Liberté, inégalite, égoïsme
Distrust and lack of solidarity as threats to contemporary democracy[1]

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Abstract

The loss of trust in political institutions in general and in democratic institutions, in particular, has long been an object of study. Theories that seek to explain this phenomenon can be divided into two broad categories, depending on the perspective they take: historical or systemic. The paper briefly examines these two approaches before proposing an explanatory strategy that seeks to combine them and, at the same time, combine philosophy and sociology. In doing so, it will recur to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* and to the conception of the relation between individual and political community defended by the German philosopher.

Keywords: trust, democracy, Hegel, liberty, equality, solidarity.

1. Introduction

In the extensive literature on the relationship between trust and democracy and, more generally, on the role of trust within political communities and society *tout-court*, a certain consensus has been established on the fact that we are witnessing a strong loss of trust in political institutions in general and, in particular, in democratic institutions, on the one hand, and in the political class, on the other.[3] I will not insist on this diagnosis, which has practically become commonplace; instead, I will devote myself to another aspect, to which few authors have given due attention, and I will try to find the reasons for this phenomenon in the historical evolution of democratic societies or even in the very essence of democracy. Generally, there is a tendency to attribute

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[3] See, among others, the classic V. Hart, *Distrust and Democracy. Political Distrust in Britain and America*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1978; as well as P. Rosanvallon, *La contre-democratie. La politique à l'âge de la défiance*, Seuil, Paris 2006.

the crisis of distrust in democratic institutions to causes external to them, such as, for example, the economic crises of recent years, the phenomenon of migration, the evident inability to control the economy by democratic means, etc. Of course, these aspects play a role in explaining the aforementioned crisis of confidence, but there is an alternative explanation, focused on the internal or endogenous causes of such a crisis.

Theories that seek to explain the lack of trust based on endogenous causes can be divided into two broad categories: those of a historical nature and those that take a systemic perspective. I will briefly examine these two approaches before proposing an explanation that seeks to combine them and, at the same time, to combine philosophy and sociology, as it is difficult to address an issue such as trust solely from a philosophical point of view. The problem is that, when trying to discuss why a certain society is characterized by a culture of trust or distrust, we have to deal with a series of variables that no philosophical theory can predict, if not descending to the level of empirical observation of society and becoming, at least in part, sociological theory (and perhaps agreeing with Adorno, who claimed that philosophy and sociology always go together).

2. Historical explanations

One of the authors who focus on the historical causes of the crisis of democracy is Ivan Krastev. Taking up an observation by Kołakowski[4] about Popper's "open society", which would be threatened by its own success, Krastev says that the current crisis «is rooted in the fact that European societies are more open and democratic than ever» and that «it is precisely this opening that leads to the ineffectiveness and lack of trust in democratic institutions»[5]. In other words, democracy would tend to poison itself, to use another Kołakowski's term, or to develop forms of self-enmity, to use Krastev's term. Krastev bases his diagnosis on a series of considerations about what he considers to have been the five great revolutions that shook the West in the last fifty years. The first is the sociocultural revolution of the 1960s, which placed the individual at the center of politics (the author refers here to the American civil rights movement and to the 1968 movement). The second is the neoliberal revolution of the 1980s, which has delegitimized the State as an economic actor. The third is the revolution that led to the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and that seemed to reconcile the two previous revolutions. The fourth is the revolution in communications introduced by the diffusion of the internet. The fifth is represented by the advances in neurosciences, which have rediscovered the role of emotions or, more generally, of irrational aspects in politics.

According to Krastev, these revolutions have caused five counter-revolutions or backlashes that contributed to increase distrust in democratic institutions. The

[4] Cf. L. Kołakowski. *Modernity on endless trial*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1997.

[5] I. Krastev, *The age of populism: reflections of the self-enmity of democracy*, in «European View», 10, 2011, pp. 11-16: 12 f.

sociocultural revolution of the 1960s undermined the feeling that the political community has a common goal, exalting individual identity and leading to a colonization of public discourse by normative and legal demands linked to that identity. The reaction elicited by this process was represented by the ever-increasing attacks on multiculturalism, particularly at the political level (less at the academic level) and by the growing nostalgia for a sense of belonging to a homogeneous and less individualistic political community.

