristotle’s *Politics* or Plato’s *Republic* (*Politétia*). This is because political science can only be satisfied with reflecting the “common ordinary life” when this ordinary life is indeed ordinary; if it is in some ways in order. However, political thinking is usually stimulated exactly by the *problematic* or even outright *critical* nature of politics. Political thinkers who lived through such chaotic times can be divided into two types. Firstly, the few who could not satisfy themselves with reproducing the worst condition in their writings but rather considered the strengthening of the good sense of human beings against the corrosive influence of the surrounding chaos as the central task of politics. Such a list would include (apart from those already mentioned) Nietzsche, Tocqueville or Foucault. And secondly, the majority, from Machiavelli, Hobbes or Descartes, up to Rousseau, Marx or Rawls (just to mention the most influential ones) who were satisfied with the disappointing, inadequate view of man that their disintegrating, or even “regressive”, age dictated.

The assumption of the common, shared, and self-evident goals of politics, based on the fundamental identity of the desires of all individuals, and on the empirical, stable existence of a life common to all members of the community is a basic anthropological idea of modern politics. The current, sad state of political life clearly indicates that something is wrong with it. They must be therefore explicitly and directly tackled, asking and problematizing dominant, taken for granted, contemporary wisdom. In my mind, this is the fundamental reason for launching this journal.

II

Politics, according to the classics, is first of all concerned with “sense”, and, more precisely, the two senses of the word “sense” (I have to apologize for the inevitable wording). The first is the “senses” as tools of perception, which are not simply “natural”, but rather have to be trained in order to perceive in the correct manner: to recognize the beautiful and the virtuous, and especially to recognize the difference not simply between the beautiful and the ugly, or the virtuous and the coward, but the beautiful and the virtuous and their mere *copy*. Second, they must “sense” in the sense of “meaning”, which in politics first of all refers to the situation where all (or almost all) members of a political community share a proper perception of the good and the ugly; the virtuous and the coward. Etymology instructs us that of the two senses of “sense”, that of “perception, meaning, and feeling” is the original. The first application to the external “senses” of hearing or touching in English only dates back to 1526. Modernity is the forgetting of chronology, the confusing loss of the senses, and the devaluation of values.²

In order to be able to guide others, the leaders of the community or public opinion must possess a mental image of what is the good, the true and the beautiful; this is what Plato called the *eidos* (*eidos* has an affinity with the Greek for seeing), which is again quite
different from the “idea” in our modern sense, that is in any case a mistranslation. It is not the “representation” or “reflection” of an “objective” reality, rather the model, the common measure that must be envisioned and followed in order to live a meaningful life. Under chaotic circumstances the only possibility for preserving politics, for maintaining the integration of the society is to reassert eidos. As the cases of Greek democracy, the Roman Republic, or even the Roman Empire prove, for a time such a concern with maintenance might produce acceptable results. The classical concerns can be recognized even in the work of Cicero, who is often considered to have been preoccupied exclusively with structural, organisational and institutional arrangements. However, for Cicero such formal concerns also had a proper philosophical and anthropological basis, not in the modern, Germanic, idealistic sense of a “general, systematic theory”, but rather in the classical, Platonic-Aristotelian sense of a concern with meaning. In classical ontology, the polis appears as a “macroanthropos”, bearing the imprint of authenticity at the communal level, as it embodied the care of the soul or self-discipline, and thus the character of its people. The reality and thus the meaning of the political community were dependent on the care of the soul and the consequent stable quality of its subjects.  

Modern political science takes up, quite explicitly in the case of liberalism, the Ciceronian concern; but with a huge difference. With the moderns, structural and institutional considerations predominate, and the anthropological assumptions are either taken for granted or simply forgotten. Furthermore, and beyond the level of mere assumptions, classical political theory is based on a certain affirmation of life, of virtue and beauty, and not on the crisis-induced social contract, emphasised by Thomas Hobbes or Jean Jacques Rousseau. Only we moderns could, with the help of the influential “founding fathers” of modern political thought (this refers not to the “founding fathers” of the United States of America, rather – apart from Hobbes or Rousseau – to Immanuel Kant, Georg W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, or Sigmund Freud), engage upon the wholesale desacralization of politics, in the sense of saying that even the false could be real or meaningful if stated at the right moment; this is quite in opposition to Montesquieu’s “spirit of laws”, according to whom the character of a people does, in fact, influence their politics.

Nevertheless, even in Antiquity, political thinking could not prevent collapse. Political theory attempted to provide a shield, to maintain meaning, but the collapse was only postponed by extending the crisis out of all proportions, through expansionist policies, as happened with the fall of Athenian democracy, the Roman Republic, and later the Empire – proving again and again that knowing and following meaningful life does not prevent its dissolution. Still, even in their collapse, there was greatness, which saved them from the savage egoism that does not trust in society. Even in the way they died, the Greeks and Romans – our own predecessors, whose heirs we are – were saved from the disgrace of sacrificing their integrity.

