



# “WE ARE SLIDING INTO UNCHARTED TERRITORY, AND WE ARE ALONE IN THIS.”

A New Look At Political Disorientation

We are lost. We can't find our way anymore. We are disoriented, anxious, fearful. No, we are not talking about our feelings in the wilderness, without a GPS and a telephone to comfort us and no landmark to show us the way. We are at the ballot box, with a ballot and a pencil, completely at a loss about the choice we have to make in the next minute or two, as million of American voters felt on November 8, 2016:

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I cried when I left the polling location because I don't like Trump at all. I was deeply saddened to vote for him. His personality, his mannerisms and his inexperience repulse me. I wish there had been another conservative choice without simply throwing away my vote... I am deeply saddened by these options and I am not proud of our president in the least. (Fishwick)

The same uncertainty was well caught in this vignette of the UK referendum in 2016:

In the morning of 23 June 2016, Rosamund Shaw still wasn't sure if she wanted Britain to leave the European Union. During the preceding weeks, she had been in turmoil. She absorbed a stream of negative stories about the EU in the *Daily Mail*, but wasn't sure they were reliable. She trusted Boris Johnson, but loathed Michael Gove. Her family was divided... In the voting booth, Shaw finally made her choice: she voted leave. "To be quite frank, I did not believe it would happen," she says. "I thought I'd put in a protest vote." (Lynskey)

These two voters' predicament has become quite common: today in the industrial democracies, from Seattle to Athens, most

of us are disoriented. Also, as Zygmunt Bauman said in the quote we borrowed for our title, “We are sliding into uncharted territory, and we are alone in this” (Bauman). The purpose of this article is to look at political disorientation from a new angle, as a phenomenon that has striking similarities with the physical disorientation created by an alien landscape. Getting lost, wrote Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, provokes “extreme anxiety,”

Orientation in time, space and status are the essentials of social existence, and the Balinese, although they make very strong spirits for ceremonial occasions, with a few startling exceptions, resist alcohol, because if one drinks one loses one’s orientation. Orientation is felt as a protection, rather than a strait jacket and its loss provokes extreme anxiety. (Bateson and Mead 11)

What makes the act of voting akin to getting lost in foreign lands is this: both experiences are *individual*<sup>1</sup> and *infrequent*. True, we vote more often than we abandon the well-marked trails of Yosemite or Yellowstone but going to polls remains a once-in-a-while action even in the most democratic regimes. This means that many citizens, who follow the daily political developments with a mix of detachment and disinterest, are not at ease entering the voting booth.

As a matter of fact, the political landscape is well-travelled only by professionals: politicians, journalists, lobbyists, top civil servants, some academics. All the others, having decided a long time ago that politics may be tremendously important *at certain times*, but that it usually makes no difference to our daily life, try to guess what would be the reasonable thing to do, basing their action on minimal information (more on this below).

The problem springs from the fact that politics in a complex society would require not only constant attention but also the study of disparate and unfamiliar matters like foreign policy, nuclear weapons, tax loopholes, health insurance, or retirement systems. To complicate the matter further, political news usually reach us packaged in an unfamiliar jargon that obscures their meaning. It is perfectly reasonable to prefer playing with children, going

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1. While it is possible to get lost as a group, we deal here only with the psychological experience of being alone, as we are in the ballot box.

to the movies, reading a good book, or maybe watching sports, gossip, and entertainment news. When summoned to the polls, however, this attitude leaves us uncertain and confused, like someone confronted with a new territory.

“It is never a good idea to leave a marked trail in wilderness. Our fragile understanding of where we are can collapse quickly, leaving us lost, disoriented, and in peril” (Ellard 4). We know that the first action of the lost travelers who need to find their way back is searching for landmarks, “significant physical, built or culturally defined objects that stand out from their surroundings:” a mountain, a tree, a river, a building that one could recognize (Golledge). Travelers remember that they were there some years ago but today the landscape appears different to them: maybe last time it was a different season, or a different time of the day. We remember that there was snow, now absent, or a busy road, now closed, or crowds moving in a well-known path, now disappeared. Is this the valley we crossed, or is our memory at fault?

In politics today, we have left the marked trail, and reliable landmarks are in short supply. As Zygmunt Bauman said shortly before dying,

We are living in an open sea, caught up in a continuous wave, with no fixed point and no instrument to measure distance and the direction of travel. Nothing appears to be in its place any more, and a great deal appears to have no place at all. (Bauman and Mauro 7)

We may add that while the disoriented traveler is supposed to be the same person who was in the mountains five years earlier, this is not necessarily true of the disoriented voter at the ballot box. *Politically, he may well be a very different person*: angry at the real, or perceived, corruption; fearful of new immigrants; disappointed by the lack of job opportunities; wounded by “unjust” decisions by local or national politicians. In other words, even if the political landscape were the same, our disoriented voter might perceive it differently because of his own inner changes, adding to the confusion.