The neoliberal revolution was the result of the gap between the global spread of democracy, on the one hand, and, on the other, of the trend towards greater economic equality that was registered in the decades after WWII. In other words, this revolution led to an increase in inequality and in distance between the economic elites and the rest of the population. The reaction would manifest itself in the increasingly numerous protests against such elites (e.g., in the opposition between the 99% and the 1% mentioned by movements like *Occupy Wall Street*).

The 1989 revolution did show that it is not enough to hold free elections to achieve order and prosperity, as promised by the theorists of the End of History or by those who pointed to the allegedly intrinsic relationship between democracy and material well-being. The initial euphoria gave way, for the citizens of Eastern Europe, to a sense of frustration and then to a tendency to support authoritarian parties and politicians, attributing to democracy itself the cause of the problems it failed to solve.

The internet revolution has not brought about the creation of an open and plural global public sphere, but a fragmentation of the public space and the emergence of echo chambers, of radicalized, closed-in virtual communities, whose members hear and repeat only opinions and news that confirm their view of things and reinforce their political position. The result is a greater polarization within the public sphere.

Finally, the revolution of neuroscience has, on the one hand, brought to a better understanding of the non-rational mechanisms that determine our policy choices; but this new knowledge was mainly used to manipulate voters. This leads Krastev to claim that «Karl Rove […] has replaced Karl Popper as the new prophet of democratic politics»[6]. Political candidates prefer to appeal to the voters' feelings rather than to their reason, promising unachievable things (the creation of millions of jobs, the expulsion of all immigrants, the return to a mythical past of general well-being etc.).

These five types of reactions would explain and characterize the type of populism that is currently asserting itself around the world and which, far from being the result of a single specific historical event (e.g., the 2008 economic crisis) is the result of a process that saw the increasingly decisive affirmation of elements that, for Krastev, are characteristic of democracy (individual freedom, free market, free elections, freedom of communication, affirmation of the principle by which all opinions have the same dignity). From this perspective, the current crisis of confidence in democracy is the result of a process determined by several contingent historical events, without which history would have taken a different path.

[6] Ivi, p. 15.

3. Systemic explanations

The second approach uses explanations of systemic nature and identifies the causes of the crisis of trust in the very essence of democracy or even in the way in which society in general is organized. An example of this is the reading that Piotr Sztompka has called the «distrust syndrome», which represents the opposite of the 'culture of trust' analyzed by many authors[7]. When, within a society, a culture of trust prevails, there are a series of positive consequences: there is no need to monitor and control every action of others; we are driven to increase the scope of our interpersonal relationships and, therefore, our social capital; we feel encouraged to accept and tolerate cultural and political differences without feeling threatened by the 'Other;' we feel more connected to our community and more willing to cooperate[8]. Correspondingly, the distrust syndrome tends to paralyze our actions, causing us to distrust others and to always expect the worst from them; it, therefore, corrodes our social capital, mobilizing a defensive attitude towards others, in particular towards those who are perceived as 'the Other' (foreigners, members of another social class, another race, a minority, etc.).

According to Sztompka, for an entire society to be a victim of the distrust syndrome, a series of conditions must be met. Its causes are therefore structural and cannot be attributed to particular historical events or personal attitudes for which individuals could be held responsible. In any case, it is not necessary that *all* these conditions are given, nor that they occur in the same way. The first one is normative insecurity or anomie, which Sztompka understands not as an absence of rules (without rules, there would be no society), but as the circumstance in which rules are applied in an ambiguous and inconsistent way. The second condition is the institutions' lack of transparency (as, for example, when the tax system is complex and incomprehensible) or the fact that they act secretly (as when government agencies spy on citizens). The third condition is the lack of stability of the social order, that is, a situation in which sudden and apparently casual social changes take place. The fourth is the lack of accountability of those in power. It is not necessary to reach the extreme case of a total lack of control on the rulers by the citizens; it is enough that those who make important decisions in the political or economic sphere never need to answer for this (as when executives who heavily harm their companies, leading to the firing of thousands of people, are in turn fired, but receiving millions in compensation, or as when politicians who failed to get re-elected due to their unpopularity receive lucrative public or private offices as compensation). The fifth condition is the

