

Identity and Compromise in the Digital Era

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The sudden, recent theoretical interest in the long overlooked concept of political compromise has, for once, very pragmatic reasons. The concept has come under increased theoretical scrutiny: from the United States (US) to the European Union (EU), and from Venezuela to Russia, national, regional, and international politics have become increasingly polarized and radicalized. It appears that for both politicians and voters, politics is no longer perceived as “the art of compromise.”

Unfortunately, the problems do not stop at the practical level. As often happens, practical disagreements are mirrored by theoretical ones. As the introduction to this volume demonstrates, the few scholars who seriously consider the problem of compromise appear unable to ... compromise ... on the role that compromise *is* or *ought* to be playing in politics. The explanation for this, I suspect, is to be found in too much focus on the normative aspects and too little on the intellectual history of the concept—a history that points instead to the subjective component of compromise and its relationship with political and self-representation.¹ If someone is not *representing* what she is doing as a compromise, let alone one who is compromising, but instead represents what she is doing as a successful negotiation or bargain, it would be theoretically unsound to impose the label of compromise on her actions from the outside. If originally, as we shall see, a compromise (*compromissum*) began with the *selection* of an impartial arbitrator,

¹ For a recent empirical study pointing toward a somewhat similar correlation, see Ryan 2016 (forthcoming).

called a *compromissarius*, it evolved to presuppose the *creation* of an arbitrator via elections in accordance with the majority rule, and ended up with the disappearance of the arbitrator, replaced, supposedly, by the goodwill of the parties involved. But when it comes to analyzing compromises and separating them into “good,” “bad,” “acceptable,” “rotten” (Margalit 2009), and so forth, political theorists today place themselves, often unknowingly, in the very position of the impartial arbitrator, i.e., the *compromissarius*. From this position, one is tempted to pass objective judgments on what qualifies as a compromise, which compromise deserves to be commended or condemned, and even who is a compromiser and who is not, regardless of what the people actually involved have said.

There is no need to go as far as US Senator Rand Paul, who declared that “compromise is in the eye of the beholder,”² but neither should one embrace a purely objective, normative perspective of the concept. This chapter argues that the two matters are interrelated: if we now have a problem handling political compromise or its lack thereof, both at a practical and at a theoretical level, it is because of the historically interrelated *and* subjective issues of political and self-representation.

Extreme political polarization and radicalization, followed by the refusal to compromise, are mere symptoms of an erosion of trust—and trust is by definition subjective and identity-related. Both at the individual and at the group level, one witnesses a lack of trust in “the other,” regardless of how one defines it—the immigrant, the Muslim, the American, and so forth. Even “our representatives,” a term that encompasses almost everyone belonging to formal channels of political representation, from mayors to presidents and everything in between, have been perceived lately as “the others.” The reasons for the continuous erosion of citizens’ trust in their

²<http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1310/13/sotu.01.html> Accessed 8 July 2016.

representatives have been addressed for some time from multiple perspectives. But no matter how persuasive and sophisticated these arguments are, they generally fall into two categories: the finger points either towards the representatives or towards the process itself—never towards the complaining “representees,” i.e., the citizens themselves. By the same token, the increased suspicion of difference or otherness is the result of a perceived threat to one’s identity, a suspicion that fails to even consider the possibility that difference and identity are interrelated and constitutive of each other (Connolly 2002).

As a result, there have been no serious attempts so far to connect the refusal to compromise with the crisis of political representation and to a possible crisis of self-representation, despite the rather obvious relationship between the three—and it is precisely this interconnection that the medieval legacy may help to illuminate. Arguing that we, the contemporaries of what has been labeled “the digital revolution,” have something left to learn from our medieval ancestors might seem counterintuitive, but this is exactly what I intend to do in the following pages. Furthermore, I advance the hypothesis that the medieval person was, in some respects, better equipped to handle the opposing claims to uniqueness and sameness or individual and community rights that are brought front and center today by the digital revolution. These claims are proving to be so challenging for contemporary politics that making political compromises has become harder than ever.