If we want to answer the question why people today feel more disoriented than yesterday, our analysis needs to be more systematic and we need to look at the *strategies* people have

used to orient themselves in voting. Basically, we can distinguish three historical phases:

- men<sup>2</sup> as guides in politics
- parties as guides in politics
- men as guides in politics, again

In the 19th and early 20th Centuries, many countries used single-seat constituencies like the American ones, and more often than not these were small enough to allow voters to be personally acquainted with the candidates. The franchise was restricted and politicians tended to be figures of importance in the local society: land owners, merchants, lawyers, judges. Deference toward the “important citizens” was a fact of life, and political parties in the modern sense were either absent or newborns.<sup>3</sup> Voters used those personalities as we may use guides in a mountain tour: we don’t know the path but we trust the group leader to protect us from dangers. It was not by chance that the father of attachment theory, John Bowlby, wrote: “All of us, from cradle to grave, are happiest when life is organized as a series of excursions, long or short, *from the secure base provided by our attachment figure*” (Holmes, my italics).

Even after the birth of modern political parties and the introduction of proportional representation in Europe, *local* politicians have always been important to the disoriented voter, who was often more inclined to trust someone belonging to his town, or region, than someone else.

The second phase begins when large, national, parties appeared on stage. These parties could be more or less centralized, and ideologically coherent, but in any event, they usually had well-defined positions on the issues of the day. They appealed to the voters who wanted their (real or perceived) interests defended by the party, like tariffs on foreign goods, the conquest of colonies, or the 8-hour

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2. Historically, most politicians have been male, which is not to deny the existence of powerful women leaders, from Golda Meir to Angela Merkel.

3. This was the situation at the Philadelphia Constitutional convention in 1787, and the delegates made every effort to keep it unchanged, shaping the Constitution to this purpose. From that choice sprang institutional problems that haunt the United States to this day.

workday. The disoriented citizen was reminded through meetings, parades, speeches, leaflets, and the like, that the party indeed was the champion of his interests: deference and personal connections became marginal, while political campaigns were the equivalent of simple maps in a difficult landscape. Parties were our true landmarks.

Parties were able to flourish, or at least to remain competitive, because they offered the voter a comprehensive vision of the world: liberal parties defended free trade and individual rights; nationalist and conservative parties emphasized the importance of glory abroad, order and tradition at home; labor, social democratic or communist parties fought for different shades of socialism. These political *Weltanschauung* were more important than specific proposals: people voted their dreams more than the policies debated in Parliament.

However, parties were enormously important in citizens' democratic education (Pizzorno, *democrazia* xxii). After World War 2, the Labour party in the UK had 1 million members.<sup>4</sup> In Italy, where in 1950 a substantial proportion of Southern population was illiterate, the Communist Party had about 2 million members and remained a fundamental instrument of cultural and political education for decades. In 1961, the Communist, Christian Democrat and Socialist parties together had more than 3.5 million members, that is an astonishing 10% of the adult population. In the 1948 elections, 92.23% of Italian adults went to the polls, which means that every single citizen who was not sick, insane, or emigrated in some faraway land, actually voted. Nobody felt alone, left behind, or disoriented.

It is also important to note that parties were an almost perfect tool for the less-committed, or disoriented, voter. They simplified complex or controversial issues, giving voters the opportunity to avoid the difficult and time-consuming task of making their own opinions about specific issues like tax policy or land reform.

This "Age of the Parties" lasted quite a long time, essentially covering the entire 20th century, not only because parties were a useful tool but mostly because citizens developed strong emo-

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4. Parties have been more important in Europe than in the US, where most of the time they have been mere election machines.

tional attachments to their organizations (Pizzorno, *Politics*). They listened to slogans and marching tunes during meetings and rallies; they voted straight tickets from school board member to president. Their feelings passed from fathers and mothers to children, creating persistent political loyalties, as any history of elections in American states easily shows. This is relevant to understanding the feeling of loss and betrayal when parties have seemed to abandon their supporters.

It is this “loss and betrayal” that explains why today they are vastly unpopular, sometimes even hated, in many countries? Why do the voters reject this political instrument and choose to navigate the political landscape with few, or no landmarks? The answer is that in the last 40 years mainstream parties changed, disorienting the citizen. Not only in the United States, but in most industrial democracies, almost all parties converged on market solutions, approved the limitation of welfare, supported opening the borders to investments, goods and immigrants, eased the hiding of money in fiscal paradises abroad. Policy nuances between center-right and center-left parties were often lost to the average voter.