[7] Cf. P. Sztompka, *Vertrauen. Die fehlende Ressource in der Postkommunistischen Gesellschaft*, in «Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie», Sonderheft 35, 1995, pp. 254-276.
[8] P. Sztompka, *Trust, Distrust and two Paradoxes of Democracy*, in «European Journal of Social Theory», 1, n.1, 1998, pp. 19-32.

impossibility of having their rights recognized, for example, as a result of an inadequate or dysfunctional judicial system. The sixth is constituted by a general sense of impunity and permissiveness due to the fact that those who should control and sanction incorrect or illegal behavior intervene selectively, punishing some people and not others. The seventh condition is the lack of respect of citizens by institutions, as when, for example, institutions violate the dignity of citizens, particularly the most vulnerable ones: the elderly, the sick, children, prisoners, etc.[9]

Of course, it is impossible that total and generalized distrust dominates completely a given society. Therefore, there are theories that focus on the *processes* of formation of trust and distrust within a certain society. An example of this is offered by Luis Roniger's comparative approach, which, analyzing the ways in which the culture of trust develops in different societies, introduces the distinction between focused and generalized trust[10]. The first is aimed at specific groups with which we share something (family ties, religious beliefs, ethnic origin, etc.); the second is aimed also at strangers and larger institutions, such as the State. We could say, roughly, that the first characterizes archaic and pre-modern societies, while the second is typical of Modernity. In reality, however, neither of these two forms of trust is dominant in contemporary societies; rather, we always face a mixture of both. For this reason, Roniger identifies four models for the crystallization of trust, which are not mutually exclusive and which can coexist within a society, although one of them frequently prevails, becoming characteristic of that society. In the first three, distrust is always present, albeit selectively.

The first model is that of a dominance of focused interpersonal trust. In it, it is difficult to leave the spheres of family, clan, neighborhood and friendships, with the consequent creation and crystallization of exclusive personal networks and clientship relations. We trust more those who share certain elements with us (e.g., friendship or kinship) than those who have the most adequate technical competence to solve a problem or who better deserves to be appointed to a certain position. This model prevails, for example, in most family businesses and can explain their difficulties in reacting to new challenges (and the problems faced by economies based mainly on this type of business); it applies, however, also to the public sphere, as is evident in cases in which positions are distributed to individuals less because of their specific competences and more by political and personal patronage.

The second model is that of a selective generalization of interpersonal trust. According to Roniger, it combines the tendency to focus on institutional trust with the expansion and generalization of trust at an interpersonal level. This is often a characteristic pattern of ethnic, national, or religious minorities in the context of a larger society. It gives rise to trust expectations based on sharing a common identity. Members of such minorities tend to limit their trust to members of the group, while

[9] All these conditions can be found, in one form or another, to a greater or lesser extent, in Brazil, for instance.

[10] Cf. L. Roniger, *La fiducia nelle società moderne. Un approccio comparativo*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 1992.

granting only focused trust to the formal institutions of the host society, with which, however, they are not willing to be associated. This model could explain the difficulties of the integration of certain communities within broader societies and the formation of so-called "parallel societies".

The third model is that of a selective generalization of institutional trust, which, according to our author, characterizes societies like the Japanese one from the Meiji era onwards. In it, trust is focused, on the interpersonal level, while at the same time it is connected to the general projection of trust in institutions and to general principles of social engagement. This model is supported by a strong form of trust based on the sharing of certain characteristics (e.g,. religion), by forms of public social control, and by the importance individuals attribute to their own reputation and moral position within the community.

Finally, the fourth model foresees a total generalization, both institutionally and interpersonally, of trust, understood as a public good. In this model, which *should be* dominant in Western democratic societies, there is a crisis of confidence when there are recurring cases of administrative crimes, corruption, etc. Phenomena of this type generally lead to an increase in supervisory controls, with high social and often economic costs[11].

From a systemic point of view, there are no specific reasons why a democratic society should fall into the distrust syndrome. If the historical approach is, by definition, dynamic and insists on the process of *loss* of trust, looking for its causes in specific events, the systemic model is static and can only describe situations in which mistrust prevails over trust. I intend to combine the two approaches in search of an alternative.