After all, before the meaning of compromise split into a boo-hooray concept (Margalit 2009) across the English Channel, at the beginning of the Early Modern era, the medieval man regarded compromise as simply a tool for arbitration (*arbitratio*) or as a method of election (*electio*), neither to be embraced as a virtue, as the British did throughout the 17th century, nor to be discarded as a sell-out, as their French counterparts did during the same period. The key to

understanding this balanced attitude is to be found in the self-representation of the individual that was widespread during that time, which in turn helped shape a particular understanding of what political representation stood for. Thanks to the Christian *Weltanschauung*, with a one-in-three God and a Christ both fully man and fully God, the medieval person—regardless of her or his level of education—was prepared to handle simultaneously one’s uniqueness and one’s sameness with others. The reason, as explained by Denis de Rougemont in *Man’s Western Quest* (1956), is that, all religious considerations aside, Christianity shaped a particular understanding of the world by training the mind to “assume incompatibles.”³ Neither compromise nor representation were supposed to involve the individual qua individual, but only the individual qua member of a community or *universitas*, i.e., only her or his external self or *forum externum*. In both cases, *forum internum*, the inner self, remained off limits, protecting the uniqueness of the person (Fumurescu 2013).

As I will show in more detail later, once the subtle dialectic between the two fora broke apart under the pressures of early modernity, the result was not just a split in the meaning of compromise, but also the emergence of two peculiar forms of individualism—one centripetal, which emerged in France, the other, centrifugal, which emerged in Great Britain. In a somewhat parallel fashion, the pressures brought forward by what is labelled as the digital revolution question once again the general accepted representations of the self. I claim that the medieval and the contemporary representations of the self display to a surprising extent similar features that depart not only from the modern, “liberal self,” but also from the classic, “embedded” or “communitarian” self. Now, as then, the either-or one-dimensional self appears unconvincing,

³ For example, according to de Rougemont, accepting that Christ is simultaneously “true God” and “true man” paved the way for modern physicists to finally accept that a photon is, at the same time, a wave and a particle. Overcoming the binary logic marked the beginning of modern physics (Rougemont 1956, 115-18).

hence the benefits of remembering how medieval people managed not just political compromise, but also their multiple identities, at a personal and a political level. Now, as then, it appears that the morality *of* a compromise as an *end-state* depends on the morality *in* compromise as *process*, which in turn depends on the self-identification of the parties involved—an identity that is not inherently fixed (Golding 1979; see also Overeem, this volume).

The chapter is structured accordingly: The first part surveys the intellectual history of compromise, from a method of arbitration and/or election to either a sell-out of one's identity, as in Early Modern France, or as a constitutive political principle, as in Britain. The second part sketches the impact of the digital revolution upon self- and political representation, showing how many of the characterizations of the “new-self” are in effect just mirroring—in a distorted way—the forgotten dialectic between the inner and the outer self (*forum internum* and *forum externum*.) The aim is to initiate a dialogue between the medieval and contemporary perspectives on self- and political representation. The hope is that such a dialogue may clarify at least some of the existing disagreements about the role the new media could or should play in the political process and, most importantly, in shaping identities, both at a personal and at a group level.

The stakes are high, for being insecure about one's identity, qua individual or qua community, has the paradoxical effect of becoming overly protective of one's perceived identity, and refusing all compromise with “the other,” regardless of how one chooses to define otherness. One does not have to embrace Slavoj Žižek's ideas in order to agree with his observations published in *The New Statesman* (10 Jan 2015) in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the headquarters of *Charlie Hebdo*: “[T]he passionate intensity of the terrorists bears witness to a lack of true conviction. How fragile the belief of a Muslim must be if he feels threatened by a stupid caricature in a weekly satirical newspaper?”

Compromise and the dialectical self in medieval times⁵

Compromissum appeared for the first time in Latin,⁶ and it meant what it said—to promise together, or to co-promise. Two parties in dispute, unable to reach an agreement, consented to subject themselves to the arbitration of an independent and unbiased third party they both trusted, called a *compromissarius*. Plain and simple, it was a para-legal, private method of solving disputes and avoiding the hassles of appearing in front of a judge. It was a *verbal contract* to respect the authority of the arbitrator acknowledged as such even in court. Furthermore, the arbitrator had much more power than an official judge, for he was not restricted by any existing laws. In other words, his power was absolute.

