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# The Realism of Impossibility: Crisis and chances of democracy in an age of globalization

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## End of Democracy?

Speaking of crisis of democracy is not anything new, from Tocqueville to the Trilateral commission; the contemporary situation presents many reasons to still discuss it. In her last book, *Can Democracy be Saved?* (Della Porta 2013) points to an apparent paradox. More and more countries declare themselves as being 'democratic', whilst democracy as such seems to be losing credibility. Surely, if by democracy one means not solely a means of choosing a leadership but, in the wake of Jean Jacques Rousseau, that political arrangement that permitted its members to consider themselves 'autonomous' then it is hard to match this view with the reality we experience on a daily basis. And in fact the decline in civic and political commitment has been widely analysed and discussed in the past decades, even more: talking of the obsolescence of politics has been a kind of liturgical affirmation.

Yet, these pages are not going to reflect once more on such themes such as the end of politics, the decline of public man etc. First of all because many experts have done this more masterfully than the author can ever aspire to; and also because today many signals seem to point to a very different direction. In fact, political agency is not dying: it is resurfacing under different features. All over the world, from the Middle East to the US, to Europe (in spite of all the diversity that surely should

* Revised version of the lecture delivered at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 19 August 2013.

not be forgotten), a new scenario is emerging and many signs point towards a revived desire for political involvement and participation. However, the context is mutable and contradictory: to unravel its ambiguous morphology it is necessary to avoid both the infatuation for novelty as well as a fearful nostalgia for the good old times and to keep a clear focus on the tasks that face democratic politics today, which now stand facing tasks as urgent as life, death and survival of the whole of humanity. This paper is motivated by the observation of recent events in many Western democracies; it may therefore be influenced by a Western perspective or by an even narrower focus, European and Italian. Bearing in mind these possible biases, the author will still try to look beyond the boundaries of her own context, and will often refer to some key aspects of the Arab springs. Though not a political scientist, the objective is not to attempt an analysis that may claim to do justice to reality. As a social philosopher the author wishes to react and reflect on just the phenomenology of our present condition, in the belief that social and political theory cannot be separated from what is concretely happening around us and the signals suggest a contradictory scenario.

The point that would be to discussed here is not the end of politics, rather, its profound transformation and crisis, and in fact the very word 'crisis' originates from the Greek verb *krino* that means 'judging'. Thus, a crisis is a moment of judgement, not necessarily a death sentence. In fact it will be argued that adopting a verdict of 'death of politics' may lead to overlooking the complexity of our time. The thesis that being presented here is firstly, that we are going through a crisis of the spaces of democracy as it emerged in modernity, and that this crisis has been caused by challenges of unprecedented magnitudes, commonly associated with the processes of 'globalization'.

Secondly, the thesis will be that the crisis in *one* particular model of democratic politics does not necessarily mean the end of democracy. Representative democracy as we have learned to know it, is now confronted by challenges of unprecedented magnitude; but the future of democracy is still open. First of all, the survival of democratic politics needs a new configuration of political institutional spaces, that may go beyond the experience of the national territorial States that were the

protagonists of modernity. Last but not the least, it will be argued that far from being obsolete, democratic politics has never been so necessary.

*There are more things in heaven and earth*

Della Porta, whilst asking such a radical question regarding the future of democracy, is ready to explain that what is meant by crisis of democracy is a widespread feeling that the traditional channels of representation do not function anymore (Della Porta 2013), if ever they did. In fact, a legitimacy crisis of democratic representation seems to be the dominating feature of the last few years, at least in the western world. Undoubtedly these recent decades have marked the crisis of one model of political agency, and more specifically of democratic political agency, which originated within the framework of the Modern State, and of its structure of democratic representation. The question before us is whether this crisis of representative democracies on the basis of national territorial States must automatically coincide with a crisis of democracy, or of politics *tout court*.

For a long time we have been thinking and writing about the decline of politics, which has been described as 'the fall of public man', or the victory of *homo oeconomicus* over the *civis*; for many years sociological literature has been elaborating diagnosis of the triumph of individualism and apathy. The signals from the very last few years are not totally in line with these diagnosis: they point on the contrary to some kind of revival of political agency which is now happening, in profoundly different forms and shapes all over the world, from the Middle East to Europe. The examples are many and diverse. The long and controversial itinerary of the so-called Arab springs (many observers point out to the failure of some of these processes of transformations), occupy Wall Street, and the many forms of protest movements that sprang all over Europe, following the incredible success of the pamphlet *Indignez vous* (Hessel 2010)—from the *Indignados* in Spain to the *Piraten* in Germany to the vibrant protests in Greece.