4. A third way

I will organize my considerations around three main axes, corresponding to three central concepts of Western modernity: freedom, equality, and fraternity. I think, in fact, that the real revolution betrayed was that of 1789, not that of 1989, as Krastev thinks; and that the populism that appears to threaten our democratic institutions represents a confused and unsuccessful attempt to reassert these three core values. In my analysis I will be very much inspired by Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, not only because in this work Hegel has revealed himself to really be the first thinker of Modernity, but because it is a work written in a period when the ideals of the French Revolution were still alive and offered a stimulus to think about organizing society differently from the *Ancien Régime* or the Restoration (models that Hegel abhorred). In choosing Hegel, I follow in the footsteps of Axel Honneth and other authors, such as Terry Pinkard

[11] Ivi, pp. 38 ff. The difficulties that, in Brazil, the managers of public agencies face when it comes to acquiring material or spending money in general bear witness to this. The Brazilian laws on bidding, which are an attempt to prevent the diversion of public money, end up making it almost impossible to guarantee ordinary management.

and Robert Pippin, who use the Hegelian conceptual scheme precisely to understand how and why contemporary society has moved so far from the ideal imagined by Hegel.

Let's start with the first value, *liberté*, understood as individual freedom[12]. In his *Philosophy of Right,* Hegel admonished the reader not to interpret this concept in an individualistic sense. Individuals can only realize their freedom within and through social and political institutions such as the family, civil society and the state[13]. In this sense, Honneth is right to speak of *social* freedom in his *The Right to Freedom*[14]. Referring to the remarks on abstract law made by Hegel in the first part of *Philosophy of Right*, Honneth speaks of a veritable social pathology, identified by him with the tendency, dominant in our society, to make use of individual freedom and subjective rights to isolate oneself from the other members of the community; the tendency, at best, to use one's rights to erect a protective barrier for an individual sphere considered sacrosanct and inviolable or, at worst, to brandish them as a weapon against others individuals, in order to impose on them one's private interests or opinions. Of course, in this vision, there is no space for an understanding of oneself as a political subject or as a member of a community understood as something other than a mere set of atomized individuals. What comes to mind here is Margaret Thatcher's (in)famous statement that there is no such thing as society, but only individuals and families (which the Iron Lady, evidently, did not conceive in Hegelian terms, but only as the nuclear family, detached from others and formed by its members as isolated individuals). As crude as this view of the world may seem, it is, after all, the view of Oakeshott, Hayek and the authors who are labelled as neoliberals, whose main concern is to deny the existence of social subjects who are not mere individuals, naturally armed with freedom and rights to protect them[15].

Krastev and Honneth therefore share their diagnosis: the sociocultural revolution of the 1960s certainly had positive effects in terms of increasing individual freedom and releasing repressed emancipatory potentialities; but it also led to undesirable results in terms of loss of a sense of social belonging, thus giving rise to a deficit of solidarity with and trust in the fellow citizens. In a Hegelian tone, Honneth suggests solving this dialectic, which is intrinsic to the concept of individual freedom, resorting to the aforementioned concept of social freedom, in which the positive moment of the individual's liberation from the bonds of a suffocating cultural identity and historical tradition as well as the negative moment of atomization would be *aufgehoben*, surpassed in the Hegelian sense of a superior unity, of a vision, in which individuals

[12] A republican reading of this ideal is possible too, if one understands it in terms of the political freedom of the community, as the concept was seen by Machiavelli, for example. However, this is not the meaning that Hegel attributes to it.

[13] G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1820), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991.

[14] A. Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, Columbia University Press, New York 2014.

[15] Cf. M. Oakeshott, *Lectures in the History of Political Thought*, Imprint Academic, Exeter 2006; F. von Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 2011.

