

Bobbio: the role of intellectuals and the political discourse in modern democracies

Arnaldo M. A. Gonçalves PhD (Catholic University of Portugal)

Abstract

Noberto Bobbio, the Italian Political Philosopher has devoted several of his most relevant essays of political theory to the role of rhetoric within political discourse. In those texts he has tried to compose a political theory with a much focused philosophical component that he intends to oppose to a global theory of law. Bobbio saw the "Theory of Politics" as an equivalent to Political Philosophy and comprehending the four following disciplinary fields: a) the ideal Republic or a utopian society in the sense that is structured on Plato and on Marx; b) the question of legitimacy in the context of modern politics; c) politics as a sort of human activity independent from others; d) the epistemological dimension of political discourse.

For the Italian philosopher only Political Philosophy can fulfil the role of securing a methodological and rhetorical supervision of the political discourse as it responds positively to three requisites: a) it is validated by the praxis of politics; b) pursues the objective to elucidate the facts; c) it is orientated by an ethical vision that has its own values.

In Bobbio's discussion of the role of political discourse in modern politics when the discourse is more scientific, it becomes a theory of persuasion and modelling of the others' views. When politics is taken as an art it becomes a poetic rhetoric, the art of fine speech. Bobbio asserts a universal dimension to this dual distinction in political rhetoric and defines "regulatory discourse" the poetic and artistic dimension of politics and "descriptive discourse" the one that is considered by him as scientific, as it looks to reflect the practice of political interaction.

Bobbio's distinction is still relevant and frames one of the more challenging problems in modern politics namely in democratic regimes: the superficiality of the political discourse, its vacuity, the untruthfulness of the political actors, the gap between the political programs and the electoral promises and the reality of day-to-day politics.

1. Introduction

We may perceive rhetoric as the study of effective speaking and writing and an efficient tool of persuasion. Throughout history, rhetoric has enjoyed many definitions and changed according to the contexts. As rhetoric examines what is being said, and how it is said, it deals with language and the methods and means of communication. For many authors and philosophers rhetoric was considered superficial or deceptive, a method of communication concerned mostly with the appearances and style and little to do with the quality or the content of communication. Plato defined it "the art of winning souls by discourse"; Aristotle articulated it as "the faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion"; in the same direction Cicero called it a "speech designed to persuade". Several hundred years later John Locke portrayed it as "that powerful instrument of error and deceit".

If we consider philosophy more a question of argumentation than doctrine, rhetoric is the field of fine argumentation. Rhetoric considered as art was an important area of study in Middle-Age universities and has returned to the public

with the suggestion that every speech and argumentation has political and persuasive contents¹. So it should be far from wonder to acknowledge that rhetoric has become instrumental in contemporary political discourse and a nuclear topic of discussion between political scientists, linguists, sociologists and experts of marketing and communication. Therefore, political communication is directly related to the exercise of power. By “political communication” I mean - following Richard Huggins definition - “the intended explicit communication of messages with a political content between members of the political system”². Political communication is insofar connected to issues of representation and the way ideas, identities and relationships between political actors, are represented in language, images, sounds and symbols. For Dyer, representation is of decisive importance influencing, partly how we treat and are treated by others and are also critical issues of politics and power³.

There are some trends that characterise political communication and the role of the media in modern societies⁴. The first is the proliferation of media and telecommunication technologies which includes newspapers, television, radio, film, the Internet, broadcasters and web pages. Second there is a growing penetration of political communications exteriorized by governments, political parties, non-governmental organizations, lobby groups and other political actors⁵ through the media, communications and advertising techniques and specialists. Third, media production, the property of media groups and the interaction between national broadcasters and the global media industry have become intense and more connected.

The impact of these trends has had a deep outcome on the nature and extent of political communication. There has been an increased visibility of media channels used by political actors, away from the array of formal and controllable messaging to a combination of messages and communication techniques and strategies that are non-distinguishable from those used in commercial products and commodities. Politicians are expected to behave like media personalities and adopt readily the techniques of media marketing such as Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* which runs his party like a football supporter's club.

This is the reason why many argue that mass media has taken the place of political parties in organizing, motivating and gathering political participation, opening

¹ Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 386.