It would be obviously wrong to throw together without differentiating such diverse phenomena. As mentioned earlier, this paper

has no ambition to provide any kind of 'scientific' assessment of the situation. It simply wishes to capture at least a glimpse of the new forms of political agency and of their meaning for the future of democratic politics. First of all, it is worth mentioning the renewed vibrancy of the call for dignity connected to social justice, in other words, a united claim for redistribution and recognition. In fact many of these movements—the Arab springs, or the *Indignados* and Occupy Wall Street—call for social justice that is strongly connected to the recognition of dignity. The economic crisis has brought back social justice as a primary issue. These movements show a readiness to engage with the challenge of thinking beyond the inevitability of Capitalism and of questioning the belief in the self-regulating capacity markets. In spite of all their *naivetés*, these movements are in themselves a proof of the need for a re-politicization of social conflicts, which are too often formulated in terms of 'technical' issues, calling for solutions to be taken on the basis of 'competence'. Regardless of how short-lived or short-sighted they might have been, a cry such as *We are 99* remains as a powerful call to reconsider the order of priority of our advanced democracies.[1]

These movements call for a profound renewal of democratic political agency, and often they claim to be those who are actually making it happen. Their ideal of democracy aims at being much more than a method for the selection of political leadership; it contemplates first of all the enacting of a genuine 'public sphere' where men and women discuss issues of common concern and, as Habermas would say, convince each other with the strength of arguments. This renewed desire for participation shows some dark sides as well. Often rooted in a bitter mistrust in the traditional political actors (unfortunately not without reason) this claim for more direct protagonism results in a hasty dismissal of the channels of democratic representation and in the transformative capacities of democratic representative institutions.

One of the most unexpected features of this present resurgence of participation and civic engagement is the adoption of means of political

[1] I use this expression to indicate countries with a long experience of democratic politics and with an advanced social-economic system.

expression that seemed to be gone for good. After so many years when scholarly debates have been focusing on the de-territorialization of politics, we seem to be confronted with an unexpected resurgence of the most traditional spaces of politics, in their material dimension. These recent years have been all about streets, squares, parks, being occupied by real people, by thousands and thousands of bodies, as has been evident in Europe and the US and more importantly in many countries south of the Mediterranean. Under this point of view the protest style of the *femens*, a kind of body art revisited, is the ultimate application of this materiality of politics. Yet, typical of this new political ebullience is the mixture of local/physical and virtual/immaterial: the most 'material' action, such as the physical occupation of one specific place becomes amplified and globalized by the use of social media.

Obviously, this specific character inclines towards a spectacularization of politics and definitely constitutes the dark side of these new trends in political agency, together with their trend towards a very ephemeral life. This character does not surprise if seen in conjunction with the emphasis they place in internal direct democracy and by the reluctance to set up formal structures (reference is here especially to the European case). But even more, their inclination to be as bright and short-lived as shooting stars corresponds to the dominating pace of this time of late modernity. Just as economic organizations, political participation is also just-in-time, issue-oriented and focused on the present. Individuals do engage in collective actions; however the focus remains firmly upon individuality. Feminist movements in the 1970s claimed a new style in political practice—the personal is political—where a thorough, often painful analysis of individual's life was necessary for undertaking meaningful collective strategies. Today, the terms of the question are quite different. Collective mobilization is an expression of individuality; the priority is on individual authenticity. Individuals mobilize in collective forms of actions but they lack the political and cultural instruments to re-interpret their individual condition in terms of a common historical narrative that may go beyond the strict boundaries of their personal life (Martuccelli 2010). Socio-political mobilization does not seem to have a temporal scenario that may go beyond the absolute present. As in the suggestive image by Peter Sloterdijk, the traditional 'banks' of rage—political actors moved

by a radical project of transformation—are no longer in function; rage is thus deprived of the possibility of becoming a project (Sloterdijk 2010). Political participation is becoming not solely issue-oriented, but it is the very line separating issues that are private from those which were considered as public. New issues and new themes are taking up political relevance. The space of politics is now occupied by issues that used to belong to an exquisitely private sphere. The vocabulary of politics struggles to accommodate issues deriving from the body and its integrity or manipulation, health, life, death, or sexuality. In other words, we can affirm that bios is actually invading the polis.