can concretely realize their freedom only thanks to the action of others. Everything we want to accomplish with our freedom we can only achieve if others cooperate with us – not only passively, that is, refraining from hindering us (as classical liberals and neoliberals want), but also actively helping us. The neoliberal individual is an *unencumbered self*, to use the term used by Sandel in his critique of liberalism[16]: a subject with no roots and no social ties, no history, and no intersubjective relationships. Their freedom, as Hegel remarks with regard to the mere faculty of willing, is indeterminate and therefore empty, whereas true freedom is conditioned by the concrete possibilities of realizing the object of volition. To make a concrete and trivial example, no one is truly free to obtain a university degree, if they do not live in a society that concretely offers them this possibility – and in this case, too, this freedom depends very much on objective conditions that have to be satisfied (existence a system of free public education, the offering of scholarships, etc.). Obviously, freedom here is understood to be something more than the mere absence of obstacles or constraints theorized by Hayek (or by Hobbes); it is seen rather as a concrete possibility of acting to achieve a certain state of affairs. We are faced with two concepts of freedom that seem to follow Berlin's classic distinction between negative and positive freedom[17]; but with a closer look, it is clear that this is not the case[18]. Honneth's social freedom is not Berlin's positive freedom: it is not self-determination, understood primarily as self-government. Rather, it indicates a way of conceiving freedom in both negative and positive terms, that is, as the absence of coercion by external agents (the State, fellow citizens), but also as the presence of cooperation schemes among such agents, without whose help one could never reach their ends. Social freedom takes into account the intersubjective dimension of our individual freedom, that is, the fact that we are always tied up in an inextricable network of social relationships with other individuals, on whom our actions, and the results we achieve through our actions, depend.

Part of this freedom is also the freedom to participate in the government of the political community itself (Constant's freedom of the ancients[19]); but this is only one of its multiple aspects, although a relevant one that is inseparable from the very concept of freedom. In fact, thinking of freedom as the mere absence of obstacles represents an unacceptable abstraction, since human coexistence inevitably implies the presence of obstacles and limits to my will; by renouncing to participate in decisions concerning such limits, I put myself at the mercy of the decisions of others and, therefore, of the will of others. Constant's freedom of the moderns, that is, the freedom to detach oneself from the political arena and to deal only with the particular

16 M. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1982.
17 I. Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, in Id., *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1969, pp. 118-172.
18 I disagree, however, with the definition of negative freedom as "liberal freedom", defended by several neo-republican authors, as there are liberal authors like Adam Smith who are aware of the social dimension of individual freedom.
19 B. Constant,. *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns*, in Id., *Political Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, pp. 309-318.

sphere, thus represents a false freedom, since it means letting others establish without my consent the rules, based on which I will have to interact with them and live my social life – including my family life (which is regulated by the rules of the civil code, starting with those that establish what counts as a family from a legal point of view) and my economic activities (which can only exist in the context of a system of strict rules, even in the case of the so-called "free" market). In other words, any attempt to split negative from positive freedom, or a modern freedom from an ancient one, or freedom as non-coercion from freedom as self-government, leads to a partial, imperfect and insufficient view of the essence of freedom. On the one hand, Honneth and Krastev are right when they regret the fact that recent decades have seen the prevalence of a negative view of freedom, which has led to the atomization of individuals, with their consequent retreat into a private sphere delimited by formal rights (which are used as a weapon against other individuals and against society). On the other hand, though, one has to register a growing dissatisfaction with this process and an equally growing demand for greater political participation. Despite their diverse purposes and their diverse ideological orientations, the populist movements and parties that are spreading around the world share the idea that it is necessary to give back to citizens a decision-making power that many of them feel they have lost in favor of economic elites or a political class that is self-referential and disinterested in their problems. This allegedly "anti-political" tendency can only be considered to be such by those who forget or pretend to forget that its origins lie in a deeply political demand for greater participation. Such demand, however, is faced with a disheartening lack of responses on the part of political actors who traditionally functioned as spokespersons for the instances of the masses, that is, popular parties and unions. Voters therefore end up giving their votes either to heterogeneous movements without a defined ideological identity, such as the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* in Italy or the various *Pirate* parties in Northern Europe; or to parties born out of nowhere, but with a very clear ideological character, such as *Novo* e *Cidadania* in Brazil, *Podemos* and *Ciudadanos* in Spain, *Syriza* in Greece and *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany; or to pre-existing parties that, in addition to attacking the traditional political class (which they nevertheless belong to), often defend extreme positions, such as *Fronte National* in France, *Lega* in Italy, *PVV* in Holland; or to heterodox politicians, who are sometimes frowned upon even by their party establishment, like Bolsonaro, Trump (whose candidacy the Republican Party had to swallow in 2016) Johnson in the UK. The result is the prevailing model of a selective generalization of interpersonal trust (those who think like us are trusted while everyone else is idiot or criminal). In extreme cases, there is a risk of falling back into the model of focused trust, as in countries with a high rate of institutional corruption (e.g., Brazil). Honneth is right, therefore, when he laments, in his book on the idea of socialism[20], the absence of a socialist movement that embraces the demand for greater political participation advanced by so many European citizens (but a

[20] A. Honneth,. *The idea of Socialism*, Polity Press, Oxford 2017.

conservative author might say the same thing about the absence of an analogue European conservative movement).