² Richard Huggins, “Political Communication and the Media” in Barry Axford, Gary K. Browning, Richard Huggins and Ben Rosamond, *An Introduction to Politics*, Second Edition, London, New York, Routledge, 2002, pp. 409 and 566.

³ Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation*, London, Routledge, 1993. See also S. Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Oxford University Press, London, 1997.

⁴ Huggins, “Political Communication”, *ibid*, p. 411.

⁵ By political actors I intend those who have a political message to communicate and include governments, political parties and interest groups. These “actors” use media to exert pressure, influence public opinion, and fight back their opponents rather than inform the public of their needs.

direct routes of communication between political leaders and the citizens, encouraging populism and artificiality. Governments use mass media to advertise and sell their policies rather than struggle for them. Political parties communicate aiming to win and retain power, or influence decision-making and public opinion through political campaigns, namely electoral campaigns. Social groups and interest groups pursue the same objective but usually with particular focus on special issues.

When political actors have a message to communicate, it is through the media that these messages are conveyed and television, newspapers, radio and the Internet provide the preferable channels for the distribution of political messages. So the importance of professional communications specialists such as marketing specialists, advertising specialists and public relations experts has risen substantially, over the last decades⁶. Insofar political communication and campaign tactics have increasingly become long-term and quasi-permanent in which the party and the politician (normally the leader) is permanently promoted. Political communications are intensively managed having a high “sound-bite” orientation and dependent on media-friendly images and symbols⁷.

Although many social scientists and commentators agree that media has a crucial importance in modern democracies, and help to form what is normally identified as “public sphere”⁸, some point out that the media is underpinning the quality and functioning of democracy. The media is supposed to have a central role in informing the public and pursuing the truth independently of every political, economic or governmental interest, but the idea of a scrupulous media has been ruined by news of scandals, political manipulation and cronyism. So we may conclude that the complex relationship between media, politics and democracy is experiencing some sort of crisis and the rose-pink expectations of the “marketration”⁹ of political messages have been unsuccessful, in the end.

For Blumler and Gurevitch excessive media coverage (tabloidism) and the way such coverage is constructed, dilutes and corrupts the process and operation of democracy by trivializing or ignoring the real issues and presenting irrelevant criteria for the public to be informed¹⁰. By trivializing and mocking the political message and the political targets the large media newscasters created a intuitive suspicion in the truthfulness of the news, the professionalism of the reporters and the coverage of political events. To the public they are seen as expedients to

⁶ Margaret Scammel, *Designer Politics: How Elections are Won*, London, Macmillan, 1995.

⁷ Political campaigns of Berlusconi in Italy, Blair in UK and Chavez in Nicaragua are fine examples of these advertising processes. Still Huggins, “Political Communication”, *ibid*, p. 433.

⁸ A space in which debate, discussion and reflection take place, free from political and state interference, and in which public opinion can form. See Barry Axford, *et al.*, *An Introduction to Politics*, *ibid*, p. 567.

⁹ Another name for Integrated Marketing Services, an area of business looking to unite the needs of retailers, brands and other clients to drive the greatest sales impact and deliver long lasting impressions through consumers and audiences.

¹⁰ Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, *The Crisis of Public Communication*, London, Routledge, 1995.

bulldoze the prestige and name of some politicians and praise others.

Subsequently there was a return to a systematic analysis and interpretation of events and attitudes of political actors by commentators, social scientists and pundits in TV channels. This reality has been comprehended as the homecoming of intellectuals to the public sphere, not only in the opinion pages of major newspapers but also in TV channels, radio stations and social networks such as Facebook.

Norberto Bobbio's analysis of the *broken promises of democracy* - where power remains hidden and unaccountable; citizens are often non-educated; technicians (experts) often rule in what should be the political dominion; bureaucracy is beyond the reach of public accountability - leads him to raise against a perfectionist view of democracy, coming usually from the left and defends that conventional democratic arrangements are enough to ensure practical democratic justice. Bobbio claims that democracy is about competition not only among challenging groups in society but between citizens and organized powers, whether public or private. Bobbio's vision is the responsibility of intellectuals to challenge secretive and hidden practices that weaken the role of the public (the people) in public affairs that deteriorates democracy.