*A changing geography: Are we still in the land of modernity?*

This hasty and necessarily superficial analysis of the preceding paragraph may lead us towards a much wider question: what is left of the modern experience of political agency, expressed through the forms of democratic representation? In order to answer this question it is necessary to first of all consider the conditions that helped the development of the forms of democratic representation as we have known it until the present day. Representative democracy means the way to ensure democratic legitimacy together with one specific political arrangement, the modern State, with all its implications. The Sovereignty model typical of the Modern State (based upon the possibility of controlling a territory) as conceptualized in Hobbes's Leviathan provided the basic structure that was later reclaimed by popular sovereignty. The *moi commun* described by Rousseau is a democratic leviathan: Rousseau's collective will—the source of popular sovereignty and of democratic legitimacy—is of course focused upon ensuring autonomy, yet not an inch weaker than the Sovereign or 'mortal God', conceived by Hobbes. One of the most controversial evolutions of political modernity occurs somehow 'after Rousseau': it is a gradual but crucial sliding of the concept of people into the concept of Nation (see for example the reflection of Carl Schmitt). The Modern state thus made it possible for the 'nation'—meant as a pre-political community defined by 'natural' deep-rooted bonds of brotherhood—to overlap with, ultimately to replace the 'people' meant as a community of citizens defined primarily by their political membership. Democratic politics, meant as a way of life and, as we are used to

practice and hopefully would love, cannot be considered as separate from its interaction with the Modern State; correspondingly, the crisis or transformation of political agency cannot be considered as separate from the crisis and transformation of its main institutional reference.

In his lecture *Politics as Vocation* Max Weber defined politics as the struggle for the control of the State, as the State was the body endowed with the monopoly of legitimate violence. This powerful, lucid definition does not seem to capture our reality today. The 'control' of the State does not seem to be anymore the prize that commands the fight. World politics can no longer be explained in terms of the power relationship among States (what used to be defined as international politics). In the end it will discussed the challenges that the processes commonly defined as 'globalization' pose to the modern State. However, it is clarified that this term should not refer solely to economic globalization, although of course global economic and financial flows pose a major challenge to representative democracy. The term globalization should point to a much broader understanding of the crisis of modernity, focused mostly on the emergence of global risks. The basic framework for any reflection on the role of States today cannot be separate from the awareness of the magnitude of the challenges that are now before us. What is at stake today is not solely the limits to growth (with all the problems of sustainability and global justice that it entails) (Bardi 2012), but the survival of the planet as such as the most recent ICCP report has demonstrated beyond reasonable doubts (IPCC 2013).

No need to recall how far the crisis of the Modern State has gone under the impetus of such an enormous process. However the readings of globalization that point to the simple withering away of the nation state do not capture the real complexity of the situation. Today 'how the world goes around' has to be explained and visualized referring to complex and often elusive networks of global governance. Some of these networks may be formally regulated, as in the case of EU, or still largely informal, and therefore oblivious to any form of legitimate coercion, which used to be the chief resource of the State. This does not mean that States are just disappearing, or that borders do not have meaning. Rather, States have to re-negotiate their function, in a

context where their typical feature, territorial sovereignty, and their typical resource, legitimate violence, are becoming less and less relevant (Sassen 2006, Badie 2007).

Some criticism is expected on this point, which may be particularly biased by the European/Western perspective. Fights for a State outside of Europe are a main source of conflict— conversation in these recent days with friends and colleagues is a reminder of that. Moreover it is a well-known fact that the sheer number of States is constantly growing since the end of the Cold War: 34 new States from 1990, most of which (22) are originated by quintessentially European issues and/or tragedies, such as the dissolution of Yugoslavia and Soviet Union. In many contexts—first of all in India itself—the claim for 'statehood' is still capable of mobilizing tremendous forces: however differences must be identified.