The second value, that of *égalité*, equality, is perhaps the one that was most conspicuously betrayed. Nobody could ever really imagine that full economic equality would be achieved; its practical realization, in addition to being impossible, could even be undesirable, as defended by many authors (e.g., by Rawls). Certainly, however, one aspired to a less unequal society or to one in which economic inequalities did not translate directly into political and even legal privileges, as it happened in the *Ancien Regime*. Studies by economists and sociologists such as Thomas Piketty or Anthony Atkinson have shown not only that economic inequality has steadily increased in recent decades, returning to pre-1929 levels, but also that the greatest fortunes remain firmly in hand of the same families through centuries, while social mobility has proved to be a much more marginal phenomenon than previously thought[21]. In particular, economic inequality seems to have negative practical consequences that were not anticipated by economic and philosophical theories (from Rawls to Nozick) that considered it morally acceptable or even attributed a positive role to it (as in economic theories of the trickle-down effect, which are regularly contradicted by empirical research on the economic effects of inequality)[22]. These negative consequences are the object of numerous studies and concern, primarily, the economic sphere itself, also because the increase in economic inequality negatively influences the economic growth of a country, as claimed even by neoclassical or non-heterodox economists, such as Lansley and Stiglitz[23]. Mainly, however, they have effects in spheres that are apparently disconnected from the economic one, such as: physical and mental health, death rates, drug addiction, social mobility or criminality. It is worth mentioning, in this context, the famous study *The Spirit Level*, by the British epidemiologists Wilkinson and Pickett[24], which brings together and summarizes the results of numerous empirical researches carried out by specialists from different areas, all of which

[21] Cf. T. Piketty, *Capital in the 21st century*, Belknap Press, Cambridge (MA) 2014; A. Atkinson, *Inequality. What can be done?*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2015.

[22] «Pooling data for 1905 to 2000, we find no systematic relationship between top income shares and economic growth in a panel of 12 developed nations observe d for between 22 and 85 years. After 1960, however, a one percentage point rise in the top decile's income share is associated with a statistically significant 0.12-point rise in GDP growth during the following year. This relationship is not driven by changes in either educational attainment or top tax rates. If the increase in inequality is permanent, the increase in growth appears to be permanent, but it takes 13 years for the cumulative positive effect of faster growth on the mean income of the bottom nine deciles to offset the negative effect of reducing their share of total income" (D. Andrews, C. Jencks, A. Leigh, *Do Rising Top Incomes Lift All Boats?*, in «HKS Working Paper No. RWP09-18», 2009, p. 1; http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:4415903 last access on December 29th, 2021).

[23] Cf. S.Lansley, *The Cost of Inequality. Why Economic Equality is Essential for Recovery*, Gibson Square, London 2012; J. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality. How Today's Divides Society Endangers our Future*, Norton, New York 2012.

[24] Cf. R. Wilkinson, K. Pickett, *The Spirit Level. Why Equality is Better for Everyone*, revised edition, Penguin, London 2010.