In a sense, Bobbio's discussion of the role of the political discourse and the task of the democracy's most reliable raconteurs - the intellectuals - transport us to an era where the opinions of erudites and philosophers were not only listened to and respected but were also followed by political leaders and rulers. His argumentation needs to be understood within the frontiers of a fully democratic system. A fully democratic system is according to David Held, a system that meets five criteria: a) effective participation of the citizens; b) enlightened understanding of the choices existing in the public sphere; c) voting equality at the decisive stage; d) control of the agenda; e) inclusiveness of the people in the polity¹¹. If citizens are unable to enjoy conditions of "effective participation" and "enlightened understanding" it is likely that large categories of citizens will persist being divorced of political participation. In the absence of these conditions, citizens will not have the discursive means or the participatory channels to pursue collective decision-making effectively¹².

2. Bobbio's eulogy of democracy and the role of the Men of Culture

In Bobbio's most famous book - *The Future of Democracy* - the Italian philosopher and jurist speaks about the regime where power is visible (transparent) and about its association with Athena's model of democracy. Democracy brings to our spirit - he invokes - the image memorized by all political philosophers that review themselves through the noble model of Pericles' Athena, the model of the Agora

¹¹ David Held, *Models of Democracy*, Third Edition, Cambridge, Malden, Polity Press, 2006, pp. 270-271.

¹² Ibid, p. 272.

and the Ecclesia. A political paradigm of all citizens (of the city) gathering in a public square to present and listen to proposals, to denounce abuses and formulate accusations and make a decision – after listening to the arguments pro and against those proposals - by raising one hand or the use of pieces of sea-shells as votes. When the people got together, the herald cursed those who would attempt to deceive the people in order that the demagogues would not abuse their oratorical skills. The herald also alerted that the assembly was always under the protection of God's sight¹³.

Bobbio acknowledges that it is not without reason that this type of assembly was compared to a theatre or a stadium, i.e. a public show where the audience assisted to a scenic performance that was performed according to pre-established rules and where the outcome was a judgement. Going back to Plato, Bobbio quotes one passage from the book "*The Laws*" where Plato complains that through the action of the poets, dragged by "the enthusiasm of Baco' devotees", a deplorable bewilderment amongst all the musical categories took place, contaminating the populace with a slackness on the laws of music. Therefore, still quoting Plato, "the public in the theatre instead of being silent became talkative as it seemed to understand what was beautiful and non beautiful in art"; that led to "a miserable technocracy instead of an aristocracy in the discipline of music". Plato – Bobbio's notes – as an anti-democratic author - considered the popular government the government of the public in a theatrical performance, and that system of government being the site where profligacy and wastefulness presides. Elaborating on Plato's judgment, Bobbio says that the democratic government persists, more intensely in moments of effervescence and anticipation of a new order, as the ideal model for popular government and government in public¹⁴.

In the *Autobiography* of 1997, based on a series of interviews given by the Italian journalist, Alberto Papuzzi, Bobbio recalls that within the clandestine Committee of National Liberation, a front of intellectuals was formed with the initiative of the Italian Communist Party leading to the founding of a teachers association, the *School Committee*. Bobbio was the representative, in both entities, of the *Partito d'Azione* (PdA) a liberal socialist party formed during the Resistance (1942) and dissolved in 1946 after being defeated in the Italian legislative elections. Bobbio recalls his first article published in 1942 (*Chiarimento*) where he defended that the intellectuals should avoid two types of negative attitudes: the ultra-politicization, i.e. the commitment to politics for personal gains, and the apoliticality, i.e. the indifference to politics¹⁵. Bobbio notes that in the 1940's he defended an ethical

¹³ Norberto Bobbio, "Democracy and the Invisible Power" text included in Bobbio's *The Future of Democracy*, Lisbon, Publicações Dom Quixote, 1988, p. 111. Original edition by Giulio Einaudi editor, Torino, 1984.

¹⁴ There is here a game of words "public government and government in public". "Bobbio, "The Future of Democracy", *ibid*, p. 113.