What can we infer even from such scarce information? First, that in order to commit to a compromise, one has to make oneself equal to the other party at least insofar as the issue at hand is concerned. As a matter of fact, this equality is precisely the cause of the disagreement. If we are equal, how can I trust that your judgment is better than mine? The first French dictionaries spelled this out: “To compromise is to make oneself equal with the other party” (Richelet 1680, Furetiere 1690). That is why, according to these dictionaries, a prince should never compromise with his subjects, a “superior” with an “inferior,” and so forth. Second, that there is at least a potential for foul play in any compromise. One enters a compromise because one wants to avoid a formal trial. Here, once again, the first French dictionaries make it clear: “*One puts on compromise all but the doubtful affairs.*” Last but not least, it also means that one accepts the risks involved in an *undisputed* and *unrestricted* authority of a *compromissarius*/arbitrator.

⁵ The following section is informed by Fumurescu 2013.

⁶ Interestingly, the Greeks had no word for compromise, nor did they have one for representation.

During the Middle Ages, this meaning of compromise came to be extended so as to encompass a method of election as well, thus moving compromise from the private into the public sphere. It made sense—after all, what are elections if not methods devised for solving otherwise unsolvable disagreements? It may be hard to believe for many, but elections during the “Dark Ages” were quite widespread. The rationale, however, was different. They were meant not to *elect*, but to *discover* the person chosen by God for a certain office. The famous maxim, *Vox populi, Vox Dei*, did not carry any strong democratic connotations—at least not in the way we understand it today—but meant what it said, namely that God speaks through the people. Therefore, unanimity was seen as the sure sign of expressing God’s will. However, as this ideal was hardly reached, *compromissum*/compromise became the favorite method of election. If consensus proved impossible, each constitutive group from the larger community—such as women, the poor, the guilds, and so forth—designated its own *compromissarius*, its own arbitrator. The only condition was that the number of *compromissores*, i.e., arbitrators, had to be odd, in order to avoid stalemates. Technically speaking, it was these *compromissores* that made the final election (Fumurescu 2013).

This second meaning of *compromissum* proves that there is indeed a built-in connection between compromise and politics. They “belong” together, they are “meant for each other.” This meaning also demonstrates that if the medieval individual was neither in love with compromise nor discarded it altogether, it was because the compromise never involved the individual *qua* individual, but the individual *qua* member of some community of sorts—a *universitas*. Putting this in medieval parlance, it involved only her or his *forum externum*.

Unfortunately, the distinction between *forum internum* and *forum externum*—so crucial and so familiar to the medieval individual—is now totally overlooked. In fact, it is so forgotten

that some scholars still claim that these concepts are Hobbes's invention (cf. *De cive*, ch. 3, *Leviathan*, ch. 15) (e.g., Schmitt 1996, Ragazzoni 2011). Actually, Hobbes was among the last theorists who tried—quite successfully, one might add (see Runciman 2008)—to give the final blow to this distinction, which had been formally acknowledged by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1213, some four hundred years earlier. When it came to handling uniqueness and sameness, the medieval individual was quite sophisticated, moving with ease between the two, i.e., between *forum internum* and *forum externum*. One was an “I” because one was at the same time unique and the same as everyone else. One had an *identity* insofar as one was *identical* to everyone else, and one was identical to everyone else because one had an identity. The common etymological root of the two words is no accident.

In the medieval understanding, the self of each individual was composed of two fora dependent on each other, constituting each other. *Forum internum*—the internal self, so to speak—was the forum of authenticity, uniqueness, and complete freedom. No one could regulate or control the *forum internum*, not even the Church. At most, the Church could have asked you to repent, but whether you truly repented or not was beyond anyone's—even the Church's—control. On the other hand, in *forum externum*—the external self—one was an “I” insofar as one shared in the membership of various communities/*universitates* and one played by the rules of the community: the Church, to be sure, but also the township, a certain guild, and so forth. It was the forum of sameness and conformity.

Only in this capacity—as member of some community—could the individual have been represented and/or compromised. No one could represent me “in full,” for no one could represent my uniqueness or be virtuous in my place, thus only communities (or offices) could have been represented. As a matter of fact, the possibility to designate an arbitrator or an elector

(*compromissarius*) was in the Middle Ages the recognition that a certain community was acknowledged as a “legal person” or corporation. The University of Paris, for example, went through a long battle to acquire the legal status of corporation and the right to designate its own *compromissarius* (Post 1964, 5-7). The neutral attitude toward compromise was related to the self-representation of the individual—since *forum internum* could never have been represented, it could not have been compromised either, so the uniqueness of the individual was safe. It is worth remembering that even today “compromise” is used with negative connotations only when it endangers one’s identity: “I won’t compromise my honor, myself, my virtue,” and so forth.