converge in the diagnosis of the negative effects of economic inequality[25]. In other words, in countries where inequality is greater, people lead worse lives than in countries characterized by greater equality. This diagnosis is confirmed in all the most relevant areas such as health, safety, culture, etc. But what is interesting is that many of these surveys emphasize the fact that high inequality corresponds to a low level of mutual trust between members of the society in question. The cause of this phenomenon is often identified in the fact that individuals who suffer most from inequality tend to assume an attitude of strong distrust towards institutions and social rules that, evidently, favor only a small portion of society (this goes well with what Sztompka saw as the conditions that cause the appearance of the distrust syndrome). More generally, in a society of this type, the (fundamentally correct) impression prevails that economic rewards are not proportionate to individual effort or merit, but depend on the social position of the recipient. This position can allow its holders to change the rules of the game in their favor by influencing the political agenda or by successfully lobbying (or even buying) the lawmakers. In societies characterized by widespread corruption at all levels and in all spheres (political, economic, administrative), these distortions of the system and of legal and social rules are more evident, generating a generalized mistrust against large social institutions (State, public administration, market) and nurturing an attitude that openly justifies the violation of legal norms and social rules as a strategy of self-defense or prevention against the malfeasance of others. Hegel had reached similar conclusions in *Philosophy of Right,* when he described the emergence of an atypical social group that does not fit into the schemes of his system, contrary to what he considers to be the productive groups (farmers, workers in industry and commerce, and civil servants). This atypical group is the rabble or populace [*Pöbel*][26], whose members are characterized, primarily, by having been excluded from the economic system not because of its malfunctioning, but precisely because of its operating rules (e.g. because of the norms that regulate private ownership of the means of production or the labor market). They lost their job, not as a result of a momentary economic crisis, but because they became useless for the labor market. This phenomenon is quite frequent in our societies, mainly due to relocation and growing automation, not only in the production of goods, but also in services[27].

[25] Precisely these results show the limits of traditional normative theories that are content to judge inequality from the point of view of its abstract moral acceptability and not of its concrete effects on individuals and societies. Theories such as the one elaborated by Rawls, Nozick or Dworkin do not find reasons to limit inequality within society, once generic conditions are met, such as: improving the situation of the "worse-off", the absence of deception or violence, overcoming a test of "envy" that is as abstract as unrealizable in practice. Inequality produces negative effects irrespective of the fact that it is morally justifiable, and such effects cannot be imagined from a purely normative analysis of the conditions in which inequality between individuals originates.

[26] G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, cit., p. 266.

[27] The *New Digital Economy* renders entire productive sectors useless, allowing us to access any type of service over the internet. We can plan a trip in China with Opodo, buy the travel guide on Amazon, manage our account with online banking, shop online, download videos and music etc. For each of

Second, members of the populace are characterized by having lost the moral qualities that, according to Hegel, should be possessed by members of civil society (honor, professional dignity, etc.) and, more generally, by individuals who do not recognize themselves in the institutions of their society (family, market, judicial system, professional associations, police, State). The populace thus experiences a loss of ethical substance, in Hegel's language – and this in a double sense: on the one hand, a relevant group of citizens is lost to public life in the broad sense (e.g., as participants in the market); on the other hand, the individuals who form it lose trust in the institutions and began to assume an attitude of open conflict with the norms that regulate the life of their society. It is not just a matter of respecting the law (although Hegel explains the existence of crime as a reaction of individuals to a lack of institutional recognition of their basic requirements), but also of developing a sense of estrangement from society and its values. The members of the populace do not simply violate the law; they live breaking the ethical and moral norms of their society, without developing an alternative system of values and rules, but limiting themselves to obeying their selfish interests and acting arbitrarily. Now, for Hegel, this phenomenon is necessarily limited to a minority of the population. Hegel is convinced that if we reached the exclusion of a relevant part of the population, society would collapse. In reality, relatively stable societies exist and have existed in the past, despite the social, economic, and political exclusion of a large part of the population, who has lost trust in social and political institutions (Brazil offers an example of this).

Another point that should be highlighted, in this sense, is the fact that phenomena of increasing social exclusion due to structural causes also have negative consequences for individuals or social groups that are not directly affected by them, but who fear (to a greater or lesser extent with reason) that they can be "sucked down" and end up among the excluded. This generates a widespread fear of falling down the social ladder and losing not only their status but also their well-being and economic security, however modest. In other words, the middle class is afraid of impoverishment and reacts by clinging to its achievements and defending them tenaciously not against those who try to take them away from them (the elites that seek to increase their privileges), but against those who try to achieve the same goals from below and seek to improve their situation by becoming middle class. Thus, the distrust syndrome worsens. Finally, it should be noted that gender inequality remains high, despite relevant national differences. This represents perhaps the biggest violation of the principle of equality, considering that it affects half of the people, but I will not address it in this context.