¹⁵ Norberto Bobbio, *Autobiografia*, Lisbon. Editora Bizâncio, 1999, pp. 69-70. Original edition by Gius, Laterza & Figli Spa, Rome, 1997.

conception of democracy and in his last course of *Philosophy of Law* lecturing in the University of Padua (before the Liberation) he argued that the democratic state is the only one that can preserve the liberty of conscience, i.e. the coexistence of free human beings. That state is the best accomplishment in the history of a “communion” of individuals and the achievement of the ideal of Justice.

Bobbio mentions the creation of the European Society of Culture (*Società Europea di Cultura*), the initiative of the Italian philosopher, Umberto Campagnolo (1904-1976), founded in Venice in 1950. He notes that the objective of the Society was to guarantee a line of dialogue between the “men of culture”, radicalized by the political struggle that was taking place in Europe during the Cold War that led to the political division of Europe “into two camps mortally opposed”¹⁶. The “Società” facilitated the contacts amongst intellectuals from both sides of the Wall (Berlin Wall). The representatives of the West were mostly leftists (the French *intelligenza* represented by Sartre, Benda and Merleau-Ponty) and authors such as Benedetto Croce, Thomas Mann, Henri Matisse or François Mauriac. The East side was represented by intellectuals appointed by the communist parties in power in Eastern Europe. The Western intellectuals “defended a posture of ‘engagement’ in the intellectual dialogue”. The author emphasizes, that “we opposed the politics of the politicians that we labelled ‘vulgar politics’ and proposed a ‘politics of culture’, i.e., “the specific politics of the intellectuals above all political divisions”. A compromise was assumed between the Men of Culture “not to debate issues of contingent politics”¹⁷:

The Europe of Culture doesn’t recognize the Iron Wall which was a political division and only political. Our Europe was not the East opposed to the West. To the Europe of Culture belonged by right Voltaire and Pushkin, Flaubert and Dostoyevsky, Gide and Kafka. This Europe was rescued and survived after a bloody war that lasted six years, by virtue of Europe’s fine intellectuals such as Julian Benda, Benedetti Croce and Thomas Mann..

In the essay “Invito al colloquio” published in the revue *Comprendre* (of the Società) in 1951, Bobbio is even more accurate in his categorization of intellectuals as men of culture and definitively not men of party¹⁸:

The task of the men of culture today is more to spread doubts than to recognize convictions. Of convictions - covered by the luxurious skin of myth or built according to the hard stone of dogma - are the essays of pseudo-culture of the improvisers, the dilettantes and the propagandists *engagés*. Culture means moderation, weighing, and circumspection. Culture means measuring every

¹⁶ Norberto Bobbio, *Autobiografia*, pp. 92-93.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Bobbio takes position in the ideological struggle that occurred in the intellectual scene in Europe between those who defended a politicized culture that followed directives, programs and instructions coming from the parties and political leaders and a neutral culture separated from society and the problems existing in the citizenry.

argument before explaining it, to confirm every testimony before deciding, and to never make up his own mind on the way as the oracle – from whom a definitive and peremptory option depended.

Bobbio returns to this theoretical debate in his book *Il dubbio e la scelta. Intelletuali e potere nella società contemporanea* (Intellectuals and Power), published in 1996¹⁹. He argues that referring to intellectuals, as a coherent group is misleading. Intellectuals are the individuals that in other times were named wise-men, scholars, philosophers, writers, and in the religious societies priests and clerics. With different names, intellectuals have always existed; aside from the political and economic powers there was always the ideological power. This last power is not directed to institutions like the political, military or economic powers, but “to the minds of the people through the production of ideas, symbols, world visions, practical teachings and through the use of the word”. The ideological power depends forcefully in the nature of man as “the animal who speaks”, explains the Italian author²⁰.

Bobbio remarks that in every society exists those who control the ideological power, and which their roles vary from society to society, from epoch to epoch. The same tendency of change is identifiable in their attitude, sometimes of support, sometimes of opposition, to the other society powers²¹. In modern and pluralistic societies “the ideological power is fractioned and explodes in every direction. In this kind of society the role of intellectuals never ends and their announced death is unlikely”. In pluralist societies there are more intellectuals as more diverse are the tools that they use to project their power, by discourse but even more so by image. A time where space concedes to intellectuals is larger and larger. Bobbio introduces here an elegant distinction between the “ideological intellectuals” and the intellectuals that are “experts” or “technicians of the human knowledge”. Being even bigger in number, Bobbio says that it is the reason why “those who detain the political or the economic power cannot ignore them”²².