The form of statehood whose crisis is just mentioned is that which emerged from the conflicts that shaped modernity. These conflicts revolved around the need to ensure an autonomous space of politics from the claims of transcendence-based beliefs, and resulted in the affirmation of modern sovereignty. In turn, modern sovereignty provided a kind of 'shell' that was then 'filled' by the reference to the 'people' as the source to legitimate authority. That form of State embraced a specific concept of nation that may be defined as inclusive: such a definition may of course be controversial and is definitely in need of an explanation. Nation can be defined as inclusive because it is supposed to embrace other, and more limited, forms of memberships, such as ethnicity, or on religion. A nation as a political myth that in the European experience—all the more so in the American context—provided for an overcoming of differences, especially religious, in the name of a shared political identity. This form of statehood was the nurturing ground for modern theories of popular sovereignty (see Habermas, 2001). Now, it is exactly that form of State—the leviathanic— that is undergoing a profound crisis, as it is no longer capable of exercising a real control; along with this loss of control, the modern State is also losing its capacity to provide a shared identity, and most of all, with the crisis of the modern model of State comes the crisis of democratic agency as it was practiced through its representative structures.

The statehood so much sought after by a variety of actors today is of a different kind than that emerged from modernity; it answers to a different set of needs, and is moved by a drive towards the affirmation of sub-statual identities rather than towards citizenship and inclusion. The process of fragmentation discussed above is not a counter trend of globalization: on the opposite, it is part and parcel of the transformations of modern politics brought about by globalization. In other words, the processes of globalization affect with particular virulence the level of national territorial states, thus causing both a drive towards super national integration as well as towards sub-national fragmentation (Rosenau 2003). Not by chance, the EU is the theatre of both supernational integration and extreme fragmentation; but Europe is not the sole theatre of this crisis. Outside of Europe, in the Middle East as well as in Asia, a profound crisis hit those States that tried to recreate—all differences kept in due consideration—a model of Statehood resting on a political membership determined in terms of Nationhood. The tormented itinerary of the Arab springs is a rich observation ground to understand the complex morphology of the crisis of political modernity in the Middle East. The mobilization of millions of people in the name of liberty and dignity seems to have brought a resurgence of religious integration. Although the spreading of democracy should be considered as a crucial aspect of modernization, in some cases the political changes brought by the Arab Springs have threatened to annihilate the conditions for the reproduction of democracy itself; these democratization processes seem to behave as a self-immune disease, which attacks its own vital cells. This aspect is at the same time typical and idiosyncratic. Typical, as it is yet another signal of the crisis of modernity as we know it. Idiosyncratic as it reflects the historical specificity of that political context, marked by the attempt by the recently ousted élites of implanting only some elements of the European-Western model of State and of political membership (nation, secularization, centralization) without a solid basis of respect for the rules of the democratic game.

All these changes cannot fail to have a profound influence on democratic life and undermine the usefulness of many of our theoretical frameworks. Let's take the Habermasian account on the functioning of democracy, which for so many decades has been the main theoretical reference framework to think about democracy as it was and as it

could have been. According to Habermas, political issues are elaborated in the space of civil society; they are then collected by the antennae of the public sphere and transformed into proper political claims by a set of political actors, to be finally received by the institutional level of politics. In this context, a framework of constitutional rights makes sure that the channels of communications between civil society and the centre of the political system remain open; these channels, most notably, do not function only bottoms-up but also top-down. In a genuine democracy, at some stage civil society has to become 'government', and cannot remain simply at the level of 'counter-power'. On the other hand, in order to prevent politics from becoming oppressive, popular sovereignty is bridled by the self-imposed limits of constitutionalism. This is the incredible creativity of the circle of democratic politics such as it has been lucidly described by Hannah Arendt and by many others. This framework is evidently a major crisis, as it finds itself missing its reference that determined the limit of the political community, namely the national territorial state; the point is if this corresponds to the crisis of democracy itself.

Turning once again to Weber's quote may help us to find answers. The Habermasian framework still considered the State as the centre, and all the rest as periphery. The State in fact was the actor capable of transforming claims and issues into policies and more specifically into rights. Moreover, the State also played another critical function, that of providing—through welfare policies—the material conditions that made the practice of citizenship possible. The contemporary geography of politics suggests a different order that does not assign a central role to the State.