However, if free trade was supposed to bring prosperity to all, this expectation was not fulfilled. If globalization was supposed to offer opportunities to everybody, in the industrial democracies that did not happen. Salaries stagnated, inequalities skyrocketed. In the US in 2013, for example, the top 10% of families held 76% of the wealth, while the bottom 50% of families held 1%. (see Piketty, Formisano, “Trends”). It is hard to overestimate the sense of betrayal felt by citizens accustomed to see their condition, or at least that of their children, to steadily improve.

Voters reacted by looking for new leaders: in the US, “presidential elections are essentially candidate-centered, and the political party is relegated to the background” (Fabbrini). Back in 1992, well before Trump, H. Ross Perot scored a significant success as a third-party candidate.

Another aspect of our political disorientation is the refusal to participate: today voters often stay at home on election day, like would-be travelers who find the journey offered by the tour guides unappealing. Election turn-out has plummeted everywhere, except in special circumstances: citizens feel like lost travelers,

angry at the tiny group that left them stranded. Representation is fragile, and not only in the US, where barely 50% of voting age population go to the polls.

In France, only 48.5% of potential voters bothered to take part in the elections for the *Assemblée nationale* in 2017. In Romania the percentage was 39.4% (2016). In Croatia, it was 60% (2015), in Poland it was 50% (2015), in Greece 56.6% (2015), in Portugal 55.8% (2015). From Rome to Stockholm, when citizens ventured to the ballot box, they expressed their disorientation choosing new parties, even when the platforms looked weird, the leadership incompetent, and the chances to govern marginal. Sometimes they voted *en masse* for xenophobic or quasi-fascist parties, as it happened in Germany, Austria, Hungary, The Netherlands and Finland (Kaltwasser et al.).

They were like the disoriented and enraged trekker who tries to cut straight through the wood, or up the mountain, even if there is no real reason, no definite strategy in doing so. Frustration, anger, inability to think and evaluate alternatives are the reasons behind this behavior, which of course was at its zenith in the 2016 successes of Donald Trump in the US and “Brexit” in the UK.

Now we need to take into account another important factor in voters’ political disorientation: we are stressed by a deluge of contradictory messages and images on line. In this case, the appropriate comparison would not be a wilderness landscape but the urban jungle: in a foreign city we see and hear messages that we don’t understand. What we would need are few and clear signs, like an oversize trolley placard indicating the baggage claim area at the airport: on the contrary we are confronted with a blizzard of messages that we are not able to interpret correctly because we lack the “tacit knowledge” of the political environment that elites possess.

While in the past the communication environment had a small number of recognized landmarks (the “serious” press, the two or three mainstream TV channels like CBS, NBC and ABC) in the last 25 years internet transformed the landscape in a kind of Wild West, with billions of messages that cross each other, all trying to win our attention for a few minutes, or seconds.

Brian McNair remarked that

today we see increased incidence of panics of all kinds (moral, food, health), scandals and feeding frenzies, usually centered on elites, and volatility of the political agenda as reflected in the public sphere. Public discussion on all kinds of issues has become fast and frantic, the media agenda unstable and unpredictable. In feeding frenzies of the type that engulfed Bill Clinton in 1998 [...] we see loss of governmental, official and corporate control over information flows, leading to heightened competition for control of the media and public agendas.

Without much time, and effort, it is almost impossible to find the *relevant* political information we need. For the disoriented voter, this is the equivalent of a metro hub with hundreds of signs in different styles, shapes, and colors pointing to opposite directions: no hope of making sense of them.

The collapse of credibility of mainstream media is part and parcel of this new situation: if yesterday citizens would look for political clues in the endorsements of the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post* in the US and *Le Monde*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, *The Times*, or *Corriere della Sera* in Europe, today half of the electorate in industrialized countries seems to mistrust, indeed revile, the national newspapers of reference. When and why this happened?

In the USA, Donald Trump's success has exposed a fundamental weakness of the mainstream news media whose professional model was based on "objectivity." This was a weakness that had been apparent during the rise of Senator Joe McCarthy (1948-1956) but had been forgotten in the post-Watergate era. The point is that exaggerations, empty accusations, and barefaced lies may be a liability for conventional politicians but they are an asset for demagogues who rise in time of (real or manufactured) crisis. They understand journalists' working routines and use them to their advantage: news media hunger for novelty practically compel them to report about "hot" topics, all the more so when colorful personalities like Joe McCarthy, young Richard Nixon or Donald Trump are involved. This way, skilled demagogues are able to manipulate the mainstream media with a confrontational strategy that would be fatal to traditional candidates and, at the same time, tap into the widespread resentment against media elites.