Because of the challenges raised by early modernity, as broadly defined, this dialectic of the individual, this interplay between *forum internum* and *forum externum* was lost, and two different types of individualism developed across the English Channel—one “centripetal,” the other one “centrifugal”—which in turn shaped two different attitudes toward compromise.

On the one hand, in France, beginning at the end of 16th century and continuing throughout the 17th, the person, faced with absolutism and the increased pressure for conformity in *forum externum*, came to identify the “true-self” solely with his *forum internum*. *Forum externum* became, as Pierre Charron put it, a mere “costume” (Charron 1601, 415):

[We have to know] how to distinguish and separate ourselves from our public charges. *Each one of us plays two roles and has two personae, the one alien and in appearance only, the other our own and essential to us.* It is important to know the difference between the skin and the costume. (...) One must make use and avail oneself of the world as one finds it, but nevertheless consider it as a thing alien to oneself, know how to enjoy oneself apart from it...

Hence, Montaigne’s warning against the centrifugal tendencies that affect the inner self: “[Y]ou are running out, you are scattering yourself; concentrate yourself, resist yourself; you are being betrayed, dispersed, and stolen away from yourself” (Montaigne III, 9 [1998]).

Not surprising then, for both Montaigne and Charron—and they were two of the most influential writers throughout the entire 17th century—no decent man should compromise his integrity, his conscience, and the like, i.e., his *forum internum*, the true-self, not even by defending himself against false accusations. “I ordinarily assist the unfair presumptions against me that fortune sows about by a way I have always had of avoiding justifying, excusing, and interpreting myself, thinking that it is compromising my conscience to plead for it” (Montaigne 1957, III; also Charron 1601, 26).

This centripetal individualism, this retreat inside *forum internum*, was doubled by a call for conformity on the outside. As Montaigne put it,

... the wise man should withdraw his soul within, out of the crowd, and keep it in freedom and power to judge things freely; but as for externals, he should wholly follow the accepted fashions and forms. Society in general can do without our thoughts; but the rest—that is, our actions, our work, our fortunes and our very life—we must lend and abandon to its service and to the common opinion ... (Montaigne I, 23)

Once *forum externum* ceased to be revealing for the “authentic” individual, absolutism and conformity came to be a suitable solution to the representation of the people *qua universitas*. Since political representation in France did not presuppose the representation “in full” of the individual, for no one could represent someone else’s uniqueness or *forum internum*, by the time the idea of individual rights became popular in France as well, people took it seriously—hence the French insistence on direct democracy and participatory politics, but also their concerning “amour” of radicalism and their habitual refusal to compromise, then as now. In other words, there was no acceptable compromise between these two extremes: absolutism and conformity on the one hand, and direct, participatory democracy on the other (Fumurescu 2011).

During the same period, the picture was entirely different across the Channel—and both the British and visitors from the continent were aware of this fact. We have hundreds of

testimonies to support this claim. As Sir Edward Coke said, proudly quoting the Roman poet Virgil: “He spake the truth thereof when saying ‘the British being utterly divided from the whole world’” (Coke 1606 [2003, 98]). In Macfarlane’s words, “England as a whole was different from the rest of Europe,” and at least in what concerns “individualism,” it “stood alone” (Macfarlane 1979, 5). It stood alone because the *forum externum* became the defining one—the man became, so to speak, his costume. What happened within was less important than how the individual was acting in the public sphere (Condren 2006, 73).

During that period, we find hundreds of examples to prove that the exterior, “the office,” became revealing, while the interior remained suspicious, precisely for being beyond anyone’s control. It is worth remembering that the success of the reign of Elizabeth I was largely due to its insistence on outward conformity and the acceptance of the Book of Common Prayer, allowing individuals to interpret its doctrine privately, as they pleased. As Hobbes would later theorize, the inner life was to be of no concern to the government, not out of respect, but for having little or no impact when compared to exterior actions. For early modern Englishmen, “moral autonomy was neither sought nor celebrated” (Condren 2006, 54). If the *forum externum* became the defining “self,” one can already begin to understand why compromise presented no dangers—there was nothing left to be compromised. Again, as in the Middle Ages, compromise came to be likened to a contract between equal parties, only one of a different sort.