Here we enter another most perplexing aspect of modern politics that is very difficult to see, and even more difficult to capture in “rational” terminology. The ruthless modern search for happiness not only resulted in increasing and unprecedented levels of loneliness, boredom and unhappiness, but in a genuine, morbid, not to mention perverse predilection for suffering, which transmuted the desire for pleasure into a satisfaction derived from a desire for pain, procured through the perpetual tearing up of wounds. The ancients did not create a whole industry of crisis literature, as we do. They did not possess a queer curiosity for the suffering of others, and even of our own, as we evidently do as we try to gain power out of our incapacity to overcome our debility in a quite carnivalesque manner, where all
feelings are masked as something else. The smug satisfaction of “transmogrifying”’ weakness into the foundation of politics was sadly illustrated with the examples of communist and fascist political systems, which continue to puzzle political theory.

The identification of a political crisis, the recognition of the symptoms of disintegration, the traumatic loss of the bonds between social units have become in the modern world an opportunity for technical manipulation by exploiting and utilising good will, humor and benevolence. At the same time the care of self has been lost, as the techniques of the self became integrated into the machinery of the state as tools for gaining submission, with the sad result of incorporating iconoclast outcasts into politics by transforming them into electors and then even the elected. By reducing the ancient concern with politics and democracy to legal and institutional tinkering we have created a senseless world, launching our own project of disintegration, as energy of this type clearly has affinities with explosion, not with politics.

Within its own self-enclosed universe the questions and problems of modern political science make perfect sense: it is quite effective in resolving the problems posed by its own terms, just as capitalism works perfectly if every human being in a political community is transformed into a pleasure-maximising money-making machine (in so far as the natural resources are not completely used up). But the precondition of this efficiency is the exclusion of meaning; thus, contemporary politics fails even to notice its own limitations. Yet, in real life, the symptoms that something is not working with modern political systems are accumulating; and political science duly takes notice of this phenomenon. It continues to address the crisis in politics, the loss of self-respected politicians, the lack of political self-awareness and the apathy of citizens, pretending to reinvigorate the dying political life, failing to notice that the problem is one of the loss of integrity itself. This has brought about the icy calculating mentality, trying to benefit from every occasion, even from the discomfort of others, which is not problem-solving but schismatic in nature, and naturally so, as it gained its dynamic gun-powder from disintegration.

The question to ask is how this became possible; and how can we, as we must, think responsibly beyond the inflated and self-congratulatory commonplaces of modern democratic politics.

III

In facing this question we must start by posing different questions and fundamentally changing the terms of questioning. Why bother posing the same old questions if the replies are repeatedly found wanting? Why not pose, beyond the mainstream, the following questions: why the anxiousness, why the social estrangement, why the lost sense of reality in spite of politics? As far as the conventional answers and suggestions are concerned, politics is a technical enterprise that attempts to eliminate differences, by incorporating them into a common framework that treats human beings as resources on the basis of a common code of utility. As far as our question is concerned, however, politics has a sense that is not separable from the question of authenticity. Politics must be meaningful as it was originally, based on philia or friendship – otherwise it becomes a Gnostic enterprise, using the terminology developed by Eric Voegelin (1952; 2000).

Political inquiry as based on the anthropological foundations of classical political science and modern politics pursue two different modes of questioning, moving in two different directions. The latter is an elaborate systematization of the unreal dream of a
superior State, aiming to realize perfection. Conversely, the former proposes a return to
nobility and genuine integrity, incorporating the domain of the senses that must be properly
directed; using rhetorical terms, able to see instead of blindness, able to hear instead of
deafness, and thus having a human measure at its centre. This is the meaning of Political
Anthropology or Political Humanism, where anthropos eidetikos means the full possession of
senses. The second, again, is happy to cope with individual deviance, in so far as it can be
channelled into the common, whether by means of reason of state, disciplinary policies, or
the accommodation of the market to satisfy any possible individual whimsy, where the worst
is the better. This latter direction poses no real questions, is obedient, goes where diverted;
while the first is related to society, to the noble passion it organises, as Heraclitus said: keep
your soul dry, assimilate it with the fire of the world, so the common will be embodied in
yourself. In contrast, politics now has a fluid method for inclusive individual normalisation:
turning the deviant into an elector, and in this way creating absurd normality, with the equity
of unstable and weak personalities, whose only preference is to become more numerous
through enactment (Keuls, 1978). Here quantity is facing quality, and there is no question
about the winner. There is a Hungarian saying about the way something can take the place of
another which I must cite here as it is so wonderfully neutral, in line with contemporary
taste: a lot of geese can defeat a pig (sok lid disznót győz). Here there is no qualification, no
merit in the difference, just a matter of fact statement that whatever easily reproduces itself
overtakes, or “enacts”, the slowly growing.