Distracted voters may be passive and uninterested, but they are perfectly aware that political elites and media elites are



not only connected, but mostly overlap. This happens for reasons of industrial efficiency, more than servility or malice: there is simply no elite newspaper that can be published if government sources do not cooperate.

Political journalism was born as an arm of political action, and even when it has tried to free itself, it has been living in an incestuous relationship with power for the better part of the last 250 years. Guy de Maupassant's 1885 novel *Bel-Ami*, whose protagonist George Du Roy is a reporter, remains to this day a perfectly realistic description of the profession: "When he gained the threshold he saw the crowd collected—a dense, agitated crowd, gathered there on his account—on account of George Du Roy. The people of Paris were gazing at him and envying him. Then, raising his eyes, he could see afar off, beyond the Place de la Concorde, the Chamber of Deputies, and it seemed to him that he was going to make but one jump from the portico of the Madeleine to that of the Palais Bourbon."<sup>5</sup>

*Bel-Ami* was published 133 years ago, but the revolving door between politics and journalism remains well-oiled to this day.

Since the mid-1970s, the mainstream press has been promoting market solutions over public services, attacking welfare recipients, supporting globalization as a sure path to prosperity for all, and ignoring the wages stagnation. This process was accelerated by the fact that "Journalism has become obsessed with the processes of government, but incurious about any complex problem that cannot be blamed upon some hapless minister" (Toynbee). Unfortunately, the issues that matter to the average citizen—unemployment, wages, prices, bureaucracy—are not those whose solution depends on the ability of any single individual in government. No surprise, then, if disappointment and rage toward politicians slowly spread into disappointment and rage toward journalists: in many cases it may be unfair, but it is so.

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5. George Du Roy, the main character in the book, is a journalist. Palais Bourbon was the seat of the Chamber of Deputies, now the French Assemblée Nationale.

Newspapers are private firms which, in a capitalist society, exist only as long as they make profits.<sup>6</sup> Before being paladins of Free Information and servants of Democracy, editors and reporters are either politicians-in-waiting, or humble wage-makers who deal with what the publisher and the editor decide to deal. If the publisher wants to credit George W. Bush's lies on Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, with disastrous consequences for the United States and the world, neither the young reporter nor the prestigious pundit will change the front page.

It was not lost to American citizens that the establishment media had accepted, promoted, and even embellished Bush's crude lies about Iraq: in the US not a single antiwar personality was to be seen on TV during the buildup to that war, whose human and financial costs have been staggering. And in 2002 it was the *New York Times'* Judith Miller, and not Fox News or yet-to-be-founded Breitbart News, who was at the forefront of the warmongering.

We live in an era of instant communication, with billions of web sites offering free information about everyone and everything. But it is precisely this overcrowded internet landscape that does not offer us clear paths to a decision; on the contrary, it is a serious obstacle to any meditated choice. Contradictory claims about important topics like global warming or vaccines often paralyze public policy. Anthony Giddens was in advance on his times when, writing in 1994, he noted that, "The very skepticism that is the driving force of expert knowledge might lead, in some contexts, or among some groups, to a disenchantment with all experts" (as quoted in Beck 87). And this is precisely what we see today (Welch).

Therefore, disoriented voters now try to go back to the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century strategy to make political choices: looking for leaders. There are two reasons for this: first the disillusionment, and anger,

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6. The exceptions are very few indeed: the *Guardian* is owned by a trust that has no daily control of the product and covers the losses: this arrangement, however, could end in a few years, when resources will be depleted. *Le Monde* used to be controlled by a cooperative of journalists but this solution was abandoned a few years ago, always for financial reasons. *Il Manifesto* still is in the hands of its journalists, but it occupies only a tiny niche in the Italian newspapers market.

toward *all mainstream parties*, perceived as corrupt, or at least complicit in the mismanagement of the country. If parties are bad, let's look around for some honest men and women.

As Pierre Rosanvallon has noted, reputation has become

the cardinal principle in democracies of opinion [...] In this respect, contemporary democracies bear a curious resemblance to older societies, which were regulated by honor. Indeed, honor is also a form of symbolic capital and is also constituted by social judgment. (Rosanvallon 49)

We are back to trusting persons whose reputation appears to us as a promise of good behavior because we recognize our "inability to compel governments to take specific actions or decisions." (Rosanvallon 49).