Because of the fragmented religious picture—aside from the Catholics and the Protestants, we have here the Anglicans, divided, then as now, into two wings. The practice of the oath of associations or national covenants was widespread, and it was far from being treated merely as a metaphor or philosophical artifice—it involved actual swearing by actual individuals (e.g., Kahn 2004, 3). The instances in which “compromise” was used as the equivalent of

“contract,” “compact,” or “mutual promise” increased dramatically throughout the 17th century. Already, by 1602, the conflation of promises with contracts (legal acts of contracting) became official when common law courts in England started treating broken contracts as breaches of promise.

The authority of the British Parliament to represent “every single Englishman” (and not the people as a whole) was largely undisputed. Elections became more than a mere formality—the number of disputed seats increased throughout the 17th century, so that the lay Englishman became increasingly aware that he, John—his vote, his will—was the source of political authority, and that his vote was equal to anyone else’s. Unlike in France, where there were competing claims about who was more entitled to represent “the people,” in England the only two main competitors remained the King and the Parliament. It was between these two that the clash of competing claims was meant to happen—and it did, twice: First, with the Civil War (1642-1651) and the trial and execution of Charles I, and second with the Glorious Revolution of 1688—although in both cases the justification for such uncompromising attitudes was made in terms of the governmental contract, not of the social one.

By the time Hobbes published his *Leviathan*, he was knocking, so to speak, on an open door.⁸ The terrain was already prepared to accept the idea of free and equal individuals willingly entering into a social compact in which the majority of wills decided the representative or representatives. To his credit, Hobbes understood very well what was at stake—namely, the very concept of representation. What was one supposed to represent? The people as a whole, as *universitas*, or the people as individuals? In the classical understanding, the King was above every single subject, but below the corporate body of the people he represented. Yet in the

⁸ For a full exposition of the argument, see Fumurescu 2013, especially Ch. 8.3.

Leviathan, Hobbes explicitly scorns such a position, arguing that there is no such thing as a body of people awaiting representation. Hobbes's corporation is emphatically not organic, but artificial. It is, one may say, a Frankenstein's monster, only without Doctor Frankenstein. The nose, ears, eyes, hands, and so forth came together and sewed themselves up in a body held together by the representative sovereign. Differently put, it was a body only insofar as the body parts have decided to choose a head.

This should sound familiar and strange at the same time, for, as we remember, during the Middle Ages a corporation acquired the status of legal person once it was granted the right to designate a *compromissarius*. Only with Hobbes did the Sovereign become the over-arching *compromissarius*. The circle was closed. As we have seen, compromise started off as a verbal contract between private parties willing to admit the unrestrictive authority of a *trusted* arbitrator. With Hobbes, it became a social contract at the state level, which was meant to *create* an indisputable and unrestricted authority of a national arbitrator. As such, the sovereign is not sovereign because he deserves the title, nor because he has the necessary qualities (the prudence, the wisdom, and so forth), but because they were elected, i.e., created by a majority of equal individual wills that have co-promised to respect the decisions of the arbitrator as if they were their own.

Granted, Hobbes never uses the very word "compromise" (nor does he use, for this matter, the celebrated formula of a social contract). Instead, he prefers Covenant, Promise, Arbitration and the like. However, Gilbert Burnet, Hobbes's contemporary, had no problem using "compromise" instead of "contract" or "compact" in the exact same context for, as mentioned above, these words were used interchangeably during the 17th century. Here is the proof:

The true and Original Notion of Civil Society *and* Government, is, that *is a Compromise* made by such a Body of Men, by which they resign up the Right of demanding Reparations, either in the way of Justice against one another, or in the way of War, against their Neighbours; to such a single Person, or to such a Body of Men as they think fit to trust with this (Burnet 1688, 2 – emphasis added).

Thus, in this new understanding, *both* Civil Society and Government were the result of a ... compromise ... and they were both created *ab nihilo*. Many of the paradoxes and the tensions we are confronting today between individuals and political communities, between civil society and the political sphere, and between different theories of representation, are bundled into this one paragraph.