The third value, *fratérnité,* indicates the sense of solidarity that arises from seeing oneself as a member of a political community. It is the value that most interests us in this context, as its existence presupposes relationships of trust among citizens and, in turn, is presupposed by such relationships, in a kind of virtuous circle, in which

these actions, the number of people involved in providing the service is drastically reduced, increasing the number of people who become useless for the production system.

it is impossible to establish what comes before. In the diagnoses we cited so far, the loss of reciprocal trust is attributed to a kind of individualism caused by the prevailing unilateral view of negative freedom and by the increase in economic inequality, which generates social exclusion and fear (more or less justified) of social decline in large sectors of the population, as we saw. However, it may be the case to look for other causes for this phenomenon – systemic causes, but which have relevant effects on the psychology of members of society.

In *Philosophy of Right,* Hegel interposes the sphere of civil society between those of family and State. In this sphere, which for Hegel represents a momentary loss of ethical substance, subjects see themselves as isolated individuals, defined by their needs, and see others as mere instruments for satisfying such needs. In Hegel, civil society comprises, in addition to the market, also the institutions that, in the liberal tradition, make up the State, that is, police, courts, and professional associations. In Hegel's view, liberals consider the State as a mere instrument for the realization of individual ends and as the guarantor of rights linked to the satisfaction of selfish interests and needs; but the State has its own interests and purposes. Individuals ought to learn to see themselves as part of a wider community and to interpret their actions in the economic sphere of civil society in light of their role as citizens. The other individuals, then, cease to be mere instruments and appear as fellow citizens in the strong sense, that is, bearers of common interests and needs. From this arises that form of solidarity which Hegel calls patriotism and which has nothing to do with the kind of patriotism that will triumph in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. The lack of patriotism is, then, a consequence of an imperfect vision of the community that reduces it to its strictly economic dimension and, above all, sees in it only a multitude of atomized individuals. The prevailing liberal conception of the State has certainly undermined the idea of the State as a unity of citizens established over and above their personal interests. But it is not just an ideological problem linked to a certain vision of the State: the institutions of the liberal rule of law contain within them the germ of the fragmentation and disintegration of political unity into a purely fictitious unity, of the transformation of the "Great Mother" of the French Revolution into the set of selfish individuals of Hayek's Great Society. As pointed out by Krastev, the history of liberal democracy itself contains the germs of the disease that is affecting it, that is, of that syndrome of distrust that arises from the loss of the sense of belonging to a political community capable of motivating its members to sacrifice their selfishness in the name of common interest. Generalized trust ends up being selectively given to those institutions capable of effectively assisting citizens in the realization of their interests and being withdrawn from institutions that seem to represent an obstacle in this regard (e.g., the tax system). Intolerance for everything that entails the sacrifice of personal interests in the name of the common good is increasing. When the phenomena described by Sztompka (opacity of institutions, normative uncertainty, lack of accountability, corruption, etc.) are added to this, the distrust syndrome is the inevitable result.

However, there is room for moderate optimism. Despite the fears of sociologists and political scientists from Durkheim to the present, many societies evidently manage to survive despite the distrust syndrome prevailing in them. I dare say that it is not true that trust is the binding element of society; it is, rather, an essential element for a "good" society, in which it is possible to arrive at a shared social ethics and community can flourish as a whole. In other words, the distrust syndrome threatens not the stability of society but the well-being of its members. This may be a meager comfort, but it leads us to consider again the Hegelian solution, that is, that of a political philosophy that tries to show individuals that the State does not represent an obstacle to their happiness, but is its condition when they take hold of it through active political participation. If this seemed very difficult in Hegel's time, because of the triumph of Restoration, today it seems almost impossible because of the triumph of the liberal and neoliberal worldview. However, as it has already been said, it is impossible not to notice symptoms of dissatisfaction, just as in Hegel's time it was impossible not to hear the voices of those who rebelled against the atmosphere of oppression created by the policies of the governments that formed the so-called Holy Alliance. For now, this dissatisfaction is taking dangerous paths, which could even lead to the final crisis of democracy. However, distrust of so-called official truths (e.g., of neoclassical economics or of the idea of free market as a panacea) is the first step in changing reality. Whether this change will be for the worse or for the better depends, at least in part, on us intellectuals as well.