Bobbio introduces a second distinction in the discourse of the intellectuals between the plan of “being” and the plan of “ought to be”, that is between the descriptive and the normative analysis of facts. The Italian author observes that the passage from a descriptive to a normative dimension of discourse, occurs often involuntarily and is recurrent the suggestion that intellectuals don’t fulfil their duty as they should, according to the ideal paradigm every individual has in his head. Bobbio recalls the dissimilarity introduced by Jean-Paul Sartre between the “true” and the “false” intellectual; the first being the “revolutionary” and the

¹⁹ I use the Portuguese version “Os Intelectuais e o Poder”, published in Brazil (1996) by Fundação Editora da UNESP (FEU).

²⁰ All quoted from the Introduction to “Intellectuals and Power”, *ibid*, p. 9.

²¹ Bobbio, *Intellectuals and Power*, *ibid*, p. 12.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 13.

second being the “false” - the intellectual that “would not engage in the political struggle and remains closed in his ivory tower”. Criticizing Sartre, the Italian philosopher clarifies that the utopian intellectual that looked to change the world to his image, fell in disgrace and that the intellectual with his feet firmly on the ground became more reliable as someone to advise the politician to take one step at a time²³.

Bobbio affirms that between intellectuals and politicians exists a gap difficult to fill and is only possible to bridge in hard times. That is to say that the politics of culture and the politics of the politicians are different spheres that need to be kept completely separated:

Even if it is recognizable that the man of culture creates politics, he does it in the long run. The history of ideas and the history of praxis follow parallel tracks that seldom meet together.

This is the reason why the intellectual should have a special mode of conduct concerning the battles of his time:

If I have to elect an ideal model of conduct I should say that the attitude of the intellectual should be defined by a strong determination to participate in the political and social struggles of his time but not to a point that he becomes alienated, incapable of feeling what Hegel called “the soaring clamour of the history of the world”. A person that assumes a critical distance to reality that prevents him from becoming a member of faction or subordinate to a watchword²⁴.

Some years later, (1966), Bobbio participated in the congress of unification of the socialist movement. He made a speech on behalf of the *ex-accionists*, i.e. the founders of the *Partito d’Azione*, where he paraphrased the role of the intellectuals saying that they have a natural tendency to take position for their own sake²⁵. Normally the intellectual is considered – Bobbio declared – the individual that personalizes, or should personalize, the critical mind that is not satisfied with himself nor with any whole and pre-existent doctrine. The intellectual is, Bobbio continued, the individual that sows doubts, the non-believer by vocation, the impatient with every discipline and the peerless militant of dissent. Bobbio acknowledged that in recent years many intellectuals fulfilled that task with perfection and as members of parties “they were more out than in, they entered and left, being more at ease in small groups”. Those parties were:

more fictional than concrete parties which intellectuals formed and dissolved at their leisure, a little more positioned to the right rather to the left, a little more to the left rather than to the right, in a nervous search of a position that had nothing

²³ Ibidem, p. 14.

²⁴ Bobbio, *Intellectuals and Power*, *ibid*, p. 79.

²⁵ Norberto Bobbio, *Autobiografia*, p. 163.

to do with the groups in power, but to a roulette ball that jumps and jumps over the table to run away from the excessively banal fortune of immobilizing itself in the red or black zone of the roulette.

Denoting an independence of judgment that will lead him out of the Socialist party, Bobbio reproduced in his *Autobiography* a letter sent to Bettino Craxi, the then secretary-general of ISP, attacking the pamphleteer and crispy style used by the party journal to the communists²⁶:

As you know I was never a communist but now with the fall of the historical communism it would be the proper occasion for a unitary initiative. The tiny party diatribe seems to me to be absolutely sterile. I am not a politician, *I am just an observer. I don't formulate precisely an opinion and I don't make proposals. I just leave one impression*²⁷. I tell you these things because I suffer seeing the left divided, confused and stampeded and the Christian Democrats always in the blink of division and rightly united in the necessary moment saying arrogantly "I am the State".