Political and self-representation in the digital era

Beginning with Hobbes and the rise in popularity of the social contract theory, the idea of a “Western self” has had a long-established tradition and—according to some neurophysiological experiments—even has a neural basis. Neuroimaging the medial prefrontal cortex (MFPC) shows distinct types of self-representation between the Western *independent* self and the Asian *interdependent* self, “providing evidence that culture shapes the functional anatomy of self-representation” (Zhu et al 2007, 1310). The so-called liberal self is described as self-centered, self-constructed, autonomous, and one-dimensional. It has been presented as a modern evolution from the classical, embedded self of medieval times, in which—or so the argument goes—the person was defined solely in terms of the community/communities she or he belonged to, as in other, more traditional cultures.

However, the much-praised liberal self was rather quickly found in need, first from a philosophical perspective, and later from a political one as well.⁹ The idea that one cannot have a

⁹ It is worth noting that the totalitarian and uncompromising movements that plagued the 20th century, namely Fascism and Nazism, on the one hand, and Communism, on the other, emphasized the community

“healthy” political life based solely on a liberal, self-centered self has been argued from a wide variety of perspectives (e.g., Taylor 1989, Habermas 1984, Gadamer 1989). The generally accepted argument is that an active and informed citizen is one with a strong sense of belonging to a certain political community, and is involved in an open and honest dialogue with others, regardless of how one defines “otherness.”

Yet, unfortunately for some, the digital revolution appears to only exacerbate the popularity of the (neo)liberal self—the “one that uses market rationality to manage its self as though the self was a business that attempts to balance risks and responsibility appropriately in its alliances with other selves/business” (Gershon 2011). The new social media, so goes the argument, encourage quantity over quality—hits, posts, followers, “friends,” or “connections” (usually, these numbers are public and extremely visible.) “[T]he number of friends one has on Facebook ..., the number of page-hits one gets on one’s blog, and the number of videos featured on one’s YouTube channel are the key markers of success ...and details such as duration, depth of commitment ... become the boring preoccupations of baby-boomers stuck in the past” (Dean 2009, 17).

In an effort to preserve the uniqueness of the self in such an atomized society, selective self-presentation in digital media is meant to enhance self-esteem, supporting the Hyperpersonal Model from computer mediating communication (CMC) (Gonzales and Hancock 2011). As a result, some authors argue that the younger generation is more selfish and less collectively minded than previous generations (e.g., Baurlein 2008), but that it prefers compromise to confrontation (Westlake 2008, 37)—almost like the early modern Englishmen did. It is not

over the individual. For a while, the “communitarian” self-replaced the “liberal” self, yet preserved the one-dimensional perspective intact.

surprising that for these exhibitionist selves, the photographer has taken center stage in our time: The former family album has now become more of an individual album of selfies (e.g., Schwarz 2010, Papacharissi 2002). This thirst for a unique self also helps to explain why people are more willing than ever to disclose their personal lives to others as long as they do not feel their privacy encroached upon by a nefarious Big Brother (Toma and Hancock 2013, 322). Put differently, unlike their “predecessors,” they appear less willing to trade uniqueness for equality, even in the political sphere.

It is also not surprising, then, that such neoliberal selves are disappointed by the formal channels of political representation, which regards them as mere numbers, or votes to be counted. In effect, one may say that from this perspective, movements such as “Occupy” appear to share more features with the early modern Frenchmen than with their British counterparts – they seem to be swinging between conformity (“if you are not on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the like, you do not exist”), and radical, direct democracy, for no one can represent anyone else’s uniqueness. However, more cynical analysts consider that, far from “improving the self,” this type of approach is nothing but a desperate call for attention to one’s uniqueness that will end up falling on deaf ears, since everybody is calling but no one is actually listening. Because of this new form of centrifugal individualism, Samuelson, for example, called the internet “the ExhibitioNet.” “Everything about these [social network] sites is a scream for attention. Look at me. Listen to me. Laugh with me—or at me People can now lead lives of noisy and ostentatious desperation” (Samuelson 2006, A 25).