The second reason of the new faith in leaders instead of organizations is that, in the cacophony of messages, we fall back on one all-important human ability that we have: the capacity of recognizing, and judging, a face. Kin or stranger? Friend or foe? This has been a very useful tool for millennia, allowing our ancestors in the savannah to make quick decisions: fight or flee? Cooperate or keep at a distance?

Researchers have shown that humans express the same emotions with the same facial muscles and expressions everywhere in the world. Our brains are hard-wired to recognize empathy, friendliness or anger in every situation. Everywhere, people show anger with the same bared teeth and close-knit eyebrows, and they know that others making this face are angry (Bargh).

However, we tend to overestimate our ability to use this wonderful biological power, as many psychology studies show. First of all, many confidence men present themselves as trustful companions (actually, this is a prerequisite *to be* a confidence man). Second, nothing guarantees that an honest person will be a competent leader, or that he would defend *our* interests against other competing interests.

Indeed, looking for a leader to guide us out of the woods, or the urban jungle, seems to be the *least rational strategy*, because this choice is based on an exceedingly small amount of politically relevant information, practically zero. We put our faith in a man, or a woman, setting aside the programs, the constraints, the dif-

faculties of politics, and policy, in a complex society. The task of would-be political leaders surfing these waves of disorientation is facilitated by our disposition to be enslaved by images. As we are “preponderantly visual beasts” (Ellard), our ability to resist emotionally-laden images is minimal. Who would remember human rights and due process when confronted with the pictures of victims of violent crime? If we are shown the images of dead women or children, our only reaction is asking for prompt and savage retaliation.

This is why some images, or symbols, are powerful enough to obscure any rational debate. In 2016, for many American voters, the mental image of a long, solid, impassable wall was stronger than any reasonable objection about the wisdom, the feasibility or the cost of such a barrier at the border between the United States and Mexico. In 2012, the pictures of 64-year-old Italian entertainer Beppe Grillo swimming from Calabria to Sicily were meant to show a physical fitness that “validated” his insurgent political campaign in Italy.<sup>7</sup> The political successes of anti-establishment leaders are strongly linked to the possibility of pushing simple, powerful, images to the forefront of the media environment, something that would have been difficult in the era when mainstream journalism was the gatekeeper of the public debate.

New leaders also take advantage of the kind of magical thinking that modernity was supposed to have erased but which, in fact, never went away. This is the idea that a strong leader will bring peace and happiness to his people, a myth so ancient that we find it everywhere, from the Bible to the tales of King Arthur and the Russian legends of the “hidden” tsar who will come back one day. What is the expectation of a Messiah, or Mahdi, coming at the end of times to bring justice on Earth if not political hope dressed as religious belief?<sup>8</sup>

The faith in the coming of a messiah is not exclusive to Jews: for most Shia Muslims, a redeemer called Mahdi was born on Earth,

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7. One year later, in 2013, M5S, the party founded by Grillo, became the first party in Italy, with about 25% of the popular vote.

8. Of course, one could claim that the opposite is true: excessive political hopes in a leader are a form of religious cult, think of Adolf Hitler. The two visions, however, are not contradictory.

then disappeared and will remain hidden until he reappears to bring justice to the world. It appears that modernity never really suppressed this kind of beliefs that have strong universal cultural roots, and are ready to surface in war, or in critical times.

Apparently, our inability to really comprehend the complex society in which we live magnifies the desire for simple solutions, notably the solution of One Man “doing it right.”<sup>9</sup> As Bernard Manin notes, “the personalization of political choices has given a prominent role to the personality and image of leaders.”

The bureaucratization of late capitalism (Graeber) finds its odd companion in the idea that such a leader could cut through red tape, expel special interests, bring prosperity and justice to the common people in no time. What did Donald Trump’s slogan “Drain the Swamp” mean, if not this? It is a bad mistake to underestimate the enormous political power of that resurgent popular aspiration.

So, here we are at the ballot box, with a ballot and a pencil, at a loss about the choice we have to make in the next minute or two: is there a solution to our predicament? Unfortunately, the answer is “no.” The reason is that rejecting parties, or other politically active organizations, makes voting a lonely act, a choice burdened by our deep disorientation. We could find again our path only by looking at the ballot box as the *final act* of a continuous process of self-education.

Just as like finding *one* path back to safety when lost in the wilderness is impossible (we need to make dozens of right choices in a row before reaching our home), we can defend our values, and our interests, at the ballot box only when we are involved in a collective exercise of self-government. Only if we *practice* the search for relevant information as part of a community, we will acquire the skills needed to navigate the muddy waters of 21<sup>st</sup>-century politics. In other words, democratic *action* is the sole prescription to heal political disorientation.

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9. For a different interpretation, see Brown.

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