In the legislative elections that were held on the 5th of April 1992, the Socialist Party suffered a heavy defeat. A new political phenomenon emerged in Italy, after the disbanding of the Christian-Democrats following a huge criminal investigation that targeted important figures of this party. The party was dismembered and from its ashes a new party appeared- *La Forza Italia* - chaired by a media tycoon and president of a famous Italian football club, A.C. Milan. This man, Silvio Berlusconi, slipped through Italian politics using a bunch of tactics inspired by the advertising and marketing business. Berlusconi was the image, the program, and the gear of the party embodying a charismatic style of leadership that recalled that of Benito Mussolini. Berlusconi won several legislative elections and was Italian Prime-Minister from 1994 to 1995, from 2001 to 2006 and from 2008 to 2011. Norberto Bobbio nourished a surprising antipathy to the Italian politician and directed some of his deadly articles, in the press, towards Berlusconi's attitude and political discourse.

From the aforementioned excerpts, it is evident that Bobbio constructed most of his arguments on the role of intellectuals, in modern democracy, departing from a classical and Ciceroian perspective that foresaw intellectuals as counsellors of a sort - advisers to the paramount political leaders. An intellectual such as Nicola Machiavelli tried to be in a relation with Prince Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici. As advisers, intellectuals possess an ethical superiority that would prevent them from putting "their hands in the mud", i.e. being forced to take a side, to be heard. The praising of the militant position of intellectuals has become odd in modern politics and basically restricted to radical fringes of the left. Party leaders now recruit

²⁶ Norberto Bobbio, *Autobiografia*, p. 191.

²⁷ Italics not in the original text.

independent advisers not to say to them what the party bureaucracy wants but more what the public, the common citizen, thinks and expects from the politicians. The problem is to know how trustworthy these counselors are and how objective their opinions are.

3. Bobbio and the *Leviathan* politics

Bobbio directed his attacks to Berlusconi in two articles published in the journal *La Stampa*. In an article entitled *Separazione come arte liberale* ("Separation as liberal art", 10 February, 1994), Bobbio explained that within democratic states there never existed a tendency for amalgamation of the gigantic economic and culture powers with the political power - throughout the powerful instrument of television - similar to the one that was taking place by the ascent of Berlusconi, in Italian domestic politics. A president of a government that proclaimed himself to be the "quintessence of the liberal state". The philosopher evoked the intimate connection that exists between the democratic state and the system of rule of law, a connection that he found Berlusconi did not take into consideration by declaring "the majority should take it all". Returning to the customary subject of the "tyranny of the majority", Bobbio alleged that the democratic state is only the best or the lesser evil of the forms of government when its action takes place within the boundaries of the rule of law, being thus last perceived "as the government of laws opposed to the government of men"²⁸.

In a second article (*Il Partito Fantasma*) ("The Phantom Party", 3 July, 1994) the philosopher asks "if the political movement headed by Berlusconi is not a Party, then what is it?"²⁹. In a reply he stated "it is hard to understand what is a party, so it is much more difficult, even impossible, to understand what is a non-party". Berlusconi replied to Bobbio in the pages of *La Stampa* (*Che cosa è Forza Italia?* ("What is Forza Italia", 5 July, 1994). Bobbio counter-attacked in *Il diritto di fare domande* ("The right to formulate questions", 9 July, 1994) where he criticized strongly the lack of transparency in *Forza Italia*, a political party that had no statute or program publicized in the press and presented itself in the elections, without having them. Bobbio inquired: what regulations govern *Forza Italia*?; what is the distribution of work and the competences of the internal organs?; who funds *Forza Italia*?; how large are Berlusconi prerogatives as leader of the party?; how long is his mandate? Is it to be a short-term leadership or like in North-Korea, eternal?³⁰

In consequence of this crisped dispute, Bobbio queries the limits of the influence of the political commentator and intellectual³¹:

²⁸ Norberto Bobbio, *Autobiografia*, p. 192

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 193.