Such studies notwithstanding, there are scholars who interpret both the symptomatology and the diagnosis of these recent changes in radically different ways. For them, the digital revolution is able to directly address the problems of the neoliberal self by increasing open

communication and by renewing the sense of belonging. For some, this revolution has been a quick fix for citizens' disenchantment by mobilizing previously passive segments of the citizenry and by helping them "bloom into both active and capable citizens" (Christensen and Bengtsson 2011, 2). Wright, for example, is convinced that we are witnessing nothing short of a genuine revolution in the democratic process and in the civil sphere, and that "politics as usual" died the moment the classical hegemonic media of from-one-to-many was replaced by the fundamentally democratic new media of from-many-to-many (Wright 2012, 245).

There is still a lot of enthusiasm about the new venues opened up by the digital revolution, especially when it comes to the youngest demographics, the so-called Generation Y (or the millennials.) It is claimed that "contrary to the prevailing attitudes of Baby Boomers and Generation X-ers that Generation Y is somehow socially and politically disengaged because of technology, the opposite is true" (Westlake 2008, 23). There is "an unmistakable expansion of youth interest in politics and public affairs" (Sander and Putnam 2010, 11). For these scholars, the increased use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter has strategic and political implications, and has led to new patterns of protest for the youth in which the virtual and the actual movements intersect (Jurris 2012, 260). When one chooses to belong to (or to withdraw from) a certain online community, one reveals something about where he or she belongs, as a peer, an equal. From this perspective, an online community fills the social role played at other times by pubs and coffee-shops—a "third place," situated between the privacy of the home (first place) and the workplace (second place), in which hierarchy and discipline dominate relationships. Here, on the contrary, are regulars who know each other, feel that they are accepted as equals, and can freely speak their minds (Steinkuehler and Williams 2006).

Yet numerous findings show that social media in itself appear unable to sustain long-term commitments (Bennett et al 2008), because communities organized online lack long-term identities. They are dissatisfied with political representation as it stands, yet don't know what to replace it with, and "smart mobs" (Rheingold 2003) can organize only ephemeral movements of protest. Despite some indisputable and palpable successes of "hashtag activism," "the thorny question ... remains of whether social networking can result in long-term meaningful engagement" (Herman 2014). Furthermore, a closer look reveals some important differences between the classical *universitates* and these online communities. First, by emphasizing the identity of the group and by emphasizing the sameness of its members, the contemporary communitarian self tends to overlook or minimize the uniqueness of each individual that was still present in the medieval self. Second, the assumption of equality inside the group is nowhere to be found in the medieval understanding. According to the latter, each member is a distinct and unique (even irreplaceable) member, precisely because each fulfills a unique role in an organic hierarchy.

Furthermore, this emphasis on group-identity tends to come at the expense of other, larger and more encompassing identities. In the same way in which in certain societies, tribal, religious, or ethnic identities trump all others, here the identity of the group tends also to be un-circumscribable in other, larger communities. From this perspective, this attitude shares with centripetal individualism the same fear of compromise, perceived in this case as a threat to the identity of individual *qua* member of a group. In many cases, such identitarian communities tend to shrink and to radicalize, instead of expanding and becoming more tolerant.

Thus, when it comes to political compromise, social media appear to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the internet helps individuals engage in acts of identity disclosure and

voluntary construction. On the other hand, it promotes group conformity and ideological “Balkanization,” because it pushes individuals towards more extreme positions in online rather than face-to-face interactions (Jamieson and Capella 2008). It appears that the cyberworld simultaneously creates conditions for praising “otherness” and provides the means to hate “the other” as the enemy with which no compromise is possible. Perhaps not surprisingly, “post-truth” was nominated as “the word of the year 2016” by *Oxford English Dictionary*. The term describes “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief,” and is often associated with politics and the new media.¹⁰ Put somewhat differently, our selves are presented with the alternative of either opening to otherness, or of basking in the echo-chambers of their choice.

The appeal of the dialogical self theory (DST) in recent years can be understood in this context, despite—or precisely because of—its not being a unified, grand theory, but rather a collection of quite different strains. Its main claim, broadly construed, can be formulated as follows: the self is the result of an ongoing dialogue taking place both inside and outside the individual, between the individual and others. “In this process of positioning, repositioning and counterpositioning, the I fluctuates among different and even opposed positions (both within the self and between self and perceived or imagined others)” (Hermans and Gieser 2012, 2). Not surprisingly, DST is considered by many to be the most suitable theory to address contemporary challenges, since “the processes of globalization and localization are not just realities outside the individual but are rather incorporated as a constituent of a dialogical self in action” (Hermans and Gieser 2012, 5).