The consequences derived from this crisis are manifold, and have already been somehow anticipated at the end of the previous paragraph. First of all, the relationship between state and civil society is profoundly altered. These last two or three decades have registered a steady increase in the number and relevance of 'civil society' organizations, and of their agency on the super national level.[2] The

[2] On this point, may I refer to my chapter 'Civil Society and the Democratisation of Global Public Space', in D. Armstrong, V. Bello, J. Gilson, D. Spini (eds) *Civil Society and International Governance,* 2010.

question is not so much whether there is enough 'civil society'. At least as far as Western democracies are concerned, it looks as though civil society is definitely on the rise. The problem is rather the connection between civil society and a level of agency specifically political, or in other words, concerned with the possibility of exercising legitimate power. Civil society participates to functions of governance, but as a pressure group, or as a precious advisor in view of achieving more effective results. The EU can be taken as a perfect example. As it is well known, the EU still cannot claim to be grounded on democratic legitimacy; actually, it rests mostly on second-hand legitimacy, and in spite of the many changes brought by the Lisbon treaty, the age old problem of the European democratic deficit still is not solved. Moreover EU policy-making, for its many peculiar features, seems to be particularly prone to the danger of inclining towards a technocracy. However, in the EU, civil society is considered as a major support in good governance; but civil society connects to policy-making bodies in the capacity of a good counsellor, or tries to exercise influence as a pressure group: but surely it is not the source of democratic legitimacy. The case of the EU deserves to be taken into consideration as inclining towards a technocratic mode of functioning which is a common trend in many advanced democracies. The trends towards technocracy do not necessarily imply a total silencing of civil society organizations, which on the contrary, play a very important role in many global governance networks. The point is that this kind of agency is very different from the flow of representation and accountability that, embodied by democratic institutions, was supposed to guarantee individual as well as collective autonomy. The connecting chain between civil society and politics (meant as a space of agency involving power relationships) seems to be clogged, if not altogether interrupted. Representative democracy seems to lose credibility as well as appeal. Civil society actors, at least in Western 'advanced'[3] democracies, appear increasingly reluctant to transforming themselves into genuinely political actors, and less and less interested in the Weberian pursuit of the 'conquest of the State'. The crisis of democratic representation manifests itself also as anti-politics: this term has come to define

[3] With this term I mean contexts with a long democratic history—advanced social and economic systems.

individual and collective actors that engage in political actions with the main purpose of denying the value and the effectiveness of politics—thus producing the paradox of a political action which is oriented against politics as such: anti-politics becomes the channel towards political agency. In many contexts these anti-political political actors are harvesting great successes, from the Five Stars movement in Italy to the AAP (Aam Aadmi Party) in the Delhi area.

This reluctance of civil society to acquire genuine political agency is not caused solely by naiveté, but by a profound feeling of alienation which may be a kind of distorted response to the challenge posed by a widespread crisis of relevance of those very structures—State, politics, government—that civil society actors would be supposed to occupy. The spaces of democratic representation are still anchored to that State dimension that is undergoing such a pressure.

In this context, Urbinati's lesson that representative democracy is not simply a second best as opposed to direct democracy but a value in itself is all the more urgent. Representation in fact is not a substitute for an absent sovereign (the people) on the contrary, the existence of representative institutions keeps, one could say, popular will healthier. In fact, popular sovereignty is no longer conceived in anthropomorphic terms, but as a process, in the wake of Habermas's works; the need to constantly reassess the creation of a common political (popular) will which is the necessary consequence of representative institutions makes it possible to go well beyond a 'yes-no' mode of functioning (Urbinati 2006, p. 227). This plea for the legitimacy and validity of representative democracy provides powerful antidotes against exclusivist and potentially violent conception of political community based upon un-mediated supposed common identity. It constitutes an alternative to those dangerous definitions of 'we', incapable of that genuine dialogue and cooperation with those who are different which is in fact the blood and flesh of democracy in complex societies (Sennett 2012). At the same time, a new awareness of the value of political representation reveals how urgent is the task to define new political spaces that may confer meaning to political agency. These new spaces should draw their legitimacy ex ante as well as ex post: from both a renewed understanding of political community as well as from their

capacity to provide a political response to the challenges of the crisis of modernity.