Modern politics and modern political enquiry have demoted classical, anthropological
politics because they considered it exclusive and elitist, siding with quality and commitment.
Instead, emphasis was placed on those who follow the presumably inevitable course, the
level of lowest common denominator. There is no better example for the contrast between
the two types of politics than the Lewinski affair that with its senseless absurdity seriously
damaged American politics, and with cool conscience, thriving on formalities and
technicalities, demonstrating how Cartesian rationalism can transform vulgarity into a
presidential question. While the contrast between Classical and Gnostic politics as ideal types
is clear enough, the course of history saw their differences diminish. One such situation
occurred with the rise of the Papal State, after the Avignon Papacy and the Great Schism
of Western Christianity, with the return of the Papacy to Rome in 1418. Leon Battista Alberti’s
Monus, a first recognition and analysis of the “return of the Trickster”, can be situated
exactly in this context (Horvath, 2007); while a second crucial stage took place after the
Reformation, and was recognized by Shakespeare (Szakoleczai, 2007). The way out of this
crisis was mapped by Machiavelli and Hobbes, with the re-foundtion of modern political
thought through the creation of a separate political body, and with the inherent reason of
state. A broad reduction of politics to the preoccupation of its incumbents with mere
survival was realised (Hobbes); and an order without meaning (Voegelin, 1999: 153-5),
concerned with “naked life” (Agamben, 1998) emerged. A further example was the
establishment of Communism in Eastern Europe. Communism is often charged with a
disregard for the law and the formal institutions of Parliamentarism, but such a criticism is
one-sided and largely displaced. Communism managed to destroy the common way of life,
and even the possibility of politics in all of the countries under its reign. However,
destruction was not restricted to institutional arrangements; quite the contrary in fact.
Communism had a parliament and even political parties in a formal sense, but not on the
level of the meaningful: it eliminated every sense of reality and through that every segment
of humanity under its reign; it chased away the soul of the people living under its grip.
This example shows us that bringing the anthropos, or the being with intelligent eyes, with senses, into politics is a very important issue, giving a genuine substance to political anthropology. After all, we cannot talk about politics without a meaning or eidos, as Plato formulated it. For the ancients politics was sacred, because it bore the imprint of the measure; one could not deviate from the image of grace without the danger of losing the sense of reality. What makes us human is to see this image clearly, and to shape our behavior accordingly. However this emphasis on eidos is hardly present in modern political inquiry; even the meaning of the word has been forgotten, explaining the general ignorance toward Plato. Modern politics fails to see the measure; even at its best it only tries to channel a disintegrated humanity into something common, with the result of the banalized sacred (here not even Weber’s concept of “charisma” is very fortunate). Contemporary politics is a carnivalesque experience in the style of “end of history” literature, embracing all in order to “bring down the house” — it is enough to evoke as examples the French presidential election, with its salacious tinge, the Berlusconi government, or the recent American election, all united by their special liking for the iconoclastic individual. It comforting shows up for all of us who are deviant, outsider, mishap or crippled — in the true spirit of Tocquevillean levelling democracy — the qualities of understanding and empathy; sadly, without resisting such a condition, and wanting betterment from us.

Human beings will always be guided by ideals or images. The essential question is the exact nature of these ideals. Once this truism is ignored, through the rationalistic presuppositions that images do not matter, that adult human beings do not imitate, and that facts can be studied without concern for meaning, then the danger is that politics will be guided by erratic images. This possibility will be realized through the activities of the Trickster who always takes the upper hand once care is forsaken in politics, the eyes and ears are shut, and electoral power is given over to the sleepwalkers.

Let me conclude by what I consider to be this journal’s main aspiration. This journal’s spirit can perhaps be compared to the spirit of the people of the Golden Age who thought that things have stable forms and unalterable strengths, and then suddenly had to realize that everything can suffer alteration as even stones are melted into metals that can be moulded. Still, the Golden Age is the property of our mind, and so it is that this journal aspires to the revitalization of political inquiry in this proper sense.

Notes

1 By regression, in contrast to the myth of “progress”, I indicate that in a confusing, liminal situation one can easily get sidetracked to a state of affairs that has already been solved or overcome.
2 See Bjørn Thomassen, “Understanding Absolutism: State and Self from the Seventeenth Century, the cases of Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes”, manuscript, 2006.
3 A return to this concern again brings together Weber, Voegelin, Patocka and Foucault.
4 The terminology is from Calvin and Hobbes.
5 See Foucault’s argument that the rationality of the governance of the others is the same as the governance of the self, referring to Plutarch (Foucault 1984: 108).
6 In this context see Francis Yates’s ‘genealogy’ of Cartesianism and modern politics (for e.g. Yates 1972).
7 About this, see Pizzorno (1991).
8 For particularly good accounts, see the works of Elemér Hankiss or Katherine Verdery.
9 The word has no accepted etymology, but ops in Greek means eyes.
Bibliography