

A « political pyromaniac » and his historical recipes

I should have been prepared to this. That's what I thought.

For decades I have been trying to be guided by the analysis of Leo Valiani (1909-1999). In order to be mentally prepared for such moments, I try to remember what this Italian journalist, historian, Resistance fighter and senator for life said about the 20th century. He stated : « Our century demonstrates that the victory of the ideals of justice and equality is always ephemeral, but also that we can always start all over again, if we succeed in safeguarding freedom. »

Valiani knew what he was talking about. He was first banished by Mussolini to the island of Ponzo in 1928, then, in exile in France, imprisoned in the Vernet concentration camp, before fleeing and finding asylum in Mexico. Then, from 1943 onwards, he participated in the liberation of his country from fascism.

I have repeated these sentences to myself again and again, because I wanted to keep in mind that the democratic world in which I was born 56 years ago, the welfare state in which I grew up, has developed out of a historical process and that it can also be questioned and dismantled in a historical process. The welfare state, as we know it today in Europe, was born out of a global economic crisis in the 1930s, which led to a World War. Dictators managed to win over millions of people, materially abandoned by democratically elected politicians. After 1945, an international community of states emerged, claiming to rely on democratic freedoms and human rights to prevent the return of barbarism. Dictators had for decades managed to mobilize the masses through nationalist and racist propaganda and politics. With the macabre result of more than 60 million deaths.

This learning process has long been effective. But it was only a matter of time before the cynical exercise of political and economic power would take over again. Before history repeated itself. Not exactly in the same way, of course. But with protagonists trying to use similar historical recipes.

I wanted to be prepared. Remember what Leo Valiani said ! Be prepared. But can you really be prepared for events like this ?

An incendiary press conference

In the end I was not prepared for what I experienced live on the night of Thursday 5th to Friday 6th November 2020 on CNN. Shortly before 1 a.m. (7 p.m. in Washington), US President Donald Trump attacked the democratic institutions at a quarter-hour press conference with a rhetoric of infamous historical precursors. A rhetoric worthy of the language of the Third Reich, in its modern form of simplistic « Newspeak » à la Trump. A neo-fascist rhetoric in which free and democratic elections are presented, on the basis of fabricated accusations, as fraudulent, as stolen by a corrupt system, « a corrupt Democratic Machine », by a system that would be run by « big media, big money, big tech ».

At 1.16 a.m. I sent this Whatsapp to my children and friends (in Luxembourgish) :
« Onglaublech wat den Trump grad vun sech ginn huet. Datt ech esou eng frontal Attack vun engem Prääsident vun den USA géint Demokratie a géint fräi Wahlen erliewen ass den trauregste Moment a mengem Liewen als Bierger. Mir fehlen d'Wierder. Wéini stoppen d'Republikaner dee Faschist ? » (« Unbelievable what Trump just has been saying. Never imagined I would experience such a frontal attack by a President of the United States against democracy and against free elections. This is the saddest moment in my life as a citizen. Words fail me. When will Republicans stop that Fascist ? »)

I had already warned against this Neo-fascist four years ago, shortly after his election as president of the United States, in the columns of this newspaper (*Trumpland*, Tageblatt, 12 November 2016, p. 7). A glance at history was enough to realise that millions of Americans had elected a politician with not only right-wing populist but also fascist views : from his hatred of people who think differently to his unscrupulous exploitation of fears and social frustrations, from his constant references to conspiracy theories to his fanatical nationalism, racism and machismo.

After November 5th, the Republicans did not stop Trump. They gave him the opportunity to take his neo-fascist society project even further. And to show the world how vulnerable our democratic institutions are. On January 6th, Trump made a public appeal to his supporters. An appeal to fight for him. Because the fascist swears by the fight. Trump : « We fight like hell and if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore. » In fascist fantasies the people are strong. The American people must distance themselves from – let's quote Trump again – « so many weak Republicans » : « You're stronger, you're smarter. »

The people must have a heroic attitude and march. Not on Rome as in 1922, not on Munich as in 1923, but in 2021 on Washington, the heart of American democracy. And storm the Capitol. Trump sees himself with them : « We're going to walk down to the Capitol, and we're going to cheer on our brave senators, and congressmen and women. We're probably not going to be cheering so much for some of them because you'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength, and you have to be strong. »

6 January 2021 : the blaze

By haranguing the crowd in this way, Trump turned into a « political pyromaniac » according to Luxembourg's Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean Asselborn. The result of this first direct attack on the seat of the American legislative power since 1811 : five dead and dozens of elected representatives of the world's largest democracy who had to fear for their lives. This is why a second impeachment trial is currently underway against Donald Trump. But the fire has not yet been put out. Those whom Trump has been inciting and exciting for months want to continue to fight and storm the democratic institutions these days, before President-elect Joe Biden is sworn in, not only in the capital, but in many American states.

History never repeats itself identically, but historians can and should try to unveil historical mechanisms that have been at work for decades or even centuries, and that can be mobilized again and again. In the case of US President Donald Trump, we see not only how the mechanisms of what Umberto Eco called « eternal fascism » in 1995 are being mobilized

by far-right political movements and their leaders to conquer the popular masses in the 21st century.

Let me conclude by mentioning two other historical mechanisms that we see at work at the moment. First, Trump's call for insurrection highlights the structural instability of democracies, which Enlightenment philosophers pointed out as early as the 18th century when the first democratic regimes were born, especially in the United States. Unstable because these regimes are based, as historians such as Gérard Noiriel or political scientists such as Bernard Manin have shown, on two contradictory conceptions of citizenship : on the one hand, the delegation of power through the election of representatives, and on the other, direct action according to the principle of popular sovereignty. Since in a democracy each citizen holds a piece of national sovereignty, the direct action of a few, of a minority, can be considered as the commitment of the whole people. This is exactly what Trump is telling his supporters, taking advantage of this contradiction to justify a coup d'état: « you're the real people. You're the people that built this nation. You're not the people that tore down our nation. »

A second mechanism that Trump uses, following the example of many other politicians over the last 150 years who, like him, have skilfully used mass media, is to combine two identity factors to bring millions of people together under his banner : the national and the social. 75 million Americans are rallying behind him and Republicans around their neo-fascist society project and discourse promising to re-establish a great America and to fight against the enemies of the American people (implied : white), inside and outside the country, against the « elites », against « big media, big money, big tech ».

This political strategy has earned Trump 12 million more votes than four years ago. That wasn't enough to get him elected, because the pandemic and the economic crisis thwarted his plans, because all those who support democracy rallied en masse to vote and made a difference in the swing states of Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, and ultimately because the judiciary and legislature stood firm in certifying the legality of the elections.

Nevertheless, in the United States, the cradle of modern democracy, a president with a neo-fascist society project ruled for four years and, despite all predictions, was almost re-elected. What lessons will the Democratic Party in the United States learn from this ? Will Biden-Harris pursue a different policy from Obama-Biden over the next four years ? A policy that would finally focus on social justice and not just on the recognition of diversity. What lessons do we, European citizens, learn from this ? We now know that frontal attacks on our democracy are once again on the agenda. But will we really be ready if our country or our European neighbours are directly threatened and affected in the years to come ?

**Denis Scuto, Chronicle « History of the present time », Tageblatt, Lëtzebuerg, 16.1.2021
(Translation from French by the author)**

Denis Scuto is Vice-Director of the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH) at University of Luxembourg.