¹⁰ The *Oxford Dictionary* traced the first use of “post-truth” to a 1992 essay by late Serbian-American playwright Steve Tesich in *The Nation* magazine about the Iran-Contra scandal and the Gulf War. “We, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world,” Tesich wrote.

However, not everyone is so optimistic. Hevern, for example, argues that while the internet alters the personal and social experience of Cartesian space and time, and hence the self, it may either foster or undermine dialogical exchange and even facilitate the expression of extreme forms of monologicality (Hevern 2012, 188). “These phenomena can be represented by a hybridized form of the strategies used by the postmodern self in confronting uncertainty; namely, a multiplication of positions functioning in relative autonomy and the simultaneous sharpening of position boundaries *within the self* rather than between the self and others” (Hevern 2012, 195 – emphasis in the original text).

In this understanding, the boundaries between *forum externum* and *forum internum* vanish. “[O]ur external identity and internal sense of self are imaginary constructs or working hypotheses subject to constant reform” (Belk 2013, 479). The self-construction online is also a co-construction (Belk 2013), and reverberates into the self-construction offline, just as virtual, online communities can become actual communities. Still, one wonders to what extent this ever-changing, rootless self is able to perform in real life as well as it does on paper, let alone how a strategy to address the contemporary challenges that political representation faces today can be devised when starting from such premises.

Being insecure about one’s identity, qua individual or qua community, has the paradoxical effect of becoming overly protective of one’s perceived identity, and thus unwilling to compromise. As history teaches us, the conundrum of political compromise cannot be solved independently of the issues of political and self-representation. Unlike the insecure postmodern self, the medieval dialectic between *forum internum* and *forum externum* was able, on its own terms, to satisfy the requirements of both uniqueness and sameness without becoming a rootless self.

Nevertheless, it is precisely the indisputable relative “restlessness” of the self brought forward by the digital revolution that appears to offer the long sought-after solution. Thanks primarily to this revolution, the idea of a one-dimensional self, be it neoliberal or communitarian, has been largely discredited, while the medieval self-apprehension of an inner and outer self has become increasingly accepted under new labels. Every day, more and more people discover and relish the freedom to shape or even reconstruct their selves in ways never imagined before, be it in their internal or external forum, to use the outdated medieval parlance. In the same way in which the rapid pace of transformations during the 17th century served as a catalyst for splitting up the dialectic of the self into two distinct forms of individualism, centripetal and centrifugal, respectively, this digital revolution *could* perform a similar function—only in reverse.

Since the digital revolution seems to be making a return to the one-dimensional self obsolete, there might be valuable lessons to be learned from our medieval ancestors—provided that we know how to adapt them to new circumstances. Many scholars have expressed worries about aspects of the process of globalization that suggest a re-medievalization or even a return to tribalism. Apparently, the double-move toward both globalization and localization mirrors the inward-outward moves inside the self. Yet if what we are witnessing is not a *re-* but a *neo-*medievalization, the future looks less gloomy. Politicians are best placed to redefine such identities in and of various constituencies, but it appears that not everyone is equally endowed with this ability—to change and be changed. Great compromises are undoubtedly necessary as soon as possible, both at national and international levels, on a variety of issues ranging from climate change to immigration. However, unless current political systems learn how to use the new media not merely as a tool for faster communication, but as a true medium in which both

group and individual identities are (re)shaped and (re)negotiated, the vicious cycle in which we seem to be caught will never become a virtuous one.

If the digital revolution is part of what Alexis de Tocqueville labeled as the democratic revolution, as I believe it is, it cannot be opposed, even if one wishes to do so. “[A]ll men have aided it by their exertions: those who have intentionally labored in its cause, and those who have served it unwittingly; those who have fought for it and those who have declared themselves its opponents, have all been driven along in the same track, have all labored to one end, some ignorantly and some unwillingly” (Tocqueville 2004 [1835], 7.) However, as the French writer recommended long ago, there is something that we can do: we can educate it.

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