*Why bother, or are politics still necessary?*

The previous pages have argued that the crisis of that form of democratic politics does not mark the obsolescence of democratic politics as such; nor does the fact that the crisis of the State depends on global risks, or challenges, of unprecedented magnitude. On the contrary, the situation that humanity is living through at present, which may reasonably be described as dancing on the brink of the abyss, makes it all the more necessary to rediscover the value of 'politics', in this case meant as the space of actions that opens up a new course, in the line of thought indicated by Hannah Arendt. The crisis of 'modern' rationality in its mainstream definition is becoming evident. The leviathanic conception of a 0-sum 'security' has resulted in the nuclear nightmare; the belief in the self-regulating capacity of capitalism of transforming self-interest and instrumental rationality into the keys for progress is now under strain, as well as the belief in the myth of 'growth' based exclusively on GDP. The urgency of survival against all kinds of TINA thinking calls for a dramatically renewed 'tool boxes' for political agency. Such tool boxes can be found essentially on two distinct, yet connected levels.

First of all, it is important to consider a new set of institutional tools. The loss of relevance of representative democracy is linked to the loss of relevance of national territorial States. The primary imperative is in fact to attempt to map the geography of power beyond the nation State, as at the moment power is often nameless. Power has to be made visible so that new spaces may open up for a genuine political agency. The modern form of nation state is not only losing relevance, but is also becoming less defendable in view of the very principle that grounded political autonomy. If all those affected by a decision are those entitled to participate in the process of decision-making, in a globalized world becomes quite hard to justify a territorially-defined democratic political community (Frazer 2009). The traditional spaces that ensured citizens' autonomy within the borders of political community as provided by states are therefore under attack, both under

the point of view of effectiveness as well as by the point of view of legitimacy.

For a long time, every attempt to take democracy beyond the limits of national territorial states has been branded as utopian. Nor is it necessary to turn to 18th century cosmopolitanism to identify the paradigm for new political forms. The new element is that the new geographies of political community are emerging, dictated by the urgency of the crisis itself (Cerutti 2007); super-national integration, therefore, is at the moment the only realistic answer to the contemporary challenges. Take for example the Asian brown cloud that floats over a very 'leviathanic' border such as the one dividing India and Pakistan. The Asian brown cloud does not need a visa to cross that border. At the same time his polluted shades may define the contours of a new kind of community, however paradoxical it may sound.

Besides the institutional tool box a new set of conceptual tools are needed. The urge for survival imposes the quest for a new rationality which goes well beyond individualism and utilitarianism, somewhat along the lines indicates since decades by the MAUSS.[4] The situation of interdependence in life and death imposes to elaborate a new political vocabulary and new motivational resources for politics. Solidarity is not a luxury, it is an imperative; and questions of global justice resources delineates a new 'realistic' landscape, whilst at the same time making evident the limits of traditional political paradigms.

In my stay in India I have heard of inclusive growth. This is all the more interesting as in the Western—or at least European—debate it shows the first signs of a growing awareness of the importance of the commons—of the 'common goods'—under the spike of global threats. Now it is important to underline that the new awareness of the

[4] MAUSS (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales, Anti-Utilitarian Movement in Social Sciences) is a group of social thinkers advocating for new paradigms in social and political theory and which may move beyond utilitarianism and instrumental reason. The movement takes its name from Marcel Mauss French anthropologist who dedicated seminal work to the practice of 'gift'.

importance of the commons does not have much to do with the Communitarian school that opposed Rawlsians and Liberal in the anglo-saxon political philosophical debate, so it is not a new version of anti-liberal views (where liberalism is the possibility for each person to determining his/her good), nor it is a re-proposition of Aristotelianism in a global risks' perspective. In fact *the point is not 'THE' common good, but the common goodS, with an 'S' at the end*. The commons, far from being opposed to the possibility of determining individually what is one's good, are in fact the pre-conditions that permit each and every individual to have a reasonable chance of determining autonomously his/her course of life. The responsibility towards the common goods is today the best form of self-interest; but in the present condition there is no way out that is not negotiated in common.

In the light of these skeletal, and often entangled considerations, the problem of the obsolescence of democracy appears under a very sharp light. In this context, what other political form may be trusted with common survival, but democracy?

Many years ago the walls of Paris featured a famous sentence, one of the best compendium to the essence of politics ever written. These words are now leaving the streets of Paris to spread all over our tormented planet: soyez realistes, demandez l'impossible.

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