³¹ Ibidem.

Although I always wrote comments in the press, throughout the years I am convinced, even more convinced than ever that the opinion-maker doesn't have the influence that he believes he has. Those who do politics are the professional politicians and not the journalists or the intellectuals. Concerning the political fight the intellectual has no concrete influence. Are right those who consider the intellectual as the town idiot happy that do everything by sport. We cannot do anything. This applies to me and to others.

In the last part of his *Autobiography*, Bobbio contemplates the eternal questions of ethics and morality, life and death and good and evil. He recalls the texts reunited in *Elogio della Mitteza e altri scritti morali* (Eulogy of mildness and other moral writings) where he figures himself as a *mild person*, a non-violent person, refusing to be violent to anyone. He categorizes mildness as "a non-political virtue and in a world injured by the abhorrence of the powerful, big and small, the antithesis of politics"³². Querying himself about the destiny of democracy he acknowledged that democracy won "but that victory was not definitive". In a laic, liberal and realist vision of history nothing is definitive, he ruled. Human history is not even ended, it is basically starting. Man has obligations as a person with dignity, apart from the circumstances of his time and his place, primarily the rights of life, liberty and equality. He has duties in relation to others and the community when man is the repository of fundamental rights. These were Bobbio's very impassioned remarks.

Bobbio concluded with a somewhat nostalgic insight into his past³³:

In the enlightened despotism of nowadays the figure of the man, obsequious but happy, substitutes the Greek and Christian traditions of the non peaceful man, but one that is free. What kind of acquaintanceship will prevail in the future we don't know. We need to understand that our moral feelings advance, admitting that this happened, more slowly than the economic, political and technological advances. Every proclamation of rights belong to the ideal world, to the world 'that should be', the world that would be marvelous if it were to happen. But if we look around us, we may see our streets covered with blood, bodies abandoned, populations expelled from their homes, famine and misery. It is comforting and perhaps stimulating by analogy with the very perfected instruments to recognize a great invention of our civilization called human rights. Compared to the technical inventions they are more talked about than actually achieved. The ethos of human rights only flashes in the solemn international declarations and congresses that celebrate them.

4. Final remarks

³² Norberto Bobbio, *Autobiografia*, p. 228.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 229.

There is a shadow of classicism and grandeur, proper of an Italian author, in the way Bobbio perceives the political game and his players. It seems to me that Bobbio is every so often melancholic about a time in Italian history that intellectuals receive a call of time to make the difference from the absurd reign of Mussolini' fascism. Probably in his eulogy of great spirits of the Italian New Renaissance, Bobbio has not comprehended that the time of the great men and the mammoth politicians has finished. People were too anxious for quick results from government to not believe in the swan mantra of snaky politicians like Berlusconi. Probably this is the reason why the Italian electorate elected three times the *Cavalieri* as the man they wanted to be president of the Italian government. No one from the left had the prestige and the charisma to oppose him. Doubtless the public feels that the man is a charlatan and the "king of pumba-pumba" but he says and promises what they want to hear.

This led us to the problem of populism and demagoguery as an innermost characteristic of contemporary democracies. When constitutionalists and free-thinkers spread the virtuosity of democracy as the government of the people, by the people and to the people they never suppose that this "dream" would be usurped by those stylish minds that would maneuver the feelings of the people for personal and faction gain. As the system stands in the formula "one man, one vote" the vote of the stupid and dumb have the same weight of the vote of the intellectuals and clerics. There is no going back from this spot. To return to our starting point, political actors don't use so much the direct mode of communication to enlighten the public about their policies. They use intermediate means, basically broadcasters, journalists, communications "experts", advisers and marketers to do the job for them. They are paid to take the messages to the receptors, bring the reaction to the source and measure the impact. This is, incurably, the process of modern political communication.

If rhetoric is a means to inform the public, the written message is less important nowadays than was before, as people are less available to think and elaborate on what is transmitted to them. The public wants short messages, strong-bites, and images. The power of the television and the Internet is appalling and makes the traditional procedures of communication like the erudite speeches and scholarly people seem like black-and-white photos in a world of 3